GARY HIRSON GARYHIRSON.COM @GARYHIRSON

Effective Interpersonal Communication

CONTENTS

The Author

Professionally speaking I am a COMENSA-credentialed Life Coach, a SAQA-accredited trainer, and a motivational speaker. I'm the creator and facilitator of bespoke training programs and webinars.
My past includes the starting, running, and selling of two businesses and being the author of three interactive children's books.
I'm also a professional photographer with two photographic coffee-table books and I've recently returned from Switzerland where I attended the opening of an exhibition that includes thirty-two of my photographs.
My belief is that leadership is not a position applicable to a select few but a set of skills that can be developed and that we are all creative. A part of our life we overlook as we grow older is the need to play and have fun. Important elements as it contributes to our well-being and inspires creativity. If we combine, the need to play, creativity, and leadership development we can lead our way through life as opposed to just managing what it throws at us. All of this I promote in my writing, coaching, training, and talks.
Personally – I live in Cape Town with my French fiancé Helene Marie. Among the many things we really love doing, swimming in the ocean daily is our favourite.

INTRODUCTION

Hello and thank you for taking the time to read my EBook," Effective Interpersonal Communication." This Ebook combined with my first Ebook, “Let’s Talk about Effective Leadership,” forms part of my Leadership Program, “ Thriving in Life.”
When acting as a leader we need to be able to SPEAK properly so that nothing gets lost in translation. We need to be able to LISTEN, without interrupting to be able to understand.
We need to be able to create an environment where our teams are comfortable enough to be able to share information, and one way to do this is by building RAPPORT.
We need to be able to deal with CRITICISM and CONFLICT RESOLUTION, and we need to be able to hand out praise when it's due.
And all of this is what this Ebook, “Effective Interpersonal Communication,” is about.

In my effective leadership training program, the module on effective communication has become so important that it now forms its own program as the importance of effective leadership is heavily dependent on effective communication skills. The key to effective leadership is that it’s about leading and contributing to the growth and development of those around us. And how we communicate with others forms the foundation. This should always be in the back of our minds when we think of leadership-based communication.

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

I recently witnessed an extreme shift in effective communication that left the staff in an office reeling and made me question the effectiveness of a leader.
I was working in an office in the Stellenbosch area. It was an open-plan office and there were five people at their desks tapping away at their laptops. There was a lot of banter going around with everyone helping the other find solutions to their problems. The problem was that they were trying to crew up a team for a film production and they were struggling to find the right people. It was a hive of jokes, banter, and creativity.

The “boss,” arrived also in a good mood, contributing to the jovial mood.
She switched on her laptop and opened her emails. One of the first emails she read was that the production that they were currently busy with was a few hundred thousand over budget. The proverbial sh!t hit the fan.

The “boss,” started screaming and shouting about this financial issue, targeting no one in particular but at the same time everyone in the office – even though it had nothing to do with them. I think a good part of Stellenbosch heard her.

Instantly the mood changed. The staff members dropped their heads, trying to hide behind their computer screens. The banter, laughter, and ideas sharing came to an abrupt halt filling the room with silence. Everyone was on tenterhooks.

The boss asked someone an accusing question, but they couldn’t reply, and she screamed, “What am I paying you all for, it seems like nothing gets done when I’m not around!”

Why was this ineffective communication?

Besides the obvious that no one really wants to be spoken to in that way, what the boss managed to do in a few brief outbursts, is squash creativity – that includes problem-solving, creating an environment where people wanted to hide instead of contributing, and speaking in a way that would take a while to repair

When I speak about effective interpersonal communication, I'm not referring to presentation skills or public speaking skills. I'm talking about the communication skills that are needed to develop interpersonal relationships. Effectively Communicating with respect to both ourselves and others.
Why I believe them to be so important is because organisations, even though are profit-driven, are made up of people. People with varying degrees of sensitivity. In our lives where more time is spent in the digital world, we still thrive on interpersonal relationships and connections.

As Nathaniel Hawthorne said
"Words – so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them."

Whether spoken or written the power of how what we say is long-lasting.

LET'S TALK ABOUT SPEAKING

We talk on the phone; we talk in meetings; we talk to each other in the office, we gossip, and we talk at home to our significant other. Whether or not we prefer to be the outspoken one, talking takes up a big part of our day. Too much talking can label someone “long-winded,” and talking too little can label one, ”shy.”

In my effective communication program when we’re workshop talking, the content related to talking is how we can get the “message” across most effectively where nothing can get lost in translation.

The formula that I introduce is very similar to the formula needed for setting goals, something that effective leaders do.

There are four questions.

W – What do you want?
W – By when do you want it done?
W - Who is going to do it?
W – Why do you want it done?

Why this formula is effective is because we are affected by internal and external influences that affect the way we think and talk.
Our moods - being in a bad mood can make us irritable,
Our energy levels – being tired can contribute to forgetfulness,
Situations – others might make us impatient,
Our environment – stuck in an office with no aircon due to load-shedding can make us all hot, sweaty, and bothered.
Excitement – can lead us to speak too quickly.

If we refer to this formula, we can effectively compile the message we wish to relay in a concise manner so that nothing gets lost in translation.
And why this is key is because, for accountability to take place, three things need to exist.

- The expectations.
- The effective communication of those expectations.
- A buy-in that the expectation has been understood and agreed to.

The beauty of this formula is that our mind reacts to questions, and it cancels out the external noise. It can be used when we're wanting to delegate tasks or when setting up the theme for a meeting (it eliminates a lot of long-winded talking in meetings if everyone knows what the desired outcome is.)

And it can be used intrinsically when we're setting personal goals and tasks so that we can hold ourselves accountable.

"What do I want? By when do you want it done? Who, if not me is going to do it? Why do I want it done?"

LET'S HEAR SOMETHING ABOUT LISTENING

One of the questions I ask in my effective communications program when I get to the listening section is, "How long do we actively listen for?" Usually, the answer is somewhere between 2-5 minutes. In a recent program, I facilitated to an organisation linked to the wine industry in Stellenbosch I was surprised when someone came very close to the correct answer.

Before I get to the big reveal take a moment to think how long it takes you before you get distracted, wander off mentally, or feel the need to interrupt.

According to Nancy Kline, founder, and president of, "Time to Think," states in her recent book, "The Promise That Changes Everything – I won't interrupt you," that according to the Gottman Institute in Seattle, the average listening time is now down to 11 SECONDS! And that is down from 20 SECONDS only 3 years ago.

My initial thoughts when I read this were.

- If it only took 3 years to drop 9 seconds how soon will it be before we're not listening at all?
- If we're only listening for 11 seconds how much information and experiences are we missing out on – two things that are crucial for effective leadership to happen?
- What is to happen to relationship building because that requires communication of which listening is a big part?

Why are we listening less?

We are now more easily distracted because of our continuous access to information but I'm not going to go into the many effects related to our dependency on smartphones.

Except for one interesting fact that came to my attention. Recent studies have shown that when people's phones are visible, even if they're off and all who are in attendance know it, the mere presence of the phone was enough to reduce the cognitive capacity. (Assistant Professor Adrian Ward, McCombs School of Business, University of Texas, Austin)

A smartphone on a table has enough power to divert our attention, and for us to listen clearly to understand, we need to limit distractions and be present.

Stephen Covey said

" The biggest communication problem is that we do not listen to understand we listen to reply."

This brings up the next point of why our listening skills are diminishing – INTERRUPTING!

I've been in conversations and while they're talking, I'm not only thinking about my answer but I'm actually chomping at the bit to get my say in. I want to interrupt them and I have interrupted them because interrupting people has become the norm and is very difficult to control.

Interrupting is a sign of passive aggression. The act of interrupting is stating things like,

“ My opinion is more important than yours – yours doesn’t count!”
“ Listen to what I have to say because I know more than you.”
“Listen to me, I’m more important than you.”

Interrupting is not only discourteous it also takes us out of the present moment. It disengages us from what the other is saying so that we might fail to understand the whole message. It promotes the fact that information can get lost in translation.

An effective leader takes time to understand that we are different and that we communicate in different ways. Some might take slightly longer to get their message across – but usually not so long that interrupting them is the right way to go.

A great exercise I did at a recent program I facilitated in Stellenbosch was not to blatantly interrupt – stopping someone mid-sentence but to “tailgate,” which is another form of interrupting. During a scripted conversation between two people what I did was jump in and end off a sentence as the other one was speaking. As I was the facilitator, initially the other person was ok with it, but the more I did it the more frustrated she became until she exploded, “You’re exactly like my boyfriend – finishing all my sentences. I hate it when he does that!”
Even though some think it’s sweet to tailgate (in a relationship) it is a form of interrupting that is rude and disruptive.

I know most of us have sat in a meeting that just goes on and on and on, with everyone wanting their say, and with the one person who just won’t stop talking...

So WHEN and HOW do we interrupt?

Try to get in when there is a natural pause while being polite.

The never-ending meeting.
“Paul, we’re a bit off topic and time is running out, can you…”

Ask for permission.
“ Can I just jump in here for a moment…?”

Apologise for the interruption.
“I’m sorry for interrupting…”

A conversation is a team sport, and a conversation is a great platform for thinking and for creativity to flourish. If we constantly interrupt, not only are we announcing that we’re the only player in the team but we’re also contributing to stemming the flow of great thinking and creativity which can include new ideas and problem-solving.
But also, if we listen to others more than we speak we are able to start building relationships.

Which brings me to my next point.

LET'S CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER

We're living in a time where it seems that human connection and interaction are on the wane. We're exposed to online meetings, more time in front of the screen, at times social distancing, and more time by ourselves. Less time physically interacting.
But humans are social species. Whether introverted or extroverted human connection and interaction are needed for creativity to flourish.

Have you ever met someone, and you felt that there was just a "connection?" Not in a romantic way, but someone whom you could chat to, who listened well, where the conversation flowed easily, someone whom you felt you might have a lot in common with? Someone you felt a RAPPORT with.

There is a commonly used definition for rapport that is,
"A friendly harmonious relationship. There's a mutual agreement, understanding, and empathy, that makes communication flow well."

My experience with building rapport is that it is a connection based on honesty, mutual respect, understanding, and empathy promoting the contribution of all concerned.

Without connection not much flourishes.

Being able to build rapport with others is an essential life skill as it helps build relationships – but also promotes an environment for a free-flowing of ideas. It's important in both our personal and professional lives because if we're really connected with someone, they're seeing the real you and are able to decide whether they're comfortable being around you or not.

We willingly share information and ideas when we feel comfortable. And for us to feel comfortable around others we need to feel that some semblance of rapport has been created.

I've had bosses in the past whom I was afraid to share ideas with because I was scared of their reaction – they were criticising but also preferred if we only followed their ideas. Not only did I not want to share ideas with them but I didn't want to be around them, and this resulted in the shutting down of my contribution while wanting to keep out of their way. Not a great contributor to a healthy office environment.

Can we actively build Rapport?

Absolutely, according to Emily and Laurence Alison - Forensic Psychologists and authors of, "Rapport, the four ways to read people," there are four core pillars needed to create rapport.

HONESTY, EMPATHY, AUTONOMY, & REFLECTION

What I totally agree with in their book is they mention that "The key to effective communication lies in what you do before you open your mouth. It's careful listening, not smooth-talking that is the key to building solid rapport." (Once again, the importance of listening comes up.)

HONESTY

We know what it feels like when we aren't honest with someone and when we find out that someone hasn't been honest with us. Honesty is a non-negotiable but can create challenges especially when in a feedback session. A person could be sensitive and take the message the wrong way so being clear, objective, direct, and calm is a good starting point, but being sensitive to the other is crucial. As (self) awareness is one of the key traits of an effective leader – knowing and understanding the other - enabling effective communication, shouldn't be too much of a challenge. Being honest, as uncomfortable as it can be is essential – as being dishonest- or finding out that you've been lying has a direct influence on your integrity. As I mentioned in my last book – if your integrity is ever in question the slope to reclaim it is steep and slippery.

EMPATHY

"If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from is point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."
Atticus Finch – To Kill a Mockingbird.

And this quote brings me to Empathy.

Empathy can be confused with sympathy. Where sympathy is about showing warmth and compassion to the other, empathy is about understanding the other – what they're thinking and feeling. It's not uncommon when someone does something we don't agree with, we can blame them for doing it because we don't understand why they did it. Reacting with empathy makes us ask the question, "Why did they do it?" instead of, "What would I have done in that situation, or why didn't they do it like me?"

One of the ways to develop empathy is by taking the time to discover more about the other (Awareness) and to do that we first need to understand ourselves (Self-Aware), as self-awareness is the bedrock of interpersonal skills.
We are all unique as individuals with different values, beliefs, strengths, etc and the key to developing empathy is understanding, and being ok with the fact that we are all different.

If we have empathy it contributes to developing rapport as it eliminates the need for everything to be done the way we do it, and allows for communication and contribution in line with the other's values and strengths, etc. If we have empathy and we understand the other, they feel more comfortable around us which opens up avenues for sharing, contributing, and the free flow of ideas.
When we feel understood, we appreciate it which promotes the idea of connecting more with the other.

AUTONOMY

I have yet to meet someone who loves to be told what to do all of the time.

An authoritative and dictatorial voice seldom attracts a willing audience that isn't based on fear.
If we are respectful and allow for reflection the other starts to feel appreciated and can think more deeply and contribute in their unique way.
If we allow for choice to be part of the instructional conversation, then we feel autonomous and that what we offer has value.

But there are circumstances that will dictate otherwise.
I do feel that if I'm in a burning building and a fireman orders me out of it as quickly as possible I'm not going to be too concerned about being barked at, or too upset if he starts forcefully pushing me towards the door – but then again, building rapport at that moment will probably be the last thing on my mind. Possibly when I'm thanking him later I'll ask if he's interested in hearing on how I would have done it 😊
Creating bonds and connections isn't a one-way street where you must do what I tell you. It includes, being respectful and considerate to the other.

Without connection not much flourishes.

REFLECTION

And lastly, we come to Reflection.
Have you ever met someone who all they can talk about is, me, me, me?
My holiday, how fit I am, how far I run, what an amazing cook I am, how my proposal was amazing etc, etc, etc?
And then when you finally get a word in, they start looking at their phone, or their eyes glaze over, or they've "got to rush off," to their next big meeting.
If so, you're not alone.
When reflecting on someone's contribution by repeating back- without interrupting - key points of what they have been saying show that you are present, interested, and acknowledging that they exist.
We all like to be acknowledged and one way that builds rapport is by being interested in what the other is saying, and for that to happen we have to listen actively.

Being asked to repeat something because of misunderstanding is one thing, but being asked to repeat something repeatedly because of non-listening or distraction can annoy the best of us.

Being honest, having empathy, allowing autonomy, and reflecting in conversation are the pillars of building rapport. And these four pillars not only help make a connection but can be used when giving feedback and dealing with potential conflict.

CRITICISM, CONFLICT RESOLUTION & PRAISE

Criticism, conflict resolution, and praise play a very big role when it comes to communicating and the development of others because here, we are really dealing with sensitivity-related issues. Especially with criticism and conflict resolution.

CRITICISM

I witnessed a scene related to criticising that always comes to mind when I talk about the subject.
It happened on a film production set. I heard someone from the lighting department ask the set runner to move quite a big and expensive light stand from one spot to another – about 5 meters away. The set runner was quite new in the industry and not too experienced - especially with the lighting department.
Instead of dropping the extended legs of the stand to make it shorter, he picked it up as it was. It was quite heavy and top-loaded making him struggle to move it. He'd walked about 2 meters with this swaying light stand and before it could fall over, breaking and possibly hurting the other crew members in the vicinity, the person from the lighting department grabbed it from his hands, lowered the legs, and then moved it into place. Potential crisis averted.
But then in front of everyone he verbally laid into this inexperienced set runner.
"You idiot! Are you so stupid to carry it that way! Do you know many people you could have hurt if it fell and smashed! Do you know how expensive this is? Can't you think! Etc, etc, etc.

I really felt for this young guy because he was really taking a verbal beating right in from of everyone.

So what are the issues here?

Besides the fact that we don't want to be spoken to in that way, especially in public, this experience could become the reference point for the set runner. He could now believe that every time he did something wrong on set, this will be the reaction. And if this is the case then he could be too fearful to try anything, limiting his contribution – making him ineffective.

Yes, he definitely needed guidance with the possibility of critical feedback.

So how should the experienced lighting guy hve gone about it?

Effective Holistic Leadership is always linked to the development and growth of those around us and in our teams. We're not trying to break them down or embarrass them.

When dealing with this or a situation where critical feedback or criticism is required.

- Deal with it privately, in a safe, quiet space away from public scrutiny.
- Before speaking to the other person decide what is your goal. What is it you want to achieve from the conversation?
- Remember that you're trying to develop them so that they can learn and grow from the experience. How you articulate the criticism will have a lasting effect on the person.

Which leads us to conflict resolution.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

During an argument or a conflict, emotions can become heated. Our triggers get pushed, we can feel verbally attacked, or we can want to verbally hurt the other person. The proverbial red mist clouds our judgment and things can lead to the point of no return. Rational thinking can fly out the window and if not kept in check irreparable damage is unleashed.

So what is the solution?

In a current argument or conflict.

- Do whatever you need to control yourself. Breathe, count to 10, go for a walk, etc. – Take time out to regroup and clear your head.

In a situation where you know, there might be conflict.

- Decide on what is your goal-what do you want to achieve.
- Handle it privately.
- Don't make it personal.
- Keep emotions out of it – by understanding that a solution needs to be found. It's not about winning or losing but about resolving the issue.

Keeping in mind that a leader's role is to contribute to the growth and development of those around them, my rule of thumb – especially when we're needing to pass feedback or when we're dealing with a possible conflict, is to talk others how I would like to be spoken to.

PRAISE

To end off on a high note Let's talk about Praise.

When I was quite a bit younger, I was promoted to the position of Export Sales Manager.
My promotion included a Personal Assistant. I was inexperienced in the way of Life and Leadership skills, but one of the things I recall reading was that one shouldn't be shy with their praise for others. Initially, when I tried this, I really struggled to compliment my PA for doing a good job. Sometimes it would take me most of the day to build up the courage to mention a few words of praise.

As my role as a Coach and a Trainer has grown, I've become a lot more comfortable with praising others. We do like to be acknowledged and recognised for the things we've done well and the way of doing that which works for me is.

- Tell the person "Well Done" when they've done something well – but be specific.
- Mention what it is they did well.
- Tell them why what they did well is important.

This makes the praise more holistic and clearer in the positive message.

IN CLOSING

Clarity in speaking, active listening, building rapport, criticising, conflict resolution, and praising all do contribute to effective holistic leadership. As we move into the future where focus is on the wane, connections are disintegrating and where the world is speeding up exponentially, how we speak, and listen and the need to connect is becoming more important by the day.

The content in this Ebook is the WHAT and the WHY of Effective Interpersonal Communication. The HOW part is explored in my Effective Interpersonal Communication program that forms part of my Leadership Program, "Thriving in Life," or as a stand-alone course.
https://garyhirson.com/createfulness-coaching/workshops/

What I offer moving forward is designed to contribute to your continued growth and development along your chosen leadership or communication journey. An accountability partnership is created for the desired outcome.

WHAT I FOCUS ON

Leadership, Communication, and Createful Life Transformation.

WHAT I OFFER

- 1:1 coaching – live and live online.
- Bespoke live programs
- Live webinars
- Online membership programs that include group sessions, individual sessions motivational tips, videos, animations, links, and exercises.

THANK YOU!

To find out more visit www.garyhirson.com or contact me at gary@garyhirson.com