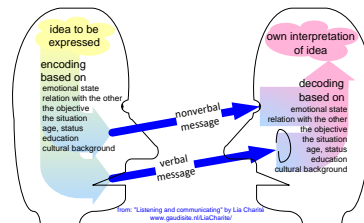# Human Side: Interpersonal Skills

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Abstract

We discuss in this paper a set of skills and techniques to cooperate effectively between two individuals. We show the wonders of communication and then we address techniques such as investigation and acknowledgement, constructive feedback, conflict management, appraisal, good practices in a conversation, searching for ideas.

1   Introduction

We often take for granted that two individuals can cooperate. However, in practice many problems arise at the fundamental level of cooperation between two individuals. We will first discuss the wonder of communication, since communication is the starting point for cooperation. Next we will discuss a set of techniques that can be deployed between two (and often more) individuals:

- investigation and acknowledgement

- constructive feedback

- conflict management

- appraisal

- good practices in a conversation

- searching for ideas
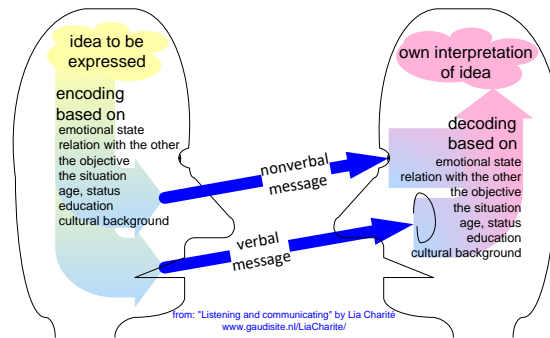
2 The Wonder of Communication

Figure 1: Active listening: the art of the receiver to decode the message

If someone wants to transfer an idea to another person, then this idea is encoded in a message. This message is encoded by a variety of means, ranging from the verbal message to the non verbal message such as facial expression(s), gestures and voice modulation. The encoding of this message depends on many personal aspects of the *speaker*, see figure 1. The receiver of this message has to decode this message and interprets the message, however, based on many similar personal aspects of the *receiver*.

From technical point of view a pure miracle is happening in communication: sender and receiver use entirely different configured encoders and decoders and nevertheless we, humans, are able to convey messages to others.
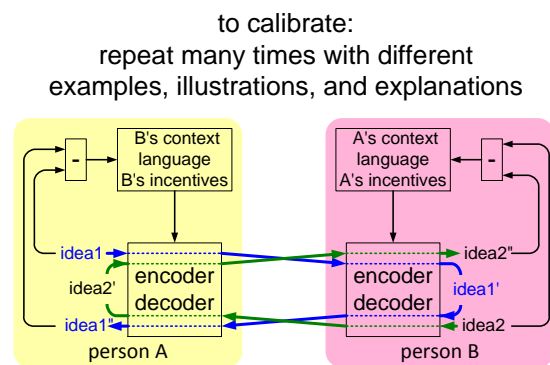

Figure 2: Intense interaction needed for mutual understanding

The mechanism behind this miracle can be understood by extending the model of sender and receiver as in figure 2. The mutual understanding is built up in an interactive calibration process. By phrasing and rephrasing examples, illustrations

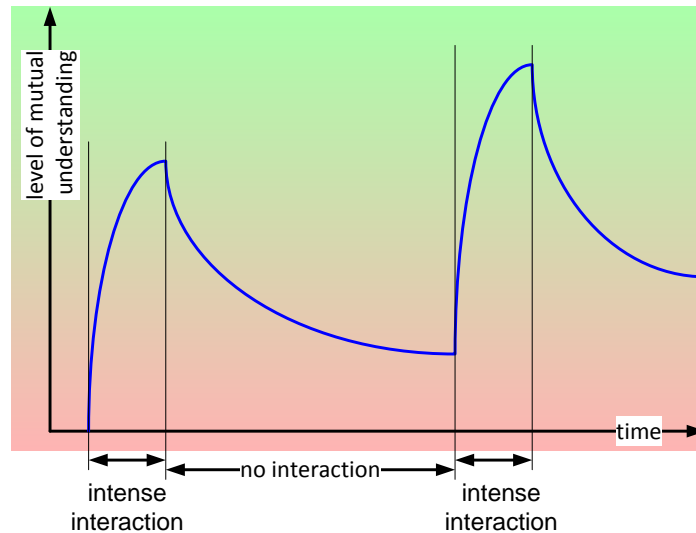and explanations the coding and decoding information is calibrated.

Figure 3: Mutual understanding as function of time

The calibration information is very dynamic, part of the coding depends on volatile issues, such as mood, and context. During interaction the mutual understanding improves, since continuous calibration takes place. Without interaction the mutual understanding degrades, due to the dynamics of the interpretation. Figure 3 visualizes the mutual understanding as function of time and interaction.

Note that glossaries of terms, unified notations and all these kind of measures do not fundamentally address the communication difficulties explained here. In fact standardized terminology and notations are a minor factor[1] in comparison with the human differences which have to be bridged continuously.

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[1]Dogmatic applied unification of terms and notations works often counterproductive. Problems or viewpoints might be more easily expressed in other terms, while the unification drive blocks the search for a mutually understandable expression. Active participation is required to obtain understanding.

3 Interpersonal skills

In the previous section we explained that it is rather miraculous that communication between individuals works. In this section we provide a number of fundamental skills to facilitate the cooperation between tow individuals.

material
$$

effect
$$

"This is too expensive"

investigate:
What has been said and why?

acknowledge:
Paraphrase what has been said and why?
i.e. use your own words

When a decision will be taken or an action will be started on the basis of exchanged information, opinions or suggestions
or
when the first reaction is to reject, ignore or contradict what you just heard.
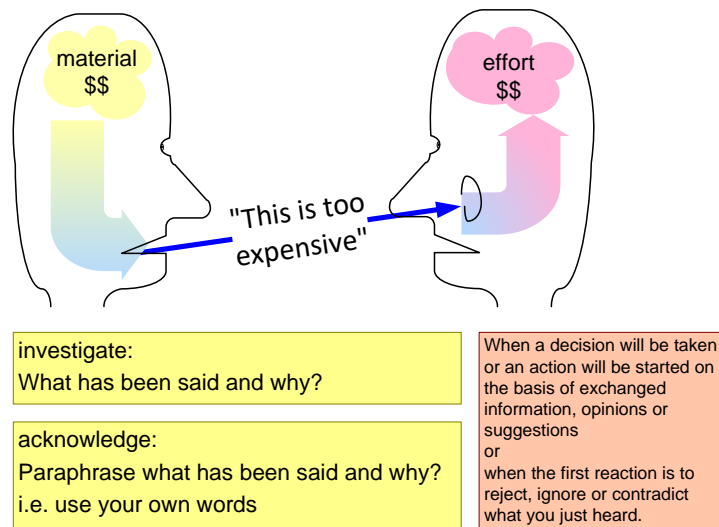
Figure 4: Investigate and Acknowledge

Investigate and Acknowledge, see Figure 4 is a technique that helps to bridge the differences between individuals. Investigation is the process of asking questions to ensure that you understand what the other person is saying. Acknowledgement is the process to help the other person understand what you have in mind.

In practice people tend to make decisions after a superficial understanding of what someone else has said. The risk is that both persons did not understand each other, with the risk that the decision is faulty. Also tensions between persons can be traced back to a lack of mutual understanding.

Note that application of the investigate and acknowledge technique in first instance slows down the communication. Its application should not be overdone, this may also cause irritation.

The basis for improvement and learning is **feedback**, get observations about the performance and its consequences from someone else. Key for effective feedback is that it is constructive. This means that not only the poor performance issues should be mentioned, but also the strong points, and that the strong points are related to ways to improve the weak points. This is called *constructive feedback*, see Figure 5.

Conflicts are part of normal human interaction. Conflicts in itself are not bad. However, conflicts that are not handled can grow to unwanted dimensions. **Conflict**

How
+ Indicate the strong points to be kept
+ Indicate the points to be improved
+ Search for solutions which build upon the strong points and improve the weak points

When
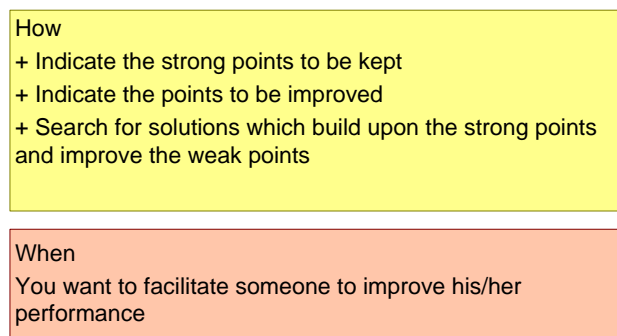You want to facilitate someone to improve his/her performance

Figure 5: Constructive Feedback

management is a technique to explicitly cope with conflicts, see Figure 6

The first step in conflict management is to understand the conflict itself. The conflict can be made explicit by formulating what is important for you and why, and by investigation and acknowledgement of what is important for the other and why. A fundamental choice has to be made when the positions are clear:

- If you are willing and able to consider alternatives, then you can jointly search for alternative solutions.

- If you are not willing and able to consider alternatives, or no acceptable solution for both parties can be found, then the conversation must be finished by acknowledging the right to have a different opinion, and by indicating your decision and its rationale.

The main message is that "false" hope should be avoided, rather the conflict should be clearly finished one way or the other. The risk of maintaining false hope is that the conflict will simmer on and it might become a festering disease.

Appraisal can work wonders for the motivation of people. Nevertheless, many people don't know or are hesitant to give appraisal. Figure 7 shows when and how to appraise. Essential for appraisal to work is that the appraisal is authentic. In the eyes of the person giving the appraisal the performance of the the appraised person should be so good that appraisal is justified.

The appraisal itself must be specific. Some people appraise simply by stating that "you did a good job". Such generic appraisal does not really help the appraised person. Rather the appraisal should explain:

- what the person did specifically

- what personal qualities were applied that enabled this performance

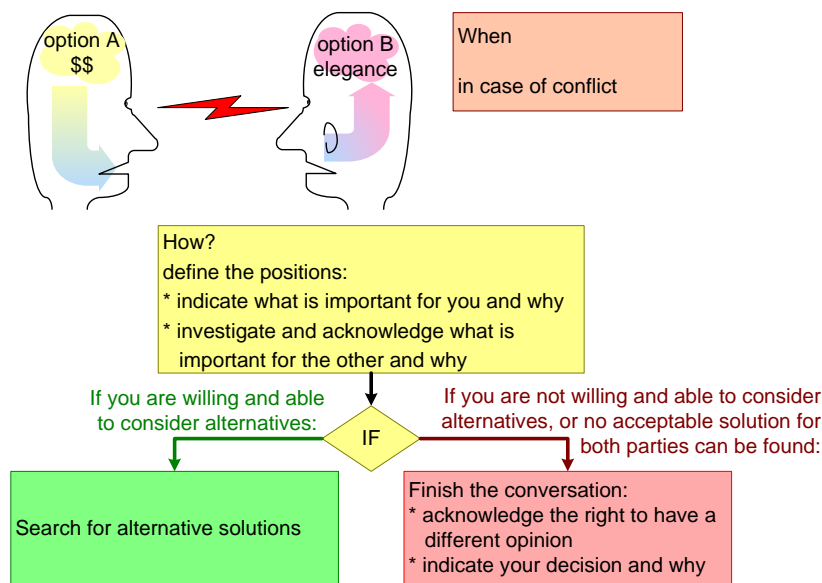- and what benefits this work had for other people or the organization

Figure 6: Conflict Management

Very elementary for effective communication is that **conversations** are opened and closed clearly. Figure 8 shows a number of good practices for opening and closing a conversation. At the beginning of a conversation it is good to make explicit what the purpose of the conversation is. At the end it is good to summarize conclusions and agreements, for example in terms of an action plan.

In several circumstances it can be desired to **search for new ideas** or alternatives. Figure 9 shows several recommendations for searching ideas. The basic idea is that two persons should build upon each others ideas, when searching for ideas. They should stimulate each other to make suggestions, and to keep going the other person should give a reaction. Credit should be given to the person who originates ideas. The last recommendation to find ideas is a technique from the creativity field: people come up with new solutions if you remove or add constraints. E.g., if cost is not a problem, how would you then solve the problem? Interestingly many solutions found this way can also be used when the constraint is reapplied.

When
Someone's performance is important for you
* exceeding the expectations
* meets expectations continuously
* meets expectations, which exceed the normal
  performance level of this person

Appraise only when authentic!

How
+ Mention the performance very specific.
+ Mention the personal qualities which lead to this
  performance.
+ Describe which advantages arise for you,
  the department or the organization.

Figure 7: Appraisal

When you open a conversation

formulate the purpose

When you finish the conversation

summarize the agreements and the actionplan

Figure 8: Conversation Good Practices

When asking for a suggestion ⟶ give a reaction
When supplying a suggestion ⟶ ask for a reaction
When you use or build ⟶ mention the source of the
  upon ideas of others   ideas
When you need new or ⟶ remove limitations temporarily
  more creative ideas   or add limitations

Figure 9: Searching for Ideas

4 Acknowledgements

The communication section is based on material from Lia Charite (`www.liacharite.nl`). The techniques for interpersonal skills are based on the course "Interpersonal Management Skills" by Hay Management Consultants.

References

[1] Gerrit Muller. The system architecture homepage. `http://www.gaudisite.nl/index.html`, 1999.

History

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- textual adaptations in the section Communication
- status set to draft

Version: 0, date: February 16, 2009 changed by: Gerrit Muller
- Created, moved section from HumanSide, and based on old slides
- status set to preliminary draft