

# Interpersonal Skills

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Interpersonal skills are the skills we use every day when we communicate and interact with other people, both individually and in groups.

People with strong interpersonal skills are often more successful in both their professional and personal lives.

Interpersonal skills include a wide variety of skills, though many are centred around communication, such as listening, questioning and understanding body language. They also include the skills and attributes associated with emotional intelligence or being able to understand and manage your own and others' emotions.

People with good interpersonal skills tend to be able to work well in a team or group, and with other people more generally. They are able to communicate effectively with others, whether family, friends, colleagues, customers or clients. Interpersonal skills are therefore vital in all areas of life at work, in education and socially.

Through awareness of how you interact with others, and with practice, you can improve your interpersonal skills. This section of Skills You Need is full of information and practical advice that you can use to improve and develop your interpersonal skills.

## You Already Have Interpersonal Skills

We've all been developing our interpersonal skills since childhood, usually subconsciously.

Interpersonal skills often become so natural that we may take them for granted, never thinking about how we communicate with other people. If you have developed good habits, this is fine. However, it is of course also possible to develop bad habits, and then fail to understand why our communications or relationships are suffering.

However, with a little time and effort you can develop both your awareness, and these skills. Good interpersonal skills can improve many aspects of your life, both professionally and socially, as they lead to better understanding and better relationships.

Interpersonal skills are also sometimes referred to as social skills, people skills, soft skills, or life skills. Although all these terms can include interpersonal skills, they tend to be broader and may therefore also refer to other types of skills. Many people also use the term communication skills for interpersonal skills, but interpersonal skills cover more, including decision-making and problem-solving, plus working in a group or team and emotional intelligence.

## What are Interpersonal Skills?

Interpersonal skills are generally considered to include a wide range of skills, such as:

- Communication skills, which in turn covers:
  - Verbal Communication – what we say and how we say it;
  - Non-Verbal Communication – what we communicate without words, for example through body language, or tone of voice; and
  - Listening Skills – how we interpret both the verbal and non-verbal messages sent by others.

- Emotional intelligence – being able to understand and manage your own and others’ emotions.
- Team-working – being able to work with others in groups and teams, both formal and informal.
- Negotiation, persuasion and influencing skills – working with others to find a mutually agreeable (Win/Win) outcome. This may be considered a subset of communication, but it is often treated separately.
- Conflict resolution and mediation – working with others to resolve interpersonal conflict and disagreements in a positive way, which again may be considered a subset of communication.
- Problem solving and decision-making – working with others to identify, define and solve problems, which includes making decisions about the best course of action.

## Developing Your Interpersonal Skills

Good interpersonal skills are often viewed as the foundation for good working and social relationships, and for developing many other areas of skill.

For example, good leaders tend to have very good interpersonal skills, and develop other areas of their leadership skills by building on these.

Without good interpersonal skills it is often more difficult to develop other important life skills. It is therefore worth spending time developing good interpersonal skills.

Unlike specialised and technical skills (hard skills), interpersonal skills (soft skills) are used every day and in every area of our lives.

Improving and developing your interpersonal skills is best done in steps, starting with the most basic, but vital:

### 1. Identify areas for improvement

The first step towards improving is to develop your knowledge of yourself and your weaknesses.

You may already have a good idea of areas that you need to develop. However, it is worth seeking feedback from other people, because it is easy to develop ‘blind spots’ about yourself.

### 2. Focus on your basic communication skills

Communication is far more than the words that come out of your mouth.

Some would even go so far as to suggest that there is a reason why you have two ears and one mouth, and that you should therefore listen twice as much as you talk!

Listening is very definitely not the same as hearing. Perhaps one of the most important things you can do for anyone else is to take the time to listen carefully to what they are saying, considering both their verbal and non-verbal communication. Using techniques like [questioning](#) and [reflection](#) demonstrates that you are both listening and interested.

When you are talking, be aware of the words you use. Could you be misunderstood or confuse the issue? Practise clarity and learn to seek feedback or clarification to ensure your message has been understood. By using questions effectively, you can both check others’ understanding, and also learn more from them.

You may think that selecting your words is the most important part of getting a message across, but non-verbal communication actually plays a much bigger part than many of us are aware. Some experts suggest

that around three-quarters of the 'message' is communicated by non-verbal signals such as body language, tone of voice, and the speed at which you speak.

These non-verbal signals reinforce or contradict the message of our words and are much harder to fake than words. They are therefore a much more reliable signal and learning to read body language is a vital part of communication.

### 3. Improve your more advanced communication skills

Once you are confident in your basic listening and verbal and non-verbal communication, you can move onto more advanced areas around communication, such as becoming more effective in how you speak, and understanding why you may be having communication problems.

Communication is rarely perfect and can fail for a number of reasons. Understanding more about the various barriers to good communication means that you can be aware of—and reduce the likelihood of—ineffective interpersonal communication and misunderstandings. Problems with communication can arise for a number of reasons, such as:

- Physical barriers, for example, being unable to see or hear the speaker properly, or language difficulties;
- Emotional barriers, such as not wanting to hear what is being said, or engage with that topic; and
- Expectations and prejudices that affect what people see and hear.

There are also circumstances in which communication is more difficult: for example, when you have to have an unpleasant conversation with someone, perhaps about their standard of work. These conversations may be either planned or unplanned.

There tend to be two issues that make conversations more difficult: emotion, and change.

- Various emotions can get in the way of communicating, including anger and aggression, or stress. Few of us are able to communicate effectively when we are struggling to manage our emotions, and sometimes the best thing that can be done is to postpone the conversation until everyone is calmer.
- Difficult conversations are often about the need for change. Many of us find change hard to manage, especially if it is associated with an implied criticism of existing ways of working.

### 4. Look inwards

Interpersonal skills may be about how you relate to others, but they start with *you*. Many will be improved dramatically if you work on your personal skills.

For example, people are much more likely to be drawn to you if you can maintain a positive attitude. A positive attitude also translates into improved self-confidence.

You are also less likely to be able to communicate effectively if you are very stressed about something. It is therefore important to learn to recognise, manage and reduce stress in yourself and others. Being able to remain assertive, without becoming either passive or aggressive, is also key to effective communication.

Perhaps the most important overarching skill is developing emotional intelligence.

**Emotional Intelligence** is the ability to understand your own and others' emotions, and their effect on behaviour and attitudes. It is therefore perhaps best considered as both personal and interpersonal in its

nature, but there is no doubt that improving your emotional intelligence will help in all areas of interpersonal skills. Daniel Goleman, the author of a number of books on emotional intelligence, identified five key areas, three of which are personal, and two interpersonal.

- The personal skills, or ‘how we manage ourselves’, are self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation. In other words, the first steps towards understanding and managing the emotions of others is to be able to understand and manage our own emotions, including understanding what motivates us.
- The social skills, or ‘how we handle relationships with others’, are empathy and social skills. These mean understanding and feeling for others, and then being able to interact effectively with them.

Improving your emotional intelligence therefore improves your understanding that other people have different points of view. It helps you to try to see things from their perspective. In doing so, you may learn something whilst gaining the respect and trust of others.

## 5. Use and practise your interpersonal skills

There are a number of situations in which you need to use interpersonal skills. Consciously putting yourself in those positions, and practising your skills, then reflecting on the outcomes, will help you to improve.

For example:

- Interpersonal skills are essential when working in groups.  
  
Group-working is also a common situation, both at home and at work, giving you plenty of opportunity to work on your skills. It may be helpful to understand more about group dynamics and ways of working, as these can affect how both you and others behave.
- Interpersonal skills may also be particularly helpful if you have to negotiate, persuade and influence others.

Effective negotiations—that is, where you are seeking a win–win outcome, rather than win–lose—will pave the way to mutual respect, trust and lasting interpersonal relations. Only by looking for a solution that works for both parties, rather than seeking to win at all costs, can you establish a good relationship that will enable you to work together over and over again.

Being able to persuade and influence others—again, for mutual benefit—is also a key building block towards strong interpersonal relations.

- Resolving and mediating in conflict scenarios can be a real test of interpersonal skills  
  
Sometimes negotiation and persuasion are not enough to avoid conflict. When this happens, you need strong conflict resolution and potentially even mediation skills. Conflict can arise from poorly-handled interpersonal communications and may be addressed simply by listening carefully to both sides and demonstrating that you have done so. Finding a win–win situation is similarly important here, because it shows that you respect both sides.

While these skills may be thought of as advanced communication skills, if you are often required to manage such situations, some specialist training may also be helpful.

- Finally, problem-solving and decision-making are usually better when they involve more than one person

Problem-solving and decision-making are key life skills. While both can be done alone, they are often better for the involvement of more people. This means that they also frequently involve interpersonal elements, and there is no doubt that better interpersonal skills will help with both.

6. Reflect on your experience and improve

The final, but by no means least important, element in developing and improving your skills is to develop the habit of self-reflection. Taking time to think about previous conversations and other interpersonal interactions will enable you to learn from your mistakes and successes and continue to develop. You might, for example, find it helpful to keep a diary or learning journal and write in it each week.