

PEOPLE SKILLS

Guiding you to Effective Interpersonal Behaviour

Bill Sultmann & Tony Burton

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The illustration represents how our perceptions influence our behaviours; what we see, hear and say are all influenced by our perceptions of the world.

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An illustration at the top of the page shows a human ear on the left, a mouth in the center, and an eye on the right, all rendered in a sketchy, artistic style. A horizontal grey bar is positioned below the mouth and eye, and the word 'CONTENTS' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across this bar.

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About the Authors

Bill Sultmann

Bill Sultmann is the newly appointed Executive Director (Edmund Rice Education) in Saint Francis Xavier Province of the Christian Brothers. Before accepting this position, Bill was the Director of the Catholic Education Office in the Diocese of Toowoomba.

A registered teacher and psychologist, Bill's professional experiences have included teaching (primary, secondary, tertiary), guidance consultancy and administrative roles in Catholic and government sectors. He holds bachelor's degrees in arts and educational studies, master's degrees in educational psychology and Christian leadership, and a research doctorate in educational psychology. Bill has contributed to numerous texts, monographs and journals and his particular interests include educational psychology, interpersonal effectiveness, organisational development and Christian leadership within the Catholic tradition.

Tony Burton

Tony Burton is the Director Development in the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology. He is a registered psychologist and teacher and coordinates and teaches counselling in the Faculty. He has worked as a psychologist, teacher and manager, and has consulted widely in the public and private sectors. He has presented numerous workshops about communication skills as they apply to both personal and organisational effectiveness, and is coauthor of *Building Personal Effectiveness* and *People Skills for Everyone*. Tony's special interests include improving interpersonal and organisational communication to enhance positive outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

***P**eople Skills: guiding you to effective interpersonal behaviour* is for those people who are serious about exploring some of the fascinating dynamics of interpersonal effectiveness at a relatively beginning level. It would be erroneous to believe that there are universal truths to be conveyed, and arrogant to advocate that we as fellow “travellers” on this journey of life can provide the answers. Our hope is that we can highlight adequately a little of the field and, where possible, introduce you to your own possibilities for exploration so that your perceptions and pursuits may be more informed, directed and energised.

We begin by establishing a context for interpersonal development and then suggest a basic model for interpersonal functioning. In the chapters that follow, we apply this to reflections about the self, the significance of basic skills for advancing effective relationships, working effectively in groups, thriving in organisations, the challenge of personal leadership and valuing renewal as an ongoing process in interpersonal development.

The format within each chapter is designed to be supportive of our core goals: to share meaning with a sense of application to the real world. The material has been designed to be accessible by a “multi-aged classroom” and includes both theoretical concepts and practical applications. The themes are introduced by key terms and developed by related concepts. The short quotation that begins each chapter offers you an opportunity to reflect creatively.

THINKING ABOUT PEOPLE SKILLS

The unexamined life is not worth living

— Heraclitus

Focusing

Pass it on

A person we knew and admired was renowned within his community for his ability to get to the heart of the matter, largely through his simple but powerful reflections. His life was characterised by reaching out to others. Herbert Victor Tildesley (1905–1997) epitomised the classical “giver” who always put others first and was unceasing in generosity of all forms. One of his typical responses to those who would express appreciation for his kindness was simply, “just pass it on”. The content of this work is offered in the same vein. To the extent that we have been offered something of value, and have been able to reflect and choose what has been helpful, we too endeavour simply to pass it on.

Thinking Metacognitively

Those who engage regularly in an activity, such as sport, can become obsessed to the point of not just “playing a game” but becoming so committed that significant time is spent just thinking about it. For example, sportspeople often become so fixated on the experience that they “stand back” and think about what the task actually involves. As a consequence of this action they may go on to analyse

their style and maybe progress to rehearsing a better way of approaching what might normally be a complex activity.

The process of separating oneself from a task in order to examine it is a process of metacognition — a means for reflection that entails looking objectively at something without actually engaging in the process itself.

Within the discipline of education, teachers can use this technique of thinking metacognitively in order to facilitate learning.

For instance, in the area of literacy development, beginning readers can be encouraged to stand back from the print and make some observation about the task of “reading” itself. That is, they can be encouraged to pause and recognise the type size, font changes, repetition of language, left-to-right sequencing and the structure of a paragraph from the top to the bottom of the page. In this way the process of reading becomes more readily understood and the skills involved in the process become more accessible.

The development of people skills is a metacognitive process because the individual is challenged to stand outside a situation and analyse the dynamics of what is observed or spoken about. It is a process of deeper reflection. The act of reflection allows for a person’s experience to be brought to a situation, and, with the application of knowledge and skills, to make a meaningful contribution to the life and experience of self and others. It involves thinking about what is unfolding, which thereby provides a basis for interpersonal understanding.

Saying it Simply

Most writers will advance that the first, and often the most difficult, task is that of identifying the core theme around which the material will be gathered. Once having settled on the theme the task then becomes one of explaining it simply. An experienced academic colleague of ours has said to his students that it is a process not unlike retelling “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”. In other words,

identify the simple story line and allow it to unfold in the presentation. Begin with the “bones” and allow the “flesh” to be added with some reasonable structure.

The theme of this work on people skills is one of the most fundamental aspects of our human functioning: our wholeness and connection. This takes place within our personal being and in our relationships with others.

Not only are our individual natures unique, so too are our relational experiences. We are intimately connected to other people, life’s events, institutions and challenges so that a variety of environments inform and change us. Understanding the nature of these engagements and being in a position to use this knowledge in productive ways is crucial to our development; that is, to be able to think about, intervene and improve in the context of others, groups, organisational life, leadership responsibilities and continuous renewal.

We possess a personal ecology (our cognitive, affective, physical and spiritual dimensions) and we function in numerous environments with others. This text explores these ecologies and seeks to unravel some of the complexity and dynamics at work within them.

Facilitating the Continuing Journey

The experience of this text does not begin with the first few pages, or for that matter, the entirety of the material. Our belief is that one never comes to an educative experience empty-handed, and that what the teacher should do is recognise and engage the wisdom that already exists and so add value to the journey already begun. Hence, what this text offers is a stimulus to reflect and build on the experience of your life. The text presumes that you already know a great deal about people skills as people engagement has been part of the “fabric” of your life.

Learning occurs when interpretation happens and your own ideas are enhanced. The extent of this learning is only tested when this interpretation is applied in some practical way; for example, it could be the first time you are able to use the concepts to reduce conflict or are able to understand better a group's function. Whether you can use these ideas to enhance your life's journey will be evidence of the success or otherwise of what we teach you.

Key Terms

Prior to proceeding with a discussion of people skills there are a few basic terms and concepts that demand attention. These are at the core of interpersonal development and serve to remind us of why we should bother with people skills.

Mind

The mind is an arena of thought based on selection and interpretation of experience that is secured through perception.

Feelings

Feelings are electrochemical reactions to thoughts that are transmitted around the body.

Body

The body is the physical self that is able to sense, move and carry out behaviours in response to thoughts, and the feelings that are precipitated by thoughts.

Community

Community is the presence and experience of people interacting as a consequence of their bodies, minds and feelings.

Consciousness

Consciousness is the awareness of self and the environment as a consequence of the selection and interpretation of information.

Unconsciousness

Unconsciousness is a body of stored experience, perceptions, thoughts and feelings that are not recognised at the level of consciousness.

Perception

Perception is the ability to receive information through the senses of touch, taste, smell, vision and hearing, and the “sixth” sense of intuition.

Concept Development

The primary theme of this text is that people skills are significant and that some exploration of them in terms of a changing context, education, prevention, development and connection is helpful to interpersonal relationships and quality of life.

Context

One of the few statements we can make with some certainty these days is that our lives are becoming increasingly complex, busier and more pressured. Moreover, the environments impacting on us are undergoing change. To be able to deal with this feeling of being rushed in a rapidly changing world we need to become sensitive to the complexity around us, as well as develop the necessary skills to meet the challenges with confidence. Rather than being passive and reactive within these complex social systems, our behaviour needs to reflect proactivity and skilled engagement with a changing and challenging world.

Education

The concept of “feed a man a fish and you feed him for a day, but teach him how to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime” is applicable to what we want to achieve with this book. Education, drawn from the Latin, *educare*, means leading people out of places of unknowing to circumstances of growth and development. Within a contemporary context this is pursued through facilitation and

support for the development of skills and behaviours that can be life-long and life-giving. As the slogan recounts: “The sage on the stage is now replaced by the guide on the side.”

Prevention

The terms “upstream and downstream” interventions are sometimes used to differentiate two types of behaviours that are focused on people supporting and assisting other people. The terms are usually associated with the metaphor of the river (life’s journey) and the difficulties that people experience as they travel.

A man is sitting on the banks of a stream when he sees a person in trouble and, without hesitation, he goes to the rescue. He swims to the person, secures his attention and reliance, returns to shore and pursues the necessary resuscitation and recovery techniques. The rescue is successful, but before too much time elapses another “body” comes floating by. Once again the man on the bank rescues the person in the water. Again and again the task is performed until the “rescuer” becomes too worn out to rescue anymore, and ultimately decides to go “upstream” to explore and intervene before the trouble starts. In a similar mode, this text tries to offer sufficient knowledge and skills so that upstream calamity can be prevented, thereby reducing the need for downstream intervention.

Development

How often do we consider just how lucky we are? This is not a luck based on winning the Lotto or having a good day at the races, but rather the good fortune in just being alive. Some people are never fully happy. It is always a matter of my next million, my third car, a new beach house, the ultimate promotion or a new business venture. In other words, what they have is never enough. However, for others, just being alive, waking up and being given another day is sufficient for them to feel happy. What becomes important in life is the satisfaction that is derived not from material things, but the happiness that arises from being and experiencing the richness of life. All people are journeying in life and at the heart of this journey

is authentic human development: the capacity to learn and grow from experience, which has as its ultimate reward contentment, peace and happiness.

Connectedness

Environmental scientists have long told us that unless we recognise our reliance on nature our long-term prospects of survival will diminish. Pollution, ozone reduction and toxic waste are facts that tell us more and more of our global interdependence and of our delicate positioning within the expanding universe. Within the arena of our social existence we have always recognised that we are not alone and that the experience of development is dependent upon others. Primarily, who we are is defined by the nature of our experience of others, who provide us with the information about life, living and ways of behaving that constitute our social and cultural norms.

Our processes for receiving and dealing with information are shown in the ways that we take in information (through perception), select and interpret what the conscious and unconscious self determines, give expression to this information in our rational mind and then experience the nature of this thought through feelings. Our reactions and movement within the community give added expression to this behaviour, which in turn can serve to alter or reinforce the thoughts, feelings and behaviours that were precipitated initially. The next chapter will detail this interconnectedness that exists among your mind, feelings, behaviours and interpersonal relationships, all of which constitute the basis of interpersonal behaviour.
