

PAPER
11

Self and others

Bob Dick (1986) *Self and others*. An extract from Bob Dick, *Learning to communicate: activities, skills, techniques, models*. A joint publication of Interchange and the University of Queensland Bookshop.

The most basic communication skills are to do with observation or awareness—of self, of others, of the interaction. In this part, awareness skills are practised. Simple conversations between two people are then considered.

Awareness

This section of the workbook contains a number of awareness exercises. Exercise 2¹ is the first of them. It deals with immediate self-awareness. This is applied in Exercise 3 to dealing with one's own anxiety. Exercise 4 focusses on awareness of the immediate context. Exercise 5 extends this to others; it explores different

1. Exercise 1 appeared earlier in the workbook from which this is an extract.

types of awareness in the context of face-to-face communication. In Exercise 6 you are invited to consider a number of questions about face to face communication, and draw some conclusions.

You can do a lot to enhance the quality of communication by approaching it with heightened awareness of yourself and others. There is a frame of mind which, with practice, you can learn to recognise and adopt. The aim of these exercises is to help you to do this. At the same time you will be encouraged to discover for yourself some of the important personal dimensions of face-to-face communication.

Exercise 2 Self Awareness

Follow the instructions below as someone reads them aloud to you.

If there is room to do so, and the floor is carpeted or you can work outside on the grass, lie down on your back. Have your hands by your side, or resting lightly on your thighs. Place your legs together, uncrossed.

Otherwise sit comfortably on a chair, preferably one with an upright back. Have your feet together, resting on the floor directly below your knees. Sit straight but relaxed. Rest your hands lightly on your legs, just above your knees.

Now relax and be comfortable. Close your eyes gently.

Let yourself become aware of the sounds around you. Become aware of how many sounds you can hear now that you are attending to them. Relax, and listen. Do not try to do anything in your mind with the sounds, just let them lead your thoughts wherever they will. Relax, and listen ...

... Let your awareness move to your own body. Become aware that, with your eyes closed, you can still know how you are positioned. Become aware of the touch of your body against the chair, or the ground -- of one part of your body against the other. Move gently, and be aware of the senses that signal your movement to you. Now be still. Relax, and be aware ...

... Let yourself become aware of your breathing. Do not control it -- just be aware of it. With your senses, follow your breath as you breathe in ... and breathe out. Be aware of the senses that allow you to follow your breath. Do not try to think about your awareness. There is no need to shut out your thoughts, but just let your mind go where it wants to while you remain aware. Relax, and be aware ...

... Let yourself become aware of your inner self -- the tensions in your muscles -- perhaps the sound or feel of your heartbeat -- your emotional reaction to this exercise. Let your thoughts just fade as you maintain your awareness. Just relax and be aware ...

When you are ready, let your awareness return in its own time to your surroundings. Be aware again of what you can hear. Open your eyes. When you are ready, stand slowly. Stretch. Yawn.

Return your attention to the people around you.

In later exercises you will often be asked to relax before beginning. If you can remember the feeling of relaxation and awareness, you will find it easier to recapture it when you are invited to do so.

Exercise 3 Identifying and managing anxiety

This is an exercise for individual work, with occasional interchange of information in pairs. You will first identify a situation where you felt under mild stress. You will use your recollection of this situation to help you to identify the symptoms that best indicate to you that you are stressed. You will then practise relieving these symptoms through the use of deliberate relaxation.

As you work through this exercise you will once again be asked to be aware of your own body's reactions to what goes on about it. You can use it for further practice at self awareness.

Where you are asked to record any material, space will be provided in the workbook at the right hand side of the page.

1. Imagine looking through your diary (or actually do so).

Starting with today, flip back through the pages. Each day, recall the various things that you did.

As you remember an occasion which was even mildly stressful, write it down in the space on the right.

2. Look back over the list of stressful occasions you have recorded. Choose one of them which is in some way typical of the things you find most stressful.
3. Recall the chosen situation in as much detail as you can. When and where was it? Who was there? Recall when it first began to be stressful. What were you doing? Where were the others? What were they doing? What were they saying?

As you begin to recall it, your body will begin to react to your recollection. You will probably begin to experience in weakened form the same feelings you felt then.

Recall how your body reacted to the stress. What were the signs that your body used to tell you that you were under stress?

As you recall some immediate bodily response to the stress, record it in the space on the right.

4. Continue imagining the stressful situation as vividly as you can. Then, when asked to do so, stand up, take a deep and even breath, stretch, and then as you exhale let all the tension flow out of your body.

Notice the difference between the feelings of stress, and the feelings of relaxation. Notice how you can relax yourself at will, provided you recognise that you are under stress, and do something about it.

5. Working with the other members of your group, compile a list of the early warning symptoms of stress. As others list the way they respond to stress, you will find that some of these responses are also true for you. When they are, add them to your own list.

Much of the time you may not realise you are under stress until the stress becomes serious. The sooner you recognise a stressful situation, the more effectively you will be able to relax.

Three steps in stress management are

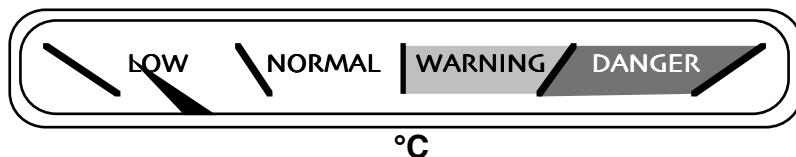
Awareness: Use the early warning symptoms identified earlier to become aware of stress as early as possible.

Relaxation: Take control of your breathing; if the occasion permits, stretch and yawn; deliberately relax.

Expression: If still tense, act out the feeling in some way by adopting some safe fight or flight behaviour that does not make the problem worse.

You have so far developed the information to practise the first and second of these. The remainder of the exercise addresses the third ...

At different times our level of arousal differs. We can become aware of the level of arousal if we choose to do so. It's a bit like a temperature gauge in a car, which often has a band of temperatures which represent a normal operating range. Below the normal range the car engine does not operate very well. A little beyond the normal range it does, but not for long. At higher temperatures the engine will be irreparably damaged.



Though notice this. The temperature gauge isn't much use unless the driver looks at it from time to time.

With people there is an added complication. Each of the zones marked 'low' and 'warning' can feel pleasant or unpleasant. We use different terms to refer to them: relaxation or boredom; excitement or anxiety. Within the warning zone we find it hard to keep control, but can do so. If we become further aroused our self-protective mechanisms take over and we switch into anxiety-solving.

8. Think of the occasions when you did things you later wished you hadn't, particularly fight or flight behaviours. Are there any symptoms which tell you when your arousal is in the warning zone, and rising.

9. Compare notes in your small group. As other people report safe fight and flight behaviours (step 7) that seem useful, add them to your list if you wish. As other people report useful early warning symptoms of high arousal levels, add them too.

Assignment 1 Stress log

During the next five working days, try to maintain an awareness of ...

- how stressful different types of situation are for you;
- how it feels for you to be stressed;
- at what level of stress you find it hard to maintain control; and
- how you tend to behave when you are under stress.

For each of the five days, set aside five minutes in the evening to reflect on these dimensions of stress.

At the end of the five days, briefly answer the following questions (using the space provided, if you wish):

Home worksheet 1: Stress

1. Briefly define a 'stressful' situation. Give an example, and use it to illustrate your definition.
2. Briefly explain the difference between a situation that makes you feel anxious, and one that excites you. Briefly explain the similarities. Give an example of each, and use them to illustrate the similarities and differences.
3. List the six or seven 'early warning symptoms' that seem to be most reliable in indicating to you that you are under stress. Of the six or seven, which are you usually most immediately aware of.
4. Briefly describe one instance where you succeeded in reducing the level of anxiety through awareness and relaxation. Describe how you did it.

5. Briefly describe one situation when you did something you later wished you hadn't. How often does this happen? At what level of stress does it happen? What can you do to recognise your growing stress before it happens?

Exercise 4 Listening and reporting

Work in pairs with someone you already know. Move away from other pairs to give yourself some room and reduce the distracting effect of their talk. Sit beside each other, closely enough so that you can hear each other clearly without having to talk loudly.

In this exercise you are to practise discriminating between information and interpretation. Information consists of the basic data which are immediately available to your senses. Interpretation is the meaning that you read into the basic information.

“I hear footsteps on gravel” is interpretation. A report which is nearer to being information might be -

“I can hear a regular sequence of sharp, crunching sounds which seem to come from successively different points in space.”

The aim of this exercise is for you to determine from your own experience how you use and report information. For the exercise you will need to allot two roles, “A” and “B”. You will each have a turn at both.

Your role as A is to listen carefully to any sounds you can hear, and report them to B. You are to try to report the raw information, rather than an interpretation of it.

Your role as B is to listen carefully to A, and help A to get as close as possible to information without interpretation.

Both close your eyes. For one minute, A reports to B what she can hear. Then reverse roles, with B reporting to A.

When you have finished, briefly answer the following questions individually. Then compare notes in a ten minute discussion. (You can use the space beside each question as working space if you wish.)

1. In this exercise, how easy or difficult is it to convey information without interpretation?— impossible, difficult, so-so, moderately easy, a piece of cake? Why?
2. Recollect carefully -- which came first into your awareness, the information or the interpretation? ('The information was immediate: I heard a crunching sound, and had to work out what it was' or 'The interpretation was immediate; I heard footsteps, and had to make a conscious effort to hear the sounds as sounds'.)
3. Can you recollect times when the other person's report triggered your awareness in retrospect? If so, what do you conclude from this? (If not, don't worry.)

4. Were there any times when your interpretation differed from the other person's? If not, can you imagine a situation when this might occur?

5. Before doing this exercise would you ordinarily have regarded interpretation (e.g. footsteps in gravel) as fact or interpretation? Does this matter? Why / why not?

6. Compared to the information you used in this exercise, is the information available to you in interpersonal situations more or less subtle? More or less complex? More or less liable to misinterpretation?

7. Now consider the exercise as a whole. What do you see as the implications for face-to-face communication?

Exercise 5 “I see, I think, I feel”

(Based on a gestalt awareness exercise)

In this exercise you will draw on material from both of the preceding exercises as you talk with another person. The aim is to practise distinguishing between what your outward senses bring to you, what your inner senses bring to you, and the interpretations that fleet through your conscious mind as you do so.

The exercise proceeds through four stages. First you will focus your attention on yourself and try to become relaxed and comfortable. Second, direct your attention to the other person and report only what you can see of her. Third, when appropriate, add to this the meaning that you read into what you see. Fourth,

add to this your own fleeting emotional responses. These responses may be to the exercise, to what you communicate, or to what is communicated to you.

Choose a partner. If possible, choose someone that you know at least a little, and feel comfortable working with. If you don't know each other take a minute to introduce yourself.

Move away from other pairs to give yourself some room and reduce the distraction of their talk. Sit down (on the floor, if you wish) facing each other. Find a distance where you can look at each other without feeling uncomfortable.

During the exercise maintain whatever level of eye contact is comfortable for you.

Stage 1 (about half a minute). Sit comfortably. Relax. Become aware of your own level of relaxation. Now, while looking at the other person, become aware of how it feels to give your attention to someone else.

Stage 2 (about two minutes). Each focus your awareness on the other person. Become aware of what you can see. Take it in turns to report your awareness as it happens: "Right now, I am aware that ...".

Report the more-or-less permanent features of the other person -- appearance, clothing, and the like. Do not go beyond what you and the other person feel comfortable with. Confine your report to what you can actually see, being as specific as you can. Try to communicate only information, not interpretation. When the other person speaks, give her your full attention.

Stage 3 (about two minutes). Continue as before. Now include also the less permanent features you can see, such as fleeting postures, gestures and expressions. Include momentary hand gestures, and facial expression around the eyes and mouth. This time, when appropriate, add your interpretations. Report your

awareness. If appropriate also say what you imagine is the meaning of what you observe. "I am aware that ..., [and I assume that ...]".

Give the other person your full attention when she speaks. You need not respond to what the other person says. Just report your own awareness of the other person, and your interpretation (if any). Confine yourself to what you and the other person feel comfortable with. But be aware of what you do not report, for any reason.

Stage 4 (about five minutes). Continue as before, reporting your awareness and your interpretation of what you see. Focus your awareness more deliberately on the fleeting expressions (particularly those about the mouth and eyes) that change from moment to moment. Report your immediate awareness. As before, add your interpretations if they are relevant. Also report your own response to what is said. "I am aware that ... [and I assume ..., and feel ...]".

Try to be aware of the other person, yourself, and your interpretations. Report your own awareness and interpretations. Listen carefully to the other person's report, and be aware of your reaction to it.

Assignment 2

Awareness of others

Choose a television programme which seems likely to involve some emotional scenes. It may be a political debate between known antagonists on one of the daily news reports like '60 minutes'. It may be a soap opera or some torrid drama.

Turn the sound off. Watch the programme (picture only) for about 20 to 30 minutes. As the programme proceeds, try to remain aware of your interpretation of what is happening on the screen. When you interpret what you see as some strong emotion, note down in a few words the emotion and the non-verbal

expression of the person you are watching: posture, gesture, facial expression, use of space, and so on. Also note how confident you are of your interpretation.

Emotion

Non-verbal signs

Confidence

At the end of the time, list the emotions that seem to occur most often. Look for non-verbal signals that seem to be associated more or less consistently with particular emotions (or at least as you interpreted them).

Use the information you have gathered to answer the following questions (overleaf)

1. Which three or four emotions did you find easiest to interpret from visual information only?
2. What visual information was associated with each of the emotions?

3. How much of the time were you able to reach some interpretation of the feelings of the people you were watching?

4. To what extent was your interpretation based on the non-verbal signals from the person? To what extent did it depend on the context (other people, the situation, and the like) and on what had happened beforehand?

5. If you had been one of the people in the interaction, how much do you think your own intentions and feelings would have influenced your interpretation of others' behaviour?

Exercise 6 Dimensions of face to face communication

First, consider these questions about awareness.

1. How easy do you find it to remain aware at the same time of the other person and of yourself?

2. How active is your mind. Does it continuously or only intermittently interpret the information that comes to you through your senses?

3. You have been giving your concentrated attention to yourself and another person in face-to-face communication. Was this high level of attention characterised by a recognisable feeling? In other words, does 'being attentive' feel different from being unattentive?

4. How different is this concentrated attention from the level of attention you usually give to the other person and yourself during face-to-face communication?

The following statements may or may not be correct. Explore your reaction to them in the light of your own past and immediate experience.

5. "I have the capacity to understand the information in front of me only to the extent that I pay attention to it and try to understand it."

6. "I have the capacity to understand others only to the extent that I can acknowledge the possibility of behaving in the same way myself."

7. "My perception of other's feelings is often unconscious. When conscious, it is often interpreted from my own intuitive reaction to it. I can perceive my intuitive reaction only to the extent that I am self-aware, and accepting of my reaction."

Exercise 7 Depth of disclosure

At various times during the previous exercises you have been asked to be aware of: things outside yourself (including other people); your thoughts; and your emotions and other bodily reactions. Gestaltists sometimes refer to these as the outer world, the middle world, and the inner world respectively.

You can think of the inner world of feelings as being the centre of a number of concentric circles. The middle world of thoughts then lies outside that. The outer world lies both literally and figuratively beyond that again.

Here are some exercises and questions about those three worlds for you to consider.

The exercise has four stages. For stages 1 to 3, you will work in pairs. For stage 4 you will join together with another one or two pairs to compare notes.

Stage 1. For three minutes, talk to each other only about what you can see or hear. Limit yourself to what you can see and hear now. Do not add to it any information about your thoughts and feelings.

When you have completed stage 1, jot down a few adjectives which characterise the sort of relationship for which such an interchange would be appropriate.

Your adjectives:

Stage 2. For three minutes, talk to each other only about the thoughts and beliefs that are going through your mind now. Do not include anything on the world around you, or about your own feelings or attitudes to any of the material being discussed.

When you have completed stage 2, jot down a few adjectives which describe the sort of relationship for which such an exchange would be appropriate.

Your adjectives:

Stage 3. For three minutes, talk to each other only about your own present feelings -- how you react emotionally to the exercise, the other person, what the other person says. Do not include any information about your thoughts, or about the outside world.

When you have completed stage 3, jot down a few adjectives which describe the sort of relationship for which such an exchange would be appropriate.

Your adjectives:

Stage 4. Introduce yourself briefly to one or two other pairs near you. Compare your adjectives with those devised by them. Then see if you can come to an agreement of what sort of information characterises the following relationships:

- *A distant, or casual, or formal relationship, where people are strangers, is characterised by the exchange of information mainly about ... (things and events / thoughts and beliefs / feelings)*

- *An ongoing and informal (but not close) relationship is unlikely to involve the interchange of much information about ... (things and events / thoughts and beliefs / feelings)*

- *Information about ... is most likely to be exchanged within a close relationship ...
(things and events / thoughts and beliefs / feelings)*

