

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the nature of interpersonal communication
- To appreciate the importance of assertion in interpersonal communication and be introduced to some key assertion strategies
- To understand the interpersonal nature of giving feedback, receiving criticism and resolving conflicts
- To establish attentive listening as an assertion strategy
- To understand meeting skills as interpersonal skills

INTRODUCTION

Communicating interpersonally is a “way of life” in organizations. Not only is interpersonal communication inescapable, but also your abilities in this area are of paramount importance. Interpersonal competence in recent years has been consistently ranked high as an important requirement for successful job performance. This is why companies and institutions put a high premium on interpersonal communication (see below a recent NUS invitation for staff to attend an interpersonal communication talk).

What is interpersonal communication?

Interpersonal communication is a term usually applied to verbal and nonverbal interactions in one-on-one or small-group settings. “People skills” and “soft skills” are terms often used to describe someone’s interpersonal competence, although the word “soft” seems to be an inappropriate word to describe skills which can potentially cost you your job. If viewed from another perspective, these should be “hard” skills too because they are difficult to learn and their impact on your career and personal life is huge.

In the workplace, one who is good in interpersonal communication can relate to and work with a wide variety of people, negotiate differences, handle conflicts, make requests effectively and receive information objectively. A person who is effective in interpersonal communication will be open to the ideas of others and willing to put forward views of her own – both essential

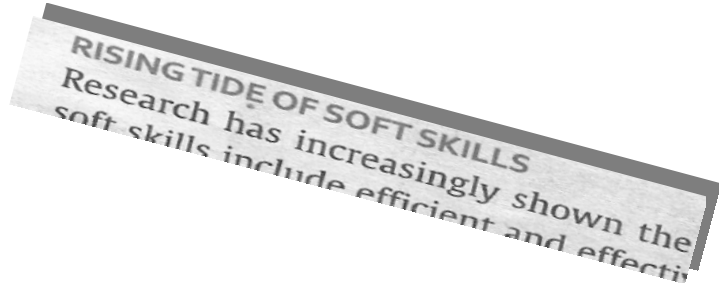


activities in the process of problem solving. Interpersonal communication is usually perceived as purely oral. However, if it is about dealing with people through, for example, negotiation and persuasion, then certain forms of written communication are also interpersonal in nature. Emails, chats, letters of request and refusal, and

similar kinds of writing, also involve communication between people who assert themselves through arguments, requests and demands. In other words, these written forms also require you to negotiate interpersonal relations with your readers.

In this lesson, you will learn about the three interpersonal functions of communication. These are:

- Asserting
- Receiving criticism
- Resolving conflicts



RISING TIDE OF SOFT SKILLS
Research has increasingly shown the
soft skills include efficient and effective

ASSERTION IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

At the heart of interpersonal communication is **assertion**, thus the most crucial strategies in effective interpersonal communication are assertion strategies. These are ways that enable you to maintain respect, satisfy your needs, and defend your rights without dominating, manipulating, abusing, or controlling others. It is important for you to be familiar with these strategies in order for you to develop your skills in effective interpersonal communication.

Assertion in interpersonal communication requires another person to do something, perhaps to change her own behavior or to ask her to do things for you or others. Because of this, assertion comes from high self-esteem and an acceptance of oneself because not everyone is able to assert herself and get the other person to change or do something. For example, instead of asking another person to stop doing something because it affects you, you may just keep silent. Perhaps in your culture, demanding your rights is not a highly valued behavior. Or it may also be possible that you would rather not tell your friend that she has done something wrong because you value her friendship more than some truth.

Assertive behavior thus is **making explicit** what you think about or want from another person. It acknowledges your rights as an individual and the rights of other people. When the occasion demands, an assertive person can disagree, stand up for her own rights and present alternative points of view without being intimidated or putting the other person down. In contrast, a person who feels threatened in such situations behaves with aggressive or non-assertive responses rather than with assertive behavior.

The pattern of behavior that leads to aggression or non-assertion is based on a number of factors such as culture, low self-esteem and feelings of vulnerability. For example, feelings of vulnerability make you feel threatened. A person who feels threatened has two choices of behavior in a disagreement: attack and aggression, or fear and non-assertion. An aggressive person may try to win at all costs. This means dominating or humiliating others, even to the

point of ignoring a suggestion that provides the best solution simply because it is someone else's solution. A submissive person, on the other hand, is unable to assert or promote a point of view. When unpleasant situations arise, a submissive person tends to avoid these, leaving someone else with the problem.

The assertive leader is able to direct others without feeling the need to manipulate or to be aggressive as she recognizes the rights of co-workers. The assertive follower recognizes the right of the manager or leader to make reasonable requests and to expect the job to be done. An assertive person is therefore able to negotiate and compromise without feeling uncomfortable.

From the above description of assertion, you have probably observed that assertiveness is an individualist concept (refer to our lesson on intercultural communication). That is, to assert in interpersonal communication is to think of oneself as the source of decision-making and likewise to think of others as rational beings capable of making their own decisions.

So, if you say something like this to someone: "Please stop smoking in front of me because I am asthmatic and it also violates the university rule on smoking" – you are asserting your right to a smoke-free environment and you are assuming that the other person sees the logic of your assertion, and therefore stops smoking. But if you say this to the same person: "Could you please get out of the way because your smoking is killing me, and you obviously are ignorant of the university rule on smoking" – you probably want to accomplish the same thing, but here you are not being assertive. You are being aggressive.

Nevertheless, even in cases where you try to be as reasonably assertive as possible, in reality it is sometimes still difficult to do so. How many times have you actually told someone to stop smoking around you, instead of just walk away to avoid it? There are times when it is difficult to confront others even if you think you are right. There are many reasons for this, but one reason could be the collectivist context you are working in. In other words, to avoid 'hurting' another colleague because of something he has done, you say nothing or just avoid him.

Assertion also involves power. You may be able to assert yourself by invoking your rights to certain privileges, but this may come at a price. Assertiveness, while desirable, is always embedded in culture and power as can be seen, for example, through interpersonal relations between nurses and doctors, pilots and first officers, and call centre representatives and clients. Your social and professional positions and affiliations influence your ability to assert.

Assertiveness, while desirable, is always embedded in culture and power.

Thus, assertion is more complex than we think it is. The context of assertion is always important because this will give you the chance

to 'size up' the people you are communicating with. The point here therefore is that, to be good at asserting yourself, you must, first, study the nature of assertion and the many ways it manifests itself in real, daily situations.

Today there is a high demand for people who are good at influencing, persuading and convincing others besides having a knack for developing relationships and sensitivity to the needs of others, especially customer.¹

STRATEGIES OF ASSERTION

THE "I" MESSAGE

Let us thus begin with strategies of assertion which can help you manage interpersonal relations more effectively. There are, in other words, strategies of how to assert yourself while respecting the other person. You may not always be effective, but these strategies at least provide you with opportunities to say and write what you want within the parameters of mutual respect and understanding. There is always the possibility of hurting other people no matter how careful you are with your language and actions, but in all assertions you must at least ensure that they are well-intentioned and well-crafted.

A useful technique to develop assertion and show openness with others is an "I" message.

Look at the following examples:

"Your report is too sloppy. You'll have to retype it."

"This is the third time this month that you've been late for work. You'll have to be more punctual."

"That was a dumb promise you made. We can never have the job done by the end of the month."

When we communicate with others, we deliver messages. The messages above could be what you really want to say. Unfortunately, when we say or write them the way they are written above, we become interpersonally unsound. This is because the statements point a verbal finger of accusation at the receiver. They are sometimes referred to as the 'you-language'.

¹ Kant, K. (2010), Job hunting: It's a different world, *TODAY*, p. B7, 10 May 2010

Examples of “you” language in interpersonal relations are: “You’re lazy.” and “You’re wrong.” By contrast, **descriptive** statements are often termed “I” language since they focus on the speaker instead of judging the other person. Notice how each of the evaluative statements above can be rephrased in descriptive “I” language:

“I’m afraid the boss will get frustrated with both of us if we turn in a report with all these errors. We’ll get a better reaction if it’s retyped.”

“Since you’ve been coming in late, I’ve made a lot of excuses when people call asking for you. I’m uncomfortable with that, and that’s why I hope you’ll start showing up on time.”

“I’m worried about the promise you made. I don’t see how we can get the job done by the end of the month.”

Statements like these show that it is possible to be nonjudgmental and still say what you want without landing any unnecessary verbal punches. Such statements are a way of showing emotion and letting the other person know both how her behavior is perceived and how it affects you.

There are specific strategies that can help you assert effectively. Let us discuss them below in terms of what constitutes a good assertion statement.

The assertion statement

An assertion statement essentially involves the following strategies:

- Describing the behavior that needs to be changed in a non-judgmental way;
- Disclosing the asserter’s feelings; and
- Clarifying the concrete and tangible effect of the other person’s behavior on the asserter.

For example:

Behavior	When you do not let me know you will be late,
+	
Feelings	I feel annoyed
+	
Effects	because I am unable to reschedule my timetable.

To **describe behavior non-judgmentally**, it is recommended that you limit yourself to the behavior description and not draw inferences about the other person's motives, attitudes, character and so on. In addition, the description should be specific, objective and as brief as possible.

When it comes to **disclosure of feelings**, people from some cultures tend to be more comfortable than those from other cultures. Hence, it is not unusual for feelings to be stated less strongly (e.g., "I feel quite upset" instead of "I feel annoyed") or not to be disclosed at all, resulting in the use of only two assertion strategies.

For example:

Behavior	When you do not let me know you will be late,
+	
Effects	I am unable to reschedule my timetable.

In our interpersonal communication with others, it is always good to remember that assertiveness in one culture may be viewed as aggressiveness in another culture.

By **concrete and tangible effects** we mean those things that unnecessarily cost the asserter money, harm her possessions, consume her time, cause her extra work, endanger her job, and/or interfere with her effectiveness at work. A well-delivered assertion message that cites a concrete and tangible effect usually persuades the other person to change her behavior to meet the asserter's needs²

These assertion strategies, however, should not be followed as a formula, such that you start with describing behavior and end with stating the concrete and tangible effects. The important point is to remember that these strategies help you formulate messages that point to the problem and the solution and not to the character of the other person. Almost always, if you attack the person's character, you draw attention away from the real issues you want addressed and solved. People who are attacked personally tend to defend themselves first, instead of looking at the real issues raised

See something, say something

The statement above is the title of an article written by Richard Hartung in the Comments & Analysis section of *TODAY*, 16 June 2010, p. 15. Although it refers to an issue concerning the painting of an SMRT train which was left undetected or unreported, the statement is also relevant to interpersonal communication.

What are underlying interpersonal issues in the statement above? Do you think these issues are 'problems'? Why?

² These notes on assertions have been adapted from Chapter 10 of Bolton's *People Skills* (1988, pp. 158 - 176).

objectively. You will then have problems delivering your message because others may no longer be able to discriminate between the real and the peripheral issues.

THREE CONTEXTS OF ASSERTION

GIVING FEEDBACK

The specific assertion skills described above will be very useful as feedback skills. Giving feedback is always a tricky act because you will never be 100% sure how the recipient of your feedback will respond to it, much more act on it. But effective communication is based on giving and receiving feedback, and effective feedback creates trust and an open relationship between the sender and the receiver. This is how giving and receiving feedback (oral and written) is interpersonal in nature.

In an organization, appropriate and constructive feedback creates an open and encouraging organizational climate which, in turn, promotes a willingness to communicate. In contrast, a rigid or competitive environment can make most people reticent or hesitant to communicate and provide ideas.

Deliver your feedback clearly and appropriately

Feedback lets the sender understand how the message is being received and helps the receiver confirm whether her perception of the message is correct or incorrect. Feedback as a form of interpersonal communication requires you to show your receptiveness, attentiveness and interest in your listener or reader. The essential point to remember is to deliver your feedback **clearly, appropriately and persuasively**. Read the following simple conversation:

John: Have you read my draft?
Ryan: Yes, yes. Last night.
John: Any comment?
Ryan: None. It's quite ok. Not perfect, but it's ok.

Ryan's response or feedback is unclear. What does 'quite ok' mean? What about 'Not perfect, but it's ok'? These comments are not helpful at all because John will still end up not knowing what to change or what it is in draft that is 'ok'. What Ryan needs is feedback that is descriptive and specific, such as the following:

John: Have you read my draft?
Ryan: Yes, yes. Last night.
John: Any comment?
Ryan: "None. It's quite ok. *Your main argument is clear and the examples you gave to*

support it are very relevant and convincing. It's not perfect because typos have not been corrected, and your sub-headings seem to be missing, but it's generally ok. Boss should be able to follow your train of thought.

Ryan's feedback is still not complete (of course), but at least he now qualifies his feedback with objective references to which aspect(s) of the draft are 'ok' and 'not perfect'. If John is interested, he can then ask for those typographical errors and missing sub-headings so he can revise his draft. Ryan's feedback, in other words, has been delivered clearly enough such that they can both move forward in the conversation.

But it is not enough to deliver your feedback clearly. You must also do it appropriately. Check the following version of the conversation:

John: Have you read my draft?

Ryan: Yes, yes. Last night.

John: Oh, any comment?

Ryan: "None. It's quite ok. Your main argument is clear and the examples you gave to support it are very relevant and convincing. It's not perfect because *you have been careless with typos, and sloppy with your sub-headings*, but it's generally ok. Boss should be able to follow your train of thought.

Ryan's feedback here has become less objective and specific. Let us take out temporarily the possibility that Ryan and John are close friends and can therefore afford to be subjective and too personal in their feedback, and focus simply on the delivery of the feedback itself. When you use words like 'careless' and 'sloppy', you focus on the person's character and not on a description of what has been done. Can you proceed with work by revising your draft with comments like 'you have been careless' and 'sloppy with your sub-heading'? If you are the receiver of the feedback, your tendency would be to defend yourself first against these personal attacks: e.g., "I'm not careless! I read through the draft many times. Unfortunately, I still missed some of them, but I'm not careless."

In other words, by using subjective, non-concrete words, you draw attention away from the real issues: e.g., "where are the typos and the missing sub-headings so I can correct them"? The lesson here – to borrow the words we used in the earlier section on assertion – is to be non-judgmental and descriptive about the basis of our feedback. As much as possible, our descriptions must also be specific and concrete so that the person receiving the feedback focuses solely on the problem and not on defending herself against personal and subjective attacks.

Feedback, of course, is of different types. You can give positive feedback on colleagues or subordinates. Such feedback is much needed, especially in environments where people are stressed and overworked. Positive feedback is also given to encourage people to continue producing good results such as better sales and better customer service. Without positive

reinforcement, people in the workplace may feel disgruntled and uninspired. Appropriate and genuine positive feedback can help create a happy working environment.

Nevertheless, it is negative feedback such as the above statements which needs more care and thought because it can potentially damage relationships in the workplace and between companies and clients.

Negative feedback is constructive feedback

In its broadest sense, negative feedback is criticism in different forms, such as a complaint or a reprimand. If you have done sloppy work in your report, you may receive negative feedback from your director or superior. If a colleague thinks that you do not dress up appropriately in the office, she may tell you exactly what she feels. This is negative feedback. If you have to tell a teammate that her executive summary is poorly written, then this too is negative feedback.

As earlier mentioned, negative feedback is a fact of life everywhere, including business contexts where bad service or bad decisions may cause much money. But negative does not necessarily mean 'hurtful'. To manage interpersonal relations in the giving of such kind of feedback, you must always remember that 'negative' should also be 'constructive'. Give feedback that will help another person improve her work, and not to destroy her character. Thus, the essentials of good communication must be pursued vigorously: deliver the negative feedback clearly and appropriately.

Here are some basic strategies that could help you deliver your criticism effectively:

➤ **Begin with positive points.**

If you can, start with good feedback. Credit the person for something good that he or she has done. This will set the tone of the criticism.

➤ **Describe the problem in a non-judgmental way.**

Inappropriate: "You are such an unethical researcher by turning in formal reports without proper source documentation. In the next quarterly report, make sure that you document your sources."

Appropriate: "You turned in formal reports without proper source documentation. In the next quarterly report, make sure that you document your sources."

➤ **Criticize the action or item, not the person.**

Inappropriate: “You are abrupt with customers.”

Appropriate: “Being abrupt with customers portrays the company as uncaring.”

➤ **Provide justification.**

Do not forget to provide rational or reasonable justification for your criticism.

➤ **Focus on what needs to be done.**

Inappropriate: “Your files are untidy.”

Appropriate: “This file could do with a tidy up.”

➤ **Be specific and concrete.**

Inappropriate: “Your gestures were distracting.”

Appropriate: “Your gestures were distracting, especially when you constantly stretched your two hands forward every time you spoke.”

**Give feedback that will help
another person improve her work,
and not to destroy her character.**

➤ **Be always constructive.**

Inappropriate: “Your proposal is disorganized, contains computational errors, and is a writing disaster.”

Appropriate: “All the elements of a good proposal are here; they just need to be reordered and be more accurate.”

➤ **Check your facts.**

If your receiver identifies even one small element of your concern as being false, she could focus on it, argue about it, and move the conversation away from the issue at hand. Once a sender’s credibility on an issue is tainted, the goal cannot be accomplished.

➤ **Do not embarrass.**

Criticism is difficult enough to receive without being embarrassed in the process. If possible, criticize only in private. If not, involve others in the process only when necessary. Give the receiver an opportunity to retain her dignity while you deliver your criticism. If open feedback is unavoidable, exercise tact. Make sure that your feedback is again non-judgmental.

➤ **If appropriate, accept partial responsibility for the problem.**

An introduction such as “Perhaps my directions weren’t clear” can temper the impact of the criticism that follows.

➤ **Respect the other person’s right to respond.**

Take time to listen. And listen attentively! If the response is written, take time to read and understand where the other person is coming from. Acknowledge the response and always entertain the possibility that the

If we want to be listened to, we must also learn how to listen.

other person has a point. You cannot do this if you have made up your mind that the other person is wrong and you are right. Mirror questions like, “So what you’re saying is...” before you give your response, and open-ended questions such as “Can you tell me more about it...”, can convince the other person that you are seriously trying to understand her position or counter-feedback.

Feedforwarding is a forgotten but important feedback strategy

Another important strategy when providing negative feedback is feedforwarding. Not too many people are aware of this as a critical strategy in interpersonal relations. Essentially, feedforwarding is the sending of information *before* the main message is delivered. There is a need to do this especially in situations where you feel the main message might offend the receiver or reflect badly on you. You feedforward because you anticipate rejection from the other party.

For example, you might disagree with another person by saying:

“I’m not really an expert in the area but...”

In this way, you express your disagreement by using the feedforward part of the message to indicate the coming disagreement. At the same time, you also let the listener or reader know she can reject your message without rejecting you. As another example, you have probably heard someone say these disclaimers before the main message:

- “I’m not a racist but...”
- “I’m not a stubborn person but...”
- “I know this is out of topic but...”
- “This is probably not the best time to say this but...”

In all the sample feedforward, the assumption of the speaker is that her main message might be rejected on certain grounds (e.g., it is racist, it not the best time to say it, it reflects the speaker stubbornness, it is off-topic). Such strategic anticipation of negative reaction cushions the impact of the message or simply gives the receiver of the message less reason to react negatively.

LISTENING

Another context of assertion is listening. When we assert, we focus on what to say and how to say it. In a specific context of assertion – say, providing negative feedback such as above – the same thing happens. We strategize what to say and how to say it.

However, delivering your message clearly and appropriately does not only involve speaking and writing. In fact, an essential part of delivering your message effectively is knowing when to be silent so that the other person is able to explain himself (in writing, the equivalent strategy is to focus on the main message of the writer – say, a complaint – and suspend judgment of the person and his claims). In other words, effective interpersonal communication requires you to let the other party do the explaining while you listen attentively. **If you want to deliver your feedback effectively, learn how to listen.**

Listening attentively to the other person demonstrates your genuine concern for her as a person and her arguments. Moreover, it also can help you clarify your message because it allows you to understand more clearly the other person’s position. One way to demonstrate attentive listening is to use paraphrasing.

- **Show your desire to understand others through paraphrasing**

Paraphrasing the other person’s message shows your desire to understand rather than evaluate her. It is more effective when you restate the sender’s messages in your own words rather than try to repeat the exact same words spoken by the sender. Usually, you signify your intent to paraphrase with the following words:

- “If I understand you right, what you are saying is...”
- “Can I say that your main complaint concerns...”
- “So, your main objection is that...”

- “So, what you want me to do is...”

When you demonstrate your understanding by paraphrasing the message, the sender’s defensiveness or fear of being judged is reduced. A closer interpersonal relationship is built between the sender and the receiver. In work situations, paraphrasing instructions or oral messages can reduce misunderstanding and lead to greater effectiveness.

Use affirming signals

Another strategy that demonstrates attentive listening is the affirming strategy. This strategy is simple: if you agree with or understand the sender’s point, you signify affirmation through verbal or non-verbal cues. You can say “Uh-huh”, “ok”, “sure”, “that’s right” and so on. Or you can nod your head indicating that you are following the speaker’s line of argument. In writing, affirming strategies include cues like “I agree with you that...”, “You are right about the fact that...”, “It is true that...”

THINKING CRITICALLY

Active listening is a characteristic that many people do not engage in. Thus, if you understand more about active listening in conversations, it will help you to be a better participant of conversations. Reflect on the statements below. How much of each of them do you agree or disagree with?

1. When listening for information, our opinion of someone’s delivery affects our understanding of the message.
2. Inability to understand a foreigner’s speech (spoken in English) is an example of ethnocentrism.
3. When you use prompts like “Uh-huh”, you are listening correctly.
4. If we do not understand the speaker’s message, it is the speaker’s fault.
5. We should focus on talking rather than listening when fostering relationships with others.
6. People who always talk more than others are the more powerful ones in the office.

MAKING REQUESTS AND GIVING DIRECTIVES

Aside from giving feedback and listening actively to others, making requests and giving directives are also crucial activities on the job. They are the third context of assertion. Consider your past and recent experiences as a student. You undoubtedly might have needed to ask a large number of questions to learn your way around. You might have asked others to do things for you too, for example when you belonged to the same project team.

How can you be sure your requests are effective? First, be specific. Make sure you describe your request clearly and specifically. Second, be sure you are asking the right person for the

information. If you are not sure, ask an exploratory question first, such as “Are you in charge of accounts?” If the answer is affirmative, make your request, for example, “How do I allocate the money for next month’s regional meeting?” Third, be confident when making your requests. If you have tried without success to find the information or to complete the job yourself, you are justified to ask for help. Others are usually willing to cooperate, particularly if you know exactly what you are asking for and phrase your request in a clear and friendly language.

Giving directives is another important assertion strategy, particularly when it complements a positive request-making style. Regardless of your position in the organization, you are likely to need both of these strategies to achieve your goals. The following list shows the difference between requests and directives:

Requests	Directives
“Can you help me solve this problem by finishing the project today?”	“Be sure to finish this project today.”
“Can we meet sometime today?”	“See me at 10.30.”
“Which file should this go in?”	“File this.”
“Is there any way we can finish the report today?”	“I am expecting the report today.”

Making requests creates a supportive climate and gives people a sense of control in carrying out their responsibilities. Those who carry out requests are likely to have a better attitude and to perform their duties in a more effective manner than those who are expected to obey directives. Nevertheless, in situations that call for specific action, directives may be more appropriate than requests (for instance, when there is danger).

It is possible to give directives in a positive way that does not assume a power imbalance. You can do this by explaining the reason for the directive. Do not simply make a demand without telling co-workers why they should do what you say. Indeed, if you give a directive, you should have an important reason for doing so and be willing to explain it to others. They are much more likely to cooperate when they see the need for such action. The directives in the table above can be rephrased as follows:

Original Version	Rephrased Version
“Be sure you finish this project today.”	“Be sure you finish this project today. Lisa needs the results tomorrow morning.”
“See me at 10.30.”	“See me at 10.30. We need to discuss the plans for the sales meeting.”
“File this.”	“File this. I am expecting an important call.”
“I am expecting the report today.”	“I need the report today because the client needs it by tomorrow morning.”

RECEIVING CRITICISM

The preceding sections have introduced you to the many facets of assertion in interpersonal communication. Assertion, to repeat what has been said earlier, is at the heart of interpersonal communication. It is the first key interpersonal function of communication. Especially in business, we get people to do things for us, to believe in us, to change their behavior, and so on. We have also emphasized the importance of listening in assertion because by being silent and letting the other person present her case, we also help build our credibility. If we want to be listened to, in other words, we must also learn how to listen.

However, there is more to interpersonal communication than asserting ourselves in interactions with people. **It is also a fact of life that people provide feedback, including negative feedback, on our own actions and practices.** How do we keep our composure in the midst of criticism?

When faced with criticism, people generally respond with “fight or flight” behavior. Fighting manifests itself in defensive, argumentative or counterattack remarks. Fleeing can be physical (e.g., avoiding face-to-face or telephone contact) or mental (e.g., tuning out). In the long run, neither method solves the problem as effectively as (i) agreeing with the criticism or (ii) seeking more information.

Agreeing

Criticisms can be based on facts, perceptions, or both. If, for example, your supervisor identifies computational errors in your work, she may perceive these facts as being related to inability or carelessness. Arguing about the facts (computational errors) may be futile, but you can redirect the perception by pointing out that these errors are the exception, not the rule, in your work performance. You can, however, acknowledge that you understand why she might feel you let her down. Acknowledging the other person’s feelings does not mean you agree with her. Say what you will do to minimize the likelihood the problem will be repeated.

Seeking more information

Showing interest in what prompts the criticism can help you decide how to fix whatever prompted it. Consider doing the following:

- **Ask for specific examples.**

“You’ve said I’m not presenting a good attitude to customers. Can you describe exactly what I’m doing?”

- **Describe a situation and ask whether it illustrates the problem.**

“Does the formula error in the spreadsheet I prepared on the Miller account illustrate your concern?”

- **Paraphrase the criticism to focus on an outcome.**

“Are you saying that when my work contains these errors, Miller is unable to use it?”

- **Ask how you can improve.**

“Other than proofreading more carefully, do you have any specific suggestions that might help me?”

THINKING CRITICALLY

Below is an authentic exchange of feedback between two teams in a previous ES2002 semester. This was written peer feedback on the report (no editing was done). Read Team B’s response (sent to the tutor) and evaluate it according to your understanding of interpersonal communication. Specifically describe what makes it a problem case in interpersonal communication.

Team A: What does “deprecate” means? The group should seriously considers changing it to “criticize” since this is more familiar and simple.

Team B: We do not agree with the suggestion. Our team feels that the problem lies in the fact that the other group lacks the linguistic competence to understand what “deprecate” means. If they knew what the words mean, we feel that they would not have proposed the change in the first place.

R ESOLVING CONFLICTS

In this section, we will focus on the third and last interpersonal function of communication: conflict resolution.

Conflict is inevitable. It can occur in your personal life or at work. In the workplace, conflict may arise between you and a co-worker, between two employees you supervise, between your department and another, or between your organization and a customer or client. Its source can be differences in personalities (e.g., extrovert and introvert), goals or expectations, values or beliefs, circumstances (e.g., money and time), or facts (e.g., different sources). In other cases, conflict results from badly given or badly received negative feedback. Conflicts associated with values and beliefs tend to be the most difficult to resolve because they are deeply rooted cultural practices. When faced with conflict, you have four options:

- **Yield.** This approach should be used when the issue is less important to one person than to the other or when maintaining the relationship is more important than the issue. It is also the logical approach when one person knows she cannot win.
- **Compromise.** This approach works best when the parties have some areas of agreement on which a mutually agreeable solution can be built or, as in yielding, when the relationship is more important than the issue.
- **Overpower.** This approach should be used only in an emergency or when the issue is more important than the relationship.
- **Collaborate.** This approach requires people to work things out. It fits best in the situations that may repeat themselves or when the relationship has been long term.



Conflict may be healthy or destructive. At its best, conflict fosters creative thinking and the opportunity to improve. Healthy conflict is marked by the ability to disagree on one issue while working collaboratively on others. At its worst, conflict sabotages relationships, destroys morale, and polarizes people. Think of the need for conflict resolution as a way to harness your interpersonal communication skills. This goes without saying that destructive conflicts can still be resolved. The following techniques can be used either when you are directly involved in the conflict or when you are an outside party with a vested interest in seeing it resolved.

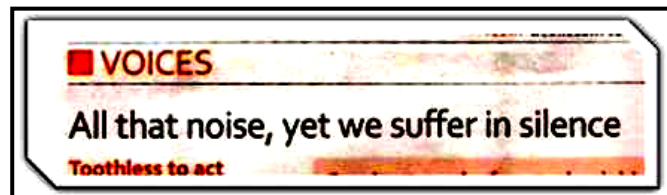
General techniques to resolve conflicts

- **Act promptly.** The longer a problem goes unattended, the greater the chance it will escalate into a major issue. If the conflict involves emotions, the parties will need time to cool off; 24 to 48 hours should be sufficient.
- **Begin by citing areas on which you agree.** This technique will make both of you realize that you agree more than you think you do. Conflict does give one the illusion that differences are all there are that exist between the two contending parties.
- **Schedule a meeting.** Whenever possible, meet face to face so that the participants can take advantage of nonverbal cues. Choose a neutral location so neither party has a territorial advantage. But issue an invitation rather than a directive. Telling the other person you must meet will create more tension.

- **Listen attentively.** Every conflict has at least two sides, and each person fervently believes that she is on the accurate or “right” side. Both people want to be heard and understood. Before a conflict can be resolved, both parties must be able to separate what happened from what they feel about it. Paraphrasing, discussed earlier, can be valuable in this effort. You can also identify points of agreement if you listen attentively.
- **Focus on the problem, not the person.** Laying the blame delays resolution. The parties must respect themselves and each other.
- **Brainstorm solutions.** Look for win-win opportunities; negotiate if necessary.
- **Formalize the solution.** Putting the solution on paper allows both parties the opportunity to see as well as hear it and minimizes the likelihood that they will later disagree on the solution.
- **Implement the solution and set a date for follow-up.** The follow-up creates an air of accountability.

CULTURE AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

We shall conclude by reflecting on the role of culture in interpersonal communication. How we relate to people certainly is influenced by culture. For example, culture does play a great part in the way we assert ourselves to other people.³



The “I” language, for example, may be an excellent strategy to assert ourselves by showing respect for others while standing up for our own rights. Similarly, giving feedback in a direct way may be necessary in the workplace. Moreover, there may be much wisdom in knowing how to make requests or direct others to do what we expect them to do.

However, assertiveness is not simply about delivering the message or feedback clearly – i.e., you say what you want to say and you are fine. Assertiveness requires you to have appropriate tone, and this can only be achieved if you know more about the person or people you are dealing with, such as their cultural expectations concerning giving and receiving feedback, their individualist or collectivist tendencies, and so on.

³ Text image on the right is taken from a letter written by Elaine Lim published in *TODAY*, 30 June 2010, p. 14.

Many times we probably have heard of comments like, “He is brutally frank. I don’t like him.” or “She’s rude.” even if, looking back, this was actually following the “I” assertion skills. What may be good assertion skills in some cultural contexts, may be plain and aggressive behaviors to others. Indeed, there is more to interpersonal skills than ‘correct’ use of language and strategies.

Let us then end our lesson by analyzing the following authentic letter⁴:

Dear Wee Siang,

I was planning to have a word with you this afternoon regarding my request to you to supervise the new team of quality controllers from Latin America starting January 2009.

George told me that she had spoken to you about my request, and I am pleased to learn from her that you have agreed to take on the challenge. Thank you very much!

If you should have any queries regarding the work, please do not hesitate to speak to George or me any time.

Once again, I'd like to express my sincere gratitude to you for your dedication and contributions to *QC Media Development™*.

Best regards,
Kum Hoong

This sounds like any normal thank you letter you read. But to understand it better, let us first know what its context is.

First, in this company supervising a new team of controllers is considered a thankless job because of the tremendous amount of preparation that goes into it. In short, this new assignment given to Wee Siang is something that no one in the office wants to take on.

Second, Kum Hoong (the boss) asked George to talk to Wee Siang about the new assignment. In other words, the communication lines are indirect. You will notice then that the boss, Kum Hoong, did not go straight to Wee Siang to tell the latter about the new assignment. Kum Hoong has delegated the task to George to ask Wee Siang to take on the job.

Thus, given the context above, what does the letter tell us about the culture of the company?

⁴ All words in the letter are in the original letter, except the names of people and the company.

The email above is a very friendly letter indeed. In it the boss speaks of his “request” twice, and refers to Wee Siang’s acceptance as Wee Siang having “agreed” to take on the new task. So, if you do not know the specific corporate culture of *QC Media Development™*, you might end up thinking that a request has been made and someone has accepted it. On the surface, it is a request but **culturally, it is actually a command**.

Something to think about then: what is the role of cultural context in determining whether a piece of writing is acceptable or not? In the letter above, the message seems straightforward, yet there are hidden meanings which the cultural context itself can illuminate.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS IN MEETINGS

Interpersonal skills in meetings are also very important, if not critical. At any meeting, people behave in different ways, and it is important to understand these in order for you to reflect on your own meeting behaviors and, eventually, use effective interpersonal skills to be an effective meeting leader or participant. But first, let us know more about the nature of meetings.

What is a meeting?

A meeting can be defined as a gathering of two or more people who interact face to face, verbally and nonverbally, to achieve an expected outcome and are interdependent on each other. Clearly, meetings are not always formal occasions held in company boardrooms but happen whenever people get together to work on something, even a tutorial assignment. Also, because of technology, ‘face to face’ here includes meetings involving interactions between people across various media such as video conferencing.



Ideally, meetings should be structured; that is, everybody should be working towards the expected outcome in some sort of orderly manner.

Much time is spent on meetings

Meetings need to be managed as effectively as possible because managers and executives spend a great deal of time in them.

- Average professional/manager > 25%
- Upper-and middle-level manager > 40%

- Some senior executives 4 days/week

Thus, clearly it is important to make meetings worthwhile. To ensure this, you need to develop good meeting skills which will make the meetings you attend more worthwhile and help you to get ahead in your career.

Meetings reveal who you are

Whenever you arrange or attend a meeting, the way you communicate in that group setting tells other people how competent you are. People can also judge your knowledge and your ability to solve problems while working as part of a team. Lastly, the way you handle yourself in meetings (e.g., how you provide feedback on other people's work, how you contradict another person's point of view) reflects your interpersonal maturity.

The importance of meetings

Meetings are an important management tool for information sharing and decision making in an organization. Effective meetings:

- provide members with updates on recent initiatives and policies of the company
- enable members to contribute personally
- allow various points of view to be presented
- give participants a sense of involvement and importance

All this increases the sense of commitment among meeting participants. Staff feel their point of view has been considered as part of the decision making process. This means that they will be more committed to making decisions work.

There are mainly three categories of behavior which are important in this context. The first two categories, task facilitating and group maintenance behaviors, are essentially good interpersonal skills in meeting contexts. The third, self-oriented behaviors, are clearly undesirable interpersonal behaviors in meetings.

Categories of meeting behavior

➤ Task facilitating behaviors

These are behaviors which help the meeting move forward because people who are task facilitating proactively present new ideas, ask questions or suggest possibilities. They will help the group to achieve the purpose of the meeting by, for example:

- Initiating — getting the group started on a line of enquiry
- Giving or seeking information — focusing on information relevant to issues facing the group

- Coordinating — pointing out the relationships between ideas, clarifying issues or summarizing what has been done
- Setting procedure — suggesting decision making procedures to help move the group towards a goal

➤ **Group maintenance behaviors**

These are behaviors which support and encourage contributions from group members because they create a positive atmosphere which helps the group work well together and feel good about working together. In other words, these behaviors take care of the emotional and psychological needs of the group. They include things such as:

- Encouraging — drawing other members out by showing verbal and non-verbal support, praise or agreement; simply attentive listening to other people in the meeting (see below for more information about listening) can encourage others to continue contributing ideas to the discussion
- Harmonizing — reconciling differences among group members – perhaps by mediation or the use of humor to reconcile differences
- Compromising — offering to give way on a point in order to reach a mutually acceptable decision

➤ **Self-oriented behaviors**

Self-oriented group members are mainly focused on fulfilling their own personal needs. They do not attend to the needs of the group. They may do any of the following:

- Controlling — dominating others by showing superiority or authority
- Withdrawing — retiring from the group, being silent or refusing to deal with a particular aspect of the group's work
- Seeking attention — calling attention to themselves and demanding recognition from others
- Diverting — trying to focus the group discussion on topics of interest to them rather than the group
- Excluding — deliberately ignoring some group members, either because they do not like them or they are not interested in what those people have to say
- Belittling — not giving respect to other people's contributions
- Blocking — constantly raising objections and bringing up the same issue after the group has considered or rejected it, thus delaying progress towards the goal

So obviously, for a productive and successful meeting you need to have group maintenance and task facilitating behaviors, not self-oriented ones. Your interpersonal maturity in meetings can be demonstrated through your use of task facilitating and group maintaining skills.

Interpersonal skills in meetings

Based on our awareness of different meeting behaviors, what then are important interpersonal skills in the successful conduct of meetings?

➤ *Contribute positively or constructively*

- Be punctual — it is true that in some contexts, meetings do not start on time. However, you cannot go wrong by being punctual. It does not only demonstrate your readiness to attend and participate in the meeting, but it also shows your respect for other people's time.
- Speak up — offer any information that you have which is relevant to the discussion. If the issue is one you really care about, you should say something early on in the discussion. Research has shown that a person who contributes early in the discussion is more likely to influence the subsequent discussion and eventual decision.
- Talk with substance — whenever you speak, build on other people's ideas, show relationships between ideas, clarify ideas or summarize what has been said so far and show where your ideas fit in.
- Follow the agenda — focus on issues on the agenda, which has been set to lead you to achieving the goal of the meeting. Do not divert the discussion to topics which interest you rather than those which are relevant to the task.

➤ *Listen attentively*

When you are part of a team, the way you listen can be as important as what you say. In your notes on interpersonal communication, a similar point has been made. If you want people to listen to you, you must also know how to listen.

You must keep alert even if parts of the discussion do not seem relevant to you. You need to concentrate so you have a complete grasp of what is going on. A lot of time is wasted in meetings because participants misunderstand when they do not listen carefully so everything has to be explained again. This is the part of listening which is task facilitating in nature.

But listening attentively is also a group maintenance behavior. When you show others that you are listening carefully you are encouraging them to contribute positively because you are showing them that you value their contribution.

- Look interested — keep a relaxed alert posture. Avoid fidgety behavior and nervous gestures. If possible, take notes. This shows the speaker you are concentrating on what he is saying.

- Maintain eye contact — establish eye contact when people speak because this also shows you are interested in their ideas.
- Welcome contributions — even if you disagree with something, show you welcome the contribution. That is good group maintenance behavior. Ask questions if you are unclear about something but avoid cutting a speaker off. If you do not listen, people will not speak – then you lose all their ideas, including the good ones.

➤ Ask questions appropriately and skillfully

The following are questions you can use to accomplish specific aims:

- To encourage participation
 - *“What is your reaction...?”*
 - *“How do you feel about...?”*
- To get contributions from quiet members
 - *“We haven’t heard from Wei Boon yet. Wei, how do you feel about this?”*
- To control members who talk too much
 - *“Yes, we all take your point on that but I think another perspective will only help. Has anyone here got any other ideas?”*
- To reach mutual understanding
 - *“Let me see if I understand your position. Are you saying that ...?”*
 - *“I’m not sure I understand. Do you mean that ..?”*

C ONCLUSION

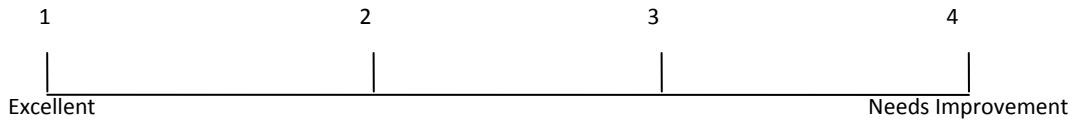
Although various techniques for improved communication with others have been suggested in all sections above, ultimately there is NO “magic formula”: we have to bear in mind thus that what works in one situation may not work in another. This is because we are dealing with human beings and not machines, with all our egos and sensitivities. What is important is that we must learn to be aware of ourselves and of others – and basically to respect and treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated. This is the real essence of interpersonal communication.

TUTORIAL EXERCISES

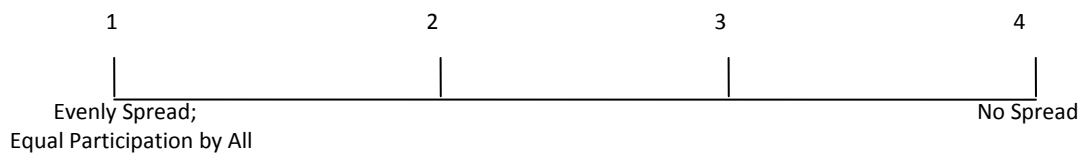
ACTIVITY 1: Interpersonal skills in meetings

Evaluate the effectiveness of your project group discussions thus far.⁵ Rate the effectiveness of these discussions based on each of the following items.

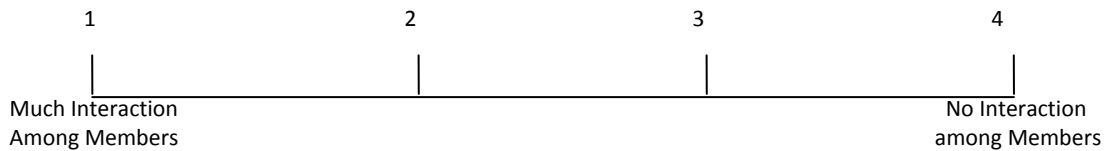
1. Overall performance



2. Participation



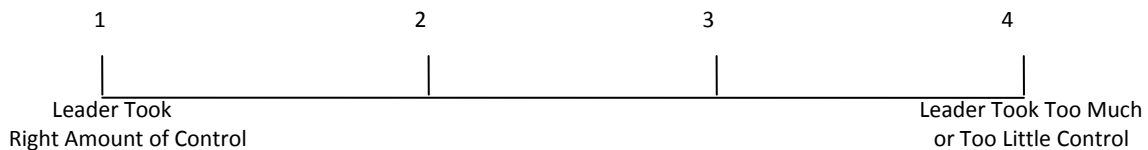
3. Interaction



4. Decision making



5. Leader control



ACTIVITY 2

⁵ From Matthews, C. 1992. *Business interactions*. Singapore: Prentice Hall.

One evening, Loke Soon Choo, CEO of EMC Greater China, went back to the office to retrieve something. When he arrived at the door, he realized that he did not have the office key. By that time, his secretary, Rui Hu (Rebecca), had already left the office. Loke attempted to reach her unsuccessfully. Several hours later, he could not restrain his anger. At 1.13 am, he sent her the following email and copied to various senior staff:

From: Loke, Soon Choo
Sent: Saturday, April 08, 2006 1:13 AM
To: Hu, Rui
Cc: Ng, Padel; Ma, Stanley; Zhou, Simon; Lai, Sharon
Subject: Do not assume or take things for granted

Rebecca, I just told you not to assume or take things for granted on Tuesday and you locked me out of my office this evening when all my things are all still in the office because you assume I have my office key on my person. With immediate effect, you do not leave the office until you have checked with all the managers you support - this is for the lunch hour as well as at end of day, OK?

The secretary replied in a Chinese-language email and then translated into English after (see both versions below):

SoonChoo, **首先**, **我做**这件事是完全正确的, 我锁门是从安全角度考虑的, 北京这里不是没有丢过东西, 如果一旦丢了东西, 我无法承担这个责任。

其次, **你有**钥匙, 你自己忘了带, 还要说别人不对。造成这件事的主要原因都是你自己, 不要把自己的错误转移到别人的身上。

第三, **你无权**干涉和控制我的私人时间, 我一天就**8小时**工作时间, 请你记住中午和晚上下班的时间都是我的私人时间。

第四, **从到EMC的第一天**到现在为止, 我工作尽职尽责, 也加过很多次的班, 我也没有任何怨言, 但是如果你们要求我加班是为了工作以外的事情, 我无法做到。

第五, 虽然咱们是上下级的关系, 也请你注重一下你说话的语气, 这是做人最基本的礼貌问题。

第六, **我要**在这强调一下, 我并没有猜想或者假定什么, 因为我没有这个时间也没有这个必要。

From: Hu, Rui
Sent: 2006-4-10 13:48
To: Loke, Soon Choo
Cc: China All (Beijing); China All (Chengdu); China All (Guangzhou); China All (Shanghai); Lai, Sharon
Subject: FW: Do not assume or take things for granted

Soon Choo,

First, I have behaved correctly on this matter. I locked the door out of concern for security. We have lost things in Beijing in the past. I cannot afford to take the chance and be held responsible for missing articles.

Second, you do have a key which you forgot to bring, yet you are placing the blame on others. You are the main cause of your situation today, do not attribute your own mistake to others.

Third, you have no right to disrupt and control my private time. I work for 8 hours a day, please remember that lunch time and evening time belong to my private time.

Fourth, since my first day at EMC until now, I have been diligent in performing my job. Many times I have worked overtime and I've never complained. But if you demand that I stay overtime for tasks outside of my job, I cannot comply.

Fifth, even though you are my superior, please pay attention to your wording. It's a matter of common courtesy.

Sixth, let me stress that I did not guess or assume anything because I have neither the time nor the need.

Rebecca copied her reply, along with Loke's original email to all of EMC's staff in China. Someone forwarded the email to a friend outside the company, and during the next couple of weeks the email exchange was forwarded around other companies in China, apparently reaching thousands of people, some of whom posted it on online forums. It became the cause of heated online debate, and eventually Chinese newspapers and TV picked up the story.

EMC is the world's largest network information storage company, with headquarters in the United States and revenues of over US\$10 billion. Loke Soon Choo is the EMC Greater China CEO. He is a veteran IT professional, having been in senior management of IBM & Siemens. Before joining EMC, he was the Greater China CEO at DP International. He was a graduate of the NUS Business School. Both Rebecca and Soon Choo eventually resigned from the company.

Questions

1. The email exchange gives us a complex picture of the interplay of power and culture in the context of EMC.
 - a. How do you explain the tone of Soon Choo's email? Where do you think he is coming from? Does it reflect his assumptions of a superior-subordinate corporate relationship? Why and how?
 - b. How do you explain Rebecca's use of Chinese to respond to Soon Choo's email? What are her assumptions of what corporate culture is or should be?
2. Both Soon Choo and Rebecca resigned from the company because of this controversy. Looking back, how do you explain what happened?
 - a. If Soon Choo wrote the email differently, could the response have been different?
 - b. Could national cultures, individual interpersonal characteristics, gender, corporate culture, and use of language have contributed to this controversy? What hidden facets of communication do you think were at play?
3. **What lessons in interpersonal communication can you learn from this controversy?**

ACTIVITY 3

Read through the following scenario and the meeting transcript that follows. Then answer the question at the end of the transcript.

Star-Asia Biomedical Research Group (SABRG), a pioneering biomedical laboratory plant based in Penang, Malaysia, has recently registered its highest annual growth rate of 23% from the previous year's \$213 million ringgit. It feels it is now ready to open itself up for an IPO or initial public offering which will enable the public to buy shares in the company. In this connection, the company is hoping to engage the services of a public relations firm to initiate and intensify its efforts towards the IPO.

This move, however, has been met with criticism from some of the staff who believe that (1) an IPO is not needed since the research group has established itself as a very stable business venture and/or (2) the company does not need a PR firm to do the job of information dissemination. Below is an excerpt from a closed-door meeting between three high-ranking officials of the research group. The purpose of this particular meeting is to identify the contending positions and arrive at a consolidated decision, if possible.

Dr Faridah Hasan is the CEO of SABRG who believes that both an IPO and PR firm are needed. She is a Malaysian with a doctorate in bioengineering from Sweden.

Tomoko Iwai, a Japanese, is Head of the Human Resources Department who believes that an IPO is both timely and needed, but is not sure whether the company actually needs a PR firm to

do the job of informing the public about its initial offering. She has a firm grasp of the company's human resources capability since she has been in it for six years now.

Razlan Jafaar, the eldest of the three participants, is a Malaysian bioengineer who is in charge of SABRG's sub-group in biomedical engineering research. While he believes that the company is also a business venture, he strongly resists the idea that money should top everyone's concerns. If SABRG has survived – and succeeded – with a purely research focus, why concern itself with so many other issues?

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MEETING

- (1) Faridah: *The options are clear: we go public to survive or deteriorate in the next few years.*
- (2) Razlan: *Why say that? If we have succeeded for the past few years...*
- (3) Tomoko: *We can't think of the past at this stage. We know that this is a volatile world we are in. Why, even the tsunami disaster has affected our stocks since December!*
- (4) Razlan: *My only worry is that we are turning out to be a completely investment/business affair.*
- (5) Tomoko: *I don't think so. Research is still top...*
- (6) Razlan: *Top priority? Then, why are we meeting now? To discuss where the best penang laksa is?*
- (7) Faridah: *So, what do you wish us to do, Razlan? An IPO is actually our way of providing firm controls for our company. That is, the public CAN share the ups and downs of SABRG. At the rate we are going now, without public shares, all it takes is another Asian tsunami for our company to go bankrupt.*
- (8) Razlan: *I see your point there.*
- (9) Tomoko: *Of course, that's a good point.*
- (10) Faridah: *Hold on, Tomoko.*
- (11) Razlan: *But, is it really the point? The issue here is: do we need the public to help us defend our shares against economic or political dangers? With or without external pressures, for as long as we are doing good, with topnotch research...*
- (12) Tomoko: *You really don't get it, Razlan.*
- (13) Razlan: *...we will survive.*
- (14) Faridah: *But this is not a question of survival now, Razlan. It is a question of being consistently the best in the field.*
- (15) Razlan: *A good penang laksa will always be good, no matter how the economy is doing.*
- (16) Tomoko: *But how many people will buy a good penang laksa if they don't have money?*
- (17) Faridah: *Hold your analogies! This is serious business.*
- (18) Razlan: *But we're talking serious business here!*
- (19) Faridah: *No.*
- (20) Tomoko: *Why are you so against an IPO, Razlan?*
- (21) Faridah: *Razlan has already answered that question many times, Tomoko. He doesn't see the point of an IPO since we are already a stable company which is engaged in solid*

- biomedical research. He fears that we will ultimately be distracted from the main agenda of SABRG.*
- (22) Razlan: *In your case, Tomoko, you favor an IPO but don't want a PR firm to do the job?*
- (23) Tomoko: *Exactly, for the...*
- (24) Razlan: *See! Because SABRG is such an established biomedical company that we no longer need anyone to let other people know about us! You just proved my point, Tomoko.*
- (25) Tomoko: *Huh?*
- (26) Faridah: *Go ahead, Tomoko.*
- (27) Tomoko: *I go for a compromise. If the public wants to invest with us, then they will pursue it because of our credibility. We don't need to spend money on a PR firm to encourage people to buy shares from us. If they don't want to come to us, so be it.*
- (28) Razlan: *That's an even more confused position.*
- (29) Faridah: *You don't give a solid, confident face for the company with that kind of approach.*
- (30) Tomoko: *It's the market's hands working, that's what I mean! Let the market decide what it wants to do to us because...*
- (31) Faridah: *That's not right. Not right at all. We need to have an active role in defining the wants and desires of the market. After all, we have established a niche in the biomedical research business BECAUSE we have defined our paths our way.*
- (32) Razlan: *Emphasis on BECAUSE, Tomoko.*
- (33) Faridah: *We can't make any decision now. But some points are good: that we need to guard ourselves against external pressures but still make research our top priority.*
- (34) Razlan: *And the point is to find a way to make research our main priority despite investment/stocks concerns.*
- (35) Tomoko: *What about the thing on the PR firm?*
- (36) Faridah: *Let's think about it more.*
- (37) Tomoko: *I say we don't need it at all.*
- (38) Faridah: *Let's think about it more.*

Question

If you were asked to rate the participants on their interpersonal skills with 1 being the best and 3 being the worst, what would your ratings be? Justify your answer.

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