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Reaching OUT

INTERPERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Fourth Edition

fourth edition

Reaching Out

*interpersonal effectiveness
and self-actualization*

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Preface

Reaching Out seeks to provide the theory and experience necessary to develop effective interpersonal skills. It is more than a book that reviews current psychological knowledge on how to build and maintain friendships. It is more than a book of skill-building exercises. The theory and exercises are *integrated* into an *experiential approach* to learning about interpersonal skills.

I wish to thank many people for their help in writing this book. My younger sister, Edythe Holubec, contributed the questions the reader will find in the text and helped revise and improve many parts of the book. My secretary, Judy Bartlett, stepped in to handle many of the bothersome details and greatly facilitated the publication. I owe much to those psychologists who have influenced my theorizing and to my colleagues with whom I have conducted various types of experiential learning sessions. Whenever possible, I have tried to acknowledge the source of any exercises that are not original in this book, but a few of the exercises are so commonly used that the originators are not traceable. If I have inadvertently missed giving recognition to anyone, I apologize.

Special thanks go to the many friends who have helped me improve my interpersonal skills and to my wife, Linda Mulholland Johnson, who contributed her tireless support to the rewriting of this book. All photographs not otherwise credited were taken by the author. Finally, I wish to thank Nancy Valin Waller, who drew the cartoon figures appearing in the book.

D.W.J.

Contents

The Importance of Interpersonal Skills

1

THE RELATIONSHIP IMPERATIVE

A friend is one
to whom one may pour
out all the contents
of one's heart,
chaff and grain together
knowing that the
gentlest of hands
will take and sift it,
keep what is worth keeping
and with a breath of kindness
blow the rest away.

Arabian proverb

A new student enters the school lunchroom. He looks around trying to decide where to sit. He knows no one, but has high hopes. In that lunchroom may sit individuals who will later become close friends, companions, girl friends, and even a future wife. Or, if things go wrong, individuals sitting in that lunchroom may reject, dislike, belittle, and ridicule him. As the new student stands in the doorway it seems as if his whole life hangs in the balance. Will he make

1

friends? Will people like him? Will he fall in love? All else pales in comparison.

We are created, not for isolation, but for relationships. At heart, we are not a thousand points of separated light but, rather, part of a larger brightness. *To live is to reach out to others.* "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world," a popular song tells us. That includes all of us. Initiating, developing, and maintaining caring and committed relationships is the most important (and often the most underestimated) activity in our lives. From the moment we are born to the moment we die, relationships are the core of our existence. We are conceived within relationships, are born into relationships, and live our lives within relationships. We are dependent on other people for the realization of life itself, for survival during one of the longest gestation periods in the animal kingdom, for food and shelter and aid and comfort throughout our lives, for the love and education necessary for social and cognitive development, for guidance in learning the essential competencies required to survive in our world, and for fun, excitement, comfort, love, personal confirmation, and fulfillment. Our relationships with others form the context for all other aspects of our lives.

Interpersonal relationships take many forms. Some people are only casual acquaintances; others become spouses or lovers. Some relationships last. Others end in boredom or distress. And sometimes you may be lonely, wanting relationships you do not have. Whether relationships begin, deepen, or end largely depends on your interpersonal skills.

We are not born instinctively knowing how to interact effectively with others. Interpersonal and group skills do not magically appear when they are needed. Many individuals lack basic interpersonal skills, such as correctly identifying the emotions of others and appropriately resolving a conflict, and often their social ineptitude seems to persist as they get older. Their lives typically do not go well. Individuals who lack social skills find themselves isolated, alienated, and at a disadvantage in vocational and career settings. The relationships so essential for living productive and happy lives are lost when basic interpersonal skills are not learned.

In this chapter the importance of interpersonal relationships for personal well-being, for the well-being of society, and for self-actualization will be examined. In addition, the specific interpersonal skills needed to build and maintain relationships will be discussed, along with the procedures for learning interpersonal skills from the experiential exercises included in this book. In subsequent chapters, each major interpersonal skill will be discussed at length.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

People reach out to others because they have goals they wish to pursue that require the participation of other people as well as themselves. Social encounters are profoundly cooperative in the sense that they are improvised jointly by all present. When you participate in a genuine social encounter you and the other person are creating a "story" as you go along. You create action and dialogue that fit the situation. You and the other person coordinate your actions to maximize your mutual satisfaction.

Relationships are built on *interdependence*. You are interdependent if you share mutual goals with another person (such as repairing a car, playing chess, or enjoying each other's company). You are interdependent if what you want to do requires the other person to coordinate his or her actions with yours (such as playing tennis). When you are interdependent with another person, a change in the state of the other person causes a change in your state and vice versa. If you are sad, the other person feels concern, and if the other person is happy, you feel pleased. When the actions of other people are required for you to achieve your goals (and vice versa), and when what happens to them affects you (and vice versa), you and they are interdependent and in a relationship.

In order to form a relationship you have to interact. All interaction is based on a cycle of perceiving what the other person is doing, deciding how to respond, taking action, and then perceiving the other person's response. When a boy and a girl, for example, see each other, the boy suddenly has a goal—to meet her. He interprets her glance as an indication that she shares that goal. He decides to make a humorous comment to initiate a conversation. He acts on the decision by walking over to her and saying, "Beautiful day!" She interprets his action as meaning he would like to get to know her, decides she would like that also, and takes action. She looks at the rain outside, laughs, and says, "If you're a duck." As the interaction continues, the cycles become faster and faster and more automatic. Neither the boy nor the girl think the other is thinking consciously of what to say or do, yet both are engaged in a *cycle of social interaction* that includes perceiving (sensing, organizing, interpreting) the other person's actions, deciding how to respond, act, and perceive the other person's response. This cycle occurs throughout any kind of social interaction, from routine everyday conversations to special exchanges such as being interviewed for a job or giving a speech. It is fundamental to all interpersonal interaction and provides the context in which individuals build and sustain relationships.

The social interaction cycle begins with perception. *Perception* is the process of gathering sensory information and assigning meaning to it. Perception occurs in three stages. Your eyes, ears, nose, skin, and taste buds gather information. Your brain selects from among the items of information gathered and organizes them. Finally, your brain interprets and evaluates the information. What you perceive, furthermore, is unique to you. No two people will sense, organize, and interpret the same events in quite the same way. Perception provides a unique, but not necessarily an accurate, view of events. Sometimes the level of inaccuracy is insignificant; sometimes you completely misperceive what is taking place.

What we perceive is affected by many factors, including our expectations. In Figure 1.1, read the phrases in the triangles. If you are not familiar with this test you probably read the three triangles as ''Paris in the springtime,'' ''Once in a lifetime,'' and ''Bird in the hand.'' But if you look closely you will see something different. Many people tend not to see the repeated words because they do not expect them to be there. We are so familiar with the phrases that our active perception stops once we recognize the phrase.

After perceiving what the other person has done, you decide how to respond and then take action, while at the same time continuing to perceive how the other person is reacting to what you are doing. As two people engage in this repeating cycle, they coordinate their behavior. The repeating cycle of perceiving, deciding, acting, and perceiving is fundamental to all social interaction (Figure 1.2).

As you enter the repeating cycle of social interaction, you have (1) a set of *goals* based on your needs, interests, personality, and relevant roles; (2) a set of *roles* (male or female, adult or child, teacher or student, host or guest) that affect how you interact with the other person; and (3) a *mood* based on personality, past events, other's behavior, physical setting, and significance of the interaction. The interaction takes place within a *physical setting* in which the purpose of the setting (church or playground), color, noise, and lighting affect mood and the rules that prescribe appropriate behavior. The *nature of the occasion* (party, wed-

FIGURE 1.1

FIGURE 1.2:   Cycle of Social Interaction
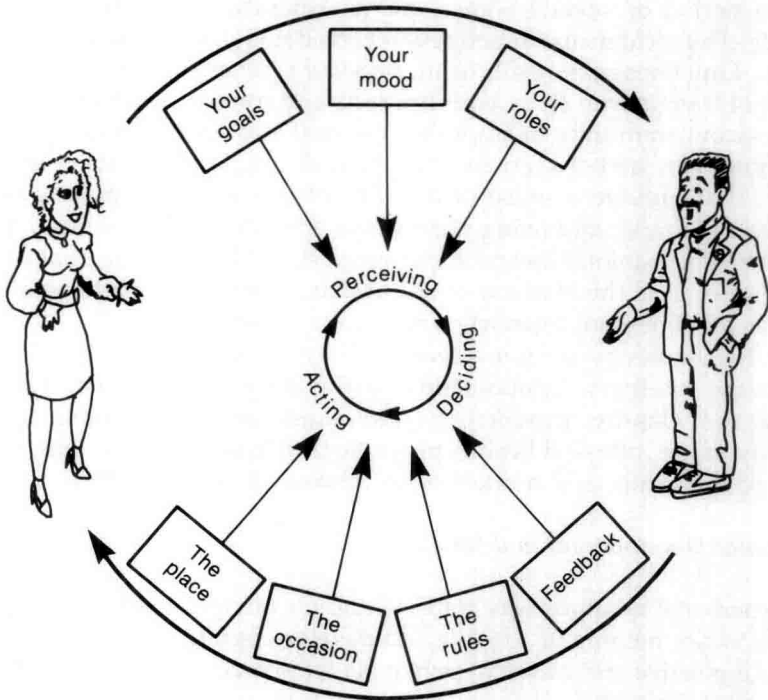
ding, funeral, sports event) limits the goals you can pursue. There are *social rules*, both general and specific to the occasion and setting, that influence your behavior. Finally, there is the *feedback* you receive as other people react to what you say and do in the situation. On the basis of the feedback, you adjust your goals, reinterpret your roles, and refine your understanding of the rules.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND PERSONAL WELL-BEING

*A real friend is one who walks in
when the rest of the world walks out.*

Walter Winchell

Life without friends is not much of a life. Loneliness stunts growth, sparks failure, makes life meaningless, kills, creates anxiety and depression, and makes one more fragile, lost in the past, and inhumane. *Loneli-*

ness is a state of dejection or grief caused by feeling alone. Within any given period of several weeks, many American adults feel painfully lonely. The incidence of loneliness is considerably higher among adolescents. Loneliness can result from the *social isolation* of not having a network of friends who share your interests and concerns and help provide a sense of community or from the *emotional isolation* of not having deep relationships, as between lovers, married couples, parents, and children, that provide a sense of attachment. Physical isolation does not create loneliness, and being near others does not end loneliness. It is a need for companionship and social support, not being alone, that causes loneliness. It is the absence of an intimate, satisfying relationship that makes loneliness an intensely unpleasant experience.

Relationships are not a luxury. They are a necessity. We have to reach out to others. Relationships are the key to our personal development and identity, productivity and career success, meaning in and quality of life, physical health, psychological health, coping with stress, self-actualization, and humaneness (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

Personal Development and Identity

Interpersonal relationships are essential for our personal well-being in many ways, helping us to grow and develop cognitively and socially, to build a positive and coherent personal identity, and to feel we are firmly in touch with reality. *Human development* follows a pattern of expansion of interdependence with other people. As growing children, we are impelled to become aware of and interact with a widening social circle. From having to relate to members of the family, we move on to interaction with peers and other people in the neighborhood. Our social world is expanded dramatically when we begin formal schooling. When, as young adults, we enter a career organization and become members of a community, we must build and maintain relationships with a larger and larger number of people. And it is from our family, peers, friends, colleagues, and teachers that we learn new skills and competencies and acquire knowledge, attitudes, and values. As we grow and develop there is an ever-expanding number of people with whom we must build and maintain relationships. We are required to cooperate with others in family, school, career, community, and societal settings. We learn how to do so from the people with whom we interact. Both our social and our intellectual growth and development are determined by the quality and nature of our relationships with other people.

Our *identity* is built out of our relationships with other people. As we interact with others we note their responses to us, we seek feedback as to how they perceive us, and we learn how to view ourselves as they

view us. From the reflections of others, we develop a clear and accurate picture of ourselves. When others view us as worthwhile, we tend to view ourselves similarly. We try to incorporate into ourselves characteristics that we admire in other people. In our relationships with other people we adopt social roles such as "student" or "engineer" that become part of our self-definition. It is within our relationships that we discover who we are as persons.

As we strive to make sense of the world around us, to determine what is real and what is illusory, we depend on other people to validate our perceptions and impressions. This is called *social comparison*. Many questions concerning reality cannot be answered by our physical senses. Although we can touch a leaf or smell a flower we cannot tell for sure what is fair or unfair, whether we are fast or slow, what is good or bad, or whether something is beautiful or ugly, without checking our opinions against the opinions of others. In order to make sense of the world, we need to share our perceptions and reactions with other people and find out whether or not other people perceive and react similarly.

We need to be *confirmed* as a person by other people. Confirmation consists of responses from other people in ways that indicate we are normal, healthy, and worthwhile. Other people *disconfirm* us when they suggest we are ignorant, inept, unhealthy, unimportant, or of no value, and, at worst, that we do not exist. In most interpersonal interactions, we implicitly request, "Please validate me as a person." In our relationships we need to give and receive such confirmations.

Career Productivity and Success

Roger is an excellent computer programmer. He likes computers, and computers seem to like him. He turns out high-quality work very fast, is knowledgeable, and is motivated to do well at his job. At his last job, he never missed a day of work in 6 months and was always on time. But he could not get along with his fellow employees. He argued, complained, fought, criticized, and generally upset everyone he interacted with. After 6 months with the company, Roger was fired. He did not survive on the job because he could not work effectively with other people.

Whether you have just graduated from high school and are taking your first college class, or are a senior looking towards being graduated, or a person starting or returning to college after raising a family or changing a career, you are likely to realize that a college education or vocational training will help improve your career life. *You may be less aware that interpersonal skills may be the most important set of skills to your employability, productivity, and career success.* A recent national survey