



Improving interpersonal relations

*Edited by
Cary L Cooper*

Management Skills Library

IMPROVING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Some Approaches to Social Skill Training

Edited by

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Foreword

Dr Ron Johnson
Director of Training
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Training in social skills has seen various 'fashions' reach their peak. Each of these thrusts, e.g. T-groups, interaction analysis and transaction analysis, has left its mark on training practices, but the discerning specialist or manager will exercise great care in choosing the best method to deal with the learning needs of the people concerned.

We now have a good deal of experience and research results to draw upon in making such decisions, but much of the information is scattered about. Often only one approach is presented without much guidance on its strengths and weaknesses and on the learning needs for which it is particularly apt.

The text brought together by Professor Cooper should prove valuable not only to trainers and managers new to this field, but also to those who have experienced some methods and would like a clear account of alternative approaches.

It is for this reason that the Manpower Services Commission has supported the publication of this book.

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1 Introduction

Cary L. Cooper

The purpose of this volume is to provide a snapshot of each of the main approaches to social skill training currently being used in industry and the public sector in the United Kingdom. Although information is available about each of these methods, it was felt it would be useful to bring them together in one volume, so that interested managers and personnel specialists can compare and contrast their various objectives, processes and applications, and their strengths and weaknesses as learning tools. Professional trainers are sometimes inclined to seek out a particular 'flavour of the month' approach without considering the range of possibilities in terms of their own needs. This is particularly the case for social skill training and this collection is intended as a resource volume for those seeking help in selecting training methods that may help them in improving the 'people problems' and skills in organisations.

Before we begin an examination of the various approaches to social skill training that we have selected here, it might be helpful to highlight what some of the objectives of these techniques are. These methods tend to achieve one or a combination of several goals, depending on the approach; such as improvements in:

- (a) Self insight

- (b) Diagnostic skills (individual, group and organisational)
- (c) Communication skills
- (d) Action skills
- (e) Resolution of conflict between people
- (f) Team building
- (g) Organisational development.

I have chosen four approaches that attempt to achieve one or more of these objectives and which are currently being used widely throughout the country. In my view they represent the main thrusts of this work.

We start Chapter 2 with a technique which is daily growing in usage and varied application, Transactional Analysis. It is an approach to social skill development which has its roots in psychoanalytic theory and method. Its main strength lies in its diagnostic framework, which is both easy to understand and goes beyond the surface level of behaviour. TA provides a structured set of concepts which enables the individual to understand the nature of relationships not only at work but in the home and social environment as well. And more importantly, it helps one to understand the 'why' of people's behaviour, unlike T-groups which are concerned with the 'here-and-now' aspects only. It can also be applied to standard management theories, particularly those of Herzberg, McGregor, etc. And finally, TA encourages change and is based on the assumption that people can change. In addition to its strengths, TA also has several drawbacks. First it possesses its own set of jargonistic language, which can have the effect of excluding others who do not understand it, and can act as a psychological barrier to protect the individual concerned. Second, since it is not here-and-now oriented, it can distance the person from his own immediate behaviour. Third, it implicitly encourages the values of assertiveness and autonomy. Dave Barker and Keri Phillips will discuss TA in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 highlights the widely utilised Interaction Analysis method. This technique attempts to provide the training officer with a well-designed framework for exploring interactive behaviour in small group and organisational contexts. This approach avoids some of the alleged problems with more person-centred techniques (such as T-groups), by relying more on objective and analytical tools. The main objectives of interaction analysis are (1) to increase an individual's knowledge about his/her own social behaviour through systematic observation; (2) to

expand his/her information and concepts in such a way that his/her social performance will improve and (3) to understand and adequately respond to the behaviour of others. The two main advantages of this method are that (a) it enhances an individual's diagnostic skills by direct observational training, and (b) that it does this with a minimal of psychological disruption to the individual, that is, in a low confrontation way. Its main weakness lies in the absence of action plans to help the individual deal with his enhanced self insight. In addition, this approach explores only the surface level of behaviour and may not be highlighting the 'real' nature of conflicts or behaviour. In Chapter 3 Damien Dyar and John Giles provide an excellent summary of the technique, its applications and a review of its strengths and shortcomings.

In the next chapter we examine Assertiveness Training, a form of social skill training which is on the ascendant, with the growing increase in women who are taking on full time careers in all aspects of industry and the public sector. This trend is particularly acute in the management field, where women now represent something near to 40 per cent of all undergraduates in management departments and business schools.

'Assertion' can be defined as 'the action of stating positively; declaring'. Being assertive means standing up for one's own basic human rights without violating the basic human rights of others. The purpose of assertion training therefore, is to help the participant to develop assertive responses in those situations in which he/she would like to improve his/her behaviour.

As with all interpersonal skills training, there are both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages can be listed as the following:

- 1 Enables one to influence the environment more effectively than before.
- 2 Improves self-esteem and feelings of self-worth.
- 3 Allows one to examine the appropriateness of one's behaviour in a social context.
- 4 May lower anxiety level.
- 5 Has a theoretical base, but is behaviour-oriented and therefore practical and easily transferable from a workshop situation into everyday life experiences/situations.
- 6 Applies to both work and non-work areas.

Assertiveness training has the following drawbacks:

- 1 Assertion training requires rehearsal and role play to be effective and some participants may find this threatening and difficult.
- 2 Requires examination of aspects of one's life which while being unsatisfactory may not be comfortable to confront (especially in a group versus a 'one to one' training situation).
- 3 Currently there is very little UK based literature or visual aids relating to assertion training.

The final technique we will explore is T-group or Sensitivity Training, which in many ways is the 'queen-bee' of all the experiential methods. It has been used in a variety of forms for nearly forty years, although its shape and colour, like that of the chameleon, have changed to suit the needs and requirements of the time. Perhaps, its very adaptability and versatility are the primary reasons for its long survival and continued usage. Under the rubric of T-groups, we find a wide variety of approaches, such as Tavistock training groups, encounter groups, gestalt groups, etc. They all have several things in common, even though they appear to the outsider as manifestly different. First, they all tend to be *process-oriented*, that is, they are interested in understanding, and making explicit, immediate interpersonal behaviour and feelings. And second, they tend to have a *here-and-now orientation*, that is, they encourage the expression of feelings and behaviour that are taking place at the time of the group training programme. Third, they tend to be *less structured* than some of the other techniques already described. And fourth, they utilise the *small group* as the vehicle for such learning. Their main advantages are that they have the potential of meeting all of the objectives one might want to consider in using social skill training, i.e., self insight, action skills, diagnostic skills, communication skills, etc. Unfortunately, they do not always achieve what they set out to, partially because of their less structured approach, but also because of their tendency to avoid a more systematic framework for diagnosis and theory. In effect, their strength of flexibility, however, can make the understanding of behavioural events that occur in these group settings less clear. Another potential weakness of these techniques is their *risk*. Many people believe these approaches to be potentially dangerous. This is a problem which I shall explore in the last chapter. And finally, these experiential groups are criticised for requiring highly trained and skilled staff, difficulty in transferring learning, and being too time consuming. The Smith and Cooper

chapters look at a number of these issues.

We conclude the volume with a chapter by myself which looks at a study which attempts to evaluate these techniques. It focuses on experiential learning groups primarily, but it is the kind of research which needs to be carried out on all social skill training techniques, if we are to be able adequately to evaluate their effectiveness and potential weaknesses. It is indeed one of the strengths of the T-group approach that it has spawned a large number of evaluation studies, which have helped us to understand its dynamics and potential as a training method.

Table 1.1
An audit of interpersonal or social skill training

	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Transactional analysis</i>	<p>Good diagnostic tool</p> <p>Can examine and express feelings less directly than T-groups</p> <p>Linked to standard management theories</p> <p>Provides a framework of personality which helps to understand the 'why' of behaviour</p> <p>Theory encourages change and is based on assumption that people can change</p>	<p>Jargon can be protective</p> <p>Can distance the person from his own behaviour</p> <p>Implicitly values assertiveness and autonomy</p> <p>Too psychoanalytic</p>
<i>Interaction analysis</i>	<p>Structured framework for understanding interactive behaviour in organisations</p>	<p>Only deals with surface behaviour</p> <p>Difficult to use to develop action skills</p>

	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Interaction analysis (continued)</i>	Feedback of interpersonal behaviour at work	May improve communications but in less structured way
	Little threat to individual	
<i>T-groups</i>	Good at developing self insight	Weak in developing action plans
	Develops group diagnostic skills	Risky for small numbers of vulnerable trainees
	Establish norms for more open communications	Need highly skilled trainer
	Can adapt for team building	Low transfer of learning from stranger groups
		Totally unstructured T-group is too time consuming
<i>Assertiveness training</i>	Improves self-esteem and self-worth	Trainees may find it threatening due to role playing exercises
	Allows one to examine the appropriateness of one's behaviour in a social context	Obviously places high value on assertiveness which may not be appropriate for some
	Has a theoretical base	
	Easily transferable from training situation to work	Few UK training aids available

2 Transactional analysis

Dave Barker and Keri Phillips

Introduction

The last few years have seen the introduction of transactional analysis (TA) as an approach to training for improved interpersonal skills in organisations in the United Kingdom. The number of organisations who have used, or are using, TA is a small minority but appears to be growing. It is experienced by many people as a powerful and penetrating aid to the development of interpersonal skills, resulting in a significant growth in personal awareness as well as improved communication between people. At the same time, its application in industry has not been without criticism (Kilcourse, 1978). Indeed, like any other approach, it does have its limitations, and is not a panacea for all the 'human problems' in industry. It is, however, a very significant option for the development of people in organisations.

In origin, TA is an approach to therapy, developed in the early 1950s by Dr Eric Berne, a Canadian working in the United States. However, it is a theory of communication between people as well as of individual personality, and this duality is part of its particular usefulness in organisations. The communications aspect relates to two important interests of Berne's. First, that relationships between people are a prime focus for examining and resolving personal problems. (This echoes a view of many management training and development specialists, that the

'spaces between people' are sometimes crucial to organisational effectiveness, and it also underscores team development as an approach to organisational growth.) Secondly, that individuals can be helped to improve their relationships with others if the concepts being used by the 'professional helper' are understood and actively shared by those being helped. This led to the development of a 'catchy' language for TA as distinct from traditional psychoanalytic and psychiatric practice.

Since the mid-1950s, TA in the USA has grown to become an established choice for personal therapy and in 1965 the International Transactional Analysis Association was created. Berne became known in the UK through the popularity of one of his books (Berne, 1968) and TA crossed the Atlantic in the 1960s followed later by the establishment of a British based Institute of Transactional Analysis.

The 'theory of communications' aspect of TA, together with its appealing language are fundamental to its use for social change in general, as well as just therapy. Use in organisations started in the 1960s in the US, and in 1971 American Airlines carried out their 'TACT' (TA for Customer Treatment) programme, involving over 6,000 employees (Jongeward, 1973). It was perhaps a natural development for an airline on this side of the Atlantic (Aer Lingus) to be among the first European organisations to apply TA, and the 1970s have seen its increased use in UK industry and business.

Part I TA theory

A. Ego states

This central idea was developed by Berne from his early work on intuition, and proposes the classification of individual personality into three 'sub-personalities' or 'ego states', each with characteristic attitudes, feeling, behaviour and language. The three basic ego states are referred to as the Parent, Adult and Child conventionally portrayed as shown in Figure 2.1 (referred to as a first order functional diagram).

1 Parent

The Parent in us feels and behaves in the same way we perceived the feelings and behaviour of our mother, father and/or others who raised us, together with other 'authority' figures we have met in our lives (from school teachers through to our latest boss).

The Parent:

sets limits

disciplines, judges and criticises
gives advice and guidance
protects and nurtures
keeps traditions
makes rules and regulations about how life should be (the 'do's',
'don't's', 'always', 'nevers', 'should', 'shouldn't's', 'musts', 'ought-
to's', 'have-to's', 'can't's', 'goods', 'bads').

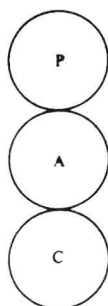


Fig. 2.1 First order functional diagram of ego states

2 Adult

The Adult is the part of us that works things out by looking at the facts, and then makes decisions. It is unemotional and is concerned with 'what fits' and what is most useful. *Adult does not mean mature.* The Adult:

gathers data from the outside world, and also from the inside, e.g. how the Child feels and what the Child wants, what the Parent says, and what the memories stored of past decisions in the Adult have to 'say'.

sorts out the best alternatives from this data and estimates probabilities.

plans the steps in the decision-making process.

3 Child

The Child in us is what and how we were as very young children with

all the feelings and ways of behaving we had at that time. The Child may be:

- fun loving
- energetic
- compliant
- polite
- creative
- rebellious

depending on the individual.

The Parent and Child ego states are commonly subdivided into facets as follows.

4 Facets of the Parent

A distinction is made between the Critical Parent and the Nurturing Parent. The Critical Parent sets limits, disciplines, makes rules, keeps traditions, judges and criticises oneself and/or others. The Nurturing Parent takes care of and looks after oneself and/or others. Both have a protective role, unless over used, in which case they tend to be suppressive.

5 Facets of the Child

The Child ego state has two major facets, Free (or Natural) Child and the Adapted Child. The Free Child is natural, loving, spontaneous, carefree, curious, fun-loving, adventurous, trusting and joyful. The Adapted Child represents all the ways we have of getting attention from and getting along with authority figures. Our behaviour from this aspect of the Child includes not only useful things like saying 'please' and 'thank you' and 'sorry' at appropriate times, but also behaviour which can lead us into difficulties with others, such as rebellion, habitual lateness or overcompliance (always saying yes). These behaviours may have proved useful in getting others to take notice of us when we were young, but can sabotage our work and communication with others in our adulthood.

These facets of the ego states are portrayed in Figure 2.2, referred to as a second order functional diagram.