
David W. Johnson

REACHING OUT

*Interpersonal Effectiveness
and Self-Actualization*

fifth edition

David W. Johnson

University of Minnesota

Reaching Out

***Interpersonal effectiveness
and self-actualization***

Fifth Edition

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Reaching Out

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.



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1 *The Importance of Interpersonal Skills*

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

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

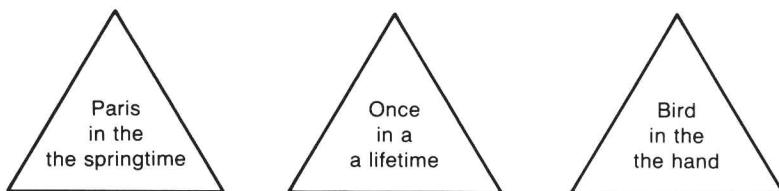
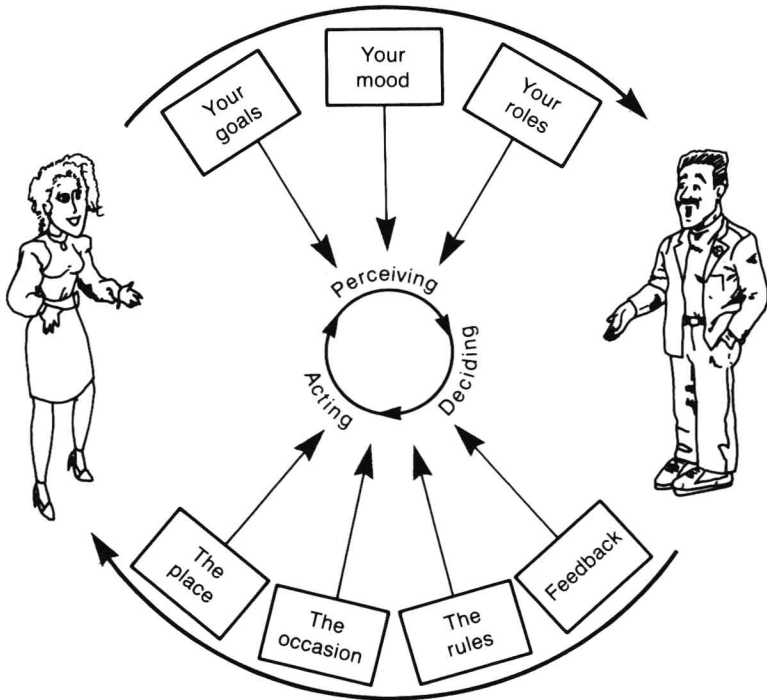


FIGURE 1.2: Cycle of Social Interaction



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-*