

Part I

FOCUS ON SKILLS



INTERACTIVE SKILL 1 – FACE-TO-FACE SKILLS

Managers of all types spend most of their time talking with people; information is the stock in which they trade. HR specialists have skilfulness in interaction as their core expertise. We have already seen how interactive skill is essential to enable HR people to have an impact on strategy formulation. Throughout this book we shall see how effective handling of face-to-face situations is essential throughout human resource management. As well as being articulate and receptive in any face-to-face situation, HR specialists need to develop their skills in various different types of encounter.

The recruiter has to be effective in the highly specialised interaction of the selection interview, where the task is to find out a great deal of relevant information about an applicant on which to base a judgement as to whether or not that person would match the skills, experience and attitudes required in the job to be filled. The skilled recruiter knows that such information will only come from an applicant who has confidence in the interviewer's integrity and who volunteers the information, responding willingly and helpfully to the questions that are posed.

The industrial relations manager, in contrast, needs to be an effective negotiator, explaining a position that those on the other side of the table may not appreciate and who have themselves a position which the industrial relations manager may not appreciate. Common ground has to be established, differences clarified and possibilities for reconciling those differences explored.

Both interactions have things in common, but they require different skills. Each Part of this book is rounded up by focusing on an interaction central to the theme of the Part. Understanding that interaction helps with understanding the other activities that have been reviewed.

Our objectives in this introductory Focus on skills are to:

- 1 Explain what makes for effectiveness in interaction
- 2 Explain the different types of interaction
- 3 Review the fundamental skills of (a) setting the tone, (b) listening, (c) questioning and (d) feedback

There is also a brief case study, typical examination questions and some suggested web links.

Effectiveness in interaction

In the remainder of this focus on skills we concentrate on methods, but we also must remember the need to understand non-verbal behaviour. We all reveal our feelings by what we do as well as in what we say. Someone blushing is obviously embarrassed and someone crying is clearly distressed, but there are a host of other signs or *tells* that indicate what a person is feeling. The person who is able to read these signals has a great advantage in interactions. The term ‘tell’ comes from the study of poker players, who are as anxious to conceal their own hand as they are to guess what is in someone else’s (Caro 1994).

Effective face-to-face people are likely to have some basic qualities. *Poise* enables a person to be at ease in a wide variety of social situations, often enjoying them, and able to talk with different types of people in a relaxed and self-confident way. This self-confidence derives partly from the feedback of willing responses constantly provided by other people.

Another element of poise is knowing what you are talking about, so we demonstrate our poise much more in situations with which we are familiar than we do in strange circumstances. There is less fear of what the other may say and less apprehension about appearing naive. Questions, and even criticism, are easier to deal with and are often wanted, so stimulating the interchange.

Poise is often associated with maturity, due to a person having succeeded in developing a rounded view of themselves without feeling too much anxiety about the possible adverse opinions of others. The process of acquiring poise can be accelerated by experience which involves meeting a variety of people from differing backgrounds.

A necessary adjunct to poise is the quality of being *responsive* to the needs, feelings and level of understanding in other people. This prevents poise from becoming too egocentric. The teacher, for instance, will be looking for signs of misunderstanding in the student so that the message can be restated or clarified, and the market research interviewer will be looking for signals that the question has been accurately

construed, or that it needs elaboration. Responsiveness can also include offering rewards, like friendliness, warmth, sympathy and helpfulness as features of general style or as part of a relationship with other participants. These not only sustain and strengthen the relationship, but may also be held back as a means of trying to get one's own way.

There are certain general problems that impair effectiveness. They mostly concern ways in which people tend to hear what they expect to hear rather than what they are being told.

The frame of reference is the standpoint from which a person views an issue, and understanding of the issue will be shaped by that perspective rather than any abstract 'reality'. It is a set of basic assumptions or standards that frame our behaviour. These are developed through childhood conditioning, through social background, education and affiliations. Differences in the frames of reference held by participants in interactions present inescapable problems. Can Israelis and Arabs ever really understand each other? How can those who manage and direct ever appreciate the point of view of those who are managed and directed?

The frame of reference on any particular matter is largely determined by opinions developed within a group with which we identify, as few of us alter our opinions alone. We both follow and participate in the formulation of opinion in our group, and most of us are in a number of such reference groups. Because this is so, complexities arise: some people can be vociferously anti-union as citizens and voters in general elections, yet support a union of which they are members at their workplace.

The *stereotype* is the standardised expectation we have of those who have certain dominant characteristics: typical stereotypes are that all Scots are mean, all shop stewards are disruptive, women are more caring than men and that men are more aggressive than women. The behaviour of some people in a category makes us expect all in that category to behave in the same way. This is obviously invalid, but is a tendency to which we are prone. We must always listen to what people are actually saying to us rather than hearing what we think a person of that type *would say*.

At first making use of stereotypes is necessary in working relationships; it is not feasible to deal with every individual we meet as being a void until we have collected enough information to know how to treat them, so we always try to find a pigeon-hole in which to put someone. We begin conversations with a working stereotype, so that, for example, we stop someone in the street to ask directions only after we have selected a person who looks intelligent and sympathetic. If we are giving directions to a stranger we begin our explanation having made an assessment of their ability to understand quickly, or their need for a more detailed, painstaking explanation. The stereotype becomes a handicap only when we remain insensitive to new information enabling us to develop a fuller and more rational appraisal of the individual with whom we are interacting.

Being aware of the dangers of stereotyping others, and trying to exercise self-discipline, can reduce the degree to which you misunderstand other people, but you still have the problem that your respondents will put you into a stereotype and hear what you say in accordance with whatever their predetermined notion may be.

Cognitive dissonance is the difficulty we all have in coping with behaviour that is not consistent with our beliefs. Such behaviour will make us uncomfortable and we will try to cope with the dissonance in various ways in order to reduce the discomfort. Either we persuade ourselves that we believe in what we are doing, or we avoid the necessary behaviour. When we are given new information that is not consistent

with what we already believe, we are likely to massage it to fit our existing pattern of behaviour rather than discard the beliefs of a lifetime.

Different types of interaction

Meetings are needed to make decisions, to overcome misunderstanding and to develop ideas. Interviews are used for selection, discipline, appraisal, counselling, problem solving and grievance handling. Managers ‘put things across’ in selling, persuasion, presentation and negotiation.

It is helpful to group interactions into four broad types: enquiry, exposition, joint problem solving and conflict resolution, as indicated in Figure I.1.

Enquiry is that group of situations where the HR specialist needs to find things out from someone else, with the selection interview being the classic example. What needs to be found out may be factual information, attitudes, feelings, levels of understanding or misunderstanding. The main skill is in types of questioning.

Exposition is almost the direct opposite. Instead of finding things out, the HR person is trying to convey information, to develop in the other person a level of knowledge and understanding, acceptance of an argument or agreement with a proposition. Although some questioning is often an integral part of exposition, the main skill is in clear articulation, fluency, good organisation of material and effective illustration.

Joint problem solving is a different type of activity as it involves developing an exchange in which both parties work together to unravel a problem or understand a situation which neither fully understands beforehand. It is not one person transferring an ‘answer’ to another, but both trying to understand together something which they can only partly understand alone. The skills involve some questioning and explanation, but also careful listening and feedback.

Joint problem solving assumes that both parties trust each other and see a common interest in helping the other. *Conflict resolution* begins without that mutual confidence, as the parties have interests that inevitably conflict and they are not likely fully to trust each other. The skills here are first those of presentation and then listening, questioning and feedback.

A very specialised skill is that of *chairing*, which is dealt with at the end of the book.

<p>Enquiry</p> <p>Selection Attitude survey Health screening</p>	<p>Exposition</p> <p>Presentation Lecture Briefing</p>
<p>Joint problem solving</p> <p>Appraisal Counselling Discipline</p>	<p>Conflict resolution</p> <p>Negotiation Arbitration</p>

Figure I.1 Four categories of interaction

Fundamental skills in setting the tone

Any interaction begins by someone setting the tone of what is to follow. A shop assistant who says, ‘Can I help you’, or the peculiarly common, ‘Are you all right *there?*’ is trying to set a tone of knowledgeable helpfulness to a customer that might eventually result in a sale. It is the inclusion of the apparently superfluous ‘there’ that is puzzling. Of course you are there; where else would you be? Presumably the reason is to make the question less blunt, avoiding the implication that you are not all right. The HR specialist will set the tone of a selection interview, for instance, by explaining what is to happen and providing other contextual information that will enable the candidate to engage in the process constructively. There will also be a process of conveying more subtle messages to say, ‘I’m in charge; I know what I’m doing; you can trust me.’ In other interactions the way of setting the tone is different, but some features are common:

- Speak first.
- Smile, looking confident and relaxed (much easier said than done).
- Have brief, harmless exchanges that enable the parties to speak to each other without the answers mattering (weather, travel problems, etc.), but always react appropriately to answers.
- Explain your understanding of what is to happen.
- Check that that is understood and accepted.

Fundamental skills in listening

Tone of voice

Different feelings express themselves in different voice characteristics. Possible meanings for various characteristics are tabulated below:

Characteristic	Probable meaning
Monotone voice	Boredom
Slow speed, low pitch	Depression
High voice, emphasis	Enthusiasm
Ascending tone	Astonishment
Abrupt speech	Defensiveness
Terse speed, loud tone	Anger
High pitch, drawn-out speech	Disbelief

Giving attention

Inclining the body towards the other person is a signal of attentiveness, so our posture should be inclined forward and facing the other squarely with an open posture: folded arms can be inhibiting.

Eye contact is crucial to good listening, but is a subtle art:

Effective eye contact expresses interest and a desire to listen. It involves focusing one's eyes softly on the speaker and occasionally shifting the gaze from his face to other parts of the body, to a gesturing hand, for example, and then back to the face and then to eye contact once again. Poor eye contact occurs when a listener repeatedly looks away from the speaker, stares at him constantly or blankly, or looks away as soon as the speaker looks at the listener. (Bolton 1987, p. 36)

The distinction between 'focusing one's eyes softly' and staring is vital, though difficult to describe, and competence in eye contact is never easy to establish. It is one of the most intimate ways of relating to a person and many managers fear that the relationship may become too close.

We also show *physical responses* in our attentiveness. First we have to avoid distracting the other person by physical behaviour that is unrelated to what is being said; fiddling with a pen, playing with car keys, scrutinising our fingernails, wringing our hands, brushing specks of dust off our sleeves are a few typical behaviours that indicate inattention. Skilled listeners not only suppress these, they also develop minor gestures and posture variants that are directly responsive to what the other is saying.

Being silent helps you to listen by providing space for incoming messages, but it also provides opportunities to observe the other person and to think about what is being said. Most people are uncomfortable with silence and try to fill it with inconsequential chat, but this interferes with listening. Silence still has to be attentive and the longer the silence, the harder it is to be attentive: think of the last lecture you attended and how hard it was to maintain attentiveness.

Fundamental skills in questioning

Closed questions seek precise, terse information and are useful when you want clear, straightforward data. Most encounters feature closed questioning at some point.

Open-ended questions avoid terse replies by inviting respondents to develop their opinions without the interviewer prescribing what the answer should be. The question does little more than introduce a topic to talk about. Their main purpose is to obtain the type of deeper information that the closed question misses, as the shape of the answer is not predetermined by the questioner. You are informed not simply by the content of the answers, but by what is selected and emphasised.

Indirect questions take an oblique approach on a difficult matter. A blunt 'Did you like that job?' almost suggests you didn't, or at least raises the suspicion that the interviewer thinks you didn't; it is a bit like the shop assistant avoiding being too blunt. Put indirectly as 'What gave you the most satisfaction in that job?' it has the merit of concentrating on the work rather than the person.

The *probe* is a form of questioning to obtain information that the respondent is trying to conceal. When the questioner becomes aware that the respondent is doing so he or she has to make an important, and perhaps difficult, decision: whether to respect the candidate's unwillingness and let the matter rest, or to persist with the enquiry. Reluctance is quite common in selection interviews where a candidate may

wish to gloss over an aspect of the recent employment history. The most common sequence for the probe takes the following form: (a) direct questions, replacing the more comfortable open-ended approach ('What were you doing in the first six months of 2001?'). Careful phrasing may avoid a defensive reply, but those skilled at avoiding unwelcome enquiries may still deflect the question, leading to (b) supplementaries, which reiterate the first question with different phrasing ('Yes, I understand about that period. It's the first part of 2001 that I'm trying to get clear: after you came back from Belgium and before you started with Amalgamated Widgets'). Eventually this should produce the information the questioner needs. (c) Closing. If the information has been wrenched out like a bad tooth and the interviewer looks horrified or sits in stunned silence, then the candidate will feel put down beyond redemption. The interviewer needs to make the divulged secret less awful than the candidate had feared, so that the interview can proceed with reasonable confidence ('Yes, well you must be glad to have that behind you'). It may be that the interviewer will feel able to develop the probe by developing the answer by a further question such as 'And how did that make you feel?' or 'And how did you react to that? It must have been a terrible blow.' It is only reasonable to do this if the resultant exchange adds something useful to the questioner's understanding of the client: simple nosiness is not appropriate.



WINDOW ON (MAL)PRACTICE

One rather dubious version of the probe is to offer an exaggerated explanation for something being avoided. In the imaginary situation described above the selector might do this:

Selector: Yes, I understand about that period. It's the first part of 2001 that I'm trying to get clear: after you came back from Belgium and before you started with Amalgamated Widgets. You weren't in prison or anything, were you?

Candidate: Oh no. I had a nervous breakdown

The explanation offered by the selector is so appalling that the candidate rushes to offer a less appalling explanation. This is not recommended, but it is interesting to know about. It might happen to you one day.

Some common lines of questioning should be avoided because they can produce an effect that is different from what is intended.

Leading questions ('Would you agree with me that . . .?') will not necessarily produce an answer that is informative, but an answer in line with the lead that has been given.

Multiple questions give the candidate too many inputs at one time ('Could you tell me something of what you did at university, not just the degree, but the social and sporting side as well, and why you chose to backpack your way round the world? You didn't travel on your own, did you?'). This sort of questioning is sometimes adopted by interviewers who are trying very hard to efface themselves and let the

respondent get on with the talking. However helpful the interviewer intends to be, the effect is that the candidate will usually forget the later parts of the question, feel disconcerted and ask, 'What was the last part of the question?' By this time the interviewer has also forgotten, so they are both embarrassed.

Taboo questions are those that infringe the reasonable personal privacy of the candidate. There is a proper place for the probe, but some questions have to be avoided, especially in selection interviews, as they could be interpreted as discriminatory. It is at least potentially discriminatory, for instance, to ask women how many children they have and what their husbands do for a living. Questions about religion or place of birth are also to be avoided. Some questions may do no more than satisfy the idle curiosity of the questioner. If there is no point in asking them, they should not be put.

Fundamental skills in feedback

As well as listening, it is necessary to provide feedback to demonstrate that you have received and understood what you are being told.

In *reflection*, the listener picks up and re-states the content of what has just been said. In a difficult situation the listener picks out the emotional overtones of a statement and 'reflects' them back to the respondent without any attempt to evaluate them. The interviewer expresses neither approval nor disapproval, neither sympathy nor condemnation.

At a more prosaic level, there is *summary and re-run* to show you are listening and providing the opportunity for any misunderstanding to be pointed out. In appraisal, for instance, the respondent will produce lots of information in an interview and you will be selecting that which is to be retained and understood. From time to time you interject a summary sentence or two with an interrogative inflection. This shows that you are listening, gives the respondent the chance to correct any false impressions and reinforces the key points that are being retained. It is also a useful way of making progress, as the interjection is easily followed by another open-ended question – 'Now perhaps we can turn to . . . ?'

The standard method in both reflection and summary is *paraphrasing*, by which the listener states the essence of what has been said. This is done concisely, giving the speaker a chance to review what has been said and, perhaps, to correct it.

We all respond positively when a listener shows *interest* in what is being said. If it is possible also to agree with what is being said, the reinforcement of the respondent will be greater.

The most common form of *affirmation* in feedback is the head nod, and many public speakers look for head nods (not to be confused with nodding off) as a way of judging the supportive mood of the audience. Other ways of affirming involve the use of the eyes. These are too subtle and individual to describe, but we each have a repertoire of signals to indicate such reactions as encouragement, surprise and understanding. When the eyes are part of a smile, there will be stronger reward to the talker. There are also words and phrases: 'Really?' 'Go on . . .', 'Yes . . .', 'Of course . . .', 'My word . . .', 'You were saying . . .'

Interaction contains a variety of noises that are ways of feeding back to the other party. They are impossible to reproduce in words but are usually variations of a theme of 'Mmm . . .' and they form a part of the exchanges that is inarticulate yet meaningful, keeping things going without interrupting.

SUMMARY PROPOSITIONS

- I.1 Interactive skills are a fundamentally important aspect of all managerial work.
- I.2 Effectiveness in interaction is aided by poise and being responsive to others, as well as by understanding the effects of the frame of reference, stereotyping and cognitive dissonance.
- I.3 The basic types of interaction can be categorised as enquiry, exposition, joint problem solving and conflict resolution. A specialised skill is chairing.
- I.4 Listening skills include tone of voice, giving attention, eye contact, physical responses and being silent.
- I.5 The main types of question are closed, open ended, indirect and the probe. Inappropriate questions are leading, multiple and taboo.
- I.6 Methods of feedback include reflection, summary and re-run, paraphrasing, showing interest, affirmation and using appropriate noises.

GENERAL DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 What are the advantages of face-to-face conversation compared with a combination of e-mail, fax, text messages and telephone calls?
- 2 If a central part of HRM is getting things done by other people, what is the difference between telling them what to do and asking them to do things? In what sort of situations would each approach be appropriate?

FURTHER READING

Argyle, M. (1994) *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books

This is a classic that was first published in 1967 and remains the ideal introduction to understanding the dynamics of interpersonal skills.

Collett, P. (2003) *The Book of Tells*. London: Doubleday

This book provides a comprehensive explanation of non-verbal behaviours that reveal a person's true feelings. The author is a social psychologist who combines research at the Oxford University Department of Experimental Psychology with acting as resident psychologist for the television programme *Big Brother*.

Glass, L. (1992) *He Says, She Says*. London: Piatkus

This shows the differences in communication behaviour between men and women, which lead to such extensive misunderstanding of motives. The author explains differences in body language, voice tone, speech patterns and even choice of words.



WEB LINKS

www.cipd.co.uk takes you to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which is the professional body for HR people. The site has a wealth of information, not only on qualification courses, but on all aspects of human resource management.

www.shrm.org is a similar site for the Society of Human Resource Management in the United States.

www.peoplemanagement.co.uk is the website for the monthly journal, published by CIPD.

The book's companion website contains more practical advice on interaction techniques.

REFERENCES

- Bolton, R. (1987) *People Skills*. Brookvale, New South Wales: Simon & Schuster.
 Caro, M. (1994) *The Body Language of Poker*. Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group.

REVIEW OF PART I

The early chapters of this book indicated that many controversial incidents in human life have what might be called an HR dimension. If someone fails in a job, was the right person chosen in the first place? Was the 'right' person unfairly rejected? If a train crashes with serious loss of life, was the driver properly trained and supervised? Are employees effectively disciplined when they make mistakes, or does the manager concerned avoid the issue for fear of jeopardising a working relationship? And so they go on, issues of fitting people to jobs and jobs to people, issues of training, appraisal, motivation, payment and many more. All go to the core of human resource management, yet the role of the human resource manager is not directly to manage these situations, but to ensure they are managed and to enable other people to manage them well.

The challenge for HRM people is thus, somehow or other, to get the job done by other people, not all of whom will welcome assistance and guidance because they are quite sure of their own ability to deal with the matters. Furthermore, they may well outrank the HR people and disparage HR expertise, although the latter problem seems to be getting less common.

The human resource manager needs to understand the range and potential of human resource management, its traditions, its problems and its expertise, so as to adopt a perspective on any situation (as in the case study that follows) that is realistic and fit for the purpose.

Advice from HR will always be strengthened when based on sound analysis, so expertise in planning methods and the ability to use this quickly and appropriately is a necessary part of the HR manager's toolkit.

Because human resource management deals with such a variety of situations and people, a skill that is even more important is that of being effective in face-to-face interaction. This is where advice works or is disregarded, where the 'right' person is spotted and selected or lost to a competitor, where the disgruntled employee is brought back on board or the union agreement is sealed, and so on. Because human resource management is one of the great tasks of getting things done through other people, it is appropriate to conclude this short review with a quotation from an obscure English poet of the eighteenth century, James Thomson. In a eulogy to the recently deceased Lord Talbot, he wrote:

How the heart listened while he pleading spoke!
 While on the enlightened mind, with winning art,
 His gentle reason so persuasive stole
 That the charmed hearer thought it was his own.

Clearly a man deserving immediate Chartered Personnel Practitioner status!

Part I CASE STUDY PROBLEM

You have just been appointed to replace the personnel manager in an organisation where members of the Board felt that HR practice had become over-preoccupied with fashionable ideas and was not meeting the needs of the business and the people who worked there. They have asked you to:

- 1** Review the ways in which human resource management is being conducted across the entire business, within the line as well as by the HR specialists.
- 2** Identify aspects of best practice that are currently being employed by leading-edge HR practitioners in other organisations and which would be relevant to your situation.
- 3** Draft proposals for a programme of strategic initiatives to enhance human resource management throughout the business.

On investigation you find:

- 1** A scheme of employee involvement in management decision making has foundered because of resistance from two unions with members in the organisation, whose representatives were excluded from discussions about the proposals; and by reservations held by a number of senior managers, who felt that the scheme had not been properly thought through and that it was too radical a development.
- 2** The concept of performance management has been introduced at the same time as moves to empower line managers. Many line managers feel that empowerment means no more than taking the blame for things that go wrong, and many of their subordinates feel that they are now cut off from the centralised, expert services of the HR function.
- 3** A case for the Investors in People award was turned down because what actually happened in practice did not match what the policy statement claimed.
- 4** Members of the HR function say that they have lost credibility and job satisfaction by a series of grandiose schemes that were not fully developed and which could not be fully implemented in a short time.

Required

Produce outline proposals for the Board to consider, setting out what you would do in the first six months and in the following 12 months to deal with this situation and what you expect to achieve in that time.

Locate the organisation in a real context, either in a company or other organisation with which you are familiar or in a particular industry that interests you.

- 1** Summarise the stages in development of personnel management and human resource management.
- 2** Examine some likely future trends in human resource management. Which developments do you expect to be prevalent, and why?
- 3** Explain the problems of integrating HR strategy with corporate strategy. How can these problems be addressed?
- 4** 'The employment relationship is not just an economic transaction; it also has social and moral connotations.' Discuss the arguments for and against this view and the implications for HRM practice.
- 5** Analyse the links between business strategy and HRM, using examples to support your answer.
- 6** 'HRM is a second-order function with the task of managing the administrative side of the employment relationship. It should not aspire to more than that.' Do you agree or disagree?
- 7** In May 1993 *Fortune* magazine set out 'six trends that will re-shape the workplace':
 - The average organisation will become smaller, employing fewer people.
 - The traditional hierarchical organisation will give way to a variety of forms, foremost being the network of specialists.
 - Technicians will replace manufacturing operatives as the worker elite.
 - The vertical division of labour will be replaced by a horizontal division.
 - The paradigm of doing business will shift from making a product to providing a service.
 - Work will be redefined towards constant learning, more higher-order thinking, less nine to five.How far do you see these trends exemplified in (a) the economy generally and (b) your own organisation?
- 8** In what ways have the methods and objectives of human resource planning changed as the workforce has become more diverse?