EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: A KEY TO SYNERGISTIC INTERACTIONS

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Introduction

We live in an interdependent world and in both our business and personal lives we need to interact with other people. Indeed, in today's world, which is virtually a global village with tremendous interpersonal connectivity enabled by the Internet and high-speed transportation, individuals and multinational organizations thrive on interdependence and effective interactions. It is a no-brainer to realize that it pays to bring synergy to these interactions. The objective of this article is to point out ways in which communication can play a key role in building synergistic relationships and minimizing antagonistic encounters.

Basic Principles

In order to understand the principles behind effective interactions, it is helpful to start with the basic premise that from an individual's perspective, in any situation, the aim should be to protect the body, mind, and spirit, which form the core of the life process. In his magnificent book, *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, Deepak Chopra points out that thought processes and chemicals in the body are inextricably linked to each other and that mental depression generates harmful biochemical entities, thus explaining how the chronically depressed are more likely to get sick. Those exposed to clinical trials aimed at showing the efficacy of experimental drugs are all too familiar with the placebo effect, whereby a substantial percentage of patients receiving placebo show a response similar to that of patients receiving the test drug, making it difficult to differentiate the test drug from the placebo. Again this phenomenon can be attributed to the mind-body connection, which can also be deliberately manipulated to produce positive results.

Beyond the visible mind-body effects, there must be an invisible, yet all-pervading life force that remotely controls our emotions, thoughts, and actions.

This life force is what is generally referred to as the spirit. The spirit is manifested in our awareness, disposition, intelligence, values, beliefs, assumptions and self-image, all of which influence our emotions, thoughts, actions and outcomes.

Using the computer analogy, we can equate the body with computer hardware, the mind with the user and the spirit with the software and data stored in the computer memory. New data that is fed to the computer is handled by the user who utilizes relevant software and existing data to process the fresh data. In the same fashion, the mind processes new input by drawing on the spirit where all the past experience, skills, knowledge and paradigms are stored. The quality of the computer output is clearly dependent on the input, the user's skills, the software and the hardware. Similarly, the quality of life, which includes all our interactions, is a function of the input we choose and the state of our body, mind and spirit.

The software and data stored in a computer are usually shared by other computers so that they can communicate with each other. Just as the computer software is not restricted to any particular computer, the spirit should be viewed as an all-pervading universal force that binds people. This view of the spirit helps us perceive unity in diversity and thus deal with other people effectively.

By envisioning ourselves as extensions of the environment to which we are inevitably linked, we can interact harmoniously with our environment, thus making ourselves happy and healthy. The more we have in common with other people like language, culture, exposure and outlook, the more compatible we are with them and the more effective is our interaction with the outside world. On the other hand, by seeing ourselves as totally separate entities, we become self-centered and create unnecessary discord with other people and our surroundings.

In an enlightening passage in *Meditation for Beginners,* Stephanie Clement dwells on 'unconditional positive regard', a term taken from humanistic and transpersonal psychology to mean 'awareness of oneself (or of another person) without making any judgments'. A lot of our miseries can be minimized by being kind to ourselves, and one way to achieve this objective is to practice 'unconditional positive regard' and refrain as far as possible from finding fault with ourselves,

other people, or life in general. This way, we can minimize having to deal with what has been labeled as 'bad' in our judgment and consequently minimize the potential for suffering.

A person who identifies easily with other people accepts them as they are, instead of trying to find fault with them. On the other hand, a person with type 'A' personality who feels segregated from others, subjects himself or herself to a lot of stress by trying to control and micromanage others and eventually puts the blame on others for not being able to achieve his or her goals.

It is possible to expand one's horizon and connect with other parts of the globe by reading about various cultures, travelling as widely as resources and time permit, appreciating the richness of architecture and art in a variety of settings and listening to music from different countries. This approach helps us in identifying common threads that run through the fabric of human civilization and in becoming citizens of the world beyond the artificial boundaries of the state or country of our residence.

Continuing with the computer analogy, implementation of any project on the computer typically entails more than one software package. For instance, to capture, process and analyze the data from clinical trials, we use three software packages, namely Visual Basic, ORACLE and statistical analysis systems (SAS). Each software package has its unique features and functions that are more appropriate for certain aspects of the project. Visual Basic is an object oriented programme that is particularly suitable for capturing data recorded on forms, while ORACLE is designed for creating, storing and retrieving hierarchical databases; and SAS specializes in statistical analysis of data. Clearly, each package has its own strengths and limitations and is most effective in conjunction with the other packages. This is a good example of synergism, which, by definition, is the interaction of several things resulting in a greater effect than the sum of the individual effects. Multidisciplinary teamwork is another good example of synergism, whereby the contribution of the team as a whole generally far exceeds the sum of individual contributions.

Drugs can interact synergistically or antagonistically and so can humans. Obviously, synergistic interactions are more constructive and desirable than antagonistic ones, which tend to be destructive in nature. Human interactions can be made more productive and enjoyable by bringing synergy into the equation. Effective interpersonal interactions, in turn, lead to a deep sense of emotional security and heightened self-confidence, thus enhancing the spirit in intangible ways. Antagonism should be avoided as far as possible, since it drains our emotional energy and has a negative impact on our spirit.

A 'win-win' approach is essential for any type of enduring and harmonious relationship. Clearly, there is nothing to be gained by linking two software packages if they don't complement each other. The same principle can be applied to human relationships, whether it is between a man and a woman, a parent and a child, a boss and a subordinate, two friends, two colleagues, or two companies. The alternatives, namely 'win-lose', 'lose-win', and 'lose-lose' are clearly not viable strategies for maintaining long-term relationships. A 'win-win' solution can emerge only if there is mutual trust and a genuine interest in the other person's welfare. Any type of half-hearted or faked behaviour will only generate suspicion and lack of trust, thereby quickly sabotaging a relationship. If after a concerted effort, there is no 'win-win' solution in sight, the best strategy is to terminate a relationship rather than prolong the agony of a dysfunctional relationship.

It is difficult to envision a synergistic relationship without any common goals. There are always some objectives to be accomplished by linking two software packages. In human relationships, the objectives may not be clear-cut in the beginning, but they evolve over time and a sincere attempt needs to be made to define these objectives and to communicate these to the people involved in the relationship in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Role of Communication

Communication is the exchange or flow of information or messages between two people, two groups, or one person and a group as in the case of a

formal presentation to a group. The content of a communication is the actual message delivered, written or spoken, while the context is the way in which the message is delivered, encompassing the tone, the expression in the eyes, body language and emotional state. Thus, there is more to communication than verbal communication, which refers to written or oral communication using words. Non-verbal communication is just as important as verbal communication in conveying a message effectively.

Some of the common barriers of communication are: a) the message is not clear or direct, but convoluted, b) the message is not focused, but desultory, c) the message is conveyed in an angry or sarcastic manner and not in a supportive way, and d) the message is too judgmental in nature, e) the receiver is too self-absorbed and is not listening carefully, f) the receiver is more interested in debating or sparring and wanting to be right, and g) the receiver is stereotyping or prejudging the other person negatively.

Overcoming Communication Barriers

In order to overcome the usual barriers of communication, it is important to invest in a solid and reliable interface or means of communication with others, by understanding others in terms of their qualities and needs and by clearly spelling out realistic expectations up front, honoring commitments, demonstrating integrity and building up a high level of mutual trust. In their incisive book *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen Covey and Rebecca Merrill point out how trust affects the quality of every relationship, every communication and every effort in which we are engaged. They further note that there are four factors that create trust or credibility: honesty and integrity; intent based on mutual benefit; capabilities for inspiring confidence and a good track record.

Two software packages can be linked only by creating an interface programme to convert the output from one package into the input for the other package. This involves considerable effort to be put in at the beginning and to be sustained throughout the linkage. Clearly, it is necessary to understand the salient features,

functions and limitations of each package before creating an interface between the two packages. The same deep level of understanding is necessary to make human relationships work in a positive and synergistic fashion. By making the interface between two packages as comprehensive and reliable as possible, we can prevent too many breakdowns of the integrated system and thus increase our efficiency. In the same manner, investment in a solid and reliable interface in human relationships pays rich dividends.

Active Listening

The only way to understand another person's point of view is by carefully listening to the other person without getting impatient and jumping the gun with your own perceptions. Effective listening can be accomplished by listening actively and with empathy and openness. Active listening involves paraphrasing what one just heard, asking questions for clarification and giving feedback. This technique should be used to check whether you have heard the message correctly. In addition, it ensures your active participation in the conversation and assures the other person that you are interested in what he or she is conveying, all of which is helpful in building a good rapport. Active listening can come to your rescue when you need to respond to a question from the audience in a Q and A session after you have just given a presentation. By using the active listening technique, you will not be falling into the trap of giving the right answer to the wrong question! Besides, active listening allows you to buy time, while you think of an immediate response or perhaps a comment suggesting that it is a good question that merits further thought and follow-up at a later time.

Interpersonal Skills

Interactions can be made more harmonious by applying emotional intelligence (EI), which refers to the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of the others and for managing emotions well within us and in our relationships. 'Emotional maturity' is perhaps the closest nontechnical term for emotional intelligence. A mature person has considerable poise, accepts criticism gracefully,

accepts responsibility for his or her actions, has a great deal of patience, does not unnecessarily worry about situations beyond his or her control, is modest and open-minded and has empathy with others. The EI model, introduced by Daniel Goleman in his trailblazing book *Emotional Intelligence*, outlines four main EI constructs: self-awareness or the ability to read one's emotions and recognize their impact; self-management, which involves controlling one's emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances; social awareness or the ability to sense, understand and react to others' emotions; and relationship management or the ability to inspire, influence and develop others while managing conflict.

Interpersonal skills can be viewed as the result of applying emotional intelligence at the practical level. Specifically, they refer to social communications and interactions geared towards producing certain effects. For instance, it is generally understood that by being polite and communicating respect for other people, one can reduce conflict. Polite behaviour will also facilitate cooperation and assistance in obtaining information and in completing tasks. Thus, interpersonal skills can vastly increase the productivity in an organization. In informal situations, politeness allows communication to be easy and comfortable. People with good interpersonal skills can generally control the feelings that emerge in difficult situations and respond appropriately, instead of being overwhelmed by emotion. Interpersonal skills include the ability to make people feel good by giving them appropriate and sincere compliments. By being forthcoming with your compliments, you can earn a lot of mileage toward your life destinations. In the words of Mother Teresa, "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless."

Cross-Cultural Communication

In the process of linking one software package to another, there is no need to change the basic structure of either package. The interface should focus on the input/output options of these packages. Similarly, in any relationship, it is not necessary or realistic to expect the other person or persons to change drastically and to conform to your ideas. It is possible to have a mutually satisfying relationship, in spite of sharp differences in personality and style, as long as there is flexibility and mutual

acceptance. It is important to make everyone in your purview feel welcome and worthy, without making preconceived judgments about any one. This is especially true in cross-cultural communication. An attempt should be made to have a deep understanding of the values and ethos that define another culture. However, this process needs to start by understanding one's own culture and then graduating to the level of understanding and appreciating the common elements and differences of another culture. In cross-cultural situations, it is also necessary to adapt oneself to another culture, without having to lose one's cultural identity.

Communication Styles

There are three basic communication styles: passive, aggressive, and assertive styles. A passive style is one where thoughts and feelings are not expressed directly, causing a substantial communication gap. In the aggressive style, thoughts and feelings are expressed directly, but at the expense of others' rights and feelings. In the assertive style, one makes direct statements regarding one's thoughts and feelings and stands up for one's rights, without violating the rights of others or hurting their feelings.

Aggressive behaviour usually emanates from anger and frustration, but it does not generally solve any of the problems causing the anger or frustration in the first place. Instead, negative emotions and aggressive behaviour tend to cause hypertension and other medical problems in the long run. Expressing your feelings in an assertive, not aggressive manner is the healthiest approach. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs are and how to get them met, without hurting others. Being assertive doesn't mean being pushy or demanding; it means respecting yourself and others.

Anger can be suppressed. However, unexpressed anger can lead to pathological expressions of anger, such as passive-aggressive behaviour (getting back at people indirectly, without telling them why, rather than confronting them head-on) or a personality that seems perpetually cynical and hostile. In the words of Dr. Rydel, the anger therapist, brilliantly and hilariously portrayed by Jack Nicholson in

the movie *Anger Management,* "There are two types of anger: Explosive and Implosive. The guys who scream at the cashier day in and day out for not checking their coupons correctly are explosive in their anger. But the cashier who listens to them and does not say a word harbors implosive anger and shoots everyone one day." You most certainly don't want to be the cashier! In such situations, relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation and chanting, along with a generous dose of humor can be very effective in defusing anger.

Communication Technologies

The technologies at our disposal today such as e-mail, phone, audio and video conferencing, and power point presentation, are invaluable tools for facilitating communication, if they are used appropriately. While using any of these technologies, just as in face-to-face communication, it is important to bear in mind the basic tenets of communication such as listening actively and with empathy, connecting or bonding with those you are communicating with and being polite.

E-mail is perhaps the most popular mode of communication these days, because of its ease and speed, with the result that we are inundated with e-mail messages every day. Not surprisingly, we don't generally look forward to reading long-winded messages. By the same token, we need to be considerate to others by adhering to the principles of brevity and clarity, while sending e-mail messages. A lot of information can be conveyed succinctly via email, thus obviating the need for lengthy meetings or phone calls.

Audio or video conferencing can be an effective way to connect with people in today's global environment, provided it is organized well. An agenda needs to be sent out by e-mail in advance, so that the conference call does not degenerate into a chat session, wasting everyone's time. The person who called the meeting needs to be the host and needs to take charge, by first defining the purpose of the meeting and the expected outcomes or decisions. The next step is to go over the agenda or the road map to get to the destination, and to assign roles for the attendees in terms of addressing specific agenda items. This will ensure a lively session with

a lot of group participation. The host of the meeting can also make the meeting more participatory and interactive by preparing a list of questions and directing the questions at specific participants, making sure no one is left out.

Formal presentations with or without power point slides need to be prepared and rehearsed to ensure effective delivery within the allotted time. The first step in preparing a presentation is to define the objective of the presentation or more specifically the goal one wants to achieve by making the presentation. The objective should be stated clearly in one sentence. The next step is to outline the presentation, making sure that the presentation is relevant to your objective. The presentation can be conveniently separated into three parts: a) Introduction consisting of the statement of the objective, along with the outline, basically telling the audience what you are going to tell them, b) Body of the presentation, which should be organized in a seamless manner and c) Conclusion, summarizing what you have told them. It is important to connect with the audience, by making as much eye contact as possible and to capture the attention of the audience by making the session as interactive as possible. Pausing for emphasis and voice modulation are also useful techniques for making an effective presentation. Power point slides with bullet points, diagrams, and graphical displays, and similarly, flipcharts and notes can be used as aids to remember your points and to help you get your points across.

Power of Visualization

The power of visualization can be used during the rehearsal to see, feel and experience the outcome and to visualize the main points during your presentation. Top athletes and high achievers use the power of visualization on a regular basis. Once you have the end in view, you are automatically motivated to go through the motions necessary to achieve the end you have visualized. This strong motivation, coupled with faith and the formal or informal lessons you have etched in your memory, will steer you in the right direction. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, "Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will".

Conclusion

The strategies for enhancing communication and thereby facilitating synergistic relationships, discussed in this article, can be used to help you in your personal and professional development. These strategies need to be practiced routinely and diligently, in order to achieve the desired results.

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References

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2. *Meditation for Beginners* by Stephanie Clement
3. *The Speed of Trust* by Stephen M.R. Covey
4. *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman

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