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Core requirement, Social Science

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COM 310 INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION (3 credits)

Studies interpersonal aspects of communication. Introduces concepts and related skills that define communication in a variety of face-to-face contexts. Includes models of communication, language and meaning, nonverbal and verbal communication, perception, conflict, and establishing positive human relationships via communication.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

George Herbert Mead, the well-known philosophy professor of the early twentieth century, claimed that the most human activity people engage in is talking to each other (Griffin 2004). While talking to one another may seem like the easiest thing we do as human beings, it is also the most complex. As I reflect on the failure of my parents' marriage, the challenges I have faced as a parent, and my professional career, I concluded that the ability to communicate well is a learned skill.

In this essay, I will outline the communication process, principles and skills that I learned and applied in my work, my family, and my church. I will explain some of the

complexities of the communication process, define effective interpersonal communication skills, and describe how I applied these skills in various settings.

I discovered that language has the power to construct reality and influence people's beliefs and actions. I will discuss the implications of that principle in the context of my pro-life work. I also learned that all interpersonal communication is received in the context of relationship. Therefore, the metamessage is what is heard rather than the actual words that are spoken.

In addition, I was taught that as much as 93% of interpersonal communication is nonverbal. I will describe how I trained volunteers and applied this aspect of interpersonal communication in the client room. I will also explain how creating a safe environment through sincere respect, effective listening skills and genuine empathy causes others to self-disclose and to become more self-aware.

Experience

In 1980-1989, I worked at XXXX which began my extensive experience at a nonprofit community center. I was trained extensively in the intake process and worked with clients. I held numerous positions including community liaison coordinator from 1986-1988. In 1989, I became the executive director of the XXXX in XXXX, a pro-life pregnancy center that provided crisis intervention and support services to women facing unplanned pregnancies. My primary responsibilities included counseling clients and training volunteers. (ITEM 1) I received extensive additional training in 1990-1995 in numerous subjects such as interpersonal communication, diversity, listening skills and interviewing. As a result, I trained over 50 volunteers. As the executive director of

XXXX, I received an intensive education in interpersonal communication throughout my tenure. In 2002, I was invited to present a workshop at the National Conference on Mentoring at XXXXX. (ITEM 3) I was also asked to sit on the panel for the closing session of the conference to field questions from the audience.

Over the last 15 years, I applied the interpersonal communication skills that I learned to my church work and in my family. I saw tremendous benefits in using these skills to resolve family problems. I also observed that they are extremely valuable in the workplace in developing and maintaining positive professional relationships.

Topic 1: The Communication Process and Interpersonal Communication

In the training I received, I was taught a communication model that included a sender, a message, a channel, and a receiver. In this model, the sender and the receiver are the two individuals in conversation. The message is the words that are spoken and the channel refers to how the message is communicated. However, I learned that many things could interfere with the channel and affect the message that is ultimately heard by the receiver.

The communication theorist, Paul Watzlawick, said that communication is essentially content plus relationship (Griffin, 2004). In other words, the relationship sets the context for how the message is received. I also learned that there are other things that affect the reception of the message include the physical setting in which the

conversation occurs along with such nonverbal factors as tone, inflection, body language, and proxemics.

Because of the complexity of the communication process, I took much care in the training of volunteers. I taught them the basics beginning with forming the proper attitudes of openness, acceptance, and respect. I also taught them skills in nonverbal communication, feedback, and active listening. I elaborate more fully on these skills later in this essay.

As a director, I sensed how much pressure volunteers felt to say the right thing to clients. I observed how much more confident and effective they were when they learned and practiced good interpersonal communication skills. As a result of the application of these skills, volunteers and clients felt very good about their experience at the center.

As I mastered these communication skills, I applied them to my family relationships. As my children grew older, I found that I needed to let go of my need to control and relate to them in a more symmetrical way. I also taught some of these skills to my children in order to assist them in their interpersonal communication and conflict resolution. They used to make fun of me when I would remind them of the feedback statement, "I feel (state your feeling) when you (describe the words or actions that affected you) because (explain why it affected you that way)." I stressed the importance of owning the feeling and explaining the reason for it rather than blaming the other person.

Even though my children made fun of me, I discovered that my instruction had been effective. A few years ago we went on a family vacation to Florida. At that point,

the children were all in their twenties. Nevertheless, I noticed old rivalries and personal issues coming to the surface. It all came to a head in a major blow-up that included angry words and tears. It seemed that our vacation was about to be completely ruined.

However, the children decided to have a family meeting to resolve the problems. They took the lead in this effort and I observed that they used affirmation, active listening, feedback, and more than once, the famous line, “I feel...when you...because...” We resolved the difficulty, the vacation was salvaged, and I felt very grateful.

I also applied these communication principles to the mentoring program I designed for my church. I observed that the typical mentoring program focused primarily on the exchange of information. I believed that the focus of mentoring should be on building a relationship. Without a relationship that provides safety and openness, information cannot be received no matter how valuable it is.

Therefore, much of my mentoring training focused on how to create a safe and affirming environment for the mentoring relationship. This included setting aside personal agendas, letting go of the need to control, and respecting the journey of the other person. I focused on these principles when I was invited to be the keynote speaker at a women’s retreat in Georgia in the fall of 2000. My outline used the acrostic HUGE, which stands for humility, unconditional love, genuineness, and empathy.

(ITEM 2)

Topic 2: Language

George Herbert Mead's disciple, Herbert Blumer, coined the term "symbolic interactionism" (Griffin, 2004). He proposed that meaning arises out of social interaction and that it is negotiated through the use of language. In other words, as people interact through the use of words, they construct their own reality.

I observed the power of language in the pro-life movement. The terminology that was used by each side reflected the attitude and constructed the reality for the two opposing sides. For example, both sides preferred a name that began with "pro." Neither side wanted to be seen as "anti" anything. Therefore, we preferred the term "pro-life" and they liked to be called "pro-choice."

However, pro-lifers preferred to call the other side "pro-abortion" or "pro-death" and the pro-choice side insisted on calling the pro-lifers "anti-choice." In addition, the two sides argued over who was truly "pro-woman." More inflammatory terms included "fetus-lovers" for the pro-life side and "baby-killers" for the pro-abortion side. Pro-life pregnancy centers like mine were called "fake clinics" by the other side and pro-lifers called women's health centers "death clinics."

I believe that this kind of language contributed to the violence that played such a significant part in the pro-life movement in the late 80's and early 90's. A few radical individuals felt justified in killing the "baby killers" and bombing the "death centers". Although the mainstream pro-life movement always condemned such actions, there was never an acknowledgement of the role of language in contributing to the violence.

I taught volunteers to use non-inflammatory language at all times. I educated them as to the proper medical and scientific terminology for the pregnancy as well as the abortion procedure. For example, I referred to the pre-born child as a fetus and I

explained the mechanics of the abortion procedure in the same way that a medical provider would explain them. I believed that it was improper to talk about “sucking out dismembered body parts.”

I concluded that it was unethical to attempt to manipulate a client toward a particular point of view through the use of biased language. It was my observation that clients understood the facts when they were presented in a sensitive and objective manner. I was also careful to use language that did not imply judgment or blame. For example, a question like, “Why did you do that?” implied condemnation and would cause clients to shut down.

As director, I became convinced that our mission was to empower women with the facts and the support they needed to make an informed choice about their pregnancies. Although we hoped that they would choose to continue their pregnancies rather than have abortions, it was not our agenda to manipulate them into doing so through the use of language.

Topic 3: Nonverbal Communication and Perception

Nonverbal communication is an important aspect to communication that I studied and taught to volunteers. I was taught that as much as 93% of our communication is nonverbal and consists of body language, voice tone, and inflection. I found fun ways to teach these concepts to volunteers. As a simple exercise, I asked volunteers to repeat a sentence over and over with me. Each time the sentence was repeated, we put the emphasis on a different word. The sentence was, “I didn’t say he stole the money.” Volunteers were amused and amazed to discover that each time we said the sentence, a totally different meaning was implied.

I also taught volunteers about the importance of body language. I modeled an open, relaxed posture facing the client, with good eye contact and appropriate personal space. I cautioned against the crossing of arms and legs since that could imply a closed, tense, or judgmental attitude. I shared examples from my own experiences to help them understand these concepts.

One instance that I recalled was counseling with a pregnant fourteen-year old and her parents. In my session with the young girl, she expressed an interest in learning more about adoption. Therefore, when I met with her parents and reviewed my counseling plan for their daughter, I mentioned that she had asked for information about adoption. The parents instantly became very angry and upset with me. The father accused me of trying to steal their grandchild. They insisted that adoption was immoral and out of the question, regardless of their daughter's feelings.

As I attempted to respond to this onslaught of hostility and accusation, I gradually became aware of my body language. I realized that I had crossed my legs and my arms and had turned slightly away from the parents. Clearly, I was feeling attacked and defensive and it showed in my physical position. I quickly adjusted to the proper posture and regained control of the session. I shared this story frequently in training because it gave volunteers a good example of the importance of nonverbal communication. In addition, my willingness to share my failures helped me to establish an open and safe environment in which volunteers could learn.

I learned from countless experiences in the center that clients should not be judged by their appearance. I talked about this often in training because it was such a common tendency. I stressed that a woman who comes into the center dressed

attractively should not be treated any differently than the woman who comes in dressed poorly. We learned to make no assumptions about a client's character or her values based upon her attire. To do so created a barrier to effective communication.

This particular issue went to the very core values of the organization, which included seeing each person as a unique and valuable human being made in the image of God. This was a foundational principle that I was careful to drive home in all of my training classes.

Topic 4: Self-Awareness and Self-Disclosure

Women came into the pregnancy center from all walks of life and many different circumstances. Some had experienced rejection by their parents or abandonment by a boyfriend or husband. Often, I could see how that pain affected their sexual decision-making.

It was also apparent to me that many women were not used to being heard with the kind of attention and concern that we gave them at the center. Teenagers in particular were not used to being treated in this manner and their experience with us had a significant impact on them.

I also observed that many clients were willing to disclose much personal information. As I reflected on this, I realized that this was due to several factors. Clients came in expecting to talk about personal issues and were usually fairly open. However, if I was effective in creating an environment in which they felt safe, I found that they were willing to open up even more. If clients felt respected, they were able to

overcome feelings of fear and shame. They were willing to discuss matters that they had not intended to share with anyone. In addition, by asking good questions and providing supportive feedback, clients became aware of things about themselves that they had been unable to see before. These sessions became significant moments of self-realization for many women.

Clients were always asked to fill out an exit questionnaire at the end of their appointment. (ITEM 5) Typical comments that reflected their experience were statements like, “They care about you here. They listen to you...they understand...they respect you.” For me, this was more important than any other outcome of our work.

In fact, I concluded early in my tenure that success should not be measured by whether or not a client chose to continue her pregnancy. Rather, I believed that success should be measured by whether or not she left the center fully informed about her choices and knowing that we cared about her as a unique and valuable human being. I suggested that volunteers ask themselves two questions after every client session. “Did you tell her the truth? Does she know that you care?” If they could answer, “Yes” to both of those questions, then they were successful.

Topic 5: Listening and Empathy

As I worked with clients and volunteers at the center, I came to the conclusion that listening is perhaps the most important communication skill of all. I taught volunteers that to fully attend to another person was a powerful gift. I pointed out that we often listen in order to respond rather than listening to understand. As listeners, we also have agendas. We think we know what other people need to hear and we are

eager for them to stop talking so that we can tell them. This focus on self becomes a barrier to effective listening. I suggested that volunteers imagine a box sitting inside the client room door that was labeled, "Dump Agendas Here." This served as a mental reminder to them of their goal to be an effective listener.

In training classes, we practiced the active listening skills of restating, rephrasing, interpreting, and asking good questions. Although it felt awkward at first to restate exactly what someone had just said, I observed that volunteers soon realized how very effective it was in drawing out the other person. Good questions also took practice. I defined good questions as those that could not be answered with yes or no and that did not in some way contain the answer.

Once volunteers had been exposed to these skills, I gave them the assignment of trying them on someone at home or at work and then reporting back to the class what happened. There were always many good stories to share. I remember one volunteer relating how she had started a conversation with a woman at work who was sitting alone in the cafeteria. As the conversation progressed and the volunteer applied her listening skills, she observed how the woman's entire demeanor brightened and she opened up about many things in her life. At the end of the conversation, the woman was tearful as she thanked the volunteer for listening to her. I observed how excited the volunteer was with the effectiveness of her new skills.

Empathy was an important concept that I also covered in training. I felt it was important for volunteers to understand that true empathy was not about feeling sorry for clients, but it was entering into their client's experience and feeling what they were feeling. Empathy is the ability to fully identify with others and their situation.

I taught volunteers that there were both intellectual and emotional aspects to empathy. If we become overly emotional in our response to another person, we are unable to respond to them in a helpful manner. I remember an instance in the counseling room in which I became emotionally overwhelmed with the pain of the client. I had to leave the room and compose myself in order to be able to assist her. However, it is also true that if we approach others too intellectually, we will come across as cold and uncaring. A balance between the intellectual and emotional aspects of empathy is essential.

I applied these skills in the counseling room and saw how effective they were in helping me to empathize with clients. I asked questions that helped to draw out their thoughts and feelings. I entered into their experiences and made powerful personal connections with them. As these skills became more integrated into my life, I began to use them with family members and I found them to be equally effective at home. I also incorporated them into the mentoring program and emphasized their importance in building relationships with mentees.

Topic 6: Interpersonal Communication Relationships: Friendships, Families, Intimate Partners, Professional Relationships, and Men and Women's Expressive Styles

Last fall, my husband and I found it necessary to intervene in a problem our two daughters were having with each other. Their relationship had broken down to the point that they informed us that they would not participate in family gatherings if the other one was present. This was unacceptable to us as parents and with the holidays approaching, we knew that something needed to be done. Therefore, we asked them to commit to a problem solving discussion that we would mediate. They agreed.

We set the ground rules at the beginning, which included listening to each other without interruption, restating what they heard each other say, and focusing on solving the problem rather than assigning blame. As we helped them to work through the issues, it became clear that there were unresolved tensions that pre-dated any of the issues currently on the table. These were relationship issues, or metamessages, that affected how they responded to each other in every situation. Thankfully, they were able to achieve some understanding and resolution that day and their relationship has steadily improved.

In my family of origin, I observed that relationship issues were not openly discussed. As my parents' marriage fell apart, we had no tools with which to talk about our problems. As a result, we children were left to draw our own conclusions and there was no one to help us process our situation. I was determined to do better with my own family. I saw the benefits when family members understood how to relate to one another and had the tools they needed to address problems in healthy ways. These tools include active listening, affirmation, honesty, and a commitment to maintaining the relationship.

I discovered that these tools were also vital for maintaining a marriage, the most intimate of all human relationships. To be successful, marriage partners must reach some level of understanding and acceptance of the other person. Although romantic love draws two people together, it is insufficient to keep them together unless they have developed the ability to communicate.

In my 32 years of marriage, I observed that men and women communicate differently. My husband tends to be impatient listening to details and is anxious for me

to get to the point. If there is a problem to solve, he wants to solve it. Most of the time, I do not want him to solve anything for me. I just want him to listen and understand how I feel. Over time, I learned to ask for what I needed when we talked and he learned to be a better listener.

The workplace is another key area in which interpersonal communication skills are so vital. I observed that negativity and defensiveness in the workplace damages trust and makes it extremely difficult to work together as a team. As a result, I worked hard at relating to others in a positive, appreciative and affirming manner.

For example, not long ago, someone in the office said something offensive to me. I intentionally did not respond at that moment. Instead, I chose to take the time to think through what took place. Once the initial emotional reaction was past, I found it much easier to be objective and understanding of the other person's point of view.

In addition, if I know that someone is upset with me, I consider it my responsibility to go to that person and try to resolve it. In the past when this has occurred, I found that there was usually a simple miscommunication or misunderstanding that was easily resolved.

Topic 7: Ethics in Interpersonal Communication

Respect, Honesty, and Acceptance

My seventh grade math teacher was a man who used humiliation and name-calling as teaching methods. If I was at the chalkboard trying to work a problem and had any difficulty, he would call me a "dumbhead." For nine months, I was subjected to his demeaning approach. By the end of the year, I was convinced that I was dumb when it came to math. This belief handicapped me all the way through high school. I

developed a tremendous fear of math and avoided it as much as possible. It was not until I went to community college many years later that I learned that I could do math and that I was not a “dumbhead” after all.

This experience illustrates the power of words upon our self-image and self-respect. A person’s self-image is a fragile commodity that should be handled with great care. The damage that can be done by thoughtless and degrading words can last a lifetime, affecting our choices in life and our feelings of self-worth. Words should never be used as weapons to demean and destroy. Therefore, I concluded that an important ethical principle of communication is to treat others with sensitivity and respect at all times.

I believe that honesty is another important ethical principle in interpersonal communication. I recall a meeting that I led a few years ago in my workplace in which I presented a new concept for an annual event. Everyone appeared to respond to my ideas enthusiastically and decided to adopt them. However, after implementation was well underway, it became apparent that some members of the group had objections that they had not voiced. Now they were attempting to undermine the event. Because of their dishonesty, a project that began as a positive team effort disintegrated into negativity and divisiveness.

Finally, I concluded from my work in the pregnancy center as well as from my family experiences that the most important ethical principle of all is the unconditional acceptance of others. This does not mean that we must approve of all the things that others do. It means that we value them as human beings apart from what they do. This

is unconditional love, which found its fullest expression in the life and death of Jesus Christ. He provides the perfect model of unconditional love for us to follow.

As a parent, I had many opportunities to put this principle into action. Over the years, my children have done things that have hurt and disappointed me. However, regardless of the pain they have caused me, I worked hard to maintain my relationship with them and to assure them that my love remains unchanged. This helped us to get over the difficulties and ultimately to gain a better relationship than we had before the difficulties occurred. I believe that parents who disown their children over their poor choices make a huge mistake and over time, come to regret it. They added to the pain in the relationship and now they have so much more to overcome.

Conclusion

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity at the pregnancy center to receive such an intensive interpersonal communication education and experience. I became very skilled and successful in my work with clients and in my mentoring of volunteers. (ITEM 5) (ITEM 6) I found it particularly gratifying to see volunteers flourish under my direction and with my encouragement. (ITEM 7) (ITEM 8) My time as executive director was one of the most rewarding periods in my life, both personally and professionally.

When I consider the complexities of interpersonal communication and the intricacies of relationships, it is evident to me that good communication skills are not something with which we are born. They are acquired through learning and practice. The interpersonal communication principles and skills that I learned have become a part of the fabric of my life and I applied them in many areas. In a way, they have become a

life theme that finds expression in everything I do. As a result, in this most human of all activities, I believe that I have touched the lives of other people in helpful and positive ways.

References

Griffin, E. M. (2004). *Communication: A First Look at Communication Theory*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill