

Joann Baney

Guide to Interpersonal Communication

Book Review

—Reviewed by

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Index Terms—*Appraisals, communication, interpersonal skills, interviewing, negotiating.*

Joann Baney's *Guide to Interpersonal Communication* is an excellent book that introduces guidelines for improving interpersonal communication skills and offers step-by-step recommendations for approaching common business interactions.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, "Building blocks," consists of four chapters that deal with communication skills: active listening, good feedback, effective questioning and responding, and awareness of social style. Part II, "Applications," consists of three chapters that explain the application of the building blocks to concrete applications such as interviewing, negotiating, and doing performance appraisals.

Chapter 1, "Listening," presents general guidelines for effective listening. Effective listening is important because it helps in maintaining and improving relationships leading to "greater professional and personal success" [p. 3]. The author suggests that to listen effectively, one must empathize with the speaker, control one's own responses, and devote time and energy to listening. Moreover, according to Baney, one must strive for improving the main listening skills (i.e., attending, following, and reflecting). The author ends the chapter with guidelines for avoiding the barriers to active listening, namely, judging, avoiding, and problem solving. Additionally, throughout the chapter, the author provides a number of examples on how to listen effectively in business situations. Because communication is successful only if the message is accurately transmitted and perfectly understood, the importance of listening effectively can never be overemphasized.

Chapter 2, "Feedback," deals with the construction, delivery, and reception of effective feedback. The chapter starts with the description of what constitutes

good feedback. In that sense, the author indicates that good feedback must be specific and descriptive, must refer to a behavior that can be changed, should be timed appropriately, and must be supportive as well as constructive. Next, the author suggests using a three-part message approach for building and delivering feedback: The message should objectively describe the behavior, explain the impact of the behavior, and identify the response of the speaker. Once the feedback is delivered, it is important to wait for a response from the receiver. The author concludes this chapter with a set of guidelines for constructively receiving feedback. These guidelines include understanding how feedback increases self-awareness, listening actively, acknowledging the feedback, recognizing valid points, and taking time to understand the feedback before reacting to it.

Chapter 3, "Questioning and responding," presents techniques for effective questioning and, to a lower extent, techniques for effective responding. According to Baney, "knowing the effect that different kinds of questions will have in an interaction will help you to ask the right question for the right purposes" [p. 36]. For instance, open questions are preferable when the main goal is either to build the relationship or to understand the other person's point of view. Closed questions and forced-choice questions are recommended to gather specific information. Hypothetical questions help "to gather information about someone's thought process or state of mind" [p. 38]. Regarding strategies for responding to questions, the author suggests beginning with an overview, providing details and examples, and using a language the questioner will understand.

Chapter 4, "Social styles," emphasizes the importance of the awareness of social styles (driver, expressive, amiable, and analytic) for working effectively with others. According to the author, the following activities will help in the application of social style information to improve business relationships:

- identifying one's social style through objective self-assessment and feedback from others;
- identifying others' social style by considering their behavior in a variety of daily situations;

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- adapting one's style to that of others by accommodating their needs and moving toward areas that facilitate more comfortable interactions.

Chapter 5, "Interviewing," looks at the process of preparing effectively for an interview, engaging in it, and assessing the results of this interview from the point of view of both the interviewer and the interviewee. From the interviewer's perspective, the preparation consists of (1) developing the job's sell strategy; (2) developing the assessment strategy; (3) developing the questioning strategy; and (4) developing a record keeping grid. Engaging in the interview requires choosing an appropriate environment and letting the interviewee talk for about 80% of the time allocated for the interview. Assessing the results of the interview involves using specific and descriptive assessments to fill out the record keeping grid and finding the time for doing some self-assessment. From the interviewee's perspective, the preparation requires (1) gathering information about the company and the job opening; (2) defining objectives related to the skills or traits to be highlighted; and (3) planning the use of anecdotes to achieve the objectives. Engaging in the interview involves responding to the interviewer's social style, listening actively, and structuring responses as suggested in Chapter 3. Assessing the results of the interview refers to evaluating the interactions and responses and sending a thank-you note to reinforce the good match of one's skills and traits with those required for the job.

Chapter 6, "Negotiating," explains how to plan a negotiation strategy and how to use effective listening and questioning to gather information during a negotiation. Baney indicates that, to plan a negotiation strategy, it is important to consider, first, the importance that one gives to the outcome, the relationship with the other person, and the preferred approach to conflict. One must, subsequently, determine the objectives of the negotiation and the "best alternative to a negotiated agreement" (BATNA). Then, one must identify the objectives and the BATNA of the other person and which technique one could use to influence the other person's decision-making. Finally, during the negotiation one must use effective listening and questioning techniques to gather useful information needed to succeed in the negotiation.

Chapter 7, "Performance appraisals," examines the use of interpersonal skills (listening, providing

feedback, questioning, and social style awareness) and organizational skills to conduct performance appraisals. The author considers performance appraisals as "opportunities to coach as well as to evaluate" [p. 96]. In that sense, performance appraisals can be used to instruct and inspire employees. To gain the most out of a performance appraisal session, the author suggests a six-step process:

- (1) Prepare by establishing objectives, attending the employee perspective, gathering documentation, and setting up the meeting environment.
- (2) Open the session with remarks that would help to create a positive rapport and tone.
- (3) Assist the employee with self-assessment with the use of effective listening and questioning skills.
- (4) Narrow the session's focus to deal with specific areas and clarify goals together.
- (5) Close the session with a summary and allow the employee to recap strengths and areas for improvement.
- (6) Follow up keeping in contact with the employee, keeping records, and maintaining a coaching grid.

The strengths of this book are many, not the least of which is that it presents the information in a brief, practical, and reader-friendly format. The delivery of the message is superb. The reader knows what to expect in each portion of the book. There is a general introduction for the book and one for each part and each chapter. Each chapter includes an outline to inform the reader on the content of that chapter; a good mix and examples to facilitate the understanding of the key points covered; and a summary to gather the big picture of that chapter.

The sole weak point of the book is that it does not provide guidelines for interactions in a multicultural workplace. All the examples are focused on western cultures and, in particular, US business settings.

This deficit aside, the book will certainly interest readers who are looking for techniques to improve their interpersonal communication skills in business, personal, and social settings. In summary, *Guide to Interpersonal Communication* represents a practical reference for those interested in improving their business interactions and relationships.