Interpersonal Skills

A Rejection of Empathy Concept and T-Group Methodology

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The function of any skill is to make possible the application of knowledge. For interpersonal skills, this means that a knowledge of behavior principles is essential if one is to select the principles and skills appropriate to a given situation, and to have available the necessary methods and skills for a variety of situations. Applications force one to deal with specific cases and it is at the point of application that the adequacy or inadequacy of knowledge, of proficiency in the performance of skills, or effectiveness of the behavior principles or methods used is revealed most clearly. No knowledge of principles can substitute for practice nor can any skill make use of knowledge that isn't there, and neither one can make an unsound method or principle work effectively.

Problems in Acquisition and Performance of Skill

1. All skills require practice and in this respect interpersonal skills are no exception; however, the interpersonal dimension creates certain problems. In music or golf the need for practice is taken for granted, its purpose is understood, errors are accepted and faulty performance hurts no one. In contrast, interpersonal skills are performed for keeps and errors can hurt. Thus, even when present skills are ineffective, there is reluctance to try the new, much less to risk the repeated failure which practice often demands.

2. Many skills involve merely an accommodative or manipulative relationship with an inanimate feature of the environment possessing known char-

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acteristics and consistencies. Interpersonal skills require one to deal with at least one other individual, and the unknowns are far greater, more complex and more variable.

3. That man is capable of and frequently demonstrates two qualitatively different kinds of behavior, one based on the logic of intellect and the other based on the logic of feeling,[1] adds a wholly new dimension requiring different concepts, skills, and sensitivities. Problem behavior based on feelings is often confusing and irritating and this complicates things even further.

4. Related to these difficulties is the elusive and frequently tenuous nature of feedback cues. The more highly-specialized sensory mechanisms tend to furnish immediate and sharply-defined feedback, such as a sour note or a missed ball. In interpersonal skills, the cues appear to be less clearly defined, less precise and more susceptible to distortion by the internal condition of either party as well as by the quality of the relationship between them. The recent finding of Maier,[2] that successful subjects in detecting deception in an interview situation were unable to verbalize free response cues in a meaningful way, highlights issues in both practice and performance, and suggests that sensitivity to others is not importantly, if at all an intellectual process.

5. A further complication arises from the frequently disturbing effects on performance of premature closure.[3] Most skill patterns have fairly well-defined beginnings and endings. Interpersonal skills do not always show similarly clear-cut definition. Recent interview studies of Webster[4] and Maier[2] suggest that the patterns of premature impression formation may be a manifestation of closure forces. Not only do these tend toward closure on the basis of sub-marginal data but toward "manufacturing" cues, and filtering or distorting others so that closure can be attained. Once achieved, closure tends to alter or reject subsequent cues which are inconsistent with or disconfirming of the first impression.

Interpersonal Sensitivity

Many of the existing obstacles toward understanding the processes in the acquisition and performance of interpersonal skills appear to stem from theoretical confusion and conflicting viewpoints as to the nature of interpersonal sensitivity.

Our inference from the Maier data,[2] and others summarized in Smith[5] is that in man, sensitivity is basically not an intellectual process. Despite this, efforts persist to view interpersonal sensitivity in terms of the psychoanalytic concept of empathy and to encompass it within the concepts of conventional learning theory.

We believe, on the contrary, that the data argue for a process in which all of the available and more specialized sensory mechanisms are organized into focus on a family of cues. Alternatively, there may also exist a separate sensory mechanism, operating with the help of the other available and relevant mechanisms to detect an organizable set of cues. Either system would account for what has otherwise been called intuition, sizing-up, and the like. Risking the danger of disposing of a phenomenon by naming it, we prefer to call the process *axiesthesis,* or the sensing of the worth of another.

In either case, there is evidence to suggest that a lack of inter-personal sensitivity is not so much the absence of formal development as it is the presence of obstacles and deterrents. Thus tendencies toward evaluative

judgments, as suggested by Rogers[6] and the existence of emotional blocks (Hayakawa,[7] Maier[8,9] Jenkins,[10] and Schachter,[19]), of attitudes and frustrations, and preoccupation with ideas or intellectual problems, seem to us illustrative of some of the main sources of competing stimuli, and hence deterrents to interpersonal acuity. We interpret these data, as well as others, notably from Chance and Meaders[12] as arguing for a state of psychological well-being under conditions of optimal arousal as the necessary and perhaps sufficient conditions for effective detection and perceptual organization of most interpersonal cues.

Stimulus deprivation studies of Bexton, Heron, and Scott[13] indicate that a lack of sufficient cues to form an organized whole may tend, with the help of closure forces, to induce the "manufacture" of an erroneous interpersonal impression. Conversely, excessive internal stimulation, particularly from an insoluble problem experience sufficient to induce a state of frustration, (Maier[9]) tends to distort some cues and block others, most particularly those central to the problem area. We believe, therefore, that improvement in sensitivity to others is not so much a matter of developing one's acuity through training as it is the circumvention or removal of obstacles.

Empathy and T-Groups

The conclusions we draw from our review of the investigations into sensitivity to others lead us to reject both the concept of empathy as a useful viewpoint and the assumptions and methodology of T-group training. The evidence that sensitivity to others is a biological process seems to us a compelling argument against the position that its origin lies in the psychoanalytic mechanism of identification, from which the concept of empathy is derived. In addition, there are the essentially negative findings in studies of emphathy (Lundy,[14] Chance and Meaders,[92] and Mullin[15]). Further we examined and tried to resolve differing and sometimes conflicting definitions of empathy and its related terminology. As defined in Warren,[16] "a mental state in which one identifies with or feels himself in the same state of mind as another," seems first of all to posit a condition antithetical to our understanding as to the nature of sensitivity and, second, to be at best a somewhat delusional exercise.

Underlying T-group training are the two key assumptions that (1) *sensitivity to others is developed by means of learning procedures,* and (2) that self-understanding must precede one's understanding of others. As far as we know, neither assumption is supported by experimental evidence. The T-group method seems to us to yield a process for inducing group pressures, often experienced as devaluative of the individual. That such pressures are consensual and not expert does not lessen their force, and changes appear to reflect conformity with social pressures and not either development or freedom from interfering anxieties and frustrations.

Role Playing as a Training Method

It is fortunate for both research and training purposes that sensitivity manifests itself in role playing situations where the cues are to some degree artificially created and behavior is on what Lewin[17] has called a level of irreality. Although certain ingredients of reality are removed others remain and those that are preserved appear adequate for constructing standard situations which for many purposes are the equivalent of reality.

Role playing furnishes a number of

essential training requirements. Of central importance for skill development is that training is brought to the action phase. A further asset is the opportunity to try new and different methods and skills without embarrassment or the risk of hurt feelings.

Of the many role-playing procedures, we will consider only the Multiple Role Playing Procedure which enables many persons simultaneously to experience new methods and processes and the Single Group Procedure which provides more advanced skill practice.

Skills for Routine Situations

Since skills are the application of knowledge, it follows that one's repertoire of interpersonal skills is limited only by knowledge of behavior principles and ingenuity in devising methods and techniques for using them. There exist marked individual differences in ability, and we suspect that most variations are accounted for by a number of factors, among the most important of which are differences in sensitivity to feelings and temporary lapses brought on by competing stimuli.

Skills for Problem Situations

The clearest differences are found in situations where intellectual effort and insight are needed and feelings obscure or distort reality. For both types of behavior, the appropriate skills are those which yield free expression, but in different ways and for opposite purposes. In dealing with feelings the aim is reduction of tension and conflict; for intellectual processes, its aim is the creation of differences in ideas. Skills for the release of feelings are highlighted in non-directive counseling and related methods, and for intellectual problem solving they cause free expression of ideas.

The Nature of Process

Determinations as to the nature and extent of the relative contributions of methods and skills to effective interpersonal process and outcome requires controlled experimentation. Methods, objectives, and values all are guides to performance. Methods, specifically, select skills and the effectiveness of a method depends on the degree to which it incorporates effective behavior principles and permits them to operate when activated by skills. If one views process as a product of the interaction of method and skill it becomes apparent that each contributes to process and outcome and that different situations require different combinations as well as differences in relative emphasis.

Contribution of Method

The contribution of method to process and outcome is illustrated in several experiments (Maier,[18] Maier and Maier,[19] Maier and Hoffman,[20] and Maier[21]). In a study of delegation (Solem[22]), using two very different group problems, half of the leaders were given a written instruction to present the problem and their preferred solution for discussion as to a solution and the remaining half of the leaders were given a written instruction to present the problem. One result was that the leader solution, though seldom accepted, tended to generate judgmental acceptance-rejection reactions and the problem tended to generate idea exploration with consequent quality gains. With skills constant, an orientation toward one method vs. the other influenced outcome.

An experimental situation in which achievement of a high-quality decision is hampered by considerations of feeling was used to compare two discussion methods, (Maier and Maier[19]).

One, the Free Discussion Method, is designed to give everyone his say; the other, the Developmental Discussion Method, is a way for structuring discussion toward a systematic exploration of the situation.[23]. Despite some overlap, the skills for the most part are different. The results showed that when both intellectual and feeling factors are present, methods oriented toward discussion of feelings achieve increased acceptance with lesser quality and methods oriented toward intellectual analysis achieve increased quality but less acceptance.

Skills for Release of Feelings

Methods for the release of feelings aid performance by selection of skills and by contributing to process. Effectiveness of process depends also on which skills are selected and on degree of proficiency.

In one study (Solem, previously unpublished) the effect of intensive practice on the acquisition of skill in listening and in reflecting feelings was examined. Large groups of student subjects were given thirty seconds in which to respond in writing, as an expert counselor would orally, when each of a transcribed series of client comments was read aloud by a skilled actress. In all, there were 12 sequential client comments and, after each written response, feedback was provided by having the actual reflection of the counselor read aloud. Performance, as subsequently rated by three competent judges, indicated highly significant improvement over the 12 practice opportunities in the 40-minute period. However, even the later performances were generally quite rudimentary.

The contribution of skill to process is illustrated in an experiment involving a group problem of fairness (Maier and Hoffman[20]). Leaders all had some previous training in group decision method and were instructed to put the problem to the men. Following the conferences, group members appraised the foreman's performance in terms of whether the discussion was foreman-dominated, a true group decision or a mixed type. Of 98 groups, 24 were judged as foreman-dominated, 62 as group decision, and 12 as mixed. Measures of satisfaction showed that the foreman's conduct of the discussion, and not the nature of the solution itself, was the most important single factor, and this is a matter of leader skill.

Among the more difficult skills to acquire are those needed to accept and turn hostility toward one's person or values into an interview or conference asset. This is true even given the intellectual awareness that argument or defensiveness will mean an irreversible loss of control over process or outcome.

Evidence bearing on this is found in an experiment in which three levels of training (2, 10, and 13 weeks) were compared, (Maier, Hoffman, and Lansky[24]). The problem was to deal with a peer who displayed an unreasonable attitude. Although training influences were highly significant between and across levels, the results indicated that only the more elementary skills had been acquired at the end of the 13-week period and that many skills remained untapped. Avoidance of defensiveness in both parties is one of the difficulties presented in this problem and this is a difficult and complex skill.

Skills for Expression of Ideas

A wide array of concepts and principles exist for increasing the intellectual effectiveness of others. All make use of interpersonal methods and skills for eliciting the expression of different

ideas. Certain experiments highlight the issues involved. In one experiment, a production bottleneck was used for which many solutions are possible but only one is clearly superior and elegant (Maier [25]). This yielded an extremely wide range of difference in achieving the elegant solution, depending on the skill of the leader.

That skills yield a marked upturn in the quality of thinking beyond that contributed by an effective method is illustrated in an experiment (Maier and Hoffman[25]) using the Development Discussion Method referred to earlier. With increases in various skills there were marked increments in proportions of high quality decisions.

Skills for Complex and Optional Situations

Because the nature and function of skills for dealing with feelings are very different from those for improving intellectual processes, we have considered them more or less separately. However, problem situations frequently require application of both types of skills. Although solution acceptance, which is largely a matter of feelings, is considered by managers in one study (Maier and Hoffman[27]) to be an essential consideration in more than three-fourths of their job problems and overriding in more than two out of five, a third of their problems involve acceptance and quality considerations about equally. Despite the contributions of method toward achieving these two solution attributes, such problems confront a leader with a variety of skill demands and options. Thus, he may elect to rely on his own intellectual capacities and expertise and develop his own solution, in which case acceptance will depend on skills in persuasion. Alternatively, he may rely on methods for gaining acceptance and on interview

or discussion skills for improving quality. A third possibility is possession of a skill repertoire inclusive enough to deal with problems of both feeling and intellect, and a fourth is a high level of proficiency, either in certain key representative skills, or across the board.

Some recent work bears on several of these issues. For example, several studies have established that disagreement in a group or between a leader and a member can lead to innovation, or to hard feelings. The most recent of these shows that which of these consequences will ensue is largely a matter of whether the leader judges the dissenter adversely as a troublemaker or as a potential asset and utilizes skills to capitalize on the situation. These contrasting leader perceptions frequently originate in value orientations toward judgmental versus asset value systems (Dembo, Leviton and Wright[28]). Even a skilled leader may be induced to judge a dissenter adversely; however, possession of knowledge underlying the skill should modify this tendency. Without skills for the constructive use of dissent, the leader has no choice.

Interviews

Interview problems often highlight interpersonal issues, in part because the one-to-one relationship is less diffuse than is true of larger group settings and in part because the pace and immediacy of the interchange imposes more acute pressures on the interviewer's resources of skill. In one study (Solem[29]), the interview problem is such that it can be conducted through the method of conventional performance appraisal or the method of Maier's Problem Solving Interview (Maier[30]). The first method necessitates a judgmental approach and the second abjures judgment in favor of

exploration for improvement potentials. Interview process and outcome depended mainly on two factors and the relationship between them. One was the proportion of time the superior talked, the optimum being not more than 40 percent, with a sharp break at 60 percent toward deterioration of the interview. Of even greater influence was whether the predominant motivational method used was negative, in the sense that it reflected paternalistic values and skills, or positive, reflecting respect for the subordinates' views and leader values and skills of a helper. Further, the nature of the relationship between these two factors, particularly when both are adverse, was not merely summative but compounding in its effects. The fact that only one interview in eight, as judged from a series of process and outcome factors, was optimally conducted, suggests a widespread need among managers for new knowledge, methods, and interpersonal skills.

Techniques

Many situations call for the achievement of essential but relatively narrow and specialized objectives. For this purpose interpersonal techniques can be extremely useful. We have not discussed these or the relevant data in part because such techniques are numerous and in part because detailed discussion is in many cases available in the literature.

It goes without saying that techniques differ widely in the types and degree of skills required. Given the needed skills, perhaps the most important consideration is that their user understands their rationale so that they can be incorporated into a larger repertoire of methods and skills and not be viewed merely as isolated devices.

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Shortage of Nurses

Hospital administrators and directors of nursing education at a conference of the American Hospital Association and the American Nurses Association predicted that the critical shortgages of nurses in the U. S. may double by 1970. Citing figures for 1966 that 125,000 of 746,000 potential jobs are going begging, officials declared that the number of vacancies for registered nurses could reach 344,000 out of a possible 1,000,000 positions in three years. (*U. S. Office of Education.*)