Communication is an important part of our lives. Good communication skills not only help us make friends, they can also enhance our work and daily life. As people come from different walks of life, they present different characters, background, values and cultures. This makes effective interpersonal communication an art form which is difficult to master.

Communication is an interactive process. Through verbal and non-verbal communication, people can express their emotions, share their thoughts and convey personal messages. We are not born with perfect communication skills. As a matter of fact, it is only through regular practice, self-reflection and continuous refinement that we can gradually grasp the secrets of this art. In general, communication skills can be divided into two main categories: verbal and non-verbal. Below is an introduction on verbal communication skills.

**Verbal Communication**

**The 3 Phases of Verbal Communication**

**Starting a Conversation**

- **Take the initiative**
  
  Appropriate eye contact and a smiling face can make you look friendly and approachable. Try to overcome your anxiety and fear. Initiate small talk even at the possible risk of being rejected.

- **Observe closely**
  
  Be alert to how others respond to your small talk so as to consider whether your choice of topic is suitable. Positive signals include their maintaining good eye contact with you, smiling at you and being at ease with you. On the contrary, their telling you that they are busy, have a meeting to attend, or need to rush to other places are negative signals indicating that they are not interested in continuing the conversation with you at the moment.
Make appropriate enquiry
Elicit information or opinions from the other party by asking more open-ended questions, such as “What...?”, “How...?” Avoid close-ended questions, like, “Yes or no...?”

Select diverse topics
★ Comment on distinguishing features about the other party, such as their clothing, appearance, behaviour or items that they are carrying. You can make comments like “Your jacket looks very nice. Where did you get it?”
★ Discuss current news and issues that are of common interest and concern in the community, such as “It’s now the peak flu season, do take care!”
★ Share personal information and experiences, like “I’ve enrolled for 21 credits this semester. It’s really hard! How about you?”
★ Explore areas which you may have in common with the other party, such as, “You graduated from ABC Secondary School? Me too!”

Ending the Conversation
★ Bid Farewell
When it is time to end the conversation, you can bid farewell by saying something like, “I have another appointment to attend. Let’s talk some more next time.”
★ Keep in Touch
When you wrap up your conversation, you can express your desire to maintain further contact with the other party by saying, “Call you later and let’s meet again soon!” Alternatively, you can make more specific proposals for the next meeting, such as “Let’s meet for a tennis game sometime next week.”

The Different Aspects of Communication
Apart from mastering the basic verbal communication skills, we should also pay attention to the nonverbal messages being conveyed during the conversation, which include facial expression, gesture, eye contact, tone of voice, body contact, interpersonal space, etc. This will help us go beyond what is being expressed in words.
Moreover, cultural differences may create barriers to communication and lead to misunderstanding. People from Western cultures seem to be more animated and emphasize the use of body language; while those from Asian cultures tend to be more subtle and reserved. Therefore, in the communication process, we should pay extra attention to the cultural background of the other party and acknowledge our differences. This can facilitate more rewarding and satisfying cross-cultural interaction.

Sustaining the Conversation
★ Elaborate on details
Provide more detailed information if appropriate. At the same time, attend to what is being shared by the other party and see if you both have common interests or hobbies, such as:
A: “I had a great day yesterday playing tennis!”
B: “I also like playing tennis. Where do you usually play?”
★ Disclose personal information
Take the initiative to share your personal information, experiences, opinions and feelings so as to increase mutual understanding as well as generate new topics for discussion. However, be mindful not to engage in monologue or ignore the other party’s feelings and reaction.
★ Change the topic
See if it is worthwhile to continue the conversation on the current topic. If the other party shows signs of indifference, or you find yourself having a hard time carrying on the conversation, or there is a lot of silence, it may be a good time to move on to a new topic.

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