

# People Skills Toolkit

How to Improve Your Relationships  
With Everyone



# People Skills Toolkit

This e-book is published by:

Mind Tools Ltd, 3rd Floor, The News Building, London  
Bridge Street, London, SE1 9SE, United Kingdom.

Copyright © Mind Tools Ltd 2017. All rights reserved.

“Mind Tools” is a registered trademark (US 4,566,696,  
EU 012473377) of Mind Tools Ltd.

Version 3.0.

This publication is protected by international copyright law. You may use it if you have downloaded it directly from MindTools.com, or if you have been provided with it under corporate license.

Please contact [copyright@mindtools.com](mailto:copyright@mindtools.com) if you’ve received this from any other source.

Cover image © GettyImages/DigitalVision

Inside images © GettyImages/Steve Debenport,  
Digital Vision, AntonioGuillem, PeopleImages,  
Monkeybusinessimages, Laflor, Mikolette,  
LarsZahnerPhotography, Franckreporter,  
Tom Merton, Asiseeit, Yuri\_Arcurs

# Contents

|                          |   |           |
|--------------------------|---|-----------|
| <b>Welcome</b>           |   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Executive Summary</b> |   | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>      |   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1</b>         | <b>People Skills and Why They Matter</b>                  | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>1.1</b>               | <b>Reaping the Rewards of Good People Skills</b>          | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>1.2</b>               | <b>Can You Learn People Skills?</b>                       | <b>10</b> |
| <b>1.3</b>               | <b>Do My People Skills Need Work?</b>                     | <b>11</b> |
| <b>1.4</b>               | <b>Drawing This Together</b>                              | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Chapter 2</b>         | <b>Self-Respect and Self-Management</b>                   | <b>16</b> |
| <b>2.1</b>               | <b>How You See Yourself Determines How You See Others</b> | <b>17</b> |
| <b>2.1.1</b>             | <b>Mindful Self-Awareness</b>                             | <b>21</b> |
| <b>2.1.2</b>             | <b>Self-Esteem</b>  | <b>23</b> |
| <b>2.1.3</b>             | <b>Assertiveness</b>                                      | <b>25</b> |
| <b>2.1.4</b>             | <b>Self-Actualization</b>                                 | <b>28</b> |
| <b>2.2</b>               | <b>Drawing This Together</b>                              | <b>31</b> |
| <b>Chapter 3</b>         | <b>Communication</b>                                      | <b>32</b> |
| <b>3.1</b>               | <b>Why Communicate Better?</b>                            | <b>33</b> |
| <b>3.2</b>               | <b>How to Improve Your Communication Skills</b>           | <b>34</b> |
| <b>3.2.1</b>             | <b>Explaining Your Intent</b>                             | <b>36</b> |
| <b>3.2.2</b>             | <b>Asking Questions</b>                                   | <b>39</b> |
| <b>3.2.3</b>             | <b>Active Listening</b>                                   | <b>44</b> |
| <b>3.2.4</b>             | <b>Body Language</b>                                      | <b>47</b> |
| <b>3.2.5</b>             | <b>Expressing Yourself Clearly</b>                        | <b>51</b> |
| <b>3.3</b>               | <b>Drawing This Together</b>                              | <b>55</b> |
| <b>Chapter 4</b>         | <b>Empathy</b>  | <b>56</b> |
| <b>4.1</b>               | <b>Understanding Empathy</b>                              | <b>57</b> |
| <b>4.1.1</b>             | <b>Sympathy Versus Empathy</b>                            | <b>58</b> |
| <b>4.1.2</b>             | <b>How to Be Empathic</b>                                 | <b>60</b> |
| <b>4.2</b>               | <b>Drawing This Together</b>                              | <b>62</b> |
| <b>Chapter 5</b>         | <b>Your People Skills Action Plan</b>                     | <b>63</b> |
| <b>Chapter 6</b>         | <b>What's Next?</b>                                       | <b>70</b> |

---

# People Skills Toolkit

Getting on with people at work has a huge impact on what you can achieve.

Welcome to this Mind Tools toolkit!

Whatever your role or position, you need to work well with other people to be successful. This means communicating effectively with them, understanding and addressing their motivations, and behaving in a way that brings out the best in them.

So, it's crucial that you have strong "people skills."

This workbook contains practical exercises to help you to improve your people skills. You'll become more aware of your own and others' attitudes, strengths and expectations, and develop new ways of handling difficult situations.

And your working life will become less stressful and more productive, as you discover that people are more willing to help you.

Enjoy using this **People Skills Toolkit** and seeing the benefits for you, your team and your organization!



**James Manktelow**  
CEO, MindTools.com





# People Skills Toolkit – An Executive Summary

Here are the key learning points covered in this toolkit:

Building excellent **people skills** is about acknowledging that you're not alone. It's about realizing how much easier it is to get on in life when you get on with the people around you.

When you take steps to improve your people skills, you can start to create better working relationships with your team members, your manager, your customers, and everyone else who has an influence on your success.

By **taking stock of how strong your people skills are now**, you can assess what you need to change, and plan how to do it.

You may not have given much thought to how you relate to others. Or perhaps you're a confident and skilled "people person" already. In either case, the chances are that you could still benefit from a refresher!

But don't be disheartened. You'll develop better relationships more easily and assertively if you feel **comfortable with who you are**, first. Then, your ability to **self-manage** your emotions and reactions will be a key skill to learn.

Being able to **communicate effectively** is central to having good people skills. So, pay equal attention to what you say and how you say it, and you'll get your message across more clearly. Balance this with listening well, and you'll likely become known as someone who inspires and helps others, too.

**Empathy** is an essential quality to have if you want to collaborate more effectively. When you're curious about other people, aware of their emotions, and respectful of their needs, you'll build strong and productive connections. "Putting yourself in others' shoes" has the power to transform your personal relationships!

# Introduction

Your people skills can have as much impact as your technical abilities on your success, no matter what job you do, or which industry you're part of. But what exactly are “people skills,” and how can you learn them?

People skills – or “soft skills” – enable you to engage and get along with the people around you on a personal and emotional level. They give you the power to express yourself effectively and, equally, they allow you to understand and connect with others.

So, when you work to develop your people skills, you set yourself up for business and personal success – and you put yourself in a stronger position to help your friends and colleagues to do the same.

That's especially true when you're in a leadership or management role. However, people skills will help you to achieve your objectives regardless of whether you lead people, aspire to lead people, or are a new member of the team.

To improve your people skills, you'll need to increase your understanding of your own reactions and emotions. You'll learn how to express yourself and how to listen carefully to others, and to appreciate other people's needs at a deeper level.

The first step is to **assess your current skill levels**. You'll display good people skills if you understand

how your own thoughts and attitudes feed into the way you relate to others.

Then, you'll move on to become more **mindfully aware of your own self** – of your self-esteem, your assertiveness, and your self-actualization.

Next, it'll be time to improve your **communication skills**. You'll examine why, what and how you're communicating, and learn skills for giving and receiving communications more effectively.

From there, you'll pay attention to how you relate to others, and to becoming more **empathic**.

As you work through the toolkit you'll begin to think more deeply about what practical, personal steps you can take to be a better “people person.” The toolkit and the exercises within it will take several hours for you to complete, so set aside blocks of time to work on it when you won't be distracted.

Finally, in this toolkit, you'll bring all this together by creating an **Action Plan**.

So, it's time to take your first step – turn the page and start building your people skills!

# 1. People Skills and Why They Matter

“Success or failure in this job is essentially a matter of human relationships.  
It is a matter of the kind of reaction to us by our family members, customers, employees, employers, fellow workers, and associates.  
If this reaction is favorable, we are quite likely to succeed.  
If the reaction is unfavorable, we are doomed.”

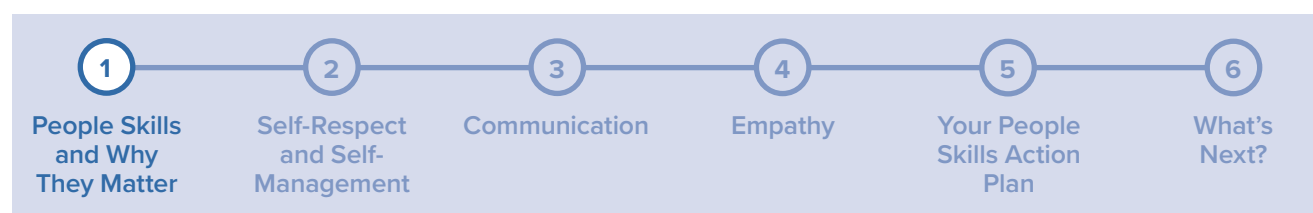
Robert W. Woodruff, president of The Coca-Cola Company, 1923-1954.

People skills involve being able to gauge how others feel, being aware of your own reactions and needs, and communicating and behaving in a way that gets the job done smoothly. So, when you put in the work to develop your people skills, you can transform your working life.

With better people skills, you'll likely be happier, more productive, and more successful. You'll work with more openness and integrity, and with a genuine desire to find solutions that meet everyone's needs. Your improved abilities will make you a trusted, popular and respected team player or leader, and someone who others can rely on.

Your people skills will have a positive impact on the people around you, too. You'll find it easier to bring out the best in them, and you'll become “a natural” at making them feel good. Your empathy and understanding will encourage your colleagues to seek you out whenever they need a good listener.

The great news is that you don't have to be a born “people person” – you can learn these skills and this workbook shows you how.



## 1.1 Reaping the Rewards of Good People Skills

The way that we relate to others reflects our own values, our beliefs, our habits, and our experiences – the things that make us who we are. For some of us, developing good people skills means making changes to the way that we see ourselves in relation to others, before we can change the way that we interact with them.

Making these changes can transform the relationships we have with the people around us. For example, it can help you to:

- **Work better with your boss**

Finding a way to align your working style and preferences with those of your boss isn't always straightforward. Good people skills will help you to do this.

- **Work more productively with your colleagues, customers, and other stakeholders**

An essential skill in any business, whether you're in a leadership role or a team member, is the ability to work with anyone, whatever their differences in attitude, habit and culture. With solid people skills, you'll have the tools you need to work together to reach a common goal.

- **Be a better manager**

You can coach and develop your team members more effectively when you have well-developed interpersonal skills. Your team will likely feel more supported and appreciated, and you'll be better equipped to defuse the tensions that can arise naturally if you're in a position of authority.



- **Have a sunnier outlook**

Good people skills enable you to build more positive relationships that leave you feeling happier. Your improving mindset makes it easier to influence the people around you, and you can then benefit from a higher level of job satisfaction and morale. This “virtuous circle” continually recharges your positivity.

- **Deal with challenging people**

Not everyone is easy to get along with all of the time. But, by developing your own people skills, you'll be able to help these people to become valuable members of a high-performing and conflict-free team.



## ACTION

Take a few moments to think about your workplace, and answer the questions below.

**Which situations or relationships could you improve by having better people skills?**

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |

**What benefits would those improvements bring to you and others?**

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |

## ACTION

Identify which situation you need to improve most urgently, and where you could see the greatest benefit. Note this priority on page 14.

## 1.2 Can You Learn People Skills?

Have you ever heard anyone being described as a “people person”? According to this notion, some of us are lucky enough to have been born with a genetically pre-programmed temperament that helps us to get along with people. This, however, is a misconception.

Anyone can develop the right skills to be a “people person.” It may be a challenge, but it is possible to learn how to feel relaxed and confident with your colleagues, to voice your opinions and needs, and to bring out the best in others so that they

feel positive, motivated and supported. After all, the way that you interact with others is a choice, and you can always learn to make different, better choices.

In the end, people skills are all about understanding yourself, and then using this knowledge to communicate and empathize with others, so that you find ways to work together.

So, no matter whether you think of yourself as a “people person” or not, you **can** do it.





So, when it comes to evaluating your people skills, you might need some help to get a realistic view of how good your skills actually are.

### ACTION

Take the following quiz to get an idea of whether your people skills are as good as they could be. For each statement, circle the number in the column that most applies. Score the statements as you actually are, rather than how you think you ought to be, and don't worry if some statements seem to score in the wrong direction.

| Statement   | I tend to think like this... |        |           |       |            |
|---|------------------------------|--------|-----------|-------|------------|
|   | Not at all                   | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Very Often |
| 1. I have a good sense of how others are feeling.   | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 2. I avoid non-work conversations with colleagues – after all, they're not my friends.                          | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 3. I find it difficult to listen sympathetically to people's problems.  | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 4. I enjoy meeting new people at work.  | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 5. I think that I'm better at my job than most of my colleagues are at theirs.                                  | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 6. I tend to talk only to people who are very similar to me.  | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 7. I tend to interrupt other people when they're speaking.  | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 8. Once I've made a decision, I push powerfully through to implementation, despite any objections.              | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 9. I keep eye contact with people when I'm talking with them. (This is dependent on culture.)                   | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 10. When chatting with colleagues, I tend not to ask them questions.  | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 11. I try to steer conversations with a particular motive in mind.  | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 12. I've been told that people enjoy working with me.   | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 13. I go out of my way to thank my colleagues when they've helped me at work.                                   | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 14. When I need someone to do something, I tend to give clear directions, rather than making requests for help. | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 15. I'm confident that the way I treat others doesn't affect the quality of their work.                         | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 16. My appraisals mention that I need to work on my "people skills."  | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |

Now, add up all of the numbers that you've selected, and record the total here: **Score** \_\_\_\_\_

## Quiz Score Interpretation

| Score | Comment  |
|-------|--|
| 16–37 | <p>Don't worry – you may have some work to do but you've already taken the first step toward developing great people skills by reading this workbook!</p> <p>Be sure to remember the value of people skills in the workplace, for your own productivity and for the good of your whole team.</p> <p>Perhaps you're shy or nervous, or just a little disdainful of your colleagues? It's never too late to turn things around!</p>                        |
| 38–59 | <p>You've likely not been told that you lack people skills, but chances are others find you a bit prickly, and they may sometimes feel uneasy about working with you.</p> <p>You probably have a good idea of how you could get on better with the people around you but, when you're under pressure, you may resort to some unproductive ways of getting things done.</p> <p>Now's a great time to explore the areas you know you could improve on.</p> |
| 60–80 | <p>Well done! You regularly display excellent people skills in your interactions. You're interested in other people, and you understand that your own thoughts and attitudes are important in how well you relate to others. But don't stop there – see if you can improve your people skills even further!</p>  |

You might be feeling surprised, anxious or angry if you didn't score as highly on this quiz as you expected or hoped to. But don't give up!

The way that we treat others reflects our core beliefs and attitudes, which can be hard to notice for ourselves. If one of the statements on the quiz had been, "I respond rudely to people," it's unlikely that you would respond, "very often": everyone knows that it's not right to be rude, and few people ever start the day intending to be rude to others.

So, acknowledging negative traits in ourselves can be uncomfortable, and even painful. However, it's a necessary step towards developing better people skills – and you've begun that process.

### ACTION

Three of the behaviors we asked you about in the quiz are very simple to improve, and doing so will have an immediate and significant impact on how other people view you. These are:

1. Looking others in the eye when you are talking to them (in cultures where this is expected).
2. Thanking people when they do something for you, even if it's their job to do so.
3. Not interrupting others when they are speaking.

Start doing these three things today, and see how differently others interact with you.

### TIP

Explore our [Career Skills](#) / [Understanding Culture and Team Management](#) / [Managing Around the World](#) menus for more on the behaviors that may or may not be acceptable.



## 1.4 Drawing This Together

Well done for reaching the end of the first chapter! You'll likely have a better appreciation of what shape your people skills are in, and a realization of how much you could benefit from developing them.

Use this section to prepare the first part of an effective action plan to develop and fine-tune your people skills.

**I want to banish these negative behaviors from my relationships:**

1.

2.

3.

4.

**The top three people skills that I want to prioritize are:**

1.

2.

3.

**The situation that I need to improve most urgently in my workplace is:**

**The benefit that I hope to achieve as a result of improving my people skills is:**

To be more effective in the way we treat others we must first become content with the people we are, and that often means working on our less desirable traits. When we become more content with ourselves, we can learn to communicate better with the people around us, to understand and appreciate them, and to find ways to resolve our conflicts. These communication abilities are central to having good people skills: when you've mastered them, you won't feel the need to be rude, arrogant, unappreciative, or antagonistic.

So, in the next chapter of this workbook, we will look at how you treat the most important person in your life: you.



## 2. Self-Respect and Self-Management

Feeling comfortable about who you are is the essential starting point for developing great working relationships with others.

You see others through the lens of your attitudes, your perceptions, and your experiences – the factors that combine to make you who you are.

If you have respect for yourself, for example, it's easier to see others more positively, too. If you have a more negative mindset, though, this will likely come through in the way that you relate to other people.

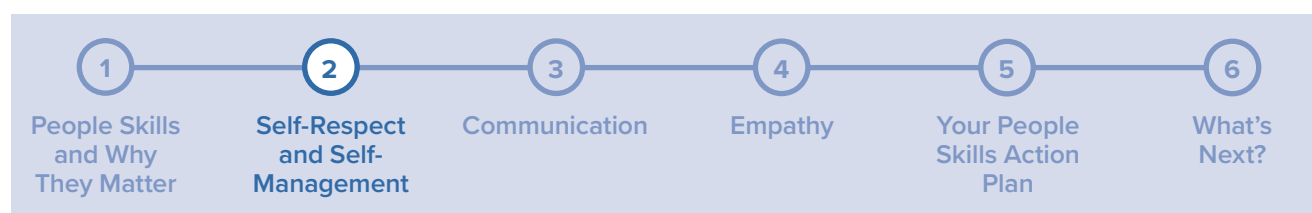
It's essential, therefore, to cultivate a sense of being comfortable with yourself.

By “comfortable,” we don't mean complacent! Instead, in this chapter, we look at improving your self-management through **mindful self-awareness**. This can help you to develop a better sense of yourself and to make positive choices that improve your personal relationships. You'll assess your general mood and attitude, and take stock of how optimistic or pessimistic your current outlook is.

**Self-esteem** is another important component of self-management. Learning how to tackle your “inner voice,” and to replace critical self-talk with positive and reassuring messages, is a big step towards having better people skills.

Having greater self-esteem often makes it easier to be more **assertive**, so we look at ways to assert yourself without upsetting the people around you.

Lastly, we examine how to be the best possible “you” – also known as **self-actualization**. This is all about shedding negative thoughts about yourself by living with meaning and purpose.



## 2.1 How You See Yourself Determines How You See Others

What you see in other people is influenced by the person you are.

Let's say, for example, that you and a co-worker are having a conversation about a new member of the team. You like this new recruit very much and find him charming, but your colleague thinks he's phony and "full of himself."

Your differing opinions likely stem from the unique ways in which life experiences have influenced you both. For instance:

- If experience has taught you to trust people, you will tend to see others as trustworthy.
- If experience has led you to be judgmental, you will likely see others as critical of you.
- If experience has encouraged you to respect others, you will probably see others as respectful, too.

It's a self-perpetuating cycle. In the words of Dr Phil McGraw (psychologist, author and TV show host), "You teach others how to treat you." So, when you see others as trustworthy they will likely see you as trustworthy in return, and treat you accordingly. This reinforces your own general view of people, and the cycle goes on.

Scrutinizing the actions and attitudes of others, and forming opinions about them, is easy! Turning the analysis around the other way takes much more effort. But, challenging as it can be, boosting your self-awareness is an important part of developing your people skills.

When you are able to maintain a healthy awareness of your thoughts, perceptions and emotions, you'll more easily recognize the impact that they have on other people. Then you can manage yourself accordingly.



### ACTION

Your first step to becoming a more able self-manager is to take stock of your views and beliefs about other people. Take some time to reflect on and answer the questions on the following page.

---

**What is your general view of people? For example, are they trustworthy or self-serving, compassionate or cutthroat?**

**What experiences in your own life have led you to this general belief?**



---

**What do you think your co-workers assume is your basic attitude towards people?**

**What experiences of you are your co-workers basing this assumption on?**

**How has your basic outlook helped you or hindered you in your career so far?**

“ *There is overwhelming evidence that the higher the level of self-esteem, the more likely one will be to treat others with respect, kindness and generosity.* ”

Nathaniel Branden,  
psychotherapist and author

#### TIP

Many of the most successful people in life tend to see others in a very positive light. This outlook is not naive. Rather, it's an objective awareness that, while everyone needs to look after their own interests, they are capable of tremendous acts of generosity and warmth, too. If you keep your eyes open for it, you'll see an enormous amount of kindness and good in the world.

Now we're going to look in detail at four key components of self-management, so that you can develop a better sense of yourself, and start to make positive choices in your relationships.

These components are:

1. Mindful self-awareness.
2. Self-esteem.
3. Assertiveness.
4. Self-actualization.

## 2.1.1 Mindful Self-Awareness

Have you noticed that some people have a problem with everyone?

Jagdish doesn't get along with Juan, or Mary, or Helmut. To him, Juan is too nosy. Mary is too arrogant. And Helmut is just... well... annoying. When Jagdish left his last two jobs, it wasn't because he was dissatisfied with the work or with the company; he just couldn't work with "those people" any longer. And, to hear him tell it, he had to get out of retail because the general consumer was far too stupid to be bothered with.

As the stories go on, the real source of the problem becomes clear. If Jagdish's people skills are so poor that he can't get along with this many individuals, the likely problem is the common denominator: Jagdish himself!

Jagdish is his own worst enemy. He's unforgiving and he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. He struggles to see life as a journey of discovery in which people can teach us valuable lessons, if we're open to each new experience.

How you choose to view the world is up to you. You can decide to regard it as a battle, as Jagdish does, or you can embrace all that life has to offer. You can opt for a positive outlook on life or make do with a negative mood and attitude.

If you have a worldview like Jagdish's, you probably already know these three general rules of a negative outlook:

### 1. If you choose to find problems, you will

Problems are everywhere, and it doesn't take much effort to locate them. Finding solutions is the difficult part, and this is what negative people tend to forget.

### 2. Problems are easy to create

You can turn almost every encounter into an issue, if you want to. Negative people add fuel to the fire. They turn small, controllable situations into infernos.

### 3. Other people's problems will find you

If you think that opposites attract, think again. Negative people are like magnets for one another. With a negative attitude, you'll find yourself becoming a dumping ground for all of the problems going on around you. This serves only to fuel your own negativity.

Maintaining and managing a happy and optimistic outlook will help you through the toughest times, and these are qualities that other people find attractive. Consider your own experience – do you prefer spending time with upbeat people who have a positive outlook, or with pessimistic naysayers?

## ACTION

Reflect on the following questions and answer them by checking “Yes” or “No.”

| Question  | Your Answer |    |
|---|-------------|----|
| 1. Do you experience conflict regularly/frequently?                         | Yes         | No |
| 2. Do you have former friends you’re no longer speaking with?               | Yes         | No |
| 3. Do people generally irritate and annoy you?                              | Yes         | No |
| 4. Do you enjoy gossiping?  | Yes         | No |
| 5. Do you tend to assume that people have ulterior motives?                 | Yes         | No |
| 6. Do you have a set way of doing things that you don’t like to be changed? | Yes         | No |
| 7. Do you criticize first and analyze later?                                | Yes         | No |
| 8. Do bad things happen to you all the time?                                | Yes         | No |
| 9. Do you let problems smolder and eventually erupt?                        | Yes         | No |
| 10. Do you feel more burdened than at ease?                                 | Yes         | No |
| <b>Totals</b>   |             |    |

How did you do? The more “Yes” answers you’ve given, the more negative your general mood. Two or more “Yes” answers suggests that your positive side could do with some nurturing.

Remember that being positive isn’t about denying the difficult realities in life. But it is about challenging the relentlessly negative messages that we hear every day. So, make a start by questioning the truth of your negative thoughts and reactions, and considering whether your existing beliefs help or hinder you.

Once you begin to notice them, you can start to rid yourself of the unkind or mean-spirited ideas and thoughts that impact others as well as yourself.

It’s also important to stay away from those who bring negativity into your life. The more positive people you invite into your life, the better you’ll begin to feel. Eventually, you’ll find that more and more people choose to be around you, and you’ll be able to build some great relationships.

## TIP

For more information on improving your mood and attitude, see the following Mind Tools articles:

- [Cognitive Restructuring](#)
- [The PERMA Model](#)
- [Are You a Positive or Negative Thinker?](#)
- [Optimism: The Hidden Asset](#)

## 2.1.2 Self-Esteem

As you move through life, you form a perception about who you are, and the difference you make to the world. This perception of yourself is called self-esteem, and it shapes many aspects of your life, from the type of work that you do, to the quality of your friends, and your desire and ability to lead and encourage others.

Your level of self-esteem reflects the strength of your belief in your own abilities and your own worthiness. When you approve of and respect yourself, you'll present yourself confidently to the world in a way that says you're capable, likable and successful. And other people will likely approve of and respect you, too!

This type of personal belief attracts others to you, and it enhances your ability to influence and relate to others. The higher you build your self-esteem, the greater your people skills are likely to be (as long as you're not overconfident or arrogant with it). The reason for this is that it's much easier to see the good in others when you recognize the good in yourself.

Conversely, feeling bad about yourself and engaging in critical self-talk can damage your ability to influence and relate to the people around you. They may respect you less, and feel wary about working with you.

In short, you can't hold others in high regard if you don't value yourself.

## Challenging Critical Self-Talk

The primary focus for people with low self-esteem is often on themselves and what they can do to preserve the small amount of self-worth they do have. Because of this, there's often not much left over for developing good relationships with others. This is why it's so important for us to challenge critical self-talk and to send ourselves positive and reassuring messages, rather than critical ones.

Some great ways to challenge negative self-talk include:

- **Taking care of your physical self**  
Get enough sleep, eat healthily, and exercise regularly, and you'll see benefits in your mental health, too.
- **Rewarding your accomplishments**  
Give yourself compliments, treat yourself to something special, and take time off work for yourself. Do things that make you feel good.
- **Reminding yourself of your strengths**  
Make a list of your successes, keep tokens of your accomplishments, and display signs of your achievements. This can be anything that will serve as a reminder of the great things you've been able to do.
- **Forgiving yourself**  
No one can be successful all the time! So, rather than criticizing yourself, spend time after any negative incident writing down the lessons you've learned. Then you can turn a failure into a success.

### TIP

You can find out more about challenging critical self-talk in our article on [Thought Awareness](#), [Rational Thinking](#), and [Positive Thinking](#).



## **ACTION**

Imagining a new and better future can help you motivate yourself to work on your self-esteem. Begin by answering the following questions.

**Building my self-esteem would help me to improve the quality of my work in these ways:**

**Having higher self-esteem would transform my interactions with other people in these ways:**

**If I forgave myself more, I would be free to learn and grow by:**

**Instead of criticizing myself and feeling angry or unworthy when I next make a mistake, I will:**

### 2.1.3 Assertiveness

To manage yourself effectively, you also need to learn how to communicate in an **assertive** way.

If your self-esteem is low, you might choose to keep quiet. By being passive, you let other people decide what happens, regardless of your own needs.

As your self-esteem grows, you'll likely want your voice to be heard more, but it's how you go about getting what you want that can be a problem. Some people choose to be aggressive. They place their own needs above the needs of other people, regardless of the outcome.

The third option – being assertive – allows you to get what you need while still respecting and acknowledging the needs of others. It differs from passive and aggressive communication because it is honest, direct, fair, positive, and constructive – not destructive.

When you're building your people skills, you need to be able to assert your position and understand what it is that you want from your interactions with others.

For example:

- Are you able to talk to your boss about an unreasonable workload?
- Are you able to ask questions and make statements, without worrying about how you'll look if you get something wrong?
- Do you stand up for yourself when a co-worker is rude?
- Are you able to convey strong messages in a way that keeps lines of communication open and builds mutual respect and understanding?

Assertive people exhibit these behaviors often. They approach situations with confidence, recognizing that their thoughts, feelings and input are important.

So, developing a more assertive approach is an important step in building great people skills. Being assertive means being clear and positive. When you're assertive, you will:

- Act in your own best interest.
- Stand up for yourself, without becoming fearful or apologetic.
- Express your honest feelings.
- Assert your rights and needs, **without** denying the rights of others.
- Do all of this in a professional, polite, "adult" way.

The following quiz helps you to determine how assertive you are right now. Then we'll look at how you can be more assertive, if you need to.

#### ACTION

Work through the table on the next page. For each statement, check the number in the column that most applies to you.

Respond to each statement as you actually are (rather than how you think you should be), and don't worry if some statements seem to score in the wrong direction.

| Statement   | I tend to think like this... |        |           |       |            |
|---|------------------------------|--------|-----------|-------|------------|
|   | Not at all                   | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Very Often |
| 1. When someone points out my mistake, I get defensive or upset.                    | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 2. When faced with an aggressive, opinionated person, I maintain my point of view.  | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 3. I stand up for myself when someone in authority is rude or unreasonable.         | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 4. When I need help from a colleague, I ask directly rather than hinting.           | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 5. I find it hard to refuse a request without feeling guilty or that I'm a failure. | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 6. I can accept my own mistakes and imperfections.                                  | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 7. I worry that I will seem stupid, incompetent or difficult if I ask questions.    | 5                            | 4      | 3         | 2     | 1          |
| 8. I recognize when I'm being treated unfairly and I can speak up.                  | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 9. I feel good about the decisions that I make.                                     | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 10. I can present my ideas and points of view confidently to a group of people.     | 1                            | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |

Now, add up all of the numbers you've checked to calculate your score. Then write it here: **Score** \_\_\_\_\_

## Quiz Score Interpretation

| Score | Comment  |
|-------|--|
| 10–23 | You would likely benefit from being more assertive. You may also want to work on your self-esteem, so that you understand what you need, and feel that you deserve to have those needs met.  |
| 24–37 | There are situations and people that you can assert yourself with, but you're not always confident about doing it. People may not know what to expect from you – will you “tell it like it is,” or will you “beat around the bush”? Ask yourself why you allow some circumstances to intimidate you. |
| 38–50 | You're very assertive, and you feel good about getting what you need. Others respect you for your choices, and people know that you will be fair and honest when dealing with them.  |

If your score shows that you need to improve your assertiveness skills, use these techniques to help you:

- **Get the other person's focused attention**  
Calmly tell the person that you need to talk. Then, agree a time when you can both listen and respond without being distracted.
- **State the issue directly**  
Be specific and use neutral language. Avoid assigning blame, and maintain an objective point of view.
- **Watch your tone and body language**  
Speak clearly, look the other person in the eye, maintain good posture, and keep your voice calm and level. This will help you avoid being either too passive or aggressive. (You can read more about using nonverbal communication on page 47.)
- **Use “I” statements**  
When you say, “I feel frustrated,” you own your feelings and you’re not looking to assign blame. However, statements such as “You make me feel frustrated,” or “I was frustrated when you...” put the onus on the other person to make the situation better. With assertive communication, you collaborate to find a solution – blame will only make the other person close down. (You can read more about using “I” statements on page 53.)
- **Check for understanding**  
Not everyone you talk to will have great communication skills – they may not listen well, and you may have to repeat key parts of your message.

- **Listen to and acknowledge the other person**

Once you’ve stated your case, let the other person have a chance to speak. (You can read more about listening skills on page 44.) Then, clarify any misconceptions that come up.

- **Negotiate a solution**

Don’t assume that the other person has the answers. Describe how you think the situation can work for everyone, and ask for agreement and commitment. Negotiate for a win-win solution where possible.

- **Be prepared to not get your way**

Assertiveness doesn’t guarantee that you’ll get exactly what you ask for, but it does ensure that both parties get to express themselves and have their positions understood.

As you continue to make good choices and to build your interpersonal skills, you’ll also become more adept at modifying your responses. You may walk away from difficult situations at times, and you might feel disrespected at others. But stay strong, lead by example, and soon others will start to adopt a similar, assertive approach.

You may find that some people respond negatively to your assertiveness. They might be wary of your change of style and may need time to trust you. Equally, not everyone understands the importance of collaboration and cooperation.

#### TIP

You can learn more about being assertive in [this article and video](#).

## 2.1.4 Self-Actualization

Imagine what it would be like to live a life full of happiness, joy, satisfying experiences, and fulfilling work. Imagine knowing what you want to do with your life, and living your life to its full potential. And imagine shedding your negative thoughts, and not worrying about what others think of you.

These are the sorts of experiences that “self-actualized” people have. “Self-actualization” is a term coined by Abraham Maslow – one of the founding fathers of motivational theory – and it means “being the best that you can be.”

Too often, we think of self-actualization as a lofty and almost unreachable state of being. Perhaps we think that no one **can** actually be that content and satisfied. But, you can be this fulfilled. You **can** live your life with meaning and purpose.

To be self-actualized, you need to have a strong understanding and acceptance of your “self.” It’s essential to know what you want, and to have the assertiveness and self-discipline to go out and get it. It also takes a strong, positive outlook, as there are many obstacles that you’ll likely come across. The exercises that you worked through earlier in this chapter will likely help you toward this position.

Some of the most important things that stand in the way of self-actualization are limiting beliefs. For example, many of us do not operate anywhere near our true levels of potential. Instead, we reach the point that we think we will get to... and then stop. If you believe that the next career step is beyond you, your mind will interpret the events around you to support that belief.

This is where you bump up against your limiting beliefs – you can see the possibilities, but you can’t quite convince yourself that you are worthy or capable of reaching them. To turn this frustrating situation around, it’s crucial to start believing that you can, in fact, reach your true potential.

### ACTION

Consider the questions on the next page, and write your answers in the spaces provided.



---

**What beliefs do you hold on to that may be blocking your path to success?**

**How long have you held these beliefs?**

**What triggered these self-limiting ideas?**

**How do you think you can change them?**

Did your solution to your limiting beliefs include challenging their rationality?

This is the best strategy for getting past the notion that you can't do something. So, just as you replace negative thoughts with positive ones, aim to replace your self-imposed limits with positive and optimistic expressions of what you can rationally achieve – if you work hard.

These new thought patterns will work their way into your mind, and you'll come to believe what you tell yourself. You'll then have the motivation to take the actions that will get you closer to your "best possible you."

Be sure to think beyond your immediate goals to what you most want to achieve in your life. This requires a serious examination of why you're doing things.

For instance:

- What legacy do you want to leave behind?
- What does "living the good life" mean to you?
- How will you measure your performance?
- How will these self-actualization plans affect your relationships with others?
- How can you ensure you'll have balance in life, when you're self-actualized?

#### **TIP**

Find out more about setting goals effectively in our article and video on [Personal Goal Setting](#).

#### **ACTION**

Take some time to think about what we've discussed above, and then answer the following question.

**What first step will you take to finding personal fulfillment and achieving self-actualization?**

When you reach the point where you are living a more self-actualized, more assertive life, and holding yourself in greater esteem, you'll have the essential foundations in place for building your people skills. Your greater self-management will allow you to start changing the way you behave with the people around you. We'll explore this in detail in the next chapter.

## 2.2 Drawing This Together

Now that you've reached the end of the second chapter, look back and summarize what you've learned. Do this by completing the statements below.

**Being more mindfully self-aware will improve my self-management by:**

**Boosting my self-esteem will improve my work by:**

**Being more assertive will help my interactions with others by:**

**Living my life more purposefully will boost my relationships by:**

### **ACTION**

Take a look back through this chapter, including your answers to the exercises, and fill in your personal Action Plan on pages 65 and 66.

# 3. Communication

## How do your attitudes, perceptions and experiences affect how you communicate with the people around you?

We communicate every day with a wide variety of people, and yet most of us could do so much more effectively. Good communication is at the heart of good people skills.

Connecting with people and genuinely engaging with them can be a real struggle: even those of us with the “gift of the gab” sometimes have difficulty communicating. The subject may be difficult, the receiver may not be paying attention, or you may have other things going on that distract you. Regardless of whether or not communication comes naturally to you, there is almost always room for improvement.

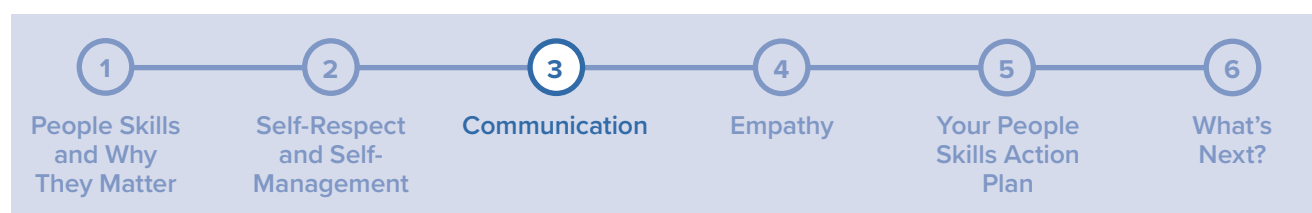
So, in this chapter we start by looking at **how better communication skills can benefit us all**, before moving on to consider why it’s important to be clear about **your intentions**. The most effective “people people” are always honest with others about why they are communicating. Here, you learn how to initiate conversations so that your listener is most receptive and open to hearing what you want to say.

From there, we move on to look at the best techniques to use when you want to **ask questions**. Some types of questioning are more effective than others, and familiarizing yourself with these styles is a crucial step forward.

People skills work both ways, of course, and it’s as important to know how to **listen** to people as it is to ask questions of them. Active listening is a way to hear the words that another person is saying and, more importantly, to understand the complete message that he or she is trying to give you.

**Body language** plays a huge part in the way that we communicate with each other, so we also take a look at the main nonverbal cues to be aware of.

Finally, we discover how crucial it is to be **clear about what you’re communicating**. Making every word count, and getting your point across while bringing out the best in others, are key people skills to have in your toolkit.



## 3.1 Why Communicate Better?

When you improve your communication, you'll enjoy more respect from others and be better equipped to influence them. You'll build more mutually respectful and considerate relationships and experience much less interpersonal conflict.

However, developing good communication skills can be a challenge. Understanding why it makes sense to put in the time and effort required can help you to see that challenge through.

### ACTION

Take some time to reflect on and answer the following questions.

**What kind of person do you enjoy being around? What qualities do they have?  
Who, in your life, has these qualities right now?**

**What kind of person do you enjoy being? When was the last time you felt like that person?**

**What kind of reputation do you want to create for yourself through your communication?**

**How might your relationships with stakeholders, team members and others benefit from you improving your communication?**

## 3.2 How to Improve Your Communication Skills

The way you communicate with others has a big impact on how they communicate with you.

It's a real talent to engage someone in conversation – to know when to listen, to know when to talk, and to know how to use words in a way that brings out the best in them. This is a talent that you can learn and improve.

The place to start is to consider the **message** you want to express. Decide what you want to say before you say it. If this means asking for time to formulate a point, then go ahead and ask for it. It may mean a second or two of uncomfortable silence, but this is far less painful than suffering the consequences of miscommunication.

Then, consider your **listener**. Is the person who you're communicating with ready to hear what you have to say? Is the timing right? Just because you have something on your mind, it doesn't mean that you have to say it immediately. Take care to respect your listener's needs, and choose a time and a place that suits you both.

Next, take some time to consider your **medium**. Which format or channel would work best? Should you email or phone, text or instant message, or meet one-on-one? Is this an informal message, or would formal communication be appropriate?

Next, you need to assess the **response** that you get. Even silence has meaning! Be ready to listen to the response of the person who you're trying to communicate with, and watch for any nonverbal cues that are sent back to you.

Finally, **adjust** as needed. As you monitor the response you get, you may need to rephrase or expand on your message, or to back up if a key piece of information is missing. You can't assume that the message got through as planned the first time around. In fact, you may want to ask the other person to paraphrase what you've said to check that he or she has received it correctly.

To help you to improve your people skills, we're going to look at five specific areas of communication and explore how you can maximize your effectiveness in each of them.

The five areas are:

1. Explaining your intent.
2. Asking questions.
3. Active listening.
4. Body language.
5. Expressing yourself clearly.





### 3.2.1 Explaining Your Intent

When you're interacting with people, it's important to be open with them. After all, they'll only want to associate with people who they can trust.

Unfortunately, many conversations start without a good understanding of why the other person has initiated it in the first place. This is an easy way to set yourself up for confusion or negativity!

The most effective conversations are cooperative: each person knows their role and has clear expectations, and they have been given a chance to accept the invitation to chat. For casual conversations, this just happens naturally. When you need to talk seriously with someone, however, it's important to make sure that the other person understands what she's getting into.

For example, if your intention is to provide feedback to a supplier on a recent delivery, but you begin the conversation with a request to chat about a new project, the supplier will feel tricked when you finally get to the point. Most people become closed and defensive when caught off guard like this, and the conversation will end unsatisfactorily.

#### ACTION

To reflect on this, work through the exercise below.

**Think of a recent situation where you had the opportunity to engage in a meaningful conversation, but where you didn't get the results you wanted from the discussion.**

**Why do you think the conversation "failed"?**

**How could you have changed the course of the conversation by being clearer about why you were communicating?**

When you ask people to talk with you about an issue, and they agree, they will be more receptive and more open to what you want to say. They will then communicate back to you in the same manner.

Some typical openers for explaining your intent include:

*“Jessica, do you have some time to talk about the survey results I just received?”*

*“I’m not sure that the figures you used in your report are entirely accurate. Can you please come and talk with me about your sources?”*

*“Kauko, I think it’d be helpful to talk about my outburst in the meeting. Is now a good time to do this?”*

These types of openers are worth using for several reasons. For example, the other person has an opportunity to decline to have the conversation right now and to offer an alternative. Then, when you do have the conversation, the other person

will have been able to prepare for it, because he knows what you want to talk about. And the person is clear about his expected role in the conversation. For example, he could be expected to help solve a problem, defend a decision, or provide support.

Inviting someone into a conversation shows that you respect the other person’s time and feelings. You show recognition that now may not be a good time to talk, but you still make it clear that you want to have the conversation.

No one appreciates being ambushed. Without these opening offers, you risk people avoiding conversations with you in the future.

Being aware of the intent will also help you when you’re asked to participate in a conversation. You can improve the overall quality of the exchange by clarifying the intent with the other person, and this is key for effective communication.



## ACTION

In the table below, make a list of some positive reasons for a conversation that you can use with other people. Also list some appropriate openers to go along with these reasons. We've included a few examples to get you started.

| Intent              | Opener   |
|---------------------|--|
| Persuade.           | <i>I'd like the opportunity to explain where I'm coming from. Would this afternoon be good for you?</i>                      |
| Change the subject. | <i>I appreciate you taking the time to clarify that. Now, can we please get back to the original discussion, which is...</i> |
| Give feedback.      | <i>Have you got a few minutes, so that I can give you my thoughts on your report?</i>  |
|                     |  |
|                     |  |
|                     |  |
|                     |  |
|                     |  |
|                     |  |
|                     |  |

### 3.2.2 Asking Questions

Questioning is one of the most important communication skills in all parts of life. Good communicators are able to ask questions that encourage others to feel comfortable in expressing themselves, without any feelings of judgment.

By asking questions, you learn, you uncover problems and needs, and you demonstrate that the other person is important to you. This all contributes toward building a lasting relationship.

#### Open and Closed Questions

**“Open” questions** enable you to learn a lot about someone. You can grasp what she is thinking and feeling, explore what she values, and probe for more detail. They invite people to talk, to open up, to expand freely, and to stay engaged with you. Most importantly, open questions send the message that you are interested in more than a one-word reply.

They can help you to understand how to use the differences between you to improve your relationship – and the better you understand that person, the stronger the foundations of your relationship will be.

**“Closed” questions**, on the other hand, require only a limited response and can usually be answered with a simple “Yes” or “No.” Closed questions can also lead the receiver toward a particular response, even unintentionally.

For example, “I think the boss should loosen up a bit, don’t you?” implies that the other person should respond by saying “Yes.” The way you asked the question sends the message, “You’d better agree with me.” Clearly, this is unhelpful when you want to build a relationship!



The chart below lists the words most commonly associated with closed and open questions.

| Closed questions often start with: | Open questions often start with: |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Do...?                             | How...?                          |
| Is...?                             | What...?                         |
| Can...?                            | When...?                         |
| Could...?                          | Where...?                        |
| Should...?                         | Why...?                          |
| Would...?                          | Which...?                        |
| Will...?                           | Please... ?                      |

If you ask a question with an open word at the beginning, you're most likely asking for a detailed response. Here are some starting phrases to use:

- What's your opinion on...?
- Why do you think that way about...?
- What do you think about...?
- How would you do...?
- How do you think we should proceed with...?
- What would you suggest for...?
- What changes do we need to make to...?
- Can you give me your advice on...?
- When did that happen with...?
- What are you experiencing when...?
- Please tell me more about...?

## ACTION

Rewrite each of the following closed questions as an open question.

Can we do this any other way?

Do you agree with this proposal?

Are you of the same opinion?

Can we fix this?

Did this happen because we missed the first deadline?

I think this is crazy. How about you?

## Probing and Reflective Questions

Let's look at two other types of questions that skilled communicators use.

**“Probing” questions** clarify and build on a person's previous answers, comments and responses. They use information already given to explore something further. They also demonstrate that you're listening to the other person, and that you are trying hard to understand him.

Some examples of probing questions include:

- What happened next?
- Why did that happen?
- What would you do differently?
- How did that affect you?

Each probe asks the other person to open up a bit more. You have to make sure, though, that you don't let the conversation become an interrogation: being bombarded with probe after probe is likely to make anyone feel uncomfortable. This could easily lead to defensive, and even aggressive answers, which is definitely not the atmosphere you want to create!

### ACTION

Suggest at least three probing questions that you could ask in response to these statements.

*“These changes to our production processes are going to be more trouble than they're worth. I really don't think that they'll make much difference.”*

1.

2.

3.

*"I'm sorry that I haven't been filling in my timesheet. I could try to complete it retrospectively, but it will be really hard to account for every minute of my time."*

1.

2.

3.

**"Reflective" questions** also demonstrate that you've been listening attentively to what the other person is saying. These questions typically start with a short summary of what you've heard, and then ask for more information or clarification.

For example, imagine that you're having a conversation with Diego, and he's expressing his discontent with his job. You could use a reflective question to show that you are listening, and to show that you're interested in learning more:

**Diego:** *My supervisor is always picking apart my work. I feel like I can't do anything right. I'm starting to doubt if I'm even competent or qualified to do this job. Maybe I'm just not cut out to be a sales rep.*

**You:** *Hmm, it sounds like you really doubt if this is the career for you. You were saying your supervisor gives you lots of feedback. Why do you think you see it as "picking apart" your work?*

In this conversation, you are taking the time to show Diego that you get how he's feeling, and that you're interested in helping him to sort through those feelings.



## ACTION

Suggest at least three reflective questions that you could ask in response to these statements.

*“Ashley, our new starter, had her first day in the office this week, and she seems really switched on. To be honest, I think she’s much more competent than I am, and it’s making me worry about my position on the team.”*

1.

2.

3.

*“Alright! My boss just gave me the best performance review ever. He really knows his stuff!”*

1.

2.

3.

### 3.2.3 Active Listening

How many times have you been in a conversation where you missed the main point because you were trying to form an argument in your head, or were too absorbed in your own concerns to acknowledge what was happening for others?

Consider this example:

**You:** *Hi Abdu, how are you doing?*

**Abdu:** *Really great, I finished that project! How are you?*

**You:** *Fine. Now, I'd like you to do something for me...*

Let's explore how well you listened to Abdu in this conversation. You asked him how he's doing. He responded by saying, "great," and told you why he feels "great." You, however, just answered "fine" and moved on to your own agenda.

You missed the fact that he's feeling good, and his big news – that he's completed the project. In other words, you heard what Abdu said, but you didn't listen to him, and you let a fabulous opportunity to connect with him slip by.

How do you think Abdu felt after the exchange? He likely didn't feel acknowledged, understood or valued, and he might not want to interact with you in any meaningful way again.

### How to Become a More Active Listener

Poor listening gets in the way of interpersonal relationships. Unless we listen actively to what someone else is saying, we can easily assume that her thoughts and feelings match our own.

So, when you speak with someone, try to **create an environment where you can listen more easily**. For instance, you could:

- Close the door.
- Mute your phone and close your laptop.
- Tidy away the papers that you were working on.
- Sit facing the person.
- Observe her intently.
- Use all of your senses to try to perceive her emotions.

It's a basic human need to know that we're understood. When you can fulfill this need by listening actively, you'll improve your people skills enormously.



A simple way to do this is to **briefly restate what you hear**. This doesn't have to mean that you agree with the speaker. Acknowledgment is not agreement, and it's not approval. You're simply showing that you understand the other person's position.

And when you do this before you state your own point of view, you demonstrate to the other person that you value her perspective. You also give her an opportunity to correct you, and to open up and say more about what's really going on.

As the conversation goes on, **continue giving brief summaries** of what the other person says, and try to **name the feeling** that appears to be at the root of the experience.

For instance:

- It sounds like you were **frustrated** about...
- What a **disappointment**...
- You'd probably **feel great** when...?
- Wow, I can tell you were **surprised** by that reaction...

However, try to avoid getting emotionally involved yourself. The point isn't to take over the conversation but to listen, and to let the other person have her say.

Avoid simply repeating word for word. For example, if a colleague says, "I can't believe how insensitive Katherine is. She's always gloating about her promotion in front of me," which of the following two responses sounds more sincere and genuine?

- A** *"What I hear you saying is that you believe Katherine is insensitive because she's always gloating about her promotion in front of you."*
- B** *"I imagine that it's very hard to hear Katherine talk about her new position."*

Response "A" repeats what was heard, but there is no indication that you "get" what your colleague is feeling and thinking. It sounds too robotic to be real. Response "A" is also likely to sound flat and distant, so remember to use the tone of your voice to help convey your acknowledgement and understanding, too.

### ACTION

Fill in the gaps in this conversation with responses that are based on active listening principles.

**Tambara:** *I can't believe that Jerry guy over at the printers. He wouldn't give me a straight answer about anything. There's no way I'm going back there to waste my time.*

**You:**

**Tambara:** *Well I don't care if he's the best guy in the world, he's not an account manager who I want to deal with. I'm not going back.*

**You:**

## ACTION

Now, think of a recent conversation that wasn't as successful as you had hoped. How could the conversation have been improved with active listening? Take some time to rewrite that conversation now, in the box below.

### 3.2.4 Body Language

We're now going to look at the role of body language, and other nonverbal cues, in communication.

Consider this comment and question:

*"I'm going to work this morning to pick up my final paycheck and collect my things. Can you meet me for lunch afterwards?"*

If this is said in an excited voice and with lots of animation, the correct interpretation would be that the speaker is looking forward to moving on from this job, and probably wants to meet for a celebratory lunch.

If, however, these words are accompanied by a sad expression, a small voice, and downcast eyes, it probably means that the person is not leaving the job by choice, and is looking for some support at lunch.

A lack of awareness of nonverbal cues may cause you to miss much of what is being communicated here.

Good people skills and an awareness of body language, however, will enable you to pick up on the real message behind the words. You'll then be able to tailor your response accordingly, adjusting your tone of voice and facial expressions to the emotion of the situation. This would help you to connect with the speaker and convey your interest and understanding.



## ACTION

Respond to the statements in the table below to see how much you know about nonverbal communication.

| Statement  | Your Answer |       |
|--|-------------|-------|
| 1. When there is a mismatch between verbal and nonverbal messages, you can often learn more by paying attention to the nonverbal ones. | True        | False |
| 2. The face is the main channel for communicating emotion.   | True        | False |
| 3. Eye contact can let us know when someone wants to end a conversation.   | True        | False |
| 4. Some people take a few moments before showing their nonverbal responses.  | True        | False |
| 5. “Mirroring” someone else’s body language is a common practice.  | True        | False |
| 6. When interpreting body language, you should look at each signal independent of the others.  | True        | False |
| 7. Gestures and other forms of body language have clear meanings.  | True        | False |
| 8. Sarcasm and humor are revealed through tone and facial expression.  | True        | False |
| 9. The physical distance between the people in a conversation is a form of nonverbal communication.                                    | True        | False |
| 10. Effective use and interpretation of nonverbal communication is essential to good people skills.                                    | True        | False |

Here are the answers, along with explanations:

| Question | Answer  |
|----------|---|
| 1.       | <b>True.</b> It tends to be easier for someone to “lie” with words than with body language.   |
| 2.       | <b>True.</b> Emotions are mainly conveyed through facial expressions, and it’s estimated that 85 percent of nonverbal communication comes from the face.  |
| 3.       | <b>True.</b> This is one of the many things that eye contact tells us. Looking away from those with whom you are talking can be a sign of disinterest, disengagement or distraction, depending on cultural background.  |
| 4.       | <b>False.</b> Nonverbal communication is often spontaneous and immediate. It’s something we use all of the time, and it can’t be fully turned on and off (although it can be faked).  |
| 5.       | <b>True.</b> This often happens unconsciously and is something that you need to watch out for. If you yawn, and then your colleague yawns, he might not be bored. It may simply be a reaction to your body language.  |
| 6.       | <b>False.</b> It’s best to look at the signals as a group of cues. A slouched position with an animated tone and good eye contact may just be about poor posture. It may look like someone is questioning what you are saying if he has a habit of raising his eyebrows, but if all the other signs indicate that he agrees with you, then go with those.                       |
| 7.       | <b>False.</b> Again, there are a variety of interpretations for a single form of nonverbal expression. Crossed arms can indicate being relaxed or defensive or cold, depending on the context. Also, be aware of cultural or national differences. For example, the “thumbs up” sign indicates a job well done to North Americans, but it’s considered rude in Iran and Greece. |
| 8.       | <b>False.</b> For instance, many Americans use sarcasm, but their tone of voice and facial expressions might not convey this, especially to anyone British. Humor is very subjective and can be confusing to interpret. It might be thought offensive – or missed entirely!   |
| 9.       | <b>True.</b> Distance can convey the degree of familiarity between two people, and it can also be used to signal aggression. Increasing the distance may mean that the person wants to end the conversation, that he is uncomfortable with the subject, or simply likes more personal space. Again, cultural norms vary widely here.  |
| 10.      | <b>True.</b> Matching your words and body language will help your listener to trust you. And recognizing body language in others will help you to understand them.  |



So, body language can help you to convey truth and sincerity, but it can also undermine the message that you're trying to send. To communicate effectively, you need to understand

the role that nonverbal communication plays in the way that you relate to other people. When you're aware of the "whole" person, your communication improves significantly.



In summary, remember the following tips when considering body language and other nonverbal cues:

- Practice good eye contact, if this is culturally acceptable.
- Be aware of all nonverbal cues – yours and theirs.
- Interpret nonverbal cues together, not in isolation.
- Be aware of tone of voice – yours and theirs.
- Be aware of words and gestures that are inconsistent.
- Consider context and circumstances.
- Recognize that your interpretation may still not be correct.
- When you note inconsistencies or feel unsure, ask for clarification.

### 3.2.5 Expressing Yourself Clearly

To communicate well, it's important to be able to express yourself in ways that others understand.

Good communicators know that every word counts. They pick and choose their words carefully, to avoid ambiguity.

The clearer you are, the more inclined people will be to believe what you say and to take you seriously. However, if what you say is mostly empty or incomprehensible, then you risk losing respect and credibility.

A statement with negative impact might go like this:

**Speaker #1:** *"We are facing a paradigm shift. As you know, we're huge in the FPS genre and it's been a great ride. We diversified into RPGs and we're now making the business case for fantasy genre GPS-enabled AR games. It's a good way to leverage our resources and maximize the return on human capital. We'll be looking at market development, and making sure that our DAGMAR is on point."*

Someone else might say the same thing, much more clearly and effectively, by using these words:

**Speaker #2:** *"We're looking to create a completely new type of product. We were into First Person Shooting video games, and we then moved into Role Playing Games. We're now making the case to develop geolocation Augmented Reality games in the fantasy genre. We've got lots of creative people who are motivated to work on these new projects. As we move forward, we're going to need to make sure we use an effective marketing campaign to reach our targets."*

Chances are, the second message makes a lot more sense to you than the first, and you feel more included in the conversation!

#### ACTION

To think about this further, answer the questions on the next page.

**What personal characteristics do you think that Speaker #1 and Speaker #2 each possess?**

**Speaker #1**

**Speaker #2**

**What do you infer about their people skills?**

**Speaker #1**

**Speaker #2**

**Which person would you rather get to know?**

If you've ever caught yourself sounding like Speaker #1, chances are your listeners stopped listening before you'd made your point.

So, make it your goal to cut out jargon and, instead, to communicate more clearly. Also, fight the urge to continue talking to embellish your message or to impress your listeners. In this case, less is often more!

## Using “I” Statements

The second part of speaking clearly is expressing what you’re feeling.

We’ve already examined how you can begin to figure out another person’s emotions, through active listening and paying attention to body language. However, it’s just as important to help your listeners understand what **your emotions** are.

The best way to voice your feelings clearly is with “I” statements. By their very nature, “I” statements are delivered from your personal perspective, so they place the accountability and responsibility for what you say firmly with you.

The basic format of an “I” statement is,  
**“I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_.”**

So, for example, instead of “You don’t respect me – you never listen to me,” you could say,  
**“I feel frustrated when you don’t consider my input because I think I have some good ideas.”**

Or, instead of “You’re lazy because you never come up with solutions to problems,” you could say,  
**“I feel disappointed when you come to me with problems because I expect you to understand the situation better than me.”**

In this way, “I” statements allow you to make your point, but without generalizing, name calling, insulting, accusing, or blaming the other person. You still honor that person’s self-worth, and you build a foundation of trust and respect between you. This paves the way for constructive dialogue.

Watch out for disguised “I” statements, though. On the surface, they follow the rules of “I” statements, but the message is actually a “you” statement. For example:

- I feel that **you don’t respect me** when...
- I feel that **you’re lazy** because...

These are really just “you” statements dressed up as “I” statements. They are full of judgment, and they’ll likely bring out resistance and resentment in your listener.

## ACTION

Turn the unproductive statements listed below into effective “I” statements. Give each one a context, based on a situation that you have experienced.

**You have a bad attitude!**

**You need to stop whining.**

**You obviously don’t care about the good of this department.**

**You don’t have the right skills to deal with that.**

**You can’t possibly have done that correctly in that time!**

You might fear that expressing yourself more clearly in this way will take too much time and energy.

However, you’ll see a big payoff from your effort, in the improved relationships that you’ll likely enjoy.

## 3.3 Drawing This Together

You now understand much more about how important your ability to communicate clearly and effectively is, and you know about lots of techniques to practice and how they can help you.

### ACTION

Complete the statements below to summarize what you've learned, and to decide what new approaches you'll try out in your workplace.

**I'll prepare my communications more by considering:**

**To make my intentions clear when I communicate, I will:**

**By avoiding closed questions and using more open, probing and reflective questions, I will:**

**I'll stop thinking of other things when someone is talking, and listen actively, so that:**

**As I become more aware of my and other people's body language, I will:**

**I'll express myself more clearly by avoiding the following jargon and "you" statements:**

In the next chapter, we'll consider how thinking more about your listener than about yourself can break down barriers, help you to solve problems, and build even stronger connections with people.

## 4. Empathy

So, we've explored self-awareness and how to manage and communicate your own needs and emotions, and we've begun to look at sensing other people's. Now we'll look at a quality that underpins all people skills.

Developing empathy is perhaps the most significant effort you can make toward improving your people skills. This is simply because others will want to "get" you when they can tell that you "get" them. When this happens, cooperation, collaboration and teamwork start to build.

Without empathy, you can seem detached from your emotions and you're likely unaware of the impact you have on others. People won't be ready to help when you need them, and they might even avoid day-to-day contact with you. In short, if you lack empathy you can struggle to connect with the people around you.

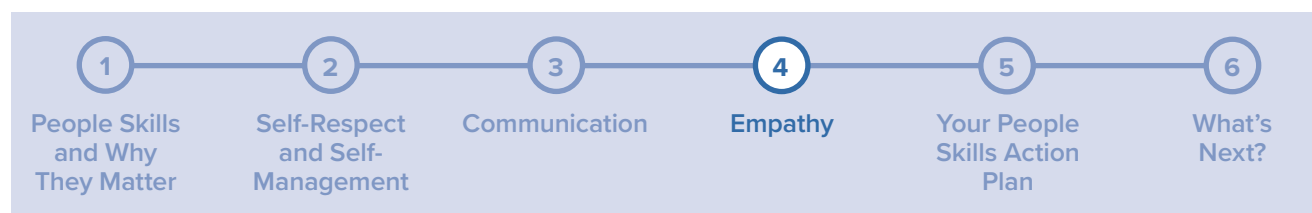
That connection with others is something we all need. Whether you're more introverted or extroverted, younger or older, a leader or a follower, you'll likely want to form meaningful relationships with other people. And the best way to make these connections is to think less about ourselves and to be genuinely interested in others.

That said, it's important to **take stock of your existing capacity for empathy** so you know what work you need to do. In this chapter, you'll achieve this by working your way through a short quiz.

You'll then move on to clarify the **difference between sympathy and empathy**. The two terms are often confused, and knowing the difference can help you take your people skills that little bit further.

Lastly, you'll pick up some winning tips and pointers about **how to be empathic (or empathetic) in practice**. Having a set of strategies to draw on when you need them can be invaluable, and this chapter walks you through the key considerations.

When you switch your focus toward other people, you begin to bridge the gap between you and your co-workers. You make yourself more accessible and allow others' experiences to touch you. When they sense this resonance, they'll feel far more inclined to be around you, and you can begin to interact more productively and meaningfully.





## 4.1 Understanding Empathy

You have to get past yourself and your own concerns to be able to empathize with other people. But this need not be a hardship. When you can look beyond your own world, you realize how much there is out there to discover and appreciate!

You don't have to be egotistical, selfish, or a one-person island to need a boost to your empathy skills, though. Most of us could benefit from an occasional reminder of how valuable it is to "step into someone else's shoes" for a while.

### ACTION

Before we look at some specific tools and techniques, take the short quiz that follows, to test how empathic you are right now. For each statement, check the box next to the number in the column that most applies.

As before, respond to each statement as you actually are, and don't worry if some questions seem to score in the wrong direction.

| Statement  | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Very Often |
|--|-------|--------|-----------|-------|------------|
| 1. I am aware of how my mood affects the people around me.   | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 2. I take note of interactions between others, and use this to figure out how to connect with them myself.       | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 3. I try to expose myself to other people's points of view.  | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 4. I am sensitive to changing moods and to the general morale of the people I work with.                         | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 5. I make an effort to engage people in conversation, and to ensure that they feel included.                     | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 6. My networks include people with different life experiences and cultural backgrounds from mine.                | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 7. I find it interesting and exciting to work with new people.   | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |
| 8. I act as a "hub" between different groups of people, helping information flow and forming social connections. | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5          |

Now, add up all of the numbers that you've checked, and write your total here: **Score** \_\_\_\_\_

A score of 32 or more shows that you are adept at empathizing with the people around you. You're able to support and encourage them, and you work hard to understand their perspectives and realities. However, this doesn't mean that you couldn't strengthen your skills in this area.

If your score is less than 32, developing and demonstrating more empathy would be a great move, so read on!

### 4.1.1 Sympathy Versus Empathy

Many people confuse empathy with sympathy, but the two concepts are quite distinct. While empathy focuses on sharing and understanding, sympathy is more concerned with feeling sorry for the other person.

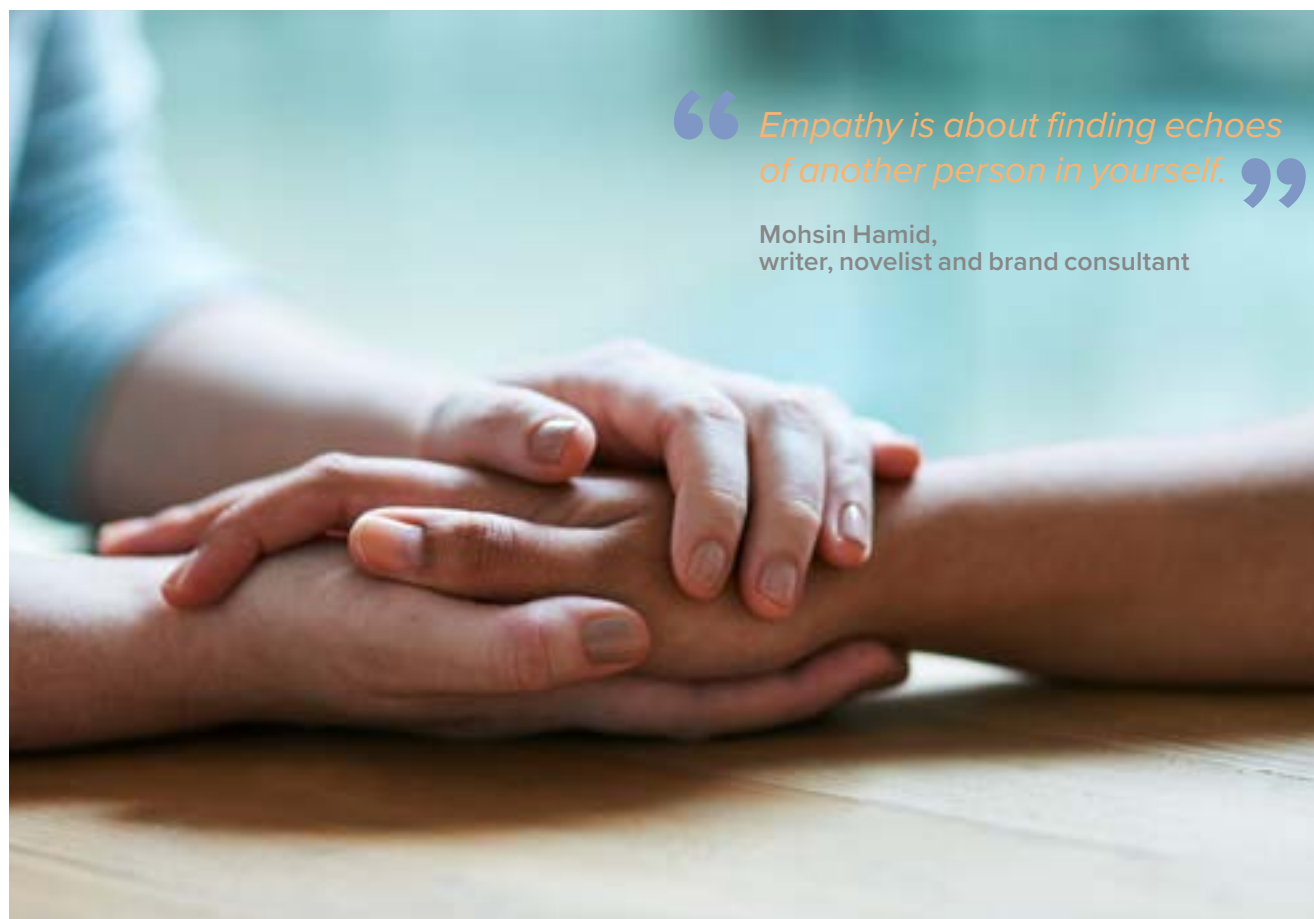
For instance, “I’m really sorry for your loss. Can I do anything to help you through this difficult time?” is a sympathetic response – and often a very welcome one. Empathy would sound more like: “I see your pain right now, and I understand how it feels.”

You may want to combine sympathy with empathy, especially when you’ve been through a similar experience to the other person.

Sympathy, however, won’t necessarily convey that you understand the other person’s perspective. It simply says that you’re commiserating with them.

#### ACTION

Take some time to reflect on your current capacity for empathy. Then, answer the questions on the following page.



“Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself.”

Mohsin Hamid,  
writer, novelist and brand consultant

**Is there anything that prevents you from looking beyond your own perspectives, and seeing things from another person's viewpoint?**

**If so, how has this affected your relationships?**

**How often do you seek others' opinions and perspectives?**

**If other people have values or beliefs that are different from yours, how do you react, and why?**

**How can you address your own needs while acting with empathy toward others?**

When we fail to see things from other people's perspectives, our relationships suffer. We risk being seen as insensitive or intolerant, selfish or egotistical. This makes others wary of us and

can easily lead to outright conflict. If you actively insulate yourself from other people's viewpoints, you also miss out on great opportunities, to learn or even to be pleasantly surprised!

## 4.1.2 How to Be Empathic

Now that you understand what empathy is and why it's important, try these strategies to help you to use it more effectively:

1. **Leave your usual vantage point, and listen to other people's experiences.** When you do this, you'll realize that other people probably aren't being, for example, unreasonable, stubborn or illogical; they are probably just reacting to a situation with the unique knowledge that they have.
2. **Validate other people's perspectives.** Once you "see" why they believe what they believe, it's important to acknowledge their rationale, even if you don't agree with it. You can accept that people have different opinions from your own, and that they may have good reason to hold those opinions, to demonstrate that you're making a genuine effort to understand them.
3. **Be curious.** Encourage people to talk about themselves. Ask questions (review chapter 3 to help you with this), and try to find out why people hold the opinions they do. What experiences have made them into the people they are? Truth is often much stranger, and more interesting, than fiction!
4. **Listen.** Listen to the entire message that the other person is trying to convey (again, review Chapter 3 for more on this):
  - Listen with your ears – what is being said, and what tone is being used?
  - Listen with your eyes – what body language is the other person using as she speaks?
  - Listen with your instincts – what are you sensing that she may not be saying or showing openly?
  - Listen with your heart – what do you imagine the other person is feeling?

5. **Examine your own attitude.** Are you more concerned with getting your own way, "winning," or being right? Or, is your priority finding a solution and building relationships? Without an open mind and attitude, there won't be enough room for empathy to squeeze in.
6. **Ask the other person for advice.** This is probably the simplest and most direct, yet the least-used way to develop empathy. Contrast this approach with buying a gift for someone without taking the time to figure out what she really wants or needs.

Practice these skills whenever you interact with other people. Simply by increasing your interest in what others think, feel and experience, you'll be seen as more caring and approachable.

Here are some more tips for giving your empathic qualities a boost:

- Be attentive, physically and mentally, to what's happening in other people's lives.
- Listen carefully, and remember their keywords and phrases.
- Respond encouragingly to their core messages.
- Be flexible – prepare to change course as the other person's thoughts and feelings change.
- Look for clues that you're "on target."



## ACTION

Bearing in mind what we've discussed so far, complete the exercise below.

Consider the following discussions between a team member and his manager and create an empathic response. (Remember to communicate that you acknowledge and understand the situation from the other person's perspective.)

***“Janice is driving me crazy. She’s always asking for help with her work. She’s been doing this job for longer than I have, so shouldn’t she be more competent? It’s like individual performance doesn’t matter around here, as long as the work gets done by somebody!”***

Your empathic response:

***“I can’t get this project done on time. My life has been turned upside down lately. I know I shouldn’t let this affect my work but it does. I can’t concentrate. I can’t get enough sleep. I’m a mess, and I needed to come clean with you.”***

Your empathic response:

## 4.2 Drawing This Together

So that's your fourth chapter completed – well done! You've now put in some serious work and considered how crucial strong interpersonal skills are for working more effectively with people every day.

More importantly, you've nearly completed your strategy for strengthening your existing people skills. This now puts you within reach of better, more productive relationships with your managers, team members, customers and co-workers.

### ACTION

Summarize what you've learned, and what you plan to practice, as a result of reading this chapter. Do this by completing the statements in the exercise below.

Boosting my capacity for empathy will affect my relationships at work by:

If I practice mutual acceptance, and value differences, my relationships will:

## 5. Your People Skills Action Plan

**Congratulations – you’ve reached the end of this toolkit! So, now’s the time to think back over everything you’ve covered and to summarize it in an Action Plan. You can then move from theory into practice and start enjoying better working relationships!**

By using all of the skills you’ve learned so far, you can really start to capitalize on the interactions that you have with others. This is what’s really at the heart of people skills – learning about yourself and others in a way that will help you to build mutual understanding, respect and trust.

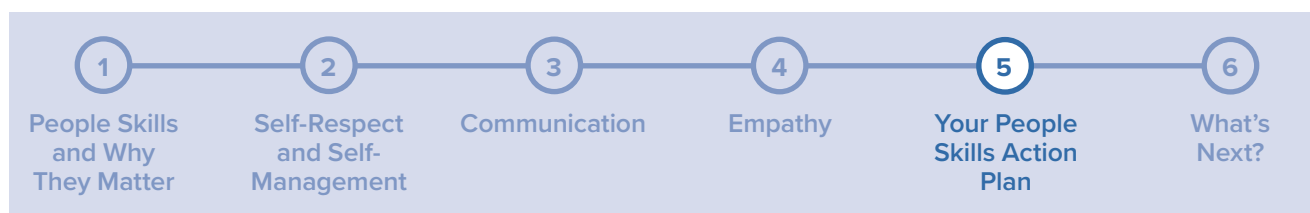
Watching your hard work pay off will be a rewarding experience.

You’ll achieve more, and be happier and more confident. So, too, will the people around you. You’ll be a better manager, a better communicator, and you’ll enjoy better relationships with the members of your team. In short, everybody wins!

You now need to create a personal “roadmap” to help you get there. So, use the questions on the next page as prompts to think back through the discoveries you’ve made and the decisions you’ve taken, to identify the actions you’re going to implement.

“The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people.”

Theodore Roosevelt,  
26th President of the U.S.



## ACTION

Fill in the most appropriate words or phrases from the pages of the toolkit shown below.

If you find it hard to get others to see things from your perspective, or struggle to get along with your colleagues, you have a lot to gain from improving

your people skills. It's important to target your efforts where they are most needed, and where they can have the greatest impact.

**The three situations with the greatest potential to be transformed by improving my people skills are (from page 9):**

1.

2.

3.

**The three highest-priority people skills for me to improve are (from page 12):**

1.

2.

3.

**I can turn around these three negative statements about my people skills, by (from the quiz on page 12):**

1. Statement:

Action:

2. Statement:

Action:

3. Statement:

Action:



Holding a negative overall view of other people encourages them to avoid you.

**My three negative thoughts about others that I need to challenge are (from pages 18 and 19):**

1.

2.

3.

You can't hold others in high regard if you don't value yourself. Developing higher self-esteem will enhance your ability to relate to the people around you.

**I'm going to challenge these three negative thoughts about myself in the following ways (from page 24):**

1. Critical self-talk:

Action:

2. Critical self-talk:

Action:

3. Critical self-talk:

Action:

Being assertive enables you to get what you need from others while respecting their needs, too.

**I can turn around my assertiveness by (from the quiz on page 26):**

1. Statement:

Action:

2. Statement:

Action:

3. Statement:

Action:

You are more likely to live a life full of happiness, joy, satisfying experiences, and fulfilling work when you reach a state of “self-actualization” – that is, when you become the “best you” possible.

**Three specific actions that I'll take to improve my sense of personal fulfilment are (from pages 29 and 30):**

1.

2.

3.

Launching straight into the substance of a conversation can throw people off guard, and being unclear about why you want to speak to someone can leave them feeling duped.

**My top strategies for explaining why I want to initiate communication with other people are (from page 36):**

1.

2.

3.

Asking questions seems, on the face of it, such a simple skill. However, the way you phrase your questions can have a dramatic impact on their effectiveness, and on the people you're in conversation with.

**I'll use open questions most effectively in the following scenarios (from page 39):**

1.

2.

3.

**I'll use probing questions in these circumstances (from page 41):**

1.

2.

3.

**I'll use reflective questions in these situations (from page 42):**

1.

2.

3.

The most effective managers listen actively to their people.

**When communicating with others, my most common distractors – and ways to deal with them – are (from page 44):**

1. Distractor:

Action:

2. Distractor:

Action:

3. Distractor:

Action:

Body language can reinforce or undermine the way that you relate to others and the message that you're trying to send.

**Three ways in which I could use my body language more productively are (from page 47):**

1.

2.

3.

The ability to express yourself well, and in ways that other people understand, is central to having great people skills.

**Common problematic situations where I could express myself more clearly are (from page 51):**

1.

2.

3.

Empathy is a way to connect with other people by “stepping into their shoes” and understanding their perspectives.

**I can become more empathic by turning around these three statements (from the quiz on page 57):**

1. Statement:

Action:

2. Statement:

Action:

3. Statement:

Action:

You now have an Action Plan to improve your people skills – a “to-do” list of concrete steps that you can take to improve your relationships with those around you. Well done!

If you’re unsure about how much you’ve learned, take another look at the “Do My People Skills Need Work?” quiz on page 12 to see how far you’ve come.

You’ve learned how people skills come down to how you conduct yourself and interact with the people around you, both verbally and nonverbally. You’ve discovered ways to collaborate more effectively – and rewardingly – with the people you work with every day. And, you’ve created a plan for putting the theory into practice.

The quality of your people skills has a strong bearing on how effective you are as a manager. By working your way through this toolkit, you’ve moved closer toward enjoying more fulfilling, productive relationships and a more confident, successful working life.

## 6. What's Next?

**I hope you've enjoyed using this toolkit!**

To get along well with people, you need to develop a specific set of skills. After all, none of us are born with a complete knowledge of who we are. Equally, no one has an in-built understanding of how to show empathy, communicate assertively, or ask productive questions.

As you've seen, you can learn and develop these people skills. By taking the time to develop yours, you'll be able to build great relationships at work and at home.

Naturally, this takes practice and commitment. In the end, though, it will be worth the effort, as you'll have generated a whole new way of interacting with others and of viewing the world. This can only make your journey through life more enjoyable, more fulfilling, and more satisfying!

We've put a great deal of effort into developing this and our other resources. If you have any suggestions on how we can improve them for the future, please let us know at [customer.helpdesk@mindtools.com](mailto:customer.helpdesk@mindtools.com).

Best wishes, and enjoy your relationships!



**James Manktelow**  
CEO, MindTools.com

Mind Tools – Essential skills for an excellent career!

