

SECTION 8

DEVELOPING YOUR STRATEGY FOR BEHAVIOR

31. IMPROVING YOUR SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

Earning Acceptance in Your Group

Your strategy for improving your social acceptance starts with meeting the requirements for membership in your group. As these requirements have already been described in detail earlier, they will only be summarized here:

- Make contributions to achieve the group's objectives
- Avoid behavior that weakens the group:
- Avoid offending others
- Avoid attacking those who offend you
- Avoid causing dissension

Improving Your Ego

Strange as it might seem, the single most important thing you can do to increase your social acceptance is to improve your ego. Improving your ego improves your social acceptance because it makes you feel more secure. This improvement in your social acceptance improves your ego, and so on. If you can get the process started, it will build on itself.

When you feel reasonably good about yourself, you won't have to try to make yourself look good and others look bad. Your feelings won't frequently hurt because you think other people are trying to diminish you. You won't consider every disagreement with your opinions to be a rejection of you as a person. And you won't take offense at every unfavorable comparison. Not only will you "win" more comparisons than you expect, but you'll realize that losing some won't hurt your acceptance significantly. So what if Joe is better looking than you are or if Betty is a better dancer? Everyone loses some of these meaningless comparisons. Besides, most people like to be with others who are no more competent than they are.

People with a low ego suspect that they are constantly being examined for possible expulsion from the group. They often misinterpret the nonverbal messages they receive. This causes a strong, negative emotional reaction, so that they misinterpret the verbal portion of the message, which annoys the transmitter. As you improve your ego, you'll interpret messages more correctly and find them less threatening.

When people don't have to be concerned about how you'll react to what they say or do, you'll find that they will like you better. You'll know this is happening when more people begin to talk to you, even if it's only about the weather.

Expectations

Reducing your expectations is the next step in your strategy to improve your social acceptance. Almost everything you do is based on expectations imposed on you by

others. As you've adopted these expectations, consciously or unconsciously, all your behavior seems normal. However, some expectations are incorrect and some are unnecessary. Check the activities you feel you must do, should do, or ought to do, whether you want to or not. You can divide these expectations that make you uncomfortable into three groups:

- Those you really have to do
- Those you really don't have to do
- Those you might be able to reduce by negotiation

Those you really have to do - You might not like going to work, paying taxes, or mowing your front lawn, but you need the money, don't want to go to jail, and have to keep your neighbors from getting mad at you. So you will have to fulfill some expectations whether you like them or not.

Those you really don't have to do - You don't have to lend out your tools, you don't have to support your kid's taste in luxuries, and you don't have to get a new car every other year. You'll be surprised how many things you really don't have to do without giving up any of your fundamental objectives. You'll feel a weight being lifted from your shoulders as you get rid of each of these unnecessary expectations.

Those you might be able to reduce by negotiation - Your mother expects you to call her every day. This can be a problem, especially since you have to deal with screaming kids when you come home from work. Or your father wants you to go to the same college he attended. You can sometimes reduce this kind of expectation by negotiating with the person who imposed it. Maybe your mother will settle for twice a week.

The third step is to examine the expectations you impose on other people. Those you impose for their benefit are probably helpful; for example, you expect your children to behave in ways that gain them social approval. But be sure these expectations are both necessary and for their benefit instead of yours. Here again, the clue is dissatisfaction. If you are unhappy because your children aren't doing as well in school as you expected, look into it. You may find that they are operating at the limit of their ability, which is all you can ask of anyone. It's your expectations and not their performance that needs adjustment.

Check to be sure you aren't using expectations to force your goals on others. Perhaps you always wanted to go to an Ivy League college or to be a public prosecutor. If you expect your children to achieve the goals you were unable to reach, you will both be hurt by your expectations.

You will find that you can eliminate or reduce some of the expectations you impose on others. In some cases, you might be able to negotiate a compromise that satisfies your need without making others too unhappy. It's especially important to

examine your expectations of your spouse, your children, and your friends. The more you reduce your unnecessary expectations of others, the happier you both will be.

Handling Errors

No matter how hard you try, you're going to hurt someone's feelings occasionally without meaning to. Apologize immediately and then do what you can to make up for it. Unless your error has caused someone to be seriously hurt physically, almost everyone will accept your apology and forget the incident.

Some people become their own judge and jury for their mistakes. They condemn themselves to intense mental pain without time off for good behavior for even minor mistakes. Sure it's embarrassing to arrive at a cookout in old clothes when everyone else is wearing elegant casuals, and of course you shouldn't have hurt your Aunt's feelings, but these are social errors, not capital crimes. If you can't forgive yourself immediately, promise yourself you won't do it again and then let yourself off on parole.

Your Communication Pattern

Except for those who know you very well, almost everyone's first opinion of you is based on the way you communicate. Yet very few people have a strategy for communicating with others. Most people pick up their communication pattern without thinking about it, so what they say and how they say it often does more harm than good. Some develop reasonably good verbal communication but don't give any thought to their nonverbal communication, which is even more important. Others say exactly what they think, without realizing that this offends some people. Still others are so careful not to offend anyone that no one is ever sure what they mean. They become the invisible people whom you don't remember meeting.

It's not easy to get the level of directness in your communications just right. Aim for the level that will seldom offend anyone intentionally. Of course, you also don't want to offend anyone unintentionally, but you can't prevent this from happening now and then. You can offset these occasional errors by developing a friendly attitude that shows you are not trying to diminish anyone.

You might need a different communication strategy for each group you belong to. Try to communicate in about the same way as the other members so. Speaking the king's English isn't going to improve your acceptance in a street gang. But if you want to move into the mainstream of society, it's absolutely necessary to communicate as they do. The language that gets you social approval in a street gang will close the doors to your advancement in the mainstream.

Selecting Your Subgroups

Our nation is made up of many different kinds of subgroups. You are automatically a member of some subgroups that you leave only at death, such as your race, your ethnic heritage, and the family you are born into. You might be forced to join some subgroups whether you like it or not, such as military service, people with an illness, physical handicap, prisoners, or a labor union. And there are some subgroups you can't join even if you want to, such as a country club or a professional society. Nevertheless, you will have more or less free choice in joining or leaving most subgroups that are important to your well being, including your employment, your marriage, your neighborhood, your friends, and your religious sect.

The subgroups you belong to have a significant effect on your happiness. The behavior required for acceptance in one subgroup might considerably differ from others or from that generally accepted in the mainstream. For example, in behaving for acceptance in your ethnic group, you might lose acceptance in the mainstream. Trying to belong to opposing groups usually makes you unhappy because you are seldom completely accepted in either group. Unless you are extraordinarily flexible and are well aware of what you are doing, choose groups where the expected behavior is similar.

Check as carefully as you can both before and after you enter a group voluntarily. If it doesn't fill your needs for social acceptance, see if you can (and want to) change your behavior to be accepted there. If not, you have two choices. You can try to change the things about the group you don't like. You can sometimes make minor changes in a small group but it is extremely difficult to make a significant change in a large group. The members of every large organization close ranks to prevent changes, however necessary they might be. So unless you enjoy being David fighting Goliath, it's easier to find another subgroup closer to your needs than to change the nature of your present group.

32. TRANSMITTING EFFECTIVELY

Although communicating is seldom recognized as a part of behavior, it might well be the most important part. All your transmission occurs through your behavior. All your behavior is part of your transmission.

You transmit verbally in what you say and nonverbally in what you do, including the way you deliver your verbal message. You also communicate nonverbally in the choices you make and in being who you are. Everything you do and say tells others something about you.

This chapter will describe effective transmitting. Reception will be covered in the next chapter. For convenience, all transmitting will be referred to as "saying," even though some consists of "doing" or a combination of saying and doing.

Preparing For Transmitting

Is this message necessary? - Be sure your message your message is necessary. Unnecessary messages do no good and might lose some social approval. A person who talks too much is avoided for wasting other people's time. Also, as most people don't listen carefully to someone who talks too much, they might not hear you when you do have something important to say.

Control Your Emotions - If possible, delay your transmissions when you're feeling strong emotions, good or bad. When you're angry or feeling bad, you might say something you'll be sorry for later. When you're feeling very good, you might exaggerate or make promises you can't keep. Unless it can't be helped, it's better to put off your transmission until your feelings are back to normal.

Intended receivers - Tailor your transmission for ease of reception by your intended receiver(s). Your receiver might be a single person in a private conversation, an audience for your talk, or the readers of your newspaper column. A message suitable for a technical society will not be suitable for a lay audience and vice versa.

Give some thought to how "difficult" receivers might interpret your message. Many people, notably parents and bosses, make it difficult for you to communicate with them. Some receivers manage to make a joke of everything. Others over-react emotionally even to routine messages. Still others twist what you say or write beyond belief. When you must transmit an important message to difficult receivers, you need to find a way to get your message through these obstacles with the least misinterpretation.

As people of different ages, genders, and occupations interpret some words and terms differently, define unusual words or terms early in your message.

Try to prevent reception by unintended receivers. Transmit your verbal communications so that they are not overheard. Stamping "confidential" on your written messages doesn't mean they will stay that way. Your love letters that are precious now might someday be a source of amusement to others and an embarrassment to you. Keep in mind that the secret memos in the tobacco industry files ignited a disaster when they became public.

Selecting the level of directness or vagueness to be used will usually be the most difficult decision in your transmission. Too much directness offends some receivers. Too much vagueness interferes with accuracy. Adjust the balance to suit each audience.

Keep your message simple - A message should be in the simplest form that will achieve your objectives. A less accurate message that is understood is better than a more complex one that is garbled or misinterpreted. In conversations, keep each transmission short, usually less than a minute at a time.

Select your vehicle - Select the vehicle that best suits all the conditions in your communication. Keep in mind that the vehicle becomes part of your message. A criticism delivered verbally in person is quite different from the same information delivered in public or in a letter. A receiver gets upset when he or she cannot defend against criticism immediately.

Try to deliver important messages in person. If that's not possible, telephone. Transmit it in writing only when you want to reach receivers in many locations or you need a written record. No doubt the printer omitted the word "not" from those little pink pads that say, "If it's important, put it in writing." If it's important, handle it in person. Otherwise you can't be sure the receiver has interpreted your written message correctly.

Sometimes you can get your message across by transmitting it as a "rider." This term refers to the practice in the Congress of attaching an item that might otherwise be rejected to an important bill that is likely to be accepted. It's a useful tool in some personal transmissions as well.

Timing - Select the best time to send your message. When is it most likely to be received and interpreted correctly? Of course you wouldn't try to transmit verbally when there is external interference, such as noise or someone else is talking to the receiver. Interference within the receiver's brain is less obvious but just as serious an obstacle. It's better to delay transmission when the receiver is busy with something more important or when you know he has just received a message that causes a strong emotional reaction. A good time to transmit your message is when the receiver is feeling good, but not out of control, such as just after lunch or dinner.

Any message that might reflect badly on the receiver should be delivered in private. Positive messages, such as compliments, gain force when delivered in public or indirectly through another person.

Mixed messages - Be sure that your message does not attract and repel at the same time; that is, that it is not a "mixed message." An example is making a negative comment about someone as you give him or her a gift.

Transmitting when there's a problem or emergency - Occasionally you will be part of a group that is faced with a problem or emergency. Most people don't try to solve the problem. Instead, they let off a stream of static to try to show that they're not to blame for it. When you find yourself in these situations, control both your emotions and your actions. Don't do anything, even nonverbally, that will make the situation worse. Then think about how to make it better.

Nonverbal stimuli - If you aren't sure the nonverbal stimuli you intend to include in your verbal message will be interpreted correctly, convert them to verbal. Try to keep unintended nonverbal stimuli to a minimum. They always tell something about you without earning you anything in exchange.

And remember that you are always part of your message.

Delivering Your Message

Getting and holding attention - You cannot transmit your message correctly if you can't get and hold the receiver's attention. You can get attention by starting your message with a "hook" and coming back to it whenever you suspect that you are losing his or her attention. A good hook is any stimulus that affects the receiver's physical well being or his social acceptance, such as improving his health or decreasing his income. However, the hook should not provoke an emotional response so strong that it interferes with the intellectual part of your message.

A short period of small talk might be needed to establish rapport. After that, transmit only information that has a significant effect on the receiver. Otherwise, he or she might seem to be listening politely but won't be hearing you. Or worse, the receiver might feel trapped and unable to get away politely. Don't talk about yourself and your interests unless they affect the receiver in some way. In short, don't bore him, which really means that you should only send stimuli that trigger some benefit in the receiver. You can sometimes hold the receiver's attention by getting him to participate, as by asking him questions. This is especially helpful in long transmissions.

Forming the stimuli - It's essential to form all the stimuli needed to convey your message correctly. Speak clearly, write legibly, and make all gestures distinctly.

Include all information the receiver needs to understand your message correctly. Don't cut verbal corners.

Where possible, trigger a thought in the receiver's brain that prepares him for your message. ("You know downtown Philadelphia, don't you? Well, I was walking along Market Street when...")

Transmitting the message

- Don't try to transmit when your stimuli will be distorted by noise or other interference.
- Don't talk faster than the receiver's brain can handle the reception.
- Don't continue after his brain has become tired. It's usually better to pause temporarily or delay the rest of your transmission to a later time.
- Try to be aware of any unintended nonverbal signals you are sending.
- Either eliminate them or explain verbally what you mean by them. For example, if you realize that you might seem to be impatient, explain that you are rushed for time.

- Alert the receivers when you change the subject in mid-stream. Otherwise they will continue to interpret your stimuli in keeping with the earlier subject.
- Block out possible misinterpretations of stimuli whose meanings are not precise ("When I say "small," I mean less than an inch.").
- Be sure the content of your message does not provoke an unintended emotional response that interferes with the receiver's interpretation of your intellectual message. If you notice that you are causing a strong emotional response, stop and discuss it before you continue with your message.
- Encourage the receiver to ask questions whenever he's not sure that he understands your message.

The Content of Your Message

General attitude - Be reasonably optimistic in your transmissions, but not polyannish. Most people like those who support their group's objectives, values, and leadership. If you must disagree with anything about the group, do it carefully and constructively.

Getting credit for your contributions - You want to get full credit for your contributions to the group without making others look bad.

Don't put others on the defensive by telling them about your achievements unless you're asked or it's necessary to defend yourself. If you must describe them, do it simply and accurately with quiet confidence.

- Don't exaggerate too much and never boast.
- Don't claim contributions you didn't make.
- Don't mistake pseudo-achievements for real ones.
- Never take credit for the achievements of others.

Establishing positive rapport

- Be respectful of everyone, regardless of his or her social status.
- Show acceptance of others by greetings, compliments, small talk, including them in activities, accepting their invitations, etc. Say nice things about them to others.
- Be willing to help others but only if they ask you to. This includes making suggestions, recommendations, or even "helping them to think things through."
- Don't give advice they don't ask as it might make them feel inferior.
- Avoid behavior that offends others

- Don't indicate, directly or indirectly, that anyone is inferior, incompetent, or incompatible with other members of the group.
- Don't diminish anyone by belittling, insulting, being sarcastic with, or making fun of him or her. Be careful of attempts at humor that may offend others and never try to diminish anyone through wit.
- Don't compare people unfavorably with others, especially yourself.
- Never disclose anyone's weakness, errors, or secrets. To avoid doing this unintentionally, avoid subject areas in which they might be sensitive.
- Don't ask questions that might be misinterpreted as prying.
- If you need to criticize someone, limit it to the specific failing so that it doesn't become broadly personal. Do it in private and try to offset it with some sign of acceptance.
- If you have to do something that might offend someone, minimize the hurt by giving your reasons for doing it. Offset any unavoidable hurt with positive comments or actions.
- Don't put other people "on the spot," as by asking, "How do you like my new auto?"
- Don't bait others into doing things that are not for their own benefit and don't let them do this to you.
- Don't place unreasonable expectations on anyone, including yourself, and especially not on your mate and your children.
- When you're wrong, admit it immediately or explain why it couldn't be helped.
- Never blame others for your mistakes.

Defending yourself - You can prevent some attacks by being ready, willing, and able to defend yourself. Nevertheless, some attacks are unavoidable.

There are three things you can do reduce them:

- You can establish a positive image so that receivers tend to excuse your minor errors.
- You can try to counterattack in a way that ends the dispute in about a draw so that a reasonable opponent will not continue his attack.

- If that doesn't work, try to defeat your attacker so decisively that he won't attack you again. Although this will cost you some social approval, it is better than having a wounded opponent waiting for his opportunity to get back at you.

Did He Get It Right?

Check to be sure the receiver has interpreted your message correctly. This isn't always easy. You can ask a child, "What did I say?" but your boss might not appreciate the question. Nevertheless, in every important message, you need to get this answer in some way or other.

A word-for-word repetition of your message isn't good enough. This shows only that the stimuli were received. You also need to know that they were interpreted properly. Considering how difficult it is to communicate completely and correctly, never omit this final step in transmitting important messages.

33. EFFECTIVE RECEPTION

Receiving messages is not a passive activity. You need to work with the transmitter to receive his message completely and correctly, even when the circumstances make this hard to do. Think of yourself as a wide receiver in football, determined to catch a pass from the quarterback even when he doesn't throw the football quite right and the other team is trying to block your reception.

Encourage Transmission

Be available for reception - No one can transfer a message to you if you refuse to receive it. Without being aware that this is their objective, many people find ways to reduce reception to prevent others from uncovering their shortcomings or errors. However, unless you really do have something to hide, reducing reception to avoid loss of social approval is usually counter-productive. As reception avoidance is an unfair transaction, it always loses some social approval. Being willing to communicate will almost always improve your status more than avoiding it.

Be easy to talk to - Some people are easy to talk to. Others develop personality traits that discourage others from communicating with them unless it's absolutely necessary. Of course you are not obliged to listen patiently to a bore, but you can encourage normal transmitters by listening carefully, asking for more information, or showing other signs of acceptance.

Receiving the message - In conversations with friends and acquaintances, it is the transmitter's responsibility to gain and hold your attention. Nevertheless, don't interfere with the transmitter by:

- Talking too much
- Interrupting unnecessarily
- Shifting the subject, especially with witticisms
- Walking out, cutting him off, or refusing to listen further

In some situations, you are obliged to listen carefully, whether or not you want to, as in a college lecture, a court of law, or a religious ceremony. You can improve reception by:

- Detecting all the stimuli, both verbal and nonverbal, being transmitted.
- Missing a single nonverbal stimulus can change the message.
- Being alert for nonverbal stimuli, such as smiles or frowns.
- Blocking out anything that might distract you, such as local noises or thinking of other subjects
- When possible, asking for retransmission of any signals you're not sure you received correctly.

The Effect of the Transmittor

The transmittor is always part of his or her message. Some transmitters trigger a strong emotional response, positive or negative, in a receiver. This emotional message influences the interpretation of the intellectual part of the message. As a result, different receivers interpret the same intellectual message from the same transmittor differently.

A similar effect occurs when an item early in the message gets you upset or elated. As with the effect of the transmittor, try to suppress your emotional response until you receive the entire message. Then try to keep your emotions out of your interpretation of the intellectual part of the message.

You sometimes receive a new message while you are still reacting emotionally to an earlier one. You usually won't detect all the stimuli about an investment when you have just learned your child has been hurt. And even if you do get all the stimuli transmitted, your present emotions, good or bad, will effect how you interpret them. If you can't put off reception of the new message, try to store it for interpretation after you have calmed down.

Interpreting The Message

Keep in mind that you do not receive the transmittor's thoughts intact. All you get is some set of stimuli. These stimuli trigger information recorded in your brain. There are several factors that might cause you to interpret the message differently from the transmittor's intention:

- You might not have detected all the stimuli transmitted.
- You may have detected some of them incorrectly.

- You might have added in some that were not part of his message i.e., "extraneous" stimuli).
- You might assign different meanings to some stimuli than the transmitter did.

As a result, your interpretation of the stimuli might be quite different from the meaning intended by the transmitter. To reduce misinterpretation:

- Keep asking yourself, "What is he really trying to tell me?"
- Don't jump to a conclusion based on the early part of your reception; wait until you have received the entire message before you attempt to interpret it.
- Don't pretend you understand all the items in the message if you don't know them. Ask the transmitter for his meaning of any words or ideas you're not sure of.
- Don't add extraneous items to the message, such as humor, pessimism, double entendres, etc.
- Allow the transmitter to check if you have interpreted his message correctly. If he fails to do so, ask him to check your interpretation.

Incomplete Transmission

Even when you have received the entire message transmitted and interpreted it as well as anyone could, your reception might still be incomplete because the transmitter has not transmitted his thought completely. For example, your boss is angry with you because you spent two weeks on a task he assigned by memo. However, the memo neglected to mention that all he wanted was a "quick and dirty" analysis. One of the great advantages of face-to-face transmission over one-way messages is that it permits the receiver to fill the gaps in a message by questions and answers.

More difficult to deal with is transmission that is purposely incomplete. Especially in some cultures, the transmitter sometimes sends a vague message to reduce the chances of hurting feelings, either yours or his.

Sometimes the true message, despite being incomplete, is easy to grasp. For example, an acquaintance might tell you in detail how attractive he thinks your sister is in the expectation you'll pass his comments on to her. More often the transmitter is unwilling to say something directly for fear that a refusal will diminish his approval. Nevertheless, he might hint at his financial problems in the hope that you'll offer to help without being asked to do so directly.

Even when you think you know the true meaning of a message, it's best not to act on it without confirmation. You can probe for the real message with "What I'm hearing is B. Is this right?" or "I know you don't want to hurt my feelings, but I really need to know if you're saying that I made a mistake by...."

When in doubt about an ambiguous message that you can't check immediately, try to get more information before you come to a conclusion.

Thinking Critically

The specific message you receive from a transmitter is usually only part of a broader message he is trying to convey, intentionally or unintentionally. This broader message is usually some aspect of communicating in a hierarchy to obtain social approval. Is he trying to impress you to raise your opinion of his status? Is he trying to diminish you? Is he hoping you will help him in some way?

Examine the content of the message. Receiving it correctly doesn't necessarily mean that information it contains is correct. Intentionally or unintentionally, the transmitter might have sent you incorrect information. You need to check the validity of the message, to the extent practical, before you accept or reject it.

Of course, you can't stop to check the correctness of all new information you receive. Nevertheless, you don't want to make a serious mistake because your new information isn't correct. And you especially don't want to do so when you're being misinformed purposely. So put a tag that says, "Hold," on all important new information. This way you won't accept it as correct until you can check it out.

Be suspicious of any message that leads you to do something that benefits the transmitter, even indirectly, as when he will earn a commission, get your vote, or induce you to do something for him. Sometimes the action called for really is for your benefit as well as his, but check to be sure you're not being manipulated.

Be especially suspicious of any message that urges you to do something immediately. Double that suspicion when it stirs you up so much that you aren't thinking clearly. You're usually better off if the "bargain" or "once-in-a-lifetime investment" isn't available tomorrow.

Sherlock Holmes once solved a case because he noticed that a dog didn't bark. The absence of a message can itself be a nonverbal message. Why didn't your boss say "Good morning?" when you greeted him? Why is your wife wearing her new dress tonight? In important decisions, try to consider what could have been done or said, but wasn't. For example, you're thinking of buying a house. The realtor talks about the taxes, the neighbors, and even the local politicians. So why didn't he mention the local schools? Better check them out.

Also, be sure you aren't receiving information that wasn't in the message transmitted. It's usually introduced by your expectations. If you expect the used-car salesman to be dishonest, you won't believe what he says even before opens his mouth. Or you might realize that you frequently give your interpretations a twist, perhaps by adding sexual meanings. Be sure all the information in your interpretation is really in the message and not in your reception pattern.

Finally, examine all your interpretations for reasonableness. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is.

These generalities are reduced to specific points in the checklist that concludes this book. Hope you enjoyed it!