Communication Skills Workshop

DP 008 - Developmental Intervention

By

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Communications Skills Workshop  DP 008
by Donna S. Simonds

Distributed by the Clearinghouse at The University of Texas at Austin

SUMMARY
This one-day workshop introduces TA concepts and applies them in experiential exercises: Win/Lose, Fair Fighting, Listening for Feelings. The client-centered approach (specifically encoding and decoding) is introduced, followed by more exercises, a relaxation sequence, and a conflict fantasy. Assertive theory is illustrated through role play of a conflict situation.

GOALS: To assimilate a conceptual framework for interpersonal communication: to increase understanding of and skills in listening and responding

TARGET: Adults of restively normal emotional adjustment, with some communication skills and a tolerance for introspection

STAFF: Co-leaders with background in TA, client centered therapy, self-assertion theory, and structured group leadership

LENGTH: 8 hours (including lunch)

SIZE: 16 - 20

OTHER: Large, comfortable room (carpet, chairs, pillows, no desks) and a chalkboard
PREPARATION

Leaders should read and become familiar with the following materials:

• Harris, Thomas. *I'm O.K, You're O.K.* New York: Avon, 1973


• Rogers, Carl. *Client Centered Therapy*. (no publication data available.) There are also audiotapes to accompany this book; however, the Clearinghouse does not have copies of these.

OVERVIEW

Part I: Introduction of format, underlying theory. Introduction of leaders and participants. Members will interview and introduce each other; staff will introduce each other. Process. Should allow for the participants to get to know each other and for the staff to begin to pinpoint "hidden agendas." Processing leads into distinction between listening and responding skills.

Part II: Introduction of didactic material. Basic Transactional Analysis concepts presented. Intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics illustrated via T.A. diagrams. (Chalkboard required.)


Part IV: Listening skills exercise. Listening-for-feelings explained. Participants break into groups of 7 or 8, practice identifying feelings. Process. Discuss non-verbal listening skills.

Lunch

Part V: Didactic presentation on encoding/decoding (i.e., Tom Gordon's explanation). Decoding discussed in T.A. terms and related to previous listening exercises. Play Client-Centered therapy tape (or trainers can model on-going listening skills). Process.

Part VI: Listening/Sharing/Observing exercise. Participants are given instructions for three roles. Group is broken up into triads; each person takes each of the three roles in three successive "role-plays." Process.

Part VII: Guided Fantasy. Warm-up exercises.

Part VIII: Didactic presentation on assertiveness. Basic theory presented and related to T.A. Specific techniques described and illustrated. Feedback model presented. Group practices skills.

Part IX: Trainers model use of alternating listening and responding skills. Process.

Part I: 40 minutes

1. Introduction

Begin by introducing yourselves (names only, at this point) and briefly describing the format: a mixture of didactic and experiential components, with a focus on listening and responding skills. Explain that communicating is antithetical to proving that one is "right"; being able to understand ourselves and the other person must become more important than adopting a win/lose position.

Emphasize that winning is often our motive in interpersonal exchanges, especially in conflict. What is being taught in this workshop requires, then, a willingness to give up an almost instinctive self-righteousness, and to adopt instead a more flexible attitude.

2. Dyads: Choosing partners

Ask participants to break into dyads and interview each other so that they can later introduce their partners. Explain that the procedure is that one is interviewer and the other is interviewee for the first 3 to 4 minutes. Then they are to switch roles, at a signal from the trainers. They are to keep the roles clearly separate, even if that seems somewhat awkward. Ask them to find out, among other things, what their partner's reason was for choosing to participate in this workshop.

Do not provide the structure for them to decide how to choose partners. As soon as everyone is matched up (if an odd number of participants, one of the trainers should be a partner), give them a few seconds for deciding who will first be interviewed. Allow 3 to 4 minutes for the interview, then ask them to switch roles. Stop them after 3 to 4 more minutes. Trainers introduce each other, and then everyone in the workshop is introduced by their partner (about 1 minute per person.) Trainers should pay special attention to members' reasons for taking the workshop, so they can make later examples relevant.

Process, asking such questions as:

1. Think back to when you were asked to pair up. Were you the "chooser" or the "choosee?" Why? How might this relate to your overall styles of relating and communicating?
2. Was it easier for you to be the interviewer or the interviewee? Why? In which situation did you feel more in control? (Responses will probably vary, which allows trainers to note that one can experience a sense of power in either the listener or the responder role.)

3. How did it feel to be introduced to the group? Does anyone want to amend their introduction? How did it feel to introduce your partner? Any anxiety? What kind? (e.g., stage fright, fear of misrepresenting, etc.)
Part II: 30 minutes

Note: If not familiar with Transactional Analysis, read Thomas Harris' *I’m O.K., You’re O.K.*, Chapters 2 through 5.

Explain, in order, the basic ego states of Child, Parent, and Adult. Give examples, as you talk, of statements and attitudes typical of each ego state. Then explain that internal (intrapersonal) conflicts can often be quickly identified as Parent–Child conflicts ("I should" vs. "I want"). Ask participants for examples of similar struggles. Then show how many interpersonal transactions can be diagrammed,

![Diagram](image)

Explain that much communication gets messed up because our Parent or Child gets "hooked," and our Adult can no longer intervene. In T.A. terms, then, much communication can be enhanced by learning to get unhooked and to use our Adult more.

Illustrate presentation by using different examples, and diagramming them on blackboard.

Especially give examples of (1) parent to child/ adult to adult and (2) adult to adult/child to parent:

![Diagram](image)

Ask frequently for questions or comments. It’s helpful to give amusing, rather extreme, examples.
Part III: 45 minutes

1. Introduction

Explain that the area often understated in communication is *listening*. It is important for most of us to feel heard and understood by those close to us, especially in conflict, but most of us have had little training in listening, and may even be aware of the risks involved (i.e., you allow another to affect you, perhaps change you).

Explain that listening for content is the easiest thing to do, although by no means is it simple.

2. Arguments in Pairs

Ask the pairs to choose a topic about which they can argue. Have some current campus or hot political issues handy as suggestions (e.g., abortion, nuclear power, etc.) Tell everyone it is not important that they believe what they are arguing about—the goal is simply to disagree. Encourage everyone to use the dirty tricks we all know how to use in arguments—this is a chance to fight dirty with no guilt!

Trainers model a free-for-all win/lose argument. Pull no punches—raise your voices, interrupt, distort, use sarcasm, etc. (but no physical violence). Then ask the pairs to "fight"—each of them is to try to intimidate the other into giving up. Allow 2 to 3 minutes. Stop them.

Process regarding the dirty tricks (i.e., Communication Roadblocks) that were used, or that they know of, but didn’t use. Write them on board. List should include:

- Interrupting.
- Distorting.
- Use of sarcasm, name calling, insinuations.
- Ultimatums.
- Psychoanalyzing (interpreting).
- Judgments, criticism.
- Going off on tangents (e.g., past history).
• Indirect confrontation (i.e., "hit and runs"—a criticism buried in other material, perhaps flattery.)

Then explain Bach's "fair fighting" technique (also called role reversal), where each person must paraphrase—**to the opponent's satisfaction**—what the opponent just said, **before** they can rebut.

Trainers model the technique, using same topic as previously argued about. Then the pairs try. Allow about 4 minutes for this exercise.

3. Process the experience:

   • What was the difference in climate in the two arguments?
   • Did anyone get closer to resolution using the second technique?
   • Other reactions?

Explain that listening-for-content is primarily a transaction between adults, hence is usually less emotionally charged. Here is the graphic representation:

```
  P   P
 /   /
 A ← A
  C   C
```

Break for 10 minutes.
Part IV: 45 minutes

1. Thinking Back

Ask participants to think back to a time in their life when they were very upset about something—perhaps some loss, or deep frustration. Wait 30 to 45 seconds–let them get back into it.

Then ask everyone to imagine talking to someone at that time, someone they really trusted, about what was bothering them. What would they have wanted as a response? (Be patient and wait for answers—this is hard for them.) Hopefully, a common theme will be that they needed to feel understood.

Explain that advice and reassurance are often, with the best of intentions, still destructive, in that they tend to minimize one’s feelings and the depth of the problem. Often, what is needed instead, is to be heard and understood in an empathic way. Emphasize that this is not a "last resort" to do for someone; it's a big thing.

2. Last Week

Tell them that the next exercise will focus on one way to empathize–to listen for feelings. Ask everyone to think of an incident that happened in the last week about which they had moderately strong feelings—happy, sad, angry, excited, etc. Tell them to choose something that they will be comfortable sharing: This is not the time for promiscuous self-disclosure.

Give them 30 to 45 seconds, then ask if everyone has an incident.

Then explain that they will shortly be breaking up into circles of 7 or 8, and will tell their incidents as naturally as possible (i.e., with facial expressions, appropriate tone of voice, etc.), except that they are not to say specifically how they felt. Others will try to guess the feeling(s).

One of the trainers then models—tells incident in a few sentences, with appropriate affect. Let participants guess at the feeling. After guesses are over, trainer may reveal how accurate they were.

Break participants into groups of 7 or 8, (or divide size of group into three sub-groups).
Ask everyone to sit on the floor, in fairly tight circles, so they can hear well. One person is to begin, tell the story in a few sentences (keep them brief) and then others go around circle and guess in a word or a phrase what the feeling(s) were. Emphasize that they are not to problem solve, or tell how they would have felt or to ask questions—their goal is to communicate understanding. After everyone has guessed, the story-teller may divulge his/her "real" feeling. Encourage listeners to try for just the right word to capture the feeling. After the first person is finished, continue the process around circle until everyone has a turn.

Trainers are to move around the group, making sure directions are followed. (It's easy for participants to slip into giving advice, or "explaining" why they guessed the way they did.)

4. Process the experience in large group:

- How did it feel to be the story-teller? The listener? The guesser?
- Did anyone get mad because the people guessed wrong? (They almost never do—which provides an opening for the trainers to emphasize that it's O.K. to "fail" when guessing.)
- What were the temptations? (e.g., give advice, steal the spotlight, etc.)
- What non-verbal cues indicated that people were listening?

Break for lunch—1 Hour
Part V: 20 minutes

Note: If not familiar with client-centered approach, read Thomas Gordon's *Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T)*, Chapter 3, and Carl Rogers' *Client-Centered Therapy*, Chapters 1 through 4.

1. Encoding/Decoding

Explain the communication process in Gordon’s terms of encoding/decoding, emphasizing that our responsibilities in relationships are to encode ourselves accurately and in a way that the other person will most likely interpret correctly, and to decode others’ remarks as accurately as possible, trying to avoid getting our Child or Parent "hooked." (Explain that the encoding part will be dealt with after the break.) The decoding (listening skills) can be an on-going process to facilitate other's growth.

At this point, trainers may either model this approach, in a 4- to 5-minute role-play, or if an appropriate audiotape is available, may play a selected portion of a client-centered-therapy session. If a Rogers' tape is chosen, select a part where he is most active (perhaps the middle part of the session with Mike). Process.

2. Processing

Participants will likely have varied reactions. The questions they eventually focus on are "Did the person move? Did the feelings change and flow, or remain static? Was self-exploration encouraged?" There may be considerable resistance to this approach. If so, do not try too hard to persuade participants of its merits. Instead, ask them to put their doubts on hold for about an hour, and try the process to see what it's like.
Part VI: 50 minutes

1. Role-Play

Ask the participants to break up into triads. Explain that each will be, in turn, the sharer, listener, and observer. Their instructions for each role are:

- **Sharer:** Think of an area in your life that is of some concern for you and which you would be comfortable talking about in this situation. Plan on devoting 7 to 10 minutes exploring it. Feel free to not get into "heavier" things than you want to. In other words, this experience is for you; you’re in charge.

- **Listener:** Try to be "present" to the sharer. Your goal is not to judge, or to offer advice, or to talk about yourself. Your task is to try to understand, in some depth, the feelings and conflicts in the sharer. You may offer your perceptions of what seems to be going on, but do so in a tentative, empathic, non-judgmental way. Try not to distance yourself. Ask questions only to help the sharer clarify: do not ask them just because you’re curious, or want to sneak in advice.

- **Observer:** Observe the process of the interaction by focusing on such questions as: (1) How is the listener facilitating, or hindering, self exploration? (2) Is the listener able to stay "in role?" (3) Does the flow of the interaction proceed smoothly, or do some of the listener’s interventions cause it to either stop abruptly, or change the tenor of it markedly? Do not get caught up in the content and then begin thinking about what you want to say to the sharer. Your job is to stay objective, so that you can offer feedback to the listener afterward.

After 7 to 10 minutes of exchange, the trainers interrupt sharer/listener and ask triads to process what that was like. Ask sharer and listener to debrief first with each other; then observer gives his/her perceptions. After about 5 minutes of processing, ask participants to switch roles and begin again.
2. Processing

When all participants have had a chance to try each role, stop and process. Especially focus on how they may have reacted differently to their different roles. (For example, some will have been frustrated being observer, others will have enjoyed it.)

Break–15 minutes
Part VII: 10 minutes

1. Relaxation
By now, the group will be getting tired and feeling overloaded. Ask them to stretch out and relax on the floor. Take them through a 1- to 2-minute relaxation sequence.

2. Conflict visualization
Then ask them to think of a conflict situation they have had trouble dealing with, or are apprehensive about. This situation should be a time when they feel "one-down", somewhat helpless, and probably resentful. Ask them to visualize the other person's face, and imagine how they're afraid the scene might go if a conflict started. Give them 1 to 2 minutes of silence. Then tell them to remember the scene, but come back to the present and sit up.

Have them stand, stretch, and move around: try to re-energize themselves.
Part VIII: 30 minutes

Note: If not familiar with assertive theory and techniques read Manuel Smith's *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*.

1. Aggressive, Assertive & Unassertive Responses

Present the basic theory of aggressive, assertive, and unassertive (passive and manipulative) responses. Give examples of each response to several situations. (For example, student calls home to tell parents that (s)he won't be home for Christmas; parent reacts in three potential ways. Or someone cuts in line outside of a movie theater and a bystander objects.)

Emphasize that assertive responses are usually from the Adult, not Parent or Child. The goal is for clear encoding of feelings and wishes, rather than resorting to controlling and game-playing.


Describe on chalkboard Serial Assertion (Broken Record), Negative Inquiry, Empathic Preface, Self-disclosure, and Workable Compromise.

Also, talk about Time Out—where one person asks for a period of time to rethink the situation and then gets back to the other person.

Give lots of examples of each technique. Also talk about Gordon's feedback model—I-statements—adding that it is appropriate (Gordon, notwithstanding) to tell someone what you want or need from them. Make up situations, and let participants field them with different techniques.
Part IX: 10 minutes

1. Introduction

Emphasize that the real test is to combine listening and assertive responding skills. The usual mistake people make is to listen only once, and then to get defensive and dogmatic. So, to "switch gears" from one skill to another is very tricky, but crucial to good communication.

2. Skill Modeling

Trainers model skills in a role-play situation (For example: a working wife trying to get a traditional husband to do more housework). Only one trainer will use the skills. The other is to be somewhat defensive, but realistic.

It is important that this modeling combine both listening and responding skills. Process. Try not to be too defensive if some participants criticize the trainer's style.
Part X: 30 minutes

1. Role-Play

Ask participants to break back into dyads, and role-play the scene they fantasized about in Part VII (or another scene, if they prefer). They are to take turns, with one partner attempting the skills first, and telling the other partner what role to play, and how to play it.

Then they process, and at the trainer's signal, switch to the other partner's fantasy situation and role-play that. Emphasize that their goal is to use both sets of skills, and not to just get their way.

2. Process the Role Play

There will probably be a number of questions difficult to answer ("What if...?"). Acknowledge that some people are easier to communicate with than others, and we can only do our half—we can't communicate for them, if they choose to opt out.

3. Evaluation

Ask for general reactions to the workshop. Remind them of any available local resources (e.g., assertive workshops, etc.) for increasing their skills.

If desired, hand out evaluation form, or wait 3 to 4 months and mail them a questionnaire asking for their "long-term" reactions.