

Interpersonal Skills in Business Communication: Basic Principles

Thirty years ago, a businessperson was generally hired on the basis of technical skills. Since then, the world's economy has moved toward service-oriented, information-focused businesses that are increasingly organized in teams. Now, *Fortune* 500 companies name strong interpersonal skills as the most important criteria for success in management positions.

Interpersonal skills are a set of skills that people use when interacting and communicating with one another. These skills include abilities to build trust and rapport with others, empathize with co workers, listen actively, collaborate, handle difficult conversations, influence people, and make effective decisions, among others. Interpersonal skills show up in countless business interactions, from public speaking, group projects and team presentations to professional writing (e-mails, contracts etc.).

Bob Dignen, author of *Communicating across Cultures*, states that as language trainers, we often fall into the trap of offering fixed phrases and language points, and students might initially feel that their needs are linguistic. We tell our learners that they should use *'I'm afraid I don't quite agree'* and *'I agree with you up to a point but...'* when disagreeing, and teach them the conditionals in the name of helping them become better negotiators (*'I'll give you a 10% discount if you take 500 pieces'*). But a phrase or sentence could have so many interpretations, inherently dependent on the different contexts and interlocutors involved, that it is perhaps more useful for the learner to look at their underlying communication strategies.