
Managing PhD students: interpersonal and communication skills

PID_00245427

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Recommended minimum time required: 0.5 hours



Index

Introduction.....	5
1. Active listening.....	7
2. How to ask questions?.....	9
3. Assertiveness.....	10
4. It's the 'what', no it's not, it's the 'how'! Techniques.....	13
5. Constructive and motivational feedback within the thesis preparation process.....	16

Introduction

We are social and relational beings by nature. This means that in all areas of our lives we are continually interacting with others. Your growth and your quality of life is going to depend, in part, on how you relate to others, and consequently, knowing how to communicate with others is a key point.

Interpersonal abilities are those behaviours and abilities that come into play the moment you relate with others. As we have seen, they relate to emotional intelligence.

It is important to note:

- The advantage of these types of abilities is that they are learnt and, as a result, you can “unlearn” them to learn to be more useful, relate better with others and have better quality relationships.
- How you behave is going to depend on the context and the relationship that you create with every person, as every relationship that you establish is unique and different.
- Communication is involved in every interpersonal relationship.

Working on your interpersonal skills involves working on social skills and, as a result, working on communication skills.

Working on communication skills involves not only establishing and improving certain abilities but also being aware of such basic things like:

- Always looking the other person in the eye.
- What your facial expression is like (non-verbal communication forms over 90% of communication, so what we think, we reflect).
- Body posture.
- The distance or physical proximity that you use when you are in the presence of different people with whom you have relationships.
- Physical contact.

Reflection

Taking into account these factors, analyse them from the point of view of your supervision of your PhD student.

- Within paralinguistic elements: the tone, latency, volume, speed, clarity, and fluidity with which you speak.

In the following points of this module, we're going to examine the supports that are going to help you to improve your relationships with your PhD student(s) and the people around you.

1. Active listening

Active listening is the ability to **listen**; this is a far cry from hearing as listening means not only hearing what the person is saying, but also what they are communicating (feelings, ideas or thoughts that are not directly expressed).

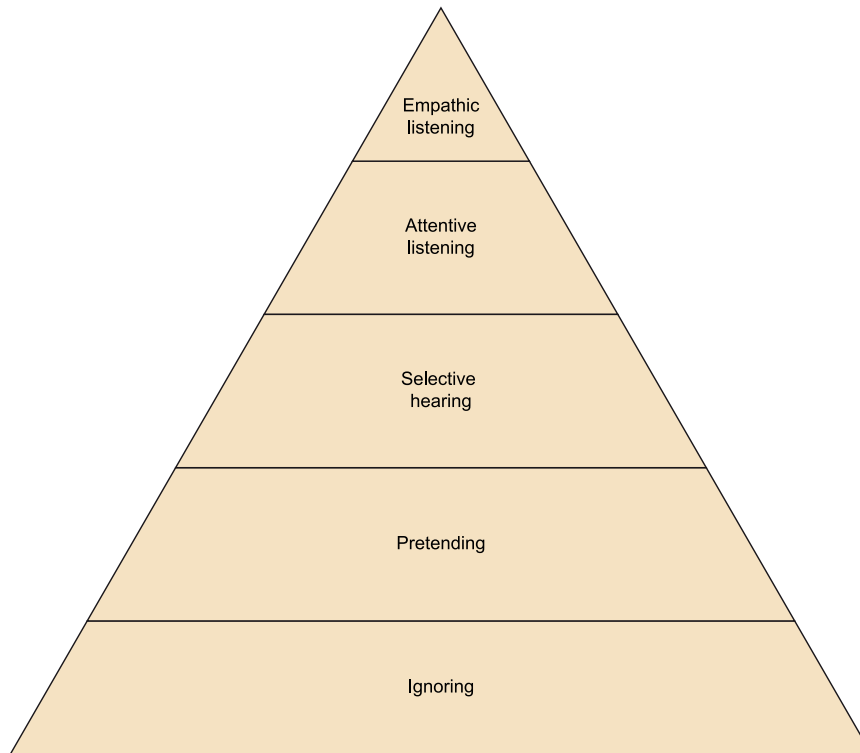
To practise active listening, abilities can be learnt such as, for example:

- Paraphrasing.
- Expressing that you have understood the other person.
- Validating what they are saying.
- Agreeing or disagreeing.
- Not giving advice.
- Not discrediting the other person.
- Not interrupting.
- Not judging.
- Asking them to repeat what you have not understood.
- Summarising to show if you need clarification or seeing if you have understood.
- Tolerating silences.

The paradigm shift is being able to talk about **empathic listening**, based on *understanding*. As Covey (1989, p. 315) states: “the majority of people don’t listen with the intention of understanding, rather to answer”.

This means that you normally interpret the other person’s information, by passing it through your own filter and your own background. This then means that you don’t listen and, consequently, don’t stop to understand what the other person is explaining or suggesting to you.

The same author (p. 316) discusses four levels of listening when someone is talking to you:



From empathic listening, he goes much further because he really tries to understand the paradigm in the context of the interlocutor, in both an emotional and an intellectual sense.

The abilities that you have to put in place to listen empathically include:

- 1) Understand the other person's view and construction of the world.
- 2) Forgetting your own mind map and biography.
- 3) Not interpreting it because whatever you have in your head, it would not be in theirs.
- 4) Focusing not only on their words but on the message behind them.

An example of empathic listening with a PhD student would be: "Let's see if I've understood what you're saying to me. What is really worrying you is that I'm suggesting you have to improve your research".

If you don't forget to check if you've understood, it will be easier to understand each other which creates a climate that fosters a good relationship.

In summary: you can use different skills involved in active listening, as well as adding others to create a climate of empathic listening that is effective and allows you to fully focus on the PhD student, while creating a unique space between both parties.

2. How to ask questions?

“The quality of our lives determines the quality of our thoughts. In turn, the quality of our thoughts determines the quality of our questions, as questions are the machinery and the force that drives thinking”. Dr Linda Elder and Dr Richard Paul (2002)

In the following module, we’re going to look at a whole series of questions to challenge a PhD student as regards the preparation process of their doctoral thesis.

If we recall that communication with our student is basic from interpersonal skills to generating knowledge.

Socrates explained that he challenged the knowledge of his students by asking questions, which fostered dialogue, understanding and the desire to learn and journey further in their quest for knowledge. With that, he encouraged critical thinking.

Recommended reading

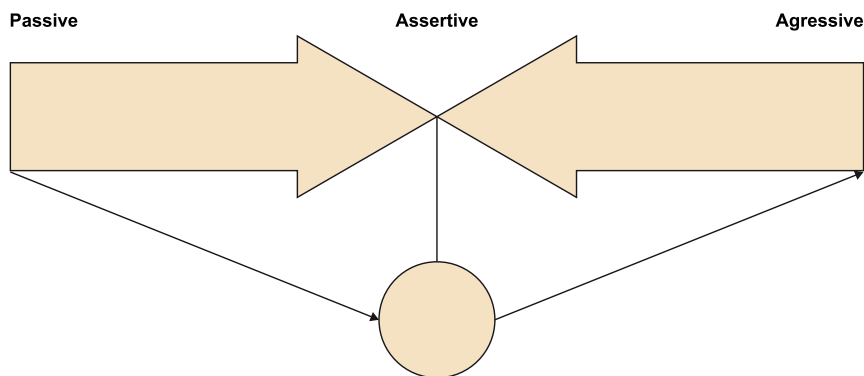
In order to see the different styles and ways of how to ask questions when carrying out research work, the following reading is recommended: L. Elder; R. Paul (2002). *The Art of Asking Essential Questions*. Foundation for Critical Thinking. [Date last accessed: November 2016]. <https://www.criticalthinking.org/resources/PDF/SP-AskingQuestions.pdf>

3. Assertiveness

Assertiveness is a communication style and as a consequence, it acts as a tool that forms the basis on which social skills are learnt.

When we talk about communication styles, we are talking about a whole series of accompanying behaviours of verbal and non-verbal communication - *we never talk about personality*.

If you imagine a continuous line with two ends, one end would have Passive and the other would have Aggressive, while Assertiveness would be in the middle. The idea is that we all tend to exhibit a communication style that could be placed at some point along that continuous line. Obviously, both ends are dysfunctional and you would need to learn skills that would bring you closer to the idea of assertiveness. If you imagine a pendulum that is hanging from assertiveness, you would see a fourth accommodating style which is passive/aggressive. This would be where the pendulum goes to a point (passive), and if it's let go, it swings towards aggressive as a result of an "eruption" where this style isn't manageable.



Various definitions can be found as to what assertiveness is. Among them, Riso (1988) defines **assertive behaviour** as:

“A behaviour that allows a person to sufficiently express (without considering cognitive distortions or anxiety and by combining verbal and non-verbal components in the most effective way possible) opposition (by saying no, expressing disagreement, giving and receiving criticism, defending rights and generally expressing negative feelings) and concern (giving and receiving praise, expressing positive feelings in general) in terms of their interests while respecting the right of others and trying to reach a proposed goal”.

A **passive style** would be defined as when *you are not respecting your rights* and, as such, you don't express everything that you are thinking, feeling or doing which gives others permission to not respect you either. This style usually generates frustration and unfavourable consequences for the individual themselves.

Aggressive behaviour would be defined as when a person thinks, feels or *expresses themselves in an inappropriate, imposing way that violates and infringes on the rights of others.*

The features of each style would be (Caballo, 1993, p. 227):

Passive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person doesn't usually complain to avoid any conflict. • A person behaves in a timid and insecure way. • Non-verbal communication: avoids making eye contact, "false" uncomfortable smiles, slouched posture. • Verbal communication: hesitant, uses words like maybe, I guess, it's just that..., would you mind if..., alright, it's not important, don't worry. • Related to low self-esteem. • "I have no right to ask for help or right of say, I don't want to be wrong, I can't bother people..." <p>Behavioural type: permissive</p>
Assertive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person expresses themselves in a direct and appropriate manner. • Non-verbal communication: direct eye contact, speaks fluently, confident gestures. • Verbal communication: I think, I feel, I want, we can do, what can we do to resolve this? Messages in the first person and positive verbalisations.
Aggressive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person overshadows everyone else's right. Generates resentment. • A person usually makes others feel intimidated. • Non-verbal communication: fixed stare, speaks quickly, intimidating postures. • Verbal communication: do it, if I were you, if you don't do it, you don't know, you should, you're wrong. • Related to low self-esteem. <p>Behavioural type: commanding</p>

An assertive person avoids being manipulated, speaks fluently with clear communication and honesty. They recognise and identify their needs and they put them across, while also respecting and listening to others.

To practise using an assertive style (Castanyer, 1996; Riso 1998; Udaondo, 2014) when focusing it on a PhD student:

- 1) Call the person by their name.
- 2) Express the problem or subject clearly and fully.
- 3) Express the reasons.
- 4) Invite them to give feedback.
- 5) Ask them what they need.

6) Recall the details.

Among the various types of assertive answers are the following:

- 1) Express what is useful and well thought out; reinforcement contributes towards motivation.
- 2) Answer empathically with the use of expressions such as: “I understand that... but it’s that...”; I understand your point of view but put yourself in my place...”
- 3) Gradually present your assertive answer: When your interlocutor pretends not to hear, for example: “please allow me to finish speaking...”, “I’d like to finish what I wanted to say...”
- 4) In cases where the other person’s response was aggressive in an unconscious way, you can:
 - a) Describe what they have done or said without passing judgement.
 - b) Provide an objective description of the effect of what they have said and done.
 - c) Describe your own feelings.
 - d) Express what you are trying to achieve. For example: “When you come back to me every week saying you don’t know where to go with it, I think that you’ve not understood what I proposed and this makes me feel frustrated as I don’t know how to help you. I would prefer it if when you’re not clear about something, you don’t leave here until we’ve been able to find a solution”.

Every answer will need to be accompanied by suitable non-verbal behaviour: posture, use of the space and distance, visual contact, gestures, facial expression, tone and volume of voice.

Reflection

What style do you identify with the most? What aspects could you improve upon so that your communication is more assertive?

4. It's the 'what', not it's not, it's the 'how'! Techniques

As we already know, the important part doesn't lie in the message and in what is being said, but in **how** it's being said. Its impact is delivered by the "packaging" that we give the message, where it may boost or lose all of its weight.

It is important that you are really aware of the fact that you may be a person who expresses yourself in the most assertive way possible, where you may have a flawless communication style, but even then, the other person's reaction is unpredictable.

You can accompany assertiveness with other types of suitable techniques in order to pay a compliment, say no, make a request, express something that annoys you, either handle criticism or methods of "defence" or "attack" at given times (Caballo, 1993, pp. 254-274):

1) Pay a compliment: To bolster them

A research project involves facing many hours of work, doubts, or feelings where it seems like it is progressing and then, all of sudden, the person falls into a dark hole.

For that reason, it is important to reinforce the steps that are being taken by positively and directly speaking about what has already been achieved and expressing it from your own perspective: "I liked your suggestion...".

2) Say no

Sometimes we find it difficult to say no to a request that is made. A whole series of personal beliefs (distortions, module 3) comes into play, and even more so if we take into account the PhD student's circumstances.

In order to say no, you can:

- a) Say no directly, although you may give them a reason.
- b) Ask for a period of time to reflect on what has been requested.
- c) Ask for more information in relation to the request.

3) Make a request

When you make a request, you don't think about the fact that it may be rejected. A request also includes when asking for favours, for help or asking the other person to change something.

To request something:

- a) Be direct.
- b) You don't have to justify yourself but sometimes giving an explanation can help.
- c) You don't have to apologise.
- d) There is a 50% likelihood of the person saying yes as there is of them saying no, so accept it.
- e) Don't take a "no" as something personal.

4) Express something that annoys you

You have the right to express if a certain behaviour or thing annoys you such as, for example, a lack of punctuality or when incomplete work has been submitted when you have a meeting planned to supervise it. If you express that something has annoyed you, the other person may improve their behaviour, and you will stop feeling angry as you've expressed it.

To minimise the other person's reaction, you need to bear in mind:

- a) Analyse if the criticism is worth the hassle.
- b) Be clear, direct and succinct.
- c) Avoid making accusations.
- d) Ask for a specific behavioural change.
- e) Start and end the conversation on a positive note.
- f) Listen to what the other person has to say.

5) Receiving criticism Garner (1981), suggests:

- a) Ask for details and pose specific questions in order to be able to understand what has been raised.
- b) By agreeing with the criticism, this implies:

- You accept that the criticism is either correct or
- you agree with the fact that the other person has a right to express their criticism.

6) Defensive methods These are essentially used when you feel that you are overwhelmed and you want to defend yourself.

a) Broken record: This is used in the event of a request, either in the event of rejecting it or insisting on it. It involves insistently but calmly repeating what you want to express. For example: “Yes, but...” “The thing is that...” “But I’d like...”

b) Assertive agreement: This is used when you recognise that you have made a mistake. For example: “It’s true that we met, I forgot. It doesn’t usually happen to me. I’m sorry”.

c) A short response: This is appropriate in cases either where a mistake may have been made or when you think that you are being attacked. It involves saying yes or no. For example: “Yes, this is true”.

d) Separate subjects: Your interlocutor may present various subjects or jump from one to another. You have to discriminate between them so that you provide a suitable answer.

e) Disarm any anger: When the other person is angry, do something to soothe their anger prior to even talking about the subject. For example: “You seem to be angry...let’s have a coffee”.

f) False surrender: This is used in order to seemingly concede ground to the other person. For example: “It’s possible that you may be right, but...”

7) Attack methods:

a) Reversal: There are times when you ask for something and your interlocutor skirts around the subject and doesn’t clearly give you a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ answer. That is when you ask them to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

b) Repetition: This is used when you believe that they are not listening to you or not understanding you. For example: “What do you think about what I’ve said?”

5. Constructive and motivational feedback within the thesis preparation process

Feedback is a tool that improves the quality in the return process for a PhD student. As a learning strategy, it is unique in order that the student learns and implements mechanisms as regards continuous improvement, both with their competencies and the focus of their task.

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), effective feedback answers three basic questions for the person being supervised:

- 1) How am I going to do it? Feed up
- 2) Am I doing it right? Feed back
- 3) And after this, what's next? Feed forward

This feedback can be focused, based on the model by these authors, on the following levels:

- a) **Task level** It has been understood and carried out correctly. Example: "You need to include authors such as... or studies by..."
- b) **Process level** In order to demonstrate their performance. Example: "Use a conceptual map to link the ideas that demonstrate... so that..."
- c) **Self-regulation level** Example: "Are the questions that you have included in the instrument going to give you the information that you're expecting?"
- d) **Self level** Emotional and motivational. Example: "Have you worked thoroughly on this section?"

Duijnhover, Prins y Stokking (2012) propose that for feedback to be effective, you have to consider:

- The frequency that you offer it.
- The number of times that work is returned.

In this regard, you have to consider that feedback **must be given at the appropriate time** (Jonsonn, 2012) because if time is allowed to pass by, it may be that the issue or competency will become harder to reconnect. For that reason, it is important to agree on supervision meetings and schedule them.

As well as providing it at the appropriate time, you have to think that it should be:

- The most specific and descriptive as possible.
- Direct.
- Applicable.
- Objective: focused on what is under examination.
- Verified: it must be verified so that the student has understood it adequately by producing some data about the information or by asking a question about the returned work.

For Nicol (2010), feedback, which is normally a monologue, must be created through dialogue by:

- Being detailed.
- Being adapted to each student and their needs.
- Encouraging reflection.

To work on this dialogue, the following technique is suggested:

Conversational sandwich technique applied to a research project

This consists of introducing the aspects that need improvement (constructive criticism) by sandwiching them between two pieces of encouraging feedback.

The reason why this type of feedback is used is due to the degree of difficulty that some people have, in this case PhD students, when it comes to the time that they have to face criticism.

With this technique, **people accept feedback better and, in addition, it motivates them to improve the aspects mentioned.**

This technique focuses on academic aspects, competencies, abilities or behaviours, and not about the person themselves.

Phases:

1) Mention the positive aspects by commenting on what you have liked about the work that you have supervised. It means validating the student while working on their motivation at the same time. In turn, this will help how they are going to receive the suggestion to change.

2) Comment on the areas for improvement in the most detailed and specific way possible, and link it to the subject you are supervising (if you are working on the hypothesis, leave other less formal aspects for another time).

3) Emphasise the positive aspects linked to an action, like how they are approaching the work, for example. You could also explain the effect that its application would have on improving the thesis.

4) Open the dialogue to discuss the improvement proposals, by encouraging reflection.

Example

“The initiative that you have shown in working on aspect x is quite appropriate and I think that it may warrant you delving deeper into this issue in order to xxxxxx. However, you have not really addressed this concept and it would be interesting to take a closer look at it. If you could focus on it from this angle xxxxx, it would give your project more depth. I’d like you to research it more in depth as it may open more doors for you to analyse xxxx. Overall, you are doing a good job “_____”... How do you see it fitting in from this perspective? What alternatives did you think about?...”

By offering feedback in this style, it motivates the PhD student as:

- They know what is expected of them.
- They feel supported.
- Their efforts have been valued.
- They may share what is worrying them, as well as their ideas.
- It gives them objectives.

It is a challenge for any teaching professional to provide full, comprehensive, effective feedback that motivates a student. For this reason, it is important to be able to adapt feedback given to each student about their work which is well planned.

To **plan a feedback session**, you can create a template that contains ideas so that you can put into practise all that you want to provide them as feedback, by using basic questions such as:

- The aim of this feedback is...
- We’re going to focus on supervising...
- What aspects need to be reinforced?
- What aspects need to be corrected?
- Concision and specification about the aspects to be corrected.
- How am I going to communicate it effectively?
- How am I going to motivate them?

- Possible difficulties at the time of providing feedback. How am I going to handle them?
- Can I use a tool to give them feedback (rubric, report, outline)?

