

microskills™

microskills™ briefing

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BACKGROUND TO microskills™

Tim Russell originated the microskills™ system of training in interpersonal skills in the early 1980's and since then it has been modified and improved to become what is now a proven, effective way of developing all staff to be able to handle any interaction with any person, be that a manager, peer, subordinate, customer or supplier. microskills™ is used in organisations worldwide to train people as varied in their occupations as doctors, government officers, airline pilots, bank staff and sales assistants.

The system has been found to work successfully across a wide range of employee levels, cultures, countries and continents. It is just as easily learned by people for whom English is a second language.

And it reduces the costs of staff training enormously.

The deceptively simple approach belies the research that has gone into it and, indeed, the material can be learned at different levels of complexity. microskills™ has verbal and non-verbal skills versions.

The applications range from one-to-one to group interactions and microskills™ has been used to train staff to handle other people, in both formal and informal contexts, face to face and on the telephone, through teleconferencing and videoconferencing. Written and email applications are currently being investigated.

Some recent examples of organisations using microskills™ to train their staff include:

- managing staff (Pratt & Whitney)
- leadership (DHL Worldwide)
- customer handling (Blockbuster Video)
- handling passengers (Singapore Airlines)
- coaching (Australian Government Solicitor)
- supporting staff (Virgin Trains)
- call centre work (DBS Bank)
- team building (DCITA)
- selling skills (Panasonic)

Some interpersonal skills training focuses on attitudes more than behaviour, trying to persuade staff to act differently and showing what happens when things go wrong.

Some training helps people to see why they might have difficulties, by analysing clashes in values and perceptions.

Other training gives guidelines on what to do in different situations.

microskills™ is only about how to handle people successfully.

microskills™ research has, however, linked the skills of how to deal with people to various personality and psychological theories and instruments that show why people behave as they do. It can, therefore, be used to complement training using, among many others, Myers Briggs Type Indicators (MBTI), Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI), LIFO, LSQ, LSI, OPQ, 16PF, Firo B and PAPI. It can be integrated with Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP).

It has also been matched to many models of leadership and motivation to give the skills of how to lead people. Such models include Situational Leadership, Maslow, Hunt, Blake, Reddin, Adair, Tannenbaum and Schmidt.

Other associated research from the tim russell group includes problem ownership™ and problem redefinition™ on the 'intellectual side' of solving problems, whilst microskills™ covers the 'interpersonal side' of implementing the solution.

Because microskills™ underpins all the interpersonal skills a person ever needs, the applications of the skills actually reinforce the original skills, so the training time is dramatically reduced.

microskills™ also has the advantage of taking any mystique out of interpersonal skills training as it can convert any conversation into simple, measurable steps. This measuring facility enables quantifiable internal validation and evaluation of both the trainees and the training program. And it makes it very acceptable to people who disparage what they see as anything 'touchy, feely'. Engineers, IT staff and accountants love it!

microskills™ APPROACH

In the same way that a spectrum of light can be categorised into any number of identifiable colours and these can then be labelled and used for communication, so too can the words and phrases that people say. We know that there is an infinite number of colours, shades and hues, but we can comfortably talk about a yellow or a red and we all know what is meant. Similarly, we can categorise human language. For most one-to-one interactions, it has been found that six is the optimum number of categories to use. So anything and everything that a person says can be put into one of these categories and each category will have a guaranteed, unique effect on the other person. These six categories are the microskills™ and mastery of the microskills™ enables someone to handle any conversation with anybody else.

The microskills™ are:

Reflecting

- mirroring what the other person has just expressed in both words and feelings. This behaviour shows that the reflector is really listening to what is being said and is concerned.

Reflecting can be subdivided into: *Rw (Reflecting words)*, *Rf (Reflecting feelings)* and *Rb (Reflecting body language)*.

Encouraging

- making the sounds that will encourage the other person to continue talking. This behaviour shows that you are genuinely interested in allowing them to speak.

Asking

- asking any questions to extract more information or opinions. This category may be subdivided in certain circumstances into questions to gain expansive facts or opinions *Ao (Asking open questions)* and ones designed to clarify understanding *Ac (Asking closed questions)*. It is important to stress that *Asking* means genuine questions where you really do want to hear the answer. Some comments might look like *Asking* but are intended to indicate sarcasm or even disagreement. These would be categorised as *Giving Opinions*.

- Summarising* - pulling together the conversation so far and structuring how it is to continue. This behaviour allows the discussion to keep on track and stop the other person going round in circles.
- Giving Information* - stating points that are facts, policies or procedures.
- Giving Opinion* - expressing views or opinions, feelings or emotions.

The Effects on Esteem

The key to interpersonal skills is to raise the other person's esteem and make them feel valued. The microskills™ have the following effects on someone's esteem:

↑ *Reflecting* accurately what the other person is saying is the most esteem raising as clearly you are listening and interested in them. *Reflecting feelings* is even more powerful than *Reflecting words*.

↑ *Encouraging* is esteem raising as you are showing that you want the other person to continue talking.

↑ *Asking* questions shows that you are genuinely interested and so raises the other person's esteem.

↑ *Summarising* shows that you have been paying attention and so raises esteem.

↕ *Giving Information* is variable as it depends upon the nature of that information. Information that the other person wants to hear will raise their esteem, whereas information that they do not want to hear will lower it. Much *Giving Information* will be totally neutral and have no effect on esteem.

↕ *Giving Opinion* is also variable. Some opinions will have no effect. *Giving Opinion* that agrees with the other person will raise their esteem. The most damage to someone else's esteem, however, is caused by *Giving Opinion* against them. Not only does the content of the message make them feel bad, but the implication is that you are superior to them if you have the right to criticise them. In this way *Giving Opinion* against someone has a multiplyingly detrimental effect on their esteem.

The microskills™ are used by everybody in every conversation and so are universally transferable and applicable.

In counselling interviews, for example, the interviewer will probably restrict the behaviours to *Asking* and then *Encouraging* (to keep the person talking), *Asking* (to gain more information) and *Reflecting* (to show concern). The interview will be kept on track by regular *Summarising*. The *EARS* are just what are needed for good listening! Any suggestions that the interviewer will make are by *Giving Information* or *Giving Opinion* (or advice) though this is usually fairly limited. The microskills™ can be similarly adapted to cover any form of interaction.

TYPICAL SITUATIONS MET BY MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS

These are some of the common situations that managers and supervisors have to deal with in their everyday lives. They might range from very formal interviews to the much more frequent brief chat in an office or a corridor, face to face or on the telephone.

GRIEVANCE discussing with a colleague a problem that prevents them from being happy and productive at work. The grievance may involve the manager just listening, representing the company (if the grievance is against the company) or representing themselves (if the grievance is against them, personally).

A variation of the grievance is the customer complaint. This has the same three variations and would still be handled in the same way.

CONDUCT discussing with a colleague a deficiency in their behaviour that is preventing them from working as effectively as they should. The purpose of the conduct discussion is to get them to return to the 'straight and narrow'. It is not about punishing or exacting retribution.

There are four levels of conduct discussion, ranging from the mildest (Level 1) for a trivial problem, through Levels 2 and 3 to the ultimate Level 4. If a relatively minor situation leads to having to take formal action against the person, there has probably been a serious lapse on the part of the manager in not having dealt with the problem effectively earlier.

With the Level 4 conduct discussion, the manager does not ask any questions. This is usually either because there has been a previous investigation, or there will be one at a later date.

If the staff member feels that the level of conduct used by the manager is inappropriate, they will switch the conversation to a 'grievance' against the manager for being unfair or discriminatory. The manager should then handle that grievance before reverting to the conduct discussion.

PERFORMANCE discussing with a colleague what their performance has been recently and what plans they should make with the manager for continuing that high level or improving.

This might be a formal annual appraisal with all the associated form filling or a less formal work review. The meeting will probably be a combination of a self review by the staff member and a feedback session from the manager. There might also be input from other people in the form of 360° appraisal.

SUPPORTING discussing with a colleague a problem that they hold. This may be a problem that is work or domestic and probably will not involve the manager other than in a role of friend and confidant. The problem will usually best be solved by the colleague though, in certain circumstances, the manager might make some suggestions.

With non-directive supporting, the manager does not offer suggestions nor advice but just listens and helps the colleague to think through their own problem and the alternatives open to them. The manager will help the colleague to deal with their emotion and see things a little more clearly.

With directive supporting, the manager might advance a suggestion or offer advice, but usually only if they know the colleague extremely well. There can be risks, though, of creating dependence, of alienating the problem holder and of suggesting something that subsequently goes wrong. If the colleague does not want advice, they might turn any suggestion into a grievance, by complaining that the manager does not really understand. The manager will then need to deal with the grievance against them personally before going back to the supporting role.

Supporters are always at liberty to describe or list sources of help, without actually suggesting that the problem holder go there.

As long as the problem does not impinge upon the staff member's work performance, it remains their problem. As soon as it does, it becomes the problem of the manager who will probably move into a Level 1 conduct. The microskills™ will be the same, but the discussion will be initiated by the manager, whereas the supporting discussion is usually initiated by the problem holder.

microskills™ FORMULAE

The following examples show how microskills™ can be used in a range of typical situations which managers and supervisors frequently handle. Although shown as a straight line, most discussions will involve the manager looping from one microskill™ to another and often going back again, particularly when using the listening *EARS*.

GRIEVANCE

against the world	$E A R > S$
against the organisation	$E A R > S > G I$
against you, personally	$R E A > S > G I$ (avoid <i>GO</i>)

CONDUCT

mildest (Level 1)	$A > E A R > S > A E > S$
warmer (Level 2)	$G I > A E > S > A E > S$
hot (Level 3)	$G I > A E > S > G I$
hottest (Level 4)	$G I > G I > G I > G I$

PERFORMANCE

self review	$A > E R > S$
giving feedback	$G I > G I > A$ (or <i>GI</i>)

SUPPORTING

non-directive	$R E A > S > A E A R > S$
directive	$R E A > S > G I$ (or possibly <i>GO</i> with care)

APPLICATIONS OF microskills™

Below are some of the very many applications of microskills™:

Appraisal	Assertiveness
Coaching	Conduct and discipline handling
Counselling	Customer handling
Giving and receiving feedback	Grievance handling
Handling conflict	Influencing
Mediation	Meetings
Mentoring	Negotiating
Performance management	Presentations
Press announcements	Public speaking
Sales	Radio and television interviews
Supporting staff	Selection interviewing
Team building	Teleconferencing
Telephone techniques	Videoconferencing