

## EMPATHIC AND ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION. EFFICIENT COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENTS Oana-Antonia ILIE, Ileana-Gentilia METEA

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu,  
[antonia\\_ilie@yahoo.com](mailto:antonia_ilie@yahoo.com), [meteaileana@yahoo.de](mailto:meteaileana@yahoo.de)

**Abstract:** *We are always confronted with situations in which prevailing socially is strictly a matter of conversational technique. First, empathy and the mirroring of the other's emotional states and gestures is a must of efficient communication. Secondly, in order to prevent conflict situations one must learn to communicate assertively. Empathic communication is the ability or talent of knowing what other people feel and is essential when we want to produce or generate feedback. Assertive communication refers to the ability to express feelings and choices in a way that the self-esteem and feelings of others are not affected. A person who has these communicative competences will know to express wishes and feelings, to refuse and express opinions without offending the others, while maintaining a favorable impression and self-control.*

**Keywords:** empathy, communication, assertive communication, active listening

### 1. Empathy and empathic communication

Empathy and the empathic phenomena have become a subject of scientific research in the field of psychology in the early twentieth century. In the recent years, a first acception of the term refers to the ability to understand and, to some extent, participate in the feelings of another person, a psychological phenomenon of identification, entrance in mental symbiosis, emotional involvement, insight, intuition, and process of mutual understanding of another person. Empathy is also regarded as an attempt to distinguish a certain subjective experience of the other by substitution with him/her, which brings empathy close to the cognitive experiences. In empathy, *"we substitute ourselves to others"* [1] empathy becoming a way of knowing, of sharing someone else's feelings, views and perspectives. In Webster's Dictionary, for empathy, there are two entries:

1. *an imaginative projection of a subjective state, conative, or cognitive, in an object so that the object appears to be infused with it;*
2. *the ability to participate in or to experience a substitution of will or ideas with the others, their movements leading to the execution of common, similar actions.*

In the Dictionary of Psychology, empathy appears as a mental condition in which an individual identifies himself with another individual or group, or feels their condition. Empathy represents an emotional understanding of other people's behavior based on one's own behavioral experiences. The term is the translation of the term *Einfühlung*, used by Th. Lipps to indicate a process by which one observes a gesture of someone else, imitates it, then invokes by imitation the emotional experience previously lived and projects this experience on the other [2]. Empathy is further identified with a phenomenon of resonance, of affective communication with the other, situated at the basis of

identification and understanding of the psychology of another. Gh. Mead, in *Mind, Self and Society* states that empathy, as a process of role assuming, is a constituent part of social intelligence. Empathy is also the transposition of an individual in the imaginative thinking, way of living and acting of another and thereby structuring of the world according to the other, or the ability to put oneself in another person's place, establishing relationships and anticipating reactions, moods and behaviors [3], the empathic ability becoming the individual variable capacity to assume another person's role.

Empathy is indicated by Daniel Goleman as one of the components of the emotional intelligence. In his book, *The Emotional Intelligence*, he affirms that the inability to detect the feelings of others indicates an imbalance in emotional intelligence and therefore it represents a tragic failure in human communication [4].

This ability, the talent of knowing what other people feel, comes into play in large areas of life, from sales to management, parental affection to love, from compassion to political action. The lack of empathy is detected in psychopaths, criminals, rapists and child molesters.

Emotions are not most often revealed at the level of verbal communication, they are rarely translated into words, more often there are other indices that we can interpret with the help of our empathic capacity. One of the empirical rules provided by the research in the field of communication is that 90% or more of the emotional message is conveyed nonverbally. The key of intuition of someone else's feelings will be in the ability to interpret the nonverbal signs, the tone of voice, the gestures, the facial expression, the mimicry, etc.

*"When the words of someone disagree with what is actually transmitted it at the level of tone of voice, gestures and other nonverbal channels, the emotional truth lies in the way one says something and not in what is said" [5].*

As Hoffmann states, the roots of altruism lie in empathy, the same as the roots of morality, perhaps even of human communication in general.

Empathy has four components - affective, cognitive, behavioral, and communicative. The communication function of empathy indicates a connection between the adaptive modalities and those of interpersonal relations. Any verbal or nonverbal communication act implies an implicit communication reaction that supports and complements the previous, of the empathetic type. In the act of communication a transposition in the partner's psychology will take place, a participation to his universe by adopting attitudes or behaviors that will mirror the other's state of mind. The communication function imposes empathy as a condition of beneficial interpersonal communication [6]. F.Held and J. Maucorps believes that if there is no empathy there can be no communication with the other. Not accidentally, in some dictionaries, empathy is defined as a communication method, which, without replacing explicit communication, complements and completes it. Empathic communication involves a mutual understanding of the other, emotional contagion and the development of collaborative behaviors that lead to social harmony. Empathy is an interactive process that fosters role play, role exchange, knowledge of self and of the other. The lack of empathy leads to a decrease or lack of communication between parents and children, while a good empathy favors winning in negotiation and enables social learning processes by using role play techniques. A.F.Osborn (1965) mentions that lack of empathy leads to dysfunctions in communication: many misunderstandings or conflicts originate in our inability to replace ourselves with another person or to imagine the response reactions of the other, aspects related to substitutive imagination.

Through empathy we can better understand our partner, we can "read" his thoughts, his

affective states/experiences, predict his future behaviours and act accordingly. If, on the one hand, empathy is able to ensure good communication by adapting to the other person's reality, the lack of empathy becomes an obstacle in communication indicating inconsistencies or differences in thinking / behavior, opposing beliefs, different social environments, contrary political / religious views, disability, etc. The refusal to empathize leads to hostile attitudes, even blockages in communication. The need for empathy is associated with the need for dialogue, the temporary change of perspective, openness towards the other [7].

Some rules for good empathic communication are the following:

- *Greeting, obtaining / uttering the name;*
- *Presenting ourselves, showing respect and interest to the interlocutor;*
- *Identifying the emotional state / situation of the interlocutor;*
- *Active, careful listening, without interrupting the partner;*
- *Encouraging the use of his own words;*
- *Clarification of the ambiguous information;*
- *Understanding of the views of the other before presenting our own viewpoint;*

- *Organizing the information according to its importance in given context;*
- *Providing appropriate information of interest to the other party, in a way that his feelings are not affected / his condition does not get worse;*
- *Checking the understanding level;*
- *Identifying verbal and non-verbal indices;*
- *Encouraging the interlocutor to speak/ offer feedback;*
- *Providing emotional support.*

## **2. Assertive communication rules for efficient communication**

*Assertive communication* indicates our ability to express our own feelings and choices in a way that the self-esteem and the feelings of others are not affected. A person who detains this competence will know how to express wishes, resolve what he thinks, refuse, solve and prevent conflicts without offending his interlocutors, while maintaining their own view points and opinions. When we want to communicate without giving course to a defensive reaction, we must use sentences that will indirectly address the interlocutor and the communication problem, preferably following the algorithm:

*When (action)... I –Feel (reaction) – What I would like is ... (preferred outcome)[8].*

In the table below are some examples:

*Table 1: Science conflict resolution (after Helena Cornelius and Faïre Shosana)*

<b><i>Situation</i></b>	<b><i>Assertive utterance</i></b>
1. Someone raises the voice	<i>When you raise your voice at me, I feel humiliated. What I would like is to have a normal father and son conversation with you</i>
2. Someone fails to respect deadlines at work	<i>If you feel you need more time to complete the work, please let me know so that I'll be able to modify the original programming</i>
3. Interruptions	<i>When I am interrupted, I feel I lose the thread of my ideas, what I would like is to be given the chance to finish my sentence</i>
4. To an extremely demanding person	<i>When you don't appreciate my efforts, I feel offended, because I am trying hard to do my best. I would really appreciate some encouragements from time to time</i>

In many cases we are faced with situations when we must say *NO* to someone, but in a manner that does not affect the relationship that we have with that person. We present below a number of assertive statements recommended for refusal situations:

- *I'm sorry but I can not help you right now.*
- *I'd like to help but I can not do this until I finish the project I'm working on at the moment.*
- *I don't have enough time right now. Can we speak about it later?*
- *Is there a problem if I'll solve the task after I finish this project I'm working on?*

The efficiency of the communication act depends not only on how the transmitter delivers the message. It is also conditioned by how it is perceived by our audience. We can become active listeners by following these requirements:

- *paying attention to the message;*
- *taking into account the communication context;*
- *confirming and reconfirming (ah, yes, true, therefore, I see, I understand);*
- *Asking ( what happened next?/what was it all about?);*
- *Paraphrasing or summarizing what was said (I understood that...;)*
- *Reading the non-verbal language.*

### 3. Conclusions

As a conclusion, we can state that empathy gains a particular importance in interpersonal communication, enabling understanding and knowledge of the other. Empathic communication is based on mirroring of the conduct and psychological state of the partner, the granting of his perspective and involvement in his internal reference frame. Empathic communication leads to emotional contagion phenomena, positive social influence, triggers harmony, tolerance, and is the key of beneficial and long-lasting interpersonal relations. Assertive communication is the key of non-violent communication, by making use of non-offensive language formulas that will only indirectly address the conflictual issue, and will evitate to put the blame on the interlocutor.

To show lack of empathy, lack of interest, to reject the feedback or interrupt the partner of conversation is not only impolite but has the effect of preventing the good functioning of the communication process. Assertive and empathic communication are key solutions for an efficient communication strategy and can be used successfully in everyday life or in the management of conflicts in organisations.

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