TEN WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR PEOPLE SKILLS

Being able to manage your relationships at work, so that they have the effect you want, is a prerequisite of optimum performance.

1. **Self-Management**
   When we think of people skills, we usually think of them in relation to other people, rather than how we handle ourselves, and yet most of us realise that we are better or worse at relating to people depending on our 'mood' or attitude. The reason for the 'mood' is the way we are choosing to react to a particular situation; we can learn to choose consciously, and use a mood to our advantage in any situation.

2. **Getting in the right frame of mind**
   The basis for a constructive mood is feeling positive. We all know the difference it makes to a working day when we wake up feeling good, rather than feeling that is 'going to be one of those days'. Make a conscious effort to seek the benefits of each situation, to enjoy the process as well as the end results of work. What we tell ourselves is very powerful in affecting our state, we can talk ourselves 'up' or 'down'.

3. **Building Rapport**
   The word 'rapport' comes from the French word that means carrying something back; rapport is about actively making sure that we have some shared message that we both send and receive. We can build rapport by being aware of the non-verbal messages we communicate. If we make eye-contact, use a friendly tone of voice, turn towards them, look relaxed and smile, we create the impression of being someone easy to deal with.

4. **Giving Attention**
   Paying attention is not the same as listening, and if we want to develop good people skills, we need to learn to pay close attention to people. When someone is really paying attention we feel not just that they have listened, but that they have understood where we are coming from and what we really mean. To pay full attention requires switching on on five levels:
   - **a)** listening with your ears - you pick up the words someone is saying.
   - **b)** listening with the inner ear - we pick up the tone of voice, the meaning behind the words, the emphasis and hesitations.
   - **c)** attending with your eyes - how the person's body language supports or negates what they are saying.
   - **d)** attending with your guts - this is the intuitive level, we get a sense of something not being communicated.
   - **e)** attending with your heart - we view the person sympathetically rather than judgmentally, and get a sense of what it is like from their point of view.

5. **Recognising and working with differences**
   Most of us have not been brought up to value other people for their difference, often we have to learnt to judge others because of it. By finding out how others are different from us, we gain very useful information to help us to deal with them more effectively. We can find out about other people's approaches or perspectives by asking 'what' and 'how' questions; e.g. How did you do that? What prompted you to handle it in that way? How is that important for you? If you were left to your own
devices, how would you deal with this? Once you have found out what really matters to the other person, you can make your communication with them much more effective.

6. **Conveying your message clearly**
   If we want to be sure our message is received correctly, it is important that we sure what our message is! You may wish to tell people about new working practices, but additionally, your tone of voice, body language, choice of words will tell them what sort of person you are, what you feel about your overt message, how you operate in the world and what you think and feel about your listeners. Being clear in our own minds what our message is, and what we want the listener to do or feel as a result helps to ensure that the right message is conveyed.

7. **Using Feedback**
   'Feedback' is a term which describes a loop of action and reaction. The most common feedback we receive is that which is given unconsciously, it is the immediate response or reaction to what we have done or said. If you are not sure of someone's reaction, asking them is the simplest way of finding out, but we need to guide the feedback, as most people are not good at giving useful information about their reactions and will tend to rationalise or justify their responses. Examples of useful questions would be:
   a) What do you think I was trying to convey to you?
   b) What worked for you in what I said?
   c) How would you have preferred me to give you the information?
   d) What do you intend to do as a result of our conversation?

8. **Using people skills in formal meetings**
   Rapport with participants of meetings will be vastly improved if everyone knows why they are there and what they are expected to contribute. It will also make a significant difference to what happens in a meeting if you arrive with a positive attitude about its value and pay full attention to both the content and the process. Acknowledging others' viewpoints and the value of their contributions will help to build rapport.

9. **Working in a team**
   Historically we have worked in a very individualistic way, competing with our peers to be best. Revising our ideas about individualism will improve the way we work in teams then identify the benefits of team work and have a shared vision as well as a shared task. Good team skills include: respect for each other's viewpoints, sharing information, mutual support, and presenting a coherent front.

10. **Dealing with conflict**
    When you strongly disagree with someone, it is hard to maintain a good working relationship as we tend to equate the disagreement with the person. It is important in dealing with conflict to step back and assess the situation objectively. Identify the reason for the conflict (misunderstanding, different approaches, different interests?) and where possible find common ground. Changing the language of discussion can improve the situation; notice the difference in feeling these pairs of comments produce:
    - You make me angry. I am angry about X.
    - You're wrong. I don't agree with what you are saying.
    - You don't understand. I haven't made myself clear.
Don't be stupid. You seem to be missing the point I am trying to make. Conflict is the negative side of something that is useful. It happens when we pick up on negativity and allow it to become prominent. We need disagreement in order to develop new ideas and approaches and understanding this will help us deal with divergent views constructively.