

Microskills: Advisor Behaviors that Improve Communication with Advisees

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In writing this article, we wanted to provide advisors practical means with which to optimize their relationships with advisees. First, we describe behavioral microskills that can be used by advisors to enhance advising sessions. Attending behaviors (eye contact, vocal cadence and tone, verbal tracking, body language) and listening skills (asking questions, observing, guiding discussion, reflecting feelings) are two core microskills that advisors can practice. Use of these microskills has been shown to improve session effectiveness and strengthen the advisee-advisor relationship. Second, we present the results of a small-scale experiment that suggests that even modest training in microskills can benefit advising sessions.

KEY WORDS: advisor training, professional development, tools for advising

Relative emphasis:* practice, theory, research

Advisors must listen and communicate effectively with their advisees. Such behavior builds rapport and makes advisees aware that their advisors care about them. Some specific behaviors that contribute to this communication process are termed *microskills*. Advisors can enhance advising sessions by employing the microskills of *attending* (eye contact, vocal cadence and tone, verbal tracking, body language) and *listening* (asking questions, observing, guiding discussion, reflecting feelings). While based on a more extensive hierarchy (Ivey & Ivey, 2003), these first two skill levels are of particular relevance to academic advisors. Microskills are definable and observable, and of importance, they can be taught (Hagie, 1986; Ivey & Authier, 1978; Ivey & Ivey, 2003), which indicates that good advising-communication skills can be acquired (Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan 1997; Poorman, 2003).

In 1968, Ivey, Normington, Miller, Morrill, and Haase developed a hierarchy of microskills that can be utilized in advising sessions to help advisors interact more purposefully with their advisees. In 1974, Ivey and Gluckstern added infor-

mation about multicultural differences in communication styles to the hierarchy. The microskills model is not linked to any theoretical approach. Rather, it is based upon the premise that the skills are useful across multiple theories and settings (Corey & Corey 2002; Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2002).

The microskills hierarchy has been studied for approximately 35 years and has been examined in over 350 studies as the concepts have evolved from research topics to practicable techniques (Daniels, 2003). The microskills studies have served as bases for many dyadic-related applications of the microskills hierarchy. Sharpley and Sagris (1995a) found a positive correlation between eye contact and counseling-session rapport. In a second study, Sharpley and Sagris (1995b) found that when the advisor leaned toward the advisee at a 41° angle higher levels of rapport were achieved. In a meta-analysis of 20 studies, van Der Molen, Hommes, Smit, and Lang (1995) found that the use of microskills by advisors had a positive effect on advising rapport. When the effect of using microskills was studied on advisee satisfaction in a college setting, Kaufman and Netusil (1975) found that microskill-trained advisors who employed microskills in their advising received greater satisfaction ratings from their advisees than did those who had not employed these techniques. Daniels (2003) reported positive effects related to the use of microskills including satisfaction with the advising process, an increase in advisee talk time, and a strengthening of the advisor-advisee relationship.

Attending Behavior

Attending behavior is the most basic microskill unit. It involves a number of skills utilized by advisors to relate better to their advisees. Attending is used to increase advisee's talk time and the quality of the advisor-advisee interactions. It refers to the ways in which the advisors can be tracking physically and psychologically with their advisees. Main behavioral components are eye contact, vocal qualities, verbal tracking, and body language. Ivey and

* See note on page 4.

Ivey (2003) used the acronym 3V + B to describe these primary microskills.

V = (Vision) Eye Contact

Eye contact is one way that the advisor indicates interest and is one of the most important components in effective communication. The advisor should look directly into the advisee's eyes, paying close attention to the advisee's pupils, which will dilate when an issue is interesting and will constrict when a person is bored or uncomfortable.

V = Vocal Qualities

The voice is an instrument that communicates much of the feelings one experiences with regard to another person or situation. Emotion is most apparent through the voice. Vocal qualities include the rate, volume, and tone. For example, an increase in volume helps to emphasize main points, whereas hesitation or breaks in talking indicate confusion and stress.

V = Verbal Tracking

When an advisor is staying with the advisee's topic, he or she is engaged in verbal tracking. The advisor should respond to an advisee about previously mentioned topics by making a comment or by

asking a question about advisee's statements before moving to a new topic. According to Ivey and Authier (1978), verbal tracking also includes selective attention; that is, one should listen to certain statements and ignore others. How should the session be directed? To what should the advisor attend? What should the advisee be encouraged to talk about? Everyone has their own pattern of listening to key topics and ignoring others. Advisors need to be alert to their own patterns, otherwise they miss important information advisees are trying to tell them.

B = Body Language

With regard to body language, Ivey and Ivey (2003) were referring to posture, gestures, and mannerisms. The advisee will be aware of the advisor's body language, and therefore, the advisor must be aware of her or his own body language. Advisors can use an effective technique referred to as *SOLER* (Egan, 1998). *SOLER* is an acronym based on words that describe the appropriate body language one can employ when communicating. In the advising session, the advisor should *squarely* face the advisee, maintain *open* posture, *lean* toward the advisee, establish *eye* contact, and remain *relaxed*. See Table 1.

Table 1 The possible interpretations of SOLER techniques for communication

SOLER Body Language	Possible Interpretation & Strategies
S = Squarely face	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The advisor is communicating: "I am here with you; I am available for you." • Advisors who turn their body away lessen their degree of contact. • If, for any reason, facing the person is too threatening, the advisor may assume an angled position.
O = Open posture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The advisor is giving the sign that he or she is open to the advisee. • An open posture is seen as a nondefensive posture. • Crossed arms and legs can be signs of lessened involvement.
L = Lean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An advisor's slight inclination toward the advisee is interpreted as "I am with you; I am interested in you and what you have to say." • Leaning back (slouch) is interpreted as "I am bored." • Learning too far forward may frighten an advisee. It can be interpreted as demanding or too intimate.
E = Eye contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steady eye contact (but not staring) says "I am with you; I want to hear what you have to say." • If the advisor looks away too frequently, the advisee may perceive that the advisor is reluctant to be with the advisee or is uncomfortable in her or his presence.
R = Relaxed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisors need to be comfortable using their bodies as vehicles of contact and expression. • The advisor should not fidget nervously or have distracting facial expressions. For example, disagreement expressed by turning one's body away or compressing one's lips into a thin line may discourage an advisee from continuing the conversation.

Advisors need to be aware of their gestures. They should use gestures that are natural and culturally appropriate. For an excellent list of many gestures and their meanings, see Remland, Jones, and Brinkman's (1995) *Interpersonal Distance, Body Orientation, and Touch: Effects of Culture, Gender, and Age*. Some of the more common gestures include:

- Uncertainty or stress is indicated by hands behind head, hand on cheek, clenching objects tightly.
- "I give up" is manifested as shrugging of shoulders.
- Dishonesty is shown by rubbing the nose and breaking eye contact.
- Submission is illustrated by maintaining pigeon-toed posture or reaching up and touching the throat.
- Dominance is shown via expansive gestures (spreading arms).
- Scolding can be seen through finger wagging.

Attending behavior is first used to encourage quality advisee talk time. The advisor will want to use attending behavior to help advisees tell their stories and to reduce the advisor's own talk time. When in doubt about how to promote talk time in an advising session, the advisor should listen, listen, listen. To communicate that he or she is indeed listening or attending to the advisee, the advisor will need to use the three V's of attending plus attentive body language (B) as presented by Ivey and Ivey (2003).

Basic Listening Sequence

At the heart of advising is listening, the experience of being heard and accepted that enables growth and change (Toller, 1999). The basic listening sequence is the second microskill level in the Ivey et al. (1968) hierarchy and refers to an ability to understand messages communicated verbally or nonverbally. The four basic listening skills are a) the

proper use of questioning; b) the application of observation skills; c) encouraging, paraphrasing, and summarizing discussions; and d) reflection of feelings.

Questioning

While Ivey and Ivey (2003) believe in asking questions, they cautioned that if the process is to be meaningful, the parties need to listen. They also distinguish between open and closed questions.

Open questions. Queries that allow the advisees to explore freely and guide the session are *open*. The first word in the advisor's question can often determine the advisee's response. See Table 2 for some examples of interrogatives and the information uncovered by them. By introducing a request for information with the qualifier *could*, advisors give the advisee an opportunity to politely refuse to answer. For example, "Could you tell me more about your situation?" is a less demanding means of soliciting information than is "Tell me about your situation." When querying for reasons behind an advisee's decision, behavior, or belief, advisors should be careful. Students may get the impression that the advisor is judging them and may become defensive.

Closed questions. Whereas open questions cannot be answered in a few words, closed questions emphasize factual content and can be answered briefly, often with a simple *yes* or *no*. These questions are designed to elicit very specific information and usually begin with *are*, *do*, or *did*: "Are you living in the dorm?" "Do you have an E-mail address?" "Did you attend the job fair last week?" The advisor commonly uses closed questions to begin the session and to assist the advisor in clarifying issues (Ivey & Ivey, 2003). However, too many questions can result in offending the advisee who may feel as though she or he is being interrogated, lessening the advisee's responsibility for the advising process, and increasing advisee's dependence on the advisor.

Table 2 Interrogatives used to lead a discussion

Interrogative	Information Gathered	Example Questions
What?	Facts	What happened when you attended the Writing Clinic?
How?	Process or feelings	How do you feel about taking a graduate-level chemistry class?
Why?	Reason	Why do you think that your grades dropped last semester?
What else?	More specific information	What else would you like to say about your class schedule?

Observation

Observation skills are defined as a person's ability to observe the communication session (Ivey & Ivey, 2003). The advisor should be able to appreciate the verbal and nonverbal cues offered by the advisee.

Verbal behavior. Vocal tone, pitch, and intensity as well as body sounds, including sighing, humming, cracking the knuckles, are examples of verbal behavior (Poorman, 2003). These behaviors add meaning to the words an individual uses. In many situations, the manner in which the message is communicated is more important than the words used.

Nonverbal behavior. Observation also includes assessment of nonverbal behavior and body language. In Western cultures, the face is considered the main channel of expression. While facial expressions do not vary much from culture to culture, norms influence how much and how often these expressions are used. The seven universal facial expressions are anger, disgust, fear, sadness, contempt, surprise, and happiness (Ekman, 1994). However, the manner and timing that is considered appropriate for using these gestures varies from culture to culture. For example, in Japan public displays of emotion are discouraged. Therefore, Japanese advisees typically have expressionless faces. Also, many American men will not cry in public, while in some situations, crying is considered an appropriate response of American women.

Advisors who display no facial expression (deadpan look) suggest a lack of interest, awareness, or mental presence to advisees. Animated facial expressions give an advisee the feeling that the advisor is alert and responding to communication. In most circumstances, the advisor's facial expression should reflect the type and intensity of the feeling he or she wishes to express.

Body language. Dynamic and interesting patterns of movement exist between people. Movement synchrony, or the mirroring of each other's body language, is a sign that excellent communication is taking place. This mirroring is seen when both the advisor and advisee unintentionally sit in identical positions and even simultaneously make complex hand and feet movements.

Movements that flow in rhythm between communicators is called *movement complementarity*; it can be seen when the advisor nods while the advisee is talking. When the body language of the advisor and advisee does not show synchrony or complementarity, the communication is considered *dis-synchronous*, which indicates a lack of harmony.

Matching body language, breathing rates, and

key words can heighten the interaction and increase understanding during an advising session. Mirroring, like many of the microskills of communication, is a technique that is best learned by observing and practicing. However, an advisor may be tempted to interpret the advisee's world through the advisor's worldview. While observing advisees and drawing meaning from their behaviors is useful, the wise advisor always is careful not to stereotype or oversimplify the meanings of these behaviors (Ivey & Ivey, 2003).

Encouraging, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing Discussions

Through active listening, advisors participate fully in the advising session to help advisees enlarge and enrich their stories. Active listening includes three higher-level skills: encouraging, paraphrasing, and summarizing. By using these skills, advisors are communicating to their advisees that they have been heard.

Encouraging. A variety of verbal and nonverbal cues, including verbal phrases such as *uh-huh* and *hum*, can be used to encourage the advisee to continue talking. Repetition of key words, used exactly as the advisee has used them, also encourages the advisee to keep the conversation going. Encouragement can also be conveyed nonverbally through head nods, positive facial expressions (smile), or open gestures.

Paraphrasing. Based on the definition put forth by Ivey and Authier (1978), paraphrasing is used by advisors who, in their own words, repeat the essence of advisee's words and thoughts to test the advisor's understanding of the advisee's statements. Paraphrasing communicates that the advisor is listening, and it can be used to highlight an issue and direct the advisee's future remarks.

Summarizing. By tying together several ideas and descriptions of feelings into one statement, the advisor can summarize an entire session. The advisor can initiate a summary by saying to the advisee, "Today, we have talked about ____." The technique can also be used to begin a session, "In our last meeting we talked about ____." Summarization can provide a smooth flow from topic to topic: "So far you have been saying ____."

Summarizing is broader, encompassing a longer period of conversation, than paraphrasing (Ivey & Ivey, 2003). When summarizing, the advisor does not add any new information or ideas. Also, key ideas and themes previously discussed should be combined into broad statements for clarification and summarization about the topics that have been or will be addressed in the advising session.

Reflection of Feelings

Reflection of feelings is defined as the expression of essential feelings that have been stated or strongly implied (Ivey & Authier, 1978; Ivey & Ivey, 2003; Ivey et al., 1968). It is often illustrated as a service provider who is emotionally in tune with her or his client (Rogers, 1961). The advisor is to note emotional aspects of the advisee's comments and clearly present them back to the advisee so that the advisee may better understand his or her own feelings. An example of an advisor's reflection of feelings follows:

Advisee: "So, I am wondering if you can help me find a new major. But, I suppose if I did find one, I'd just bungle things again."

Advisor: "You feel discouraged."

In this example, by reflecting feelings back to the advisee, the advisor may encourage the advisee to explore these expressed feelings of inadequacy. Reflection of feelings conveys to the advisee that the advisor understands or is trying to understand the advisee's feelings. It can be used to bring out problem areas without the advisee feeling pushed. In addition, it allows an opportunity for the advisee to verify the advisor's perception of the advisee's feelings.

While most of the time the academic advisor and the faculty academic advisor will be discussing academics with their advisees, they need to be aware that they can assist advisees in other areas of concern. However, if the academic advisor senses that the scope of the problem is beyond her or his area of expertise, the advisee should be referred to the counseling center or a qualified individual who can provide the needed help.

Applying Attending Behaviors and Basic Listening Skills

As with many learned skills, microskills are acquired over time and with proper practice. An important first step in this learning process is the advisor's recognition that well-applied attending behaviors and basic listening skills can improve the advising encounter. Advisors should begin to observe their own advising behaviors and incorporate the microskills in their advising sessions. Then they should observe the effects of this practice on advisees.

Employing many of the microskills is easy, and many advisors will naturally use them. However, other techniques, such as summarization and reflection of feelings, tend to take more time and prac-

tice before the advisor feels completely comfortable using them. Listening and observing skills can assist in the learning process. As advisors employ the various techniques, they should listen to determine the effects of a particular technique on each advisee's talk time and quality of discussion. They should also be observant of the advisee's body language and other nonverbal communication. By watching and listening, advisors can assess the progress that they are making in mastery of all communication microskills.

Efficacy of Microskills in Advising

The preponderance of research suggests that microskills can be effective tools in fields like counseling and academic advising. In excess of 450 studies have been conducted to explore various facets of microskill applications (we have cited many in the introduction of this article). In response to questions posed to us about the efficacy of using microskills in advising practice, we conducted a small-scale experimental study to ascertain whether peer advisors could quickly assimilate some basic microskills and employ them in an effective manner.

Eight nursing students were assigned the role of advisor. Four were randomly assigned to a microskills training group and the other four were assigned to a no-training group. The microskills training group took part in a 90-minute workshop and were taught attending and active listening microskills. For each skill, the students were presented with an explanation of the term, and activities were conducted to practice the skills. They were then told they would be providing academic advising to two students. The no-training group was given approximately 10 minutes of instruction about the duties of an advisor. Members of this group were also told that they would be providing academic advising to two students.

Thirteen nursing students participated as advisees and were informed that this was a pilot study in which we were looking at relationships between advisors' communications skills and the academic advising session. They were instructed to seek academic advising regarding their major with their assigned peer advisor and that they would talk with peer advisors trained two different ways. After receiving their instructions, the students were dismissed and told to return the next day for the advising.

The 13 advisees were divided into two groups. One group was assigned to obtain academic advising from the microskills-trained advisors while the

rest were assigned to receive advising from the untrained advisors. Upon completion of the first academic advising session, participants then switched to the other advising group. At the end of each advising session, participants used a 5-point rating scale to respond to questions about their advising encounters.

Peer advisors who had been instructed in the use of the microskills, compared to the untrained peer advisors, were perceived by the advisees as being more interested in the subject the advisee wanted to discuss, $F(1, 10) = 42.250, p < .001$, and less preoccupied with other matters, $F(1, 10) = 6.602, p = .028$. Trained advisors were viewed as more understanding of the situation of the advisees, $F(1, 10) = 5.435, p = .042$, and made advisees feel more comfortable in the advising situation, $F(1, 10) = 20.00, p = .001$. The advisees left the advising session with the feeling that the microskills-trained advisor had not dominated the conversation by talking too much, $F(1, 10) = 22.857, p = .001$, and gave the advisees adequate time to tell their stories, $F(1, 10) = 20.00, p = .001$. Advisees who had met with microskill-trained advisors were more satisfied with the advising session than advisees who had met with the untrained peer: $F(1, 10) = 10.652, p = .009$. In addition, advisees of the microskilled-trained group were more likely to request advising by the same person, $F(1, 10) = 15.625, p = .003$, than were advisees who had interacted with advisors who had not received the microskills training. No significant differences were found between perceptions of advising across the two sets of advisors on feelings regarding the full attention of the advisor, $F(1, 10) = 4.375, p = .063$; ease of talking with the advisor, $F(1, 10) = 1.078, p = .324$; advisor listening to the problem before speaking, $F(1, 10) = 1.702, p = .221$; feelings of discomfort in the advising process, $F(1, 10) = .172, p = .687$; perception that the advisor understood the advisee's needs, $F(1, 10) = .816, p = .388$; and posture of the advisor indicating interest in the advisee, $F(1, 10) = .000, p = 1.000$.

While the results of this small-scale study are by no means conclusive, they indicate that employment of the microskills in an advising situation will likely have a positive impact on those seeking advice. Of note, advisees who interacted with microskill-trained advisors were more satisfied with their experience and would opt for advising by the same person on a future occasion. These positive outcomes call for further studies that can provide additional insight into the use of microskills in advising and into ways that they can be included in the training of academic advisors.

Summary

The purpose of attending behaviors is to reduce advisors' talk time while providing their advisees with an opportunity to tell their stories better and more fully. Advisors cannot learn about their advisees if they do all of the talking. The attending behaviors consist of visual eye contact, vocal quality, verbal tracking, and body language working together to achieve a more productive advising encounter.

The purpose of listening behaviors is to assure that advisees know they have been heard. The microskills of active listening include encouraging, paraphrasing, summarizing, and reflecting feelings. Use of these listening skills helps to make the advisee feel that he or she is being heard and that the advisor understands the ideas and feelings that the advisee is attempting to convey.

These microskills can help advisors be more effective in the precious time they have with their advisees. Within their multifaceted mission, advisors must help students with academic, social, and personal issues while being knowledgeable about selecting majors, scheduling classes, managing time, joining campus organizations, choosing careers, working on- and off-campus jobs, filling out financial aid forms, navigating the college campus, and problem solving. These awesome responsibilities can be fulfilled more effectively through the use of microskills.

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- ### Authors' Note
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