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# PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH IN BUSINESS RELATIONS: TRAINING OF ACTIVE LISTENING FOR BUSINESSMEN

*Abordagem Centrada na Pessoa nas Relações Empresariais: Formação de Escuta Ativa para Empresários*

*Enfoque Centrado en La Persona en Relaciones Comerciales: Formación de Escucha Activa para Empresarios*

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses possible applications and limitations of person-centered approach in business education on the case of active listening training for managers. The form of the teaching process is assigned in accordance with the principles of cognitive-behavioral approach to therapy and education. The content is based on the central ideas in person-centered approach. Clear criteria and video feedback allow participants to self-assess their progress in the process of skills acquisition in active listening.

**Keywords:** Person-centered approach; Cognitive-behavioral approach; Training; Active listening.

**Resumo:** O artigo discute as possíveis aplicações e limitações da abordagem centrada na pessoa no ensino de negócios no caso da formação de escuta ativa para os gestores. A forma do processo de ensino é atribuído de acordo com os princípios da abordagem cognitivo-comportamental para a terapia e educação. O conteúdo é baseado nas idéias centrais na abordagem centrada na pessoa. Critérios claros e feedback de vídeo permitem que os participantes se auto-avaliar seu progresso no processo de aquisição de competências em escuta ativa.

**Palavras-chave:** Abordagem Centrada na Pessoa; Abordagem cognitivo-comportamental; A formação; A escuta ativa.

**Resumen:** El documento analiza las posibles aplicaciones y limitaciones de la persona enfoque centrado en la educación de negocios en el caso de la formación escucha activa para los directivos. La forma del proceso de enseñanza se asigna de acuerdo con los principios del enfoque cognitivo-conductual a la terapia y la educación. El contenido se basa en las ideas centrales de un enfoque centrado en la persona. Criterios claros y retroalimentación de vídeo permiten a los participantes a autoevaluar sus progresos en el proceso de adquisición de habilidades en la escucha activa.

**Palabras clave:** Aproximación centrada en la persona; Cognitivo-conductual; La formación; La escucha activa.

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## Introduction

It would seem that there are no more contrast views on an Individual, his problems and the ways of coping with them than the views underlying the two approaches in modern psychology - cognitive-behavioral and a person-centered one. Cognitive-behavioral approach, which is rooted in cognitive-behavioral therapy, follows the principles of rationality and awareness, appeals to the facts and evaluations focused on the analysis of thought and action, whereas the learning process is treated as recognition and interpretation of subsequent replacement of non-structural, inadequate behavioral design models. Goal achievement here is a measure of success, actions and behavior in general. Person-centered approach is based on the principles of client-centered therapy and is aimed primarily at creating and maintaining deep relationships, feelings and inner experiences. The major aim is to recognize the uniqueness of the human nature, to support and strengthen the "real self", promoting personal fulfillment by providing specific conditions in

the relationship between the therapist and the client. C. Rogers defines these conditions as therapist's congruence, unconditional positive acceptance of the client and the therapist's empathic understanding of which he informs the client. The latter can be realized in the behavior of the therapist as active empathic listening.

Is there any possibility of agreement between the two approaches? 20 years of coaching experience let me to suggest that the preconditions do exist. The basis for the integration of these two approaches can be trained within interpersonal interaction. Active listening for business, built on the principles of cognitive-behavioral training serves an appropriate example.

The union of these seemingly different approaches may, on my mind, due to the next point of intersection: basic necessary personal attitudes of the trainer against participants of the training. So, Rogers appreciated attitudes of the teacher higher than they practiced teaching methods. He was convinced that there is a human innate creativity that under favorable conditions is able to develop effectively. At the same time, the cognitive ap-

proach is inherent in the original belief in the possibility of “student” to be a full and equal partner in the educational process. For a better understanding, let us consider separately the outcome and means of the particular educational program. In our case, the outcome of the training is the skill of empathic active listening, but a means are cognitive-behavioral algorithms for teaching this skill. Step by step, construction of the content of the training implies that participants recognize the “correct behavioral model”, which is supported by various kinds of feedback, including video feedback. Due to such algorithmization participants are able to track their skills development dynamics on the cognitive, evaluative and behavioral levels.

Such model of teaching has been tested and validated at Tallinn School of video training in business communication in the 80s of the last century by H. Mikkin (1980, 1984, 1986, 1988). In those days, in the Soviet Union, this term was designated as the active use of video feedback in communication during the training. It should be noted that a little later, in 1990, H. Mikkin actively participated in the development of “client-centred social work” model in the Republic of Estonia.

In general, cognitive-behavioral therapy and person-centered therapy have been shown to bring about positive changes not only in the treatment, but also in the training. For example, in the literature it is proved that when

the change-producing techniques of cognitive-behavioral therapy and person-centered therapy are combined and applied, counseling is more effective (Josefowitz & Myran, 2005; Tursi & Cochran, 2006). Recently an attempt was made both cognitive-behavioral therapy and person-centered therapy to review and then integrate them into one approach (Rodriguez, 2013).

## 1. Justification of the idea

The key finding in this case suggests that the algorithm-prone procedure for the formulation of specific behavioral skills within the cognitive-behavioral approach fits in the key idea by Carl Rogers who stated the need for unconditional acceptance of the client, empathic listening, following him in the therapeutic dialogue (Rogers, 1951, 1957, 1961). Needed for what? To achieve the goal. What the purpose is? The answer is formulated in the context of “effective communication”, where the aim is to solve the problem or at least to start moving towards solution in a given situation of interaction (Zhukov, 1988). Moreover, we also rely on formulated by E. Meadows (Meadows, 1999a, 1999b) the main differences between the client-centered treatment and person-centered approach (Table 1).

Table 1: Differences between client-centered therapy and person-centered approach by Meadows (1999a, 1999b)

<b>CLIENT-CENTERED THERAPY</b> Special model to help relationship «therapist – the client» Basic terms used for the benefit of Person-client approach	<b>PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH</b> The general model for all other relationships, «I – Other». Key skills used for the benefit of self, in their own interests
<b>Necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic change:</b>	<b>Necessary and sufficient conditions for successful relations development:</b>
1. Psychological contact in relations between a therapist and a client.	1. Coming from the “inside” man ratio (the relationship did not exist outside the person)
2. Client is not congruent.	2. Congruence or use of any other skill is not essential in this model. Important is the use of human abilities for himself.
3. Therapist is congruent.	3. A person can choose congruent Property in communication (if he has this skill.)
4. Therapist is emphatic	4. A person can opt to display empathy in communication (in the case he possess the skill.)
5. Therapist obviously respects the client.	5. A person can choose unconditionally positive respect (whether EU-owns this skill.)
6. The therapist clearly expresses unconditional positive respect to the client, empathy and congruence.	6. Demonstration of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive decision is not necessary.

In person-centered approach by E. Meadows, congruence, empathy and unconditional positive acceptance are considered and used in practice as the ability to achieve individual success in communicating with another person. Here the skills that tend to be learned and trained should be added. But we do not quite share the E. Meadows’ idea that either the use or not of empathy in human collaboration with the partner turns to be unimportant. In our view, people can choose congruence/empathy/unconditional positive acceptance if they are aware of the purpose and seek to communicate effectively. In this sense, they also should be aware that not

choosing congruence/empathy/unconditional positive acceptance, they will not achieve the purpose. We explain our idea as follows.

To begin let’s ask ourselves, what should be considered an effective communication? For people who are economically educated, the answer is obvious: efficiency is determined by correlation between costs and results. But what is considered “result”? The simplest, but not the most accurate answer is: “Efficiency is communication which contributes to the goals of the communicator”. But then there is another, equally important question: Whose goals? If the goals of the partners are mutually exclusive, then

the communication is effective for one of them and is not effective for the other. Even if the goals are not opposite, and both parties believe that in the course of communication they have achieved both objectives, the difficulties may still remain on agenda. Very often the “apparent” achievement by both parties really means that they “talked about the different”. It should not be borne in mind that sometimes it is very effective to ensure completely unrealistic initial goals during the meeting.

Therefore, it begs another question whether it is possible to limit the consideration of communication as an act aimed at achieving the objectives set in advance? Apparently not, since the very purpose – each participant or only one of them sets, – can be specified, terminated, changed, and even formed in the course and results of communication. So, we have to look for another concept, relevant to the question of effectiveness in communication. This notion is the “problem”.

Indeed, understanding the fact that goal is impossible to achieve gets us only farther from it but, at the same time, pushes us towards solving the problem, because the efforts will be concentrated on setting more reasonable goals and orientating the actions in this direction. In fact, the definition of effective communication through the notion of “progress in solving problems (personal, group, organization as a whole)” is quite satisfactory from a theoretical point of view. In practice, it is very difficult to assess – how this or that communication is “worked out” on the problem. In other words, performance evaluation, in principle, can first be given only in retrospective, and then presented, on condition that we have enough detailed information about the problems of participants involved in communication (Zhukov, 1988).

There is obviously the need to find other, more easily identifiable signs of effectiveness. In the range of psychological literature this feature is often referred to as satisfaction with the results for the participants of communication. However, this criterion is, in the first place, extremely subjective and changeable over time. Then, it is usually significantly associated with perception of goal achievement. In the hope to get out of this impasse, a thought experiment was carried out. The participants of a conditional imaginary conversation, after which they felt satisfied were questioned and each of them confirmed that they had reached the goal. The questions were the following:

- What do you think your partner’s intentions have been?
- What are your plans and intentions?
- Please describe how your partner perceives the situation, the problem and solution?

Comparison of the responses received will allow us to fairly accurately estimate how partners understand each other and to determine the degree of mutual understanding. Thus, we can assume that a certain degree of understanding is a prerequisite reflecting a considerably

broad class of communication. Further, more questions to the participants are provided:

- Have you got a more complete picture of the situation, tasks, or the ways of addressing them?
- Has the general idea of all these become more specific?

The answers of the participants are then compared again. Now we can expect a kind of symmetry in the responses – mutually positive to both questions or mutually negative. If the answers are negative in both parties, it is clear that even with the understanding (mutual coincidence of response to the first series of questions about the goals and intentions of each other), this communication is hardly effective. Positive answers to the questions “on both sides” can act evidence that the communication was successful. Now we can say that such a procedural feature of communication as mutual understanding in partners, and a better comprehension of the situation and the subject of communication as the result (or achievement of greater certainty as to the understanding of the situation), are those signs that distinguish effective communication from the ineffective one.

Let’s summarize our discussion. First. Effective communication helps to resolve problems. Second. Effective communication is the one that ensures objectives at the reasonable cost of resources. Third. The result of effective communication is mutual understanding between the partners. Summarizing, we formulate our understanding of effective business communication as following: effective communication should be considered as one which enables progress in resolving problems with the use of the best ways through mutual understanding between partners (Zhukov, 1988).

Developing this idea in a comparative perspective, focusing on the special crystallographic characteristics of business communication as opposed to small talk, we find the following. On the one hand, business communication is a substantive communication (the main subject is the problem as a whole or its individual components). Small talk is pointless communication about everything and nothing special. On the other hand, the objectivity of business communication within the purpose suggests the need for personal subject positioning and personalized (“my”) vision, understanding of the subject of communication – a problem situation, which causes the development of the ways to solving it. Small talk doesn’t imply having the own subject opinion; only popular and widely accepted positioning is approved. In this sense, the willingness to produce, discover their subject position and, at the same time, a genuine interest in the subject position of the partner together present the open communicative installation for each of the interlocutors in business communication. It is important to add that the degree of awareness of the positions of others determines the degree of objectivity of personal

perception of reality. A person who is blind to other positions, alternative of his own, thus, oddly enough, does not observe his own point of view.

Thus, for effective communication the partners are required not only the ability to express, explain and verify their subject position, but, above all, the ability to perceive, to hear(!) the subject position of the Other. Consequently, the effectiveness of business communication determines the degree of completeness in the general understanding of the common (business) problem and is based on the mastery of the skills of active listening.

## 2. Idea realization

Cognitive-behavioral training has at its core a set of basic principles. First, it provides a pretty accurate description of correct and constructive behaviors that lead to success (see above the description of effective communication) compared to the wrong and unconstructive ones. Second, the enactment of new, more constructive behaviors are based on reinforcement – external or internal, that is, self-reinforcement. Third, the learning process is constructed as a gradual and consistent transition from the simple to the complex. Fourth, learning new patterns of behavior is not only the process of practicing, playing, and feedback but also observation (which makes a group the preferred form of the work).

The main learning function in the training of active listening is up to training exercises and short role situation. Played out during the course learning situations, the

situations of the pair interaction, usually become all the unique material to process the skills. Each situation in its scenario assumes role distribution in “The Speaker”, “He-who-speaks” and “The Listener”, “He-who-is listening”. First, the situation is played out according to the instructions given to the participants for each role. In the instructions “The Speaker” is usually indicated by the presence in his role behavior of the two plans – the external, surface, visible, but not real (time, resources, circumstances) and the inner, deep plan of the true problems (relationships, emotions, values). For example, “you express your chief your concern about drop in sales in the company, but in fact you are seeking for his disposition and protection from a colleague, terrorizing you at the workplace”. Then the situations emerging in the real experience of interaction between the members of the group training are played out. For example, one of the participants in the training group feels a sense of embarrassment and awkwardness because he can not demonstrate the “right” actions, but blames his coach for pedagogical incompetence, and other stakeholders – in envy and ill will towards him.

In present course the participants are proposed the correct model the behavior of “The Listener” which is described (Table 2) and, therefore, implemented in the course of training at three levels: at the level of self-regulation, at the level of non-verbal behavior and the level of verbal behavior. It is important to stress out that it is the level of self-control, being the most important component of the model, includes unconditional regard to the partner, emotional stability, and the maximum concentration on the interlocutor.

Table 2: Actions of the Listener (cognitive component of behaviors)

Name of the action	Description of the action to operationalize
1. Ignoring	statements that are derived only from the mind of the Listener, without affecting the thoughts and feelings expressed by the speaker
2. Interrogation	questions to the speaker about what he heard. Distinguish <u>closed</u> questions for which the answer is chosen from only a limited number (eg, «yes - no»), and open that begin with «what,» «how,» «why,» etc.), response to which meets is determined by the Speaker. The error of Listener is usually in too narrowly targeted or completely «closed» issue, which dramatically slows down the movement of thought of the speaker. Closed questions are relevant only when asking for a specific fact or circumstance. «Open» questions are good when Listener is poorly versed in the problem of the Speaker, in his relationships, opinions. An open question must be free of even a hint what kind of response is expected to support the speaker's importance or idea that the content of the question was related to his previous post.
4. Silent listening	addressed to the other party: pose, supporting gestures and facial expression, nodding the head as a sign of willingness to listen on, calm movements in the overall figure
4. Clarification	request to tell more about something of what has been said already.
5. Simple Restatement	the play is presented in an abbreviated form the main content of what he heard. Thus, we can verify that the listener understand the speaker (“If I understand you correctly...”, “you said that...”, “it turns out that...” etc.). As the consolidation of psychological contact with a partner allows for the interpretation of retelling content, ie scoring “said between the lines.”
6. Restatement with description of emotional state of the partner	describing the emotional state of the speaker playback content complemented by the above description of the observed emotional state of the speaker. Particularly relevant to a dispute between verbal and non-verbal behavior of a partner
7. Restatement with development of ideas of the partner	further development of ideas is retold in a hypothetical interlocutor, listening continues the form of the propositional logic
8. Summing up subtotals	particularly relevant after a long and incomprehensible remarks of the partner. Hearer reduces the dictum to short list of key points, thus helping companion structure their thoughts and not to deviate from the topic



The leading mechanism of learning in the training of active listening is multiple and diverse feedback – positive and negative – obtained from the partner participating in the interaction, the other members of the group and involves observation from the coaches. Again, it is important to note that for the training of active listening it is highly recommended that trainers work in an opposite-sex couple, which allows to use another learning effect. This is the effect of learning through observation of the band of the “samples” of behavior that coaches demonstrate, working on a course of training, to each other in the eyes of others. So, video-back link used in this particular form of training, forms another channel of feedback to the student and is an extremely powerful impact. All situations played out during the course and role-playing scenarios on harvested with clear role-playing instructions, and scenarios, “taken from a real-life” on the basis of spontaneously occurring dramas and conflicts are recorded on video.

Moreover, all the options played on the same script by different partners are recorded. After that, the video is watched in the group and undergoes integrated analysis to decide to what extent “The listener” has managed to hear his interlocutor, which were the strong points and which were the weak ones. Thus, the participants of the training, taking part in the role-playing situation, get the “objective”, impartial, free from the distorting effects of interpersonal perception, feedback “on their own behavior and its results”. This feedback allows them to take the position of an external observer, literally “see themselves through the eyes of another person”.

The training skills of active listening are determined in line with the three-level model analysis of human behavior on which the cognitive-behavioral training is based. These are cognitive, evaluative and behavioral levels of skill development.

**At the cognitive level** the participants are expected to express primarily free and accurate recognition of active listening in another, and then in their own behavior. Typically, this happens at first observation of the behavior of coaches, “Ah, I get it! When the coach was just figuring out why Helen was so reluctant to participate in group discussion, he actually was actively listening to her”. However, the more valuable “group training effect” is from revealing patterns, that is, examples of active listening in each other’s behavior. “You know, it was not easy to publicly admit that your criticisms in my address pisses me off balance. But today you are able to hear me, and I want to tell about all of this out loud”. Even greater progress toward success at the cognitive level of skill development, we note when such recognition of the “right model” takes place not only in the classroom directly, but also outside the training space. Very often it happens in the form of an insight – the participants tell about the “joy of recognition” examples of active listening in film characters, or participants of yes-

terday’s telecast, as well as in the daily conduct of their relatives or friends.

**The estimating level** accumulates positive experiences of the student during the training. They relate to the successful use of active listening in the first exercises, role-plays during the course, then – in their own daily professional and personal lives. Experiencing success from managing “conversation” with the partners in the educational training to better understand the situation and their companions in everyday life, gives participants the strength and confidence, further motivates them to learn. It is interesting to note that the greatest importance for success in students is their use of active listening in conjunction with the family environment – a spouse or children. Thus, active listening training for businessmen/businesswomen sometimes has a “by” therapeutic benefit – they have built relationships with the ones they love.

**Behavioral (the highest) level** of success is achieved by the development of active listening, first in the form of conscious, then unconscious use of active listening by the participants in situations that require it. Consciousness here means that there is a particular situation the student is able to make an informed choice – to use or not to use active listening and can later argue his choice or explain the result (cognitive level). A higher degree of skill development means conscious rejection of its use in the situations that do not require active listening (secular communication), or where it is contraindicated (ritual, highly standardized communication). And again – first in the training, in the classroom and in the intervals between them, then – beyond (in between training days, the training cycle is over). Reaching the level of behavioral acquisition of “the right model of active listening” fully demonstrates the effectiveness of the training as a whole.

## Conclusions

To sum up, we again refer to the question of mutual relevance of person-centered and cognitive-behavioral approaches. Is client-centered approach in the therapeutic interaction, formulated by Carl Rogers, relevant to training for active listening and can it be seamlessly incorporated into the process? Our argumentative evidence is based on the two premises set forth from the base of the first approach. First, person-centered approach goes beyond pure therapeutic relationship, while retaining its basic core: a man has in himself all the necessary resources for self-knowledge, self-concept changes and purposeful behavior. Second, there are three conditions that provide therapeutic personality change – congruency of the therapist, unconditional positive acceptance by the therapist and the therapist empathy to the client. In the context of business relationships between people

these conditions can also be considered, according to E. Meadows, as a kind of skills that provide for individual or joint goals achievement.

Rogers attributed these conditions to the necessary and sufficient ones, along with the other three conditions, namely: the presence of psychological contact between people, anxiety, vulnerability, suffering from one of the interviewees (the client), empathic understanding and congruence, reported by the therapist and perceived by the client at least to some degree (Rogers, 1957). And if the presence of psychological contact between the partners in a business relationship obviously contributes to the skill of active listening in at least one of them, we do not have that confidence in respect of congruence. According to C. Rogers, in the therapeutic relationship the therapist must be a congruent, genuine, integrated personality. This means the therapist staying himself, even in cases that are not ideal for psychotherapy, for example, when the therapist feels fear of his client, or is too focused on his own problems. But C. Rogers recognizes that the extent to which the therapist must inform the client about his internal state, is extremely complex. We proceed from the assumption that for successful active listening in business interaction, concentration on the own problems, as well as thinking and assessment of the information perceived from the partner on the problem under discussion is highly undesirable. In this respect, external verbal reactions generated by this inner concentration are especially destructive. T. Gordon called these barriers of communication, combining great diversity in 12 groups (Gordon, 2001, 2008). These are: (1) order or reference; (2) warning or threat; (3) obsessive teaching; (4) tips, tricks; (5) lecture; (6) condemnation, criticism, accusation; (7) praise, approval; (8) abuse, humiliation; (9) interpretation, diagnosis; (10) reassurance, compassion, comfort, support; (11) clarification, questioning; (12) leading away from the problem, distraction, joke. The overall effect of these actions is the same: we do not hear what we are said.

Therefore, in terms of cognitive-behavioral training in active listening the main emphasis is put on emotional stability, tolerance, on the one hand, and on the maximum concentration on what is told by the partner. Often, in a special exercise, when, acting to the instructions, “The Speaker” reports the business problem in an accusatory manner, suggesting that the the problem might be caused the partner, the participant performing the role of “The Listener”, is easy to succumb to provocations and start to feel guilty, or conversely, angry and blame in response. In the following analysis, once they are convinced that it is their emotional involvement that has prevented them from hearing the problem of the partner, they are suggested several images, metaphors that might help them understand the “correct behavior model” at the cognitive level – “to become

a mirror in which the interviewee sees only himself”, “to remove oneself from the screen”. In other words, we need to consciously distract our thoughts, feelings, experiences, “here and now”. This, we believe, to some extent is contrary to the condition which Rogers marks as congruence. Moreover, in the course of subsequent exercises and role-playing the participants note that the ultimate focus on what they say and how they talk, stating the problem, has an unexpected side effect. This “information focus” allows “not to get emotionally involved” with the flowing, highly volatile web of momentary feelings and relationships, while remaining stable in the problem, keeping attention in the field of the information received from the partner. We can conclude that, whereas for the notions of empathy and unconditional acceptance we have managed to demonstrate a sufficient degree of relevance and organic involvement in the frame of person-centered approach incorporating into cognitive-behavioral model of training in active listening, the constraint of congruence in these terms leaves room for debates.

In conclusion, we would like to state, once and again, that person-centered approach has a sound capacity even in such a seemingly highly pragmatic human relations field as business. A businessman who has acquired the skill of listening to his business partners, becomes quickly aware of the increase in business efficiency and personal realization.

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