

People Skills: Probably the World's Most Underused Resource

Many people talk about international understanding, yet how can we achieve an understanding on an international level when we are not prepared to understand our neighbours, colleagues, friends and family? It is all very well spouting opinions about what other people should do when we at home are not prepared to pay regard to those closest to us in both the physical and emotional sense.

We are busy people, caught up in the problems of our own lives. What does it matter if we offend the person next door, our children, our friends, our partners or the people we work with? They understand no harm was intended and they know we like and love them really. Or do they? And what about the people we barge past in a hurry to catch our usual train or bus in the mornings or after work? Or the people we see performing mundane jobs on our behalf or the people serving us?

How many of us truly take note of those we pass in the street or the person in front of us in the queue or the person reaching for the same bunch of bananas in the supermarket? How many of us walk around in our own protective bubble, determined not to connect in any sense to those about us?

Why can't we create a small community in the area around us? Why do we see other people as potential enemies rather than potential friends? Why do we concentrate on differences rather than similarities? And when there are differences, why don't we celebrate them (assuming they are not of the anti-social kind)?

My dream is to have a united community no matter what sex, faith, culture, ability or age we are: a community that looks out for its members, drawn together in everyday life, not in response to a local tragedy or major crisis. A community where each of its members feels it belongs; a community that we can call home.

To pick on one group, the elderly, I'd like to recount some memories. When I was 19, I was in hospital for a minor operation and was the youngest on the women's ward. Opposite me lay an old woman. I couldn't see her at all clearly because I didn't have my glasses; I couldn't get out of bed as I was recovering from a general anaesthetic. I wanted to show that I was friendly and so waved at her. I wasn't sure if she was looking my way so I did this twice more but saw no answering wave. I felt embarrassed. Perhaps she hadn't seen me, or perhaps she didn't want to know. I wished I hadn't bothered – it was unpleasant to have a gesture of friendship rejected. But that evening her daughter visited her and after they'd been talking for a while, her daughter came over to my bed and asked if I'd waved at her mother. Being only 19 and still in childhood mode I wondered if I'd done something wrong so prepared myself to be

told off for pestering an old woman. But no. Her daughter was thanking me for having waved. Her mother had poor sight and wasn't sure if she'd seen what she thought she'd seen – and hadn't risked a wave back.

A couple of decades later, I came out of a local gym to sit on an armchair while I waited for my husband. An old man was seated in the same area and I went to sit by him. I said hello and we started to chat. He said he couldn't hear very well so I moved to sit on the other side of him. He said he was deaf in both ears. I laughed and said, 'Oh dear,' and he laughed with me. I leaned closer and spoke more loudly so that he could hear me. He told me about his life and his trips to Norway. When my husband joined us, I introduced him and the three of us chatted for a couple of minutes before we left. As we were leaving, the man said, to my astonishment, 'Thank you for talking to me.' As though I'd done him a favour without finding the conversation enjoyable myself.

I do smile when I pass an elderly person in the street or shop, should they look up. Most don't. They don't expect anyone to take any notice of them. Is this what I have to look forward to in my old age? I can give a smile without slowing my pace, so the effort required in being friendly only involves the energy to move a few facial muscles. So why don't we all do it? I admit I don't do it every single time I am out; sometimes my own cares overtake me. But generally, I do.

I have also found that when my husband was pushing me in a wheelchair, no one's gaze met mine. Comparing this to when I wasn't in a wheelchair, I recognised a difference. I find it is also hard to meet someone's gaze when I am walking and they are in a wheelchair. They do not expect to be acknowledged. Many of us go about our lives without connecting at all with the people around us; many of us will probably miss a friendly smile just because we are not alert enough to notice – or we may regard friendly overtures with suspicion.

Some people shun others because of some physical difference to them and would not want to be seen with them perhaps fearing it lowers their social status. Why do we have a hierarchy of people that we are happy to be seen with and those we are embarrassed by? I always think: That person could be me. What do you think?

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