

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 668

CG 011 254

AUTHOR Strickland, Ben; Arnn, John  
TITLE The Interpersonal Contract: A Vehicle for Change.  
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Texas Personnel and Guidance Association (Brownsville, Texas, October 8-11, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Behavior Patterns; Communication Skills; Contracts; Friendship; Guides; Human Relations; \*Intercommunication; \*Interpersonal Competence; Interpersonal Relationship; \*Mutual Intelligibility; Nonverbal Communication; Relationship

ABSTRACT

All interpersonal relationships are a function of the basic beliefs, expectations, and reactions of the people involved. These conditions may not be written or even verbalized formally, but they exist nonetheless and are as binding as any legal contract. Giving specific and intentional consideration to interpersonal contracts and utilizing them as such can have the advantage of providing a tangible structure for reducing confusion and helping to maintain, improve, and evaluate significant relationships.  
(Author)

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THE INTERPERSONAL CONTRACT: A VEHICLE FOR CHANGE

Ben Strickland and John Arnn

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For the last two decades, interpersonal relationships have been the focal point of literature in the helping professions, as well as a continuing source of interest for the general population. As a result, considerable time and energy have been spent studying the subject; it has been dissected, grafted, and transplanted repeatedly. A multitude of approaches has been required in order to perform this study, and many of these have provided indispensable information for the continuing improvement of interpersonal relationships.

Much of the research in the subject area has been conducted by professionals for professionals. Consequently, many assumptions have been made about the preparation and training of those who read the literature. Many approaches require that the reader/consumer have highly developed skills in process observation, psychometrics, interaction analysis, interpersonal change, etc. This limits the application of significant research to those with the necessary skills in helping professions and tends to be of limited value to the general population. The person on the street generally has access only to popular publications, which too often reflect fads, provide a wide array of activities without the framework for effective utilization, and leave the reader unsure of direction for application and continuity.

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At the risk of being the subject of our own criticism, we would like to present a more simplistic approach to understanding and expanding interpersonal relationships. In our approach, we will employ a vehicle called the interpersonal contract.

The assumption underlying interpersonal contracts is that all relationships are affected by certain conditions. These conditions include rules and regulations for interaction, expectations of that interaction, limits to the interaction, and consequences arising from nonfulfillment of the conditions. All collectively comprise what we call the interpersonal contract. While these contracts are unwritten for most people, they tend to be as binding as any written legal contract, and certainly are adhered to with much greater consistency. Whether these contracts are written or unwritten, conscious or unconscious, productive or nonproductive, they exist nonetheless.

Before we examine contract conditions more specifically, let's consider some of the advantages of using interpersonal contracts. The most important advantage is that much of the confusion surrounding relationships can be reduced. We believe that there is nothing magical or mystical about interpersonal relationships. Contracts tend to simplify the conditions of relationships and identify the priorities and goals of the individuals involved.

A second advantage is that it provides a specific process for maintaining, improving, and evaluating significant relationships.

By the same token contracts assist in identifying the extent to which specific relationships are significant. As needs and expectations change, it is helpful to review goals, obstacles, and strategies for relating successfully within one's various contracts and to determine the impact of investments made. This assists the individual in investing time and activity in appropriate directions and degrees. In case the point isn't obvious, we are referring to all relationships in all settings. Contracts exist wherever people interact. Some are just more important to each individual than others.

A third advantage of the interpersonal contract is that it provides a tangible vehicle which can be used in any situation. It can be a point of discussion in the home, a teaching tool in the classroom, a learning strategy in the helping relationship, and so on. It can be graphically illustrated as well as verbalized. There is something reassuring about having something in-hand to assist one in working through the confusion, apprehension, and anticipation encountered in relationships.

#### Conditions of interpersonal contracts

In case the notion of interpersonal contracts seems too mechanical or legalistic, let us reiterate that we are merely describing the conditions which already exist in all interpersonal relationships. Although these are not usually set down formally, as in a marriage contract, they do exist and are probably monitored more closely than the conditions in most other contracts. We are

focusing on specifics for the purpose of clarification and illustration, not to suggest that relationships should be viewed mechanically or legalistically.

What are some of the conditions of interpersonal contracts? Generally there are at least four: basic premises, expectations, small print, and counter-contract options. Basic premises relate to an individual's beliefs about himself and others as persons. These beliefs are more basic than views on politics, religion, and economics. Included in basic premises are an individual's beliefs regarding his own value or worth as a person and the worth of others as persons, beliefs about motivation, beliefs concerning what people are entitled to obtain as a result of relationships, and so on. For example, some individuals feel entitled to approval while others feel that they must earn approval. Because of the large degree of abstraction, subjectivity, and uniqueness which could exist in relation to basic premises, we will make only this brief reference to these premises and encourage each person to identify his own for the purpose of better understanding his relationships. It is in this area where many people get bogged down in relationships. They begin to discuss their beliefs, discover variations, disagree as to definitions and priorities, and may never get beyond that point. What began as a discussion of interpersonal relationships deteriorates to a debate because each person expects the other to agree at least in part, if not totally, with his own basic beliefs. In reality, acceptance that their beliefs are different is a more functional

goal than futile attempts at agreement. If we seem to be suggesting that basic premises should be dealt with casually in relationships, this is not the case. Because they are less subject to change, however, we will focus on conditions more easily identifiable and more subject to modification. The need and difficulty in identifying these in no way reduces the importance that they play in the relationship. What are your basic premises about people and the relationships they generate?

A second condition of interpersonal contracts is expectations, of which there are at least two components. One component in expectations deals with rules for interaction. In other words, each person has preferences in terms of how he or she would like to be able to relate to others and how others relate in turn. Each person expects certain rules and regulations to be followed, some do's and don'ts to be adhered to, and some limitations to be respected. For example, a teacher has different expectations in a relationship with a student than in a relationship with an administrator. Some people expect rigid adherence to the rules of interaction, others are more flexible. Regardless of the nature of the rules for interaction in any contract, once identified, acknowledged, and implemented, these provide some reassurance to those involved. Some people, in fact, do not feel comfortable in relationships until they feel that their own rules for interaction have been somehow communicated and are understood and accepted by others and vice versa. This is a major part of the "getting to know" process.

What are your expectations as to rules for interaction? Do you expect consistency or flexibility? Will you settle for boredom or do you demand excitement? More specifically, how do you prefer to make it all happen? Do you prefer to entertain or to be entertained? Do you prefer to assert or to listen? If you will examine your relationships carefully, you will realize that you do have preferences as to the rules of interaction governing your relationships.

A second component of expectation deals with strokes or what a person expects to get from the relationship. Each person expects to gain something from each relationship. Respect may be expected in some, acceptance in others, and perhaps affection in others. This is what is frequently called the "pay off" in relationships. We feel entitled to get something from each of our relationships, and our satisfaction with each relationship is a function of our expectations being fulfilled. While these stroke expectations may vary greatly in terms of direction and degree, they exist in all relationships.

Generally speaking, what are your stroke expectations? Do you generally prefer physical affection, or would you feel more comfortable with a letter of appreciation written in third person? Do you expect a standing ovation or a subtle smile? While stroke expectations may sound immature, egotistical, inconsiderate, selfish, or anything else negative, these should be viewed as natural and normal for each person. While one person's



stroke expectations may be more realistic and responsible than another's, each person's stroke expectations seem to him or her to be logical, rational, normal, and necessary.

A third condition of the interpersonal contract is what we will call small print. Basically, small print specifies what a person feels entitled to do in the event that another person fails to meet an expectation or violates other conditions of the contract in some way. Small print, though perhaps embarrassing to many, is one of the surest ways to ascertain the presence of interpersonal contracts. Small print generally involves some kind of retaliation varying from ignoring someone to an outright attack. Any time thoughts like: "I deserved better than that." occur, it is obvious that a contract does exist and that it has been either neglected or violated in some way.

What do you do when you feel that others important to you are not fulfilling your stroke expectations adequately? Do you withdraw, give them the "silent treatment," pout, or do you throw a tantrum? Do you make a play for sympathy or do you punish? As previously suggested, most people are more embarrassed by exposure of their small print than by any other contract condition. Small print reveals our childish or child-like side, which is as natural and normal as our adult side. It is most helpful that each individual involved in a relationship understands not only his or her own small print but also that of the other members. This is necessary in order to avoid spending excessive



energy in feeling guilty or being confused by the results of that small print in action.

The final category in interpersonal contract conditions provides for self-defense. It is that of counter-contract options. Counter-contract options are designed, as the name implies, to counter or minimize the impact of another's contract. In other words, if a person attempts to impose his or her contract on us without our consent, we simply employ measures which we hope will minimize the impact of that imposition. Naturally, the kind of options selected would be a function of the nature and importance of the contract, not to mention the size of the person with whom the contract exists.

What kind of counter-contract options do you generally employ? Do you retreat or attack? Do you attempt to disarm the person gently and tactfully, or do you employ a "verbal 2 X 4." If you will carefully observe your actions, you will discover that you do have an array of counter-contract options which you employ with varying degrees of success, depending upon the interaction style of the other person.

In case you don't have a perspective as to your counter-contract options, or of small print for that matter, you could profit greatly by asking others for clarification. This may sound a bit foolish; but, ironically, others are usually more aware of our counter-contract options and small print than we are. If we think our contracts with others are filled with

secrecy, we are only kidding ourselves. Our contracts, or at least most of the conditions of our contracts, are open for the world to observe. Assuming that an honest answer is available, the best method for beginning to identify contract conditions is through feedback from those we value most, who have been exposed to our contract conditions.

### Contract clarification

In case the concept of interpersonal contracts and conditions is still a bit fuzzy to you, perhaps it would be helpful to employ the provided sample contract with a person whose help you need and value. You will notice that the sample contract contains several possible choices under each category. Before you ask for help in clarifying your contract, select the options which you feel fit you best and indicate their priority. If none of the options listed seem appropriate, add your own.

After you have made your selections or additions, ask someone you know to share with you their impressions of your conditions. Don't argue if you disagree. Listen and learn. Remember others' impressions are valid. Don't discount those which don't agree with yours. Carefully follow the instructions attached to the sample contract in order to make the best use of the instrument.

### Some concluding thoughts

Although we have only suggested limited examples for using personal contracts, we would like to encourage your use of the

concept with all of your relationships, or at least with those which are important to you. We have found, as previously suggested, that interpersonal contracts provide a helpful strategy for developing, maintaining, or improving any relationship. Contracts minimize the time frequently required to develop relationships, provide the support and confidence necessary to maintain relationships, and enable the participants to develop appropriate directions in improving or expanding relationships.

Again, another benefit of contract use is that it assists the participants in determining the quality of the relationship, as well as the significance of the relationships that are important. The contract indicates a willingness on the part of both participants to invest the necessary amount of time and energy required for contract development, a willingness to change or modify contract conditions, and a commitment to share the responsibility for anything involved in the relationship. When relationships are not important, however, contracts can clearly illustrate the lack of investment. Consequently, contracts can be helpful devices for screening, as well as for expansion.

### Instructions For Sample Interpersonal Contract:

The contract format can be used both as a general awareness instrument involving several persons and as an avenue for expanding specific relationships. In either case, the following procedures should be followed:

1. Read each question carefully and thoughtfully and write your answer on a separate sheet, thereby keeping the contract form clear for further use.
2. Select a person(s) to answer the same questions about you from his or her perspective. Generally speaking, it's best for you to volunteer the same information that you are seeking.
3. Rather than relying totally on your memory, record the process of input and exchange for future reference and clarification by taking notes, taping, etc.
4. After each person has completed his/her answers, compare and discuss all responses. Be particularly attentive to those answers which are least alike since these indicate differing perspectives. Remember, the more information you can glean, the better you will understand your impact and your contract(s).
5. Decide what to do about your contract(s). This must be done cooperatively. You may decide to leave things the way they are; or both you and the other person(s) may decide to make some significant changes. At any rate, decide what you want to do, how to do it, and when to do it. Make a new list of expectations, which should predictably emerge from your plans for change.
6. Do not:
  - a. Initiate contract exploration unless you are willing to commit the necessary time and energy.
  - b. Use this instrument as a game. For example, don't do this with someone whom you don't care about. To do so is a sure way to end up in confusion or conflict with no interpersonal gains.
  - c. Ask for help or input from others unless you plan to use it. For example, coercing others into changing their answers to agree with yours or denying their input all together is a waste of time.

## SAMPLE INTERPERSONAL CONTRACT

Generally speaking,

I. What are your expectations of others with whom you relate?

What kinds of strokes do you prefer or expect from others?

- |  |                       |
|--|-----------------------|
| _____ 1. physical affection            | _____ 6. smile        |
| _____ 2. compliment                    | _____ 7. support      |
| _____ 3. letter of appreciation        | _____ 8. subserviance |
| _____ 4. applause, standing<br>ovation | _____ 9. friendship   |
| _____ 5. acceptance                    | _____ 10. other _____ |

II. What kind of input do you provide in relationships?

- a. What do you do to encourage or allow others to make you feel important as a person? (How do you get strokes from others? What do you do to earn your strokes from others?)

- |                                |                                 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| _____ 1. informing, analyzing  | _____ 8. supporting             |
| _____ 2. entertaining          | _____ 9. winning                |
| _____ 3. organizing, producing | _____ 10. being creative        |
| _____ 4. cooperating           | _____ 11. charismatic influence |
| _____ 5. asserting             | _____ 12. coercing              |
| _____ 6. being helpful         | _____ 13. being vulnerable      |
| _____ 7. asking honestly       | _____ 14. other _____           |

- b. What kinds of strokes do you prefer to give? (See examples in I.)

III. What do you do if others don't fulfill your expectations?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| _____ 1. pout                          | _____ 8. attack, punish others             |
| _____ 2. send a bill, foreclose        | _____ 9. try harder                        |
| _____ 3. punish yourself, feel<br>hurt | _____ 10. re-evaluate, re-organize         |
| _____ 4. write them off                | _____ 11. try something new                |
| _____ 5. throw a tantrum               | _____ 12. seek other sources of<br>strokes |
| _____ 6. coerce                        | _____ 13. other _____                      |
| _____ 7. withdraw                      |  |

IV. What do you do to prevent others from imposing their contracts on you?

- |                          |                           |                          |                         |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. engage in fantasy      | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. out smart            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. attack first           | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. avoid                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. overpower with words   | <input type="checkbox"/> | 9. give honest feedback |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. play authority, parent | <input type="checkbox"/> | 10. distract            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. nothing, acquiesce     | <input type="checkbox"/> | 11. ask for help        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. play dumb              | <input type="checkbox"/> | 12. other _____         |