
Improving Employees' Interpersonal Communication Competencies: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Companies that recognize the relationship between employee engagement and business success will seek ways to foster and facilitate workers' emotional well-being. One way to encourage employee engagement is to provide training in interpersonal communication. This research analyzes what one U.S.-based company is doing to achieve that goal. The company and the evolution of its communication training program are described, with a focus on an interpersonal communication component. Methods used for evaluating learning outcomes are outlined, along with some results. Finally, this study proposes several implications of this case study for business communication professionals.

Keywords

business practices, case studies, corporate training, interpersonal communication

The work environment has long been recognized as having a profound effect on employee performance. Workers' attitudes toward their managers, coworkers, and organizations are usually reflected in their output. In *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*, Amabile and Kramer (2011) describe the effects of employee engagement in detail. They studied 238 professionals in seven different companies in three industries, charting the employees'

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psychological state each day for 2 years, as reflected in electronic diary entries. Their analysis revealed the subjects' "inner work lives"—perceptions, emotions, and motivations that they experienced as they made sense of their workday (p. 20). The study found that employees' inner work lives influenced performance on four dimensions: creativity, productivity, work commitment, and collegiality.

Amabile and Kramer's (2011) findings, though impressive enough to make their book a business bestseller, are not surprising. Classic research by Herzberg (1968) demonstrated that a worker's motivation to do excellent work is not tied to pay or benefits. Instead, Herzberg found that motivation is the result of having interesting, challenging work that allows an employee to achieve and to feel recognized.

Research by Ricketta (2008) exemplifies more recent studies that confirm a direct, causal relationship between work performance and factors such as satisfaction, motivation, and a positive attitude. Lim, Cortina, and Magley (2008), taking a different tack in their research, found that incivility and feelings of disrespect negatively effected job satisfaction and attitude toward work. Beyond effecting workers' emotions, interpersonal relationships can effect career paths. That is, companies often reward employees who have positive influences on coworkers' attitude toward work. A study by Cross and Parker (2004) found that employees who energized coworkers were given better performance evaluations and were promoted faster. Reinsch and Gardner (2011) cited the results of a national survey of senior business executives, confirming that workers with strong interpersonal skills are considered for additional promotions. Sandelands and Boudens (2000) demonstrated that "the meaning of work derives from the connections with coworkers, not from the work itself" (p. 46). They concluded that workers perform better when they are happily engaged in what they do.

Companies that recognize the relationship between employee engagement and business success may seek ways to foster and facilitate workers' emotional well-being. One approach to encouraging and supporting employee engagement is to provide training in interpersonal communication. Helping employees develop healthy workplace relationships makes good business sense. The purpose of this research is to describe what one U.S.-based company is doing to achieve that goal.

A cogent rationale for qualitative studies in our discipline was proposed by Tucker, Powell, and Meyer (1995). They argued that qualitative studies can be important contributions to the corpus of business communication research because "qualitative research methods can answer numerous questions about the who, what, when, where, why, and how of communication" (p. 395). Furthermore, a qualitative study can be justified because of "the opportunity it provides to get in touch with the feelings, concerns, and needs of the business community" (p. 396). The following sections present a study of a company and its commitment to employee learning and development. The information was gathered during extensive, multiple interviews over a 14-month period with six decision makers (a senior officer, two directors, a department head, and two instructional designers). The company and the evolution of its communication training program are described below, with a focus on an interpersonal communication component. Evaluation of learning outcomes is a key step in any training or education effort, and the company's evaluation methods are also outlined, along with some

findings. Finally, several implications of this case study for instructors of business communication are identified.

Company Profile and Role of the IT Training Department

The company profiled below has a marquee name but is privately held. Thus, although the factual information reported here is accurate, all identifying information about the company and individuals interviewed has been omitted, in compliance with the non-disclosure conditions under which this research was conducted. The company is the largest in its industry, with annual revenues exceeding US\$10 billion. It operates in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. It is included in the Forbes list of the 500 largest private companies in America. If publicly traded, this company would rank in the top 200 on *Fortune*'s list of the 500 largest public companies in America.

The scope of this study is the IT (information technology) division of the company, which consists of about 1,300 knowledge workers—network engineers, application developers, programmers, managers, and project leaders. Their work requires them to find creative solutions to complex problems. They are regularly offered training and development opportunities to enhance both technical skills and professional competencies. The training and development department is considered a workforce service, and the goals are learning as well as performance management.

Prior to 2010, training offered to the core IT workforce focused primarily on technical topics and leadership. A member of the IT Learning Team described the program as instructor led, built internally, and time consuming. Early in 2010, the IT Learning Team launched a different model and an expanded approach. That summer they conducted an extensive needs analysis, interviewing 60 senior managers across the corporation to determine the most important IT training needs. During the interviews they asked, “tell us about your A players,” in an attempt to identify best practices and to determine the gaps between expected and actual performance.

The interview results indicated that the Learning Team needed to go wide. They identified eight soft skills that the senior managers believed contributed the most to employee performance, and communication was at the top of the list. After following up with the interviewees to determine what they meant by communication, the Learning Team identified specific topics, including virtual and face-to-face meetings, formal presentations, team skills, email, and interpersonal communication. The senior managers complained that the IT workforce were generally uncomfortable while speaking, had difficulty getting their points across, and would speak over the heads of their corporate business partners (nontechnical). When speaking with colleagues and team members, they had difficulty identifying key points and frequently “got lost in the weeds” of detail.

The corporate culture is “fun and friendly, where teamwork rules”; flexible; and collaborative. Employees are expected to socialize early and often while also being driven problem solvers. Thus, the senior managers envisioned an IT workforce consisting of staff who do not need to be told what to develop but are aware, proactive,

and interactive with their end users. The Learning Team's investigation had clearly identified a business need.

Development of the Communication Training Program

The Learning Team decided that rather than try to use internal resources, they would look for external vendors, subject matter experts who would partner with the team to provide more dynamic programs. This author has provided communication consulting and training as an independent contractor with the company for a number of years. In December 2010, a senior manager of the IT business unit requested a proposal for a module in the communication training program menu that was under development. The focus of the module was daily workforce communication. The learning goal was clear, concise communication among IT professionals as well as between IT professionals and corporate (nontechnical) people in informal, everyday interactions. I began working with the company's instructional designers to hammer out a half-day session that would be offered to a maximum of 20 employees. Program development included soliciting ideas and real-life examples from interviews with department managers as well as the Learning Team. During this period, I learned more about the corporate culture, jargon and acronyms, values, and business goals, so I could reference them during program delivery.

After 4 months of preparation, we rolled out a pilot. The session participants included IT professionals as well as the managers who would be deciding who to send to future training sessions. Postprogram evaluations were solicited, and adjustments were made to the program materials. The official launch was 2 months later, in May 2011, and sessions continue to be offered. Due to the small number of participants who may attend each session (20) and the large pool of eligible employees (1,300), sessions are scheduled as frequently as logistical factors allow.

The training program's content and materials are proprietary and therefore cannot be described in detail here. Briefly, the program focuses on daily interactions with three audiences: superiors, peers in IT, and nontechnical colleagues in the company. Concrete tactics and strategies are presented, along with a range of realistic examples. The program offers opportunities for discussion and practice and ends with the trainees developing action plans for applying what they learned.

Training Evaluation Methods and Results

Feedback from the participants is solicited immediately postprogram via surveymonkey.com and again after 60 to 90 days. The first survey asks for satisfaction ratings of the instructor, materials, topics, and activities. It also asks participants which parts of the program they found to be most valuable and what changes they recommend. The subsequent survey attempts to determine the extent to which participants have actually changed their behaviors because of the training. The following is an example of an item in a posttraining survey:

Task	Behavior			
	<i>I attempted and completed this task with good results</i>	<i>I attempted and completed this task but had difficulty</i>	<i>I attempted this task but was unable to complete it</i>	<i>I have not attempted this task</i>
Avoided jargon and used analogies to enhance the message				
Employed active listening techniques such as clarifying questions				
Used different sequences of ideas based on my message's purpose				

Open-ended survey responses capture comments and recommendations for future programs. One participant wrote, "This is a very practical topic. It's one of those things you learn and use immediately. It was helpful and I would recommend it to anyone at any level to enroll." Another wrote,

Yes, I would recommend it. Especially good were instructions on how best to communicate upward. As our workforce (and the U.S. workforce in general) continues to diversify, classes and/or continued education courses like this are a real necessity. Please continue to offer this type of in-house training. Thanks again.

Because the Learning Team recognizes that self-report of behavioral change may not be an accurate assessment of training impact, they also solicit feedback from the trainees' supervisors. According to a member of the Learning Team, anecdotes and stories about trainees' behavior are considered to be valid evidence of a program's effectiveness. She called this approach the success case method. When asked whether any attempt is made to measure outcomes at the corporate level, such as return on investment, the Learning Team member said that would be very difficult to quantify. Furthermore, she said that her human resources colleagues working in other corporations agree that tracking the effects of training on retention, profitability, or similar metrics is impractical, if not impossible.

Nevertheless, employees who attempt to change their behavior after attending training are recognized and rewarded. Communication is a key competency in performance reviews. If a supervisor rates an employee as higher than satisfactory on a performance evaluation scale, this rating can effect salary adjustments and even promotion considerations. One supervisor, for example, commended his direct report for contributing to discussions during meetings when, prior to the communication training, he had typically remained silent.

Next Steps for the Communication Training Program

At this time, the interpersonal communication module is one of four in the communication training program, with modules on other topics under development. As for improving the module on daily workplace interactions, adjustments are made as needed. That is, if the postprogram evaluations show a trend—if, for example, a significant number of trainees say they tried but are struggling—then the training program is changed to improve the outcomes.

To date, the IT Learning Team has accumulated 1 year's worth of data from the evaluations. Because results indicate that only 25% of the trainees who responded to the evaluations stated that they either do not remember or have not applied any of the strategies or techniques presented, the interpersonal communication module is considered to be highly successful.

Going forward, the Learning Team plans to launch an effort to encourage the trainees' supervisors to reinforce the training. Limited resources prevent them from putting a formal system in place, but their philosophy is that 50% of the value of any learning comes from postlearning implementation. According to this view, another 25% comes from manager coaching and feedback. Only 25% of the value comes from time spent in the classroom. One strategy being developed to enlist the supervisors' support is an impact map that will tell the supervisors about a training module's objectives and topics and then suggest ways to reinforce the learning outcomes.

On a larger scale, the Learning Team is developing a blended learning model for its training program. According to this model, a face-to-face (or virtual) class is considered a live kickoff. Within 2 months after the class, trainees are asked to participate in a series of online interactive sessions, such as a topic blog, brief phone Q&A (Question and Answer), simulation, discussion board, and group assignment. The department's senior managers, not professional trainers, lead these activities. The stated goals of the follow-up activities are building self-awareness and reinforcement of the learning. Benefits of the blended learning model are that it is a student-owned time commitment, is self-paced, and has a flexible format that builds the trainees' skills. Furthermore, the model builds the skills of the senior managers and project managers who lead the webinars, manage the blogs, and conduct the Q&A phone sessions.

The company that is the subject of this study provides a noteworthy example of how businesses support the improvement of their employees' interpersonal communication competencies. A limitation of this study should be pointed out, however. There are no long-term metrics concerning the effectiveness of the communication training program that could contribute to our knowledge of the effects of training on retention, improved customer service, or profitability.

Conclusions and Implications for Business Communication Professionals

This research described a U.S.-based company that dedicates considerable resources to the improvement of employees' communication skills, particularly their interpersonal

skills. Three apparent implications of this research are relevant to business communication professionals: (a) analysis of real business examples is a valuable classroom activity, (2) students need to recognize the role of daily workplace interactions in productivity and job satisfaction, and (3) companies benefit from the consulting services of subject matter experts in business communication.

Companies such as the one described here could be easily studied in the business communication classroom as real examples of best practices and as a springboard for analysis and discussion of the role of interpersonal communication in business. Case study is a widely accepted learning tool in business schools, but business communication professors may not use it as frequently as our colleagues may in other business disciplines. The Association for Business Communication (ABC) has a record of promoting case study. In 1998, for example, an ABC-sponsored journal, *Business Communication Quarterly*, published a special issue on business and management communication cases. The issue included 15 cases relevant to workplace communication, appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate courses. The cases were accompanied by teaching notes and student sample documents. In the special issue's introduction, Rogers and Rymer (1998) listed key benefits of case study:

- Cases provide a context for communicating
- Cases enable active learning
- Cases present communication as social action
- Cases show the collaborative nature of communication
- Cases integrate special topics like interculturalism and ethics
- Cases show communication effectiveness as contingent
- Cases offer scenes for testing theories and models (p. 10)

Rogers and Rymer (1998) concluded that “case pedagogy and research are very important parts of disciplinary activity” (p. 23).

The following year, the ABC's Teaching Committee sponsored a column in *Business Communication Quarterly* that explained how to use cases in our classes (Dyruud & Worley, 1999). The column provided several examples, ranging from the theoretical to the pragmatic. It offered resources for more cases, both short and comprehensive, including useful websites and a bibliography of sources dealing with the case method. Dyruud and Worley noted as benefits that “cases rapidly engage student interest, help them practice discussion and decision-making skills in an arena that is conducive to experimentation, and require a high level of interaction between students and instructors” (p. 76). Thus, business communication educators generally agree that studying real business cases such as the one described here adds value to our classroom teaching.

A second implication of this research is that interpersonal communication appears to be just as important, if not more so, than business writing or making professional presentations in the business curriculum. Over the past 30 years, the literature has consistently indicated that recruiters consider a candidate's communication skills to be among the most important criteria for hiring (Hopkins, Raymond, & Carlson, 2011;

Velasco, 2012). A study by Kirmer and Sellers (2009) attempted to clarify which communication skills recruiters valued most highly. After analyzing survey responses from 94 campus recruiters, Kirmer and Sellers found that oral communication skills—formal speaking, teamwork, interpersonal communication, and listening—rated highest. Hynes and Sigmar (2009) also administered a survey to approximately 100 campus recruiters representing 45 businesses and government agencies in order to determine the relative importance of various communication skills. Their results were consistent with those of the studies described earlier in this paragraph—the recruiters ranked courses in daily workplace relationships and team communication as more important for success in their companies than courses in business writing, presentations, office technology, and intercultural business communication. Job Outlook 2012, a national survey of recruiters conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, also found that the “ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside of the organization” ranked higher (#2) than the ability to write reports (#9) on a list of important skills for new hires to possess (as cited in Koc, 2011, pp. 18-19).

The company profiled here focuses on improving the interpersonal communication skills of its IT workforce. However, research indicates that workers in all industries and businesses, not just IT, can benefit from communication training. The Center for Professional Excellence at York College of Pennsylvania commissions an annual survey of more than 600 human resources professionals and business leaders to gauge their perceptions of their entry-level employees. The results of the 2012 survey suggest that the majority believe their new hires lack professionalism. The traits mentioned most often by the respondents as being characteristic of professional employees were “personal interaction skills, including courtesy and respect” (34%), and “the ability to communicate, which includes listening skills” (25%). Similarly, among the traits associated by the respondents with “unprofessionalism” was “poor communication skills, including poor grammar” (21%; Center for Professional Excellence at York College of Pennsylvania, 2012, pp. 19-24).

Since less than half of the survey respondents in the York College study reported that their companies have training programs on professional behavior, these results imply that colleges should attempt to foster professionalism among their students. Thus, a course in interpersonal communication seems appropriate for students who are preparing for a business career. While typical undergraduate business degree programs offer a course or two in writing and formal speaking, a course dedicated to interpersonal communication or daily workplace interactions is rarer. At my university, such a course was launched a year ago as a core component of a business communication minor, and it has become so popular that during enrollment periods, the sections fill before any other business communication course offered. Apparently, students recognize what the company profiled above recognizes: that daily workplace communication is a key to success.

A third implication of this study is that business communication professionals should consider participating in corporate consulting and training activities. Barker and Camarata (1998) argued that communication is an important component of

learning organizations, and that business communication professionals must be committed to helping such organizations achieve these goals. Barker and Camarata presented a case study of an organization that used embedded communication and relationship building in an effort to remain a learning organization. Implications of their research included that

communication classes can play a major role in developing student appreciation and acceptance of learning organizations by continuing to provide the necessary theory and skills from a relation-based perspective. Professors of communication encouraging an integrated view of organizational, corporate, managerial, and business communication may produce the generative learning needed for tomorrow's organizations and members. (p. 462)

In summary, this research has described a corporation that recognizes the centrality and criticality of interpersonal communication competencies for workforce productivity and engagement. Studying actual business cases that demonstrate the importance of communication informs our teaching. Business communication educators who collaborate with companies and other organizations are helping to improve the business world into which we send our students.

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Bio

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