Business Communication Quarterly
75(4) 449–452

DOI: 10.1177/1080569912458966
http://bcq.sagepub.com
SAGE

Interpersonal Communication in the Workplace: A Largely Unexplored Region

Sam H. DeKay, Section Editor[1,2]

Recent research has identified interpersonal communication skills as critical attributes for new employees and more experienced workers seeking promotion. However, despite the significance of interpersonal communication in the workplace, our knowledge of these skills and how they may be taught is limited. The two articles comprising this theme section are intended to extend our understanding of these skills.

Nineteenth-century maps of the African continent—at least those printed in the United States and Europe—contain a rather strange entry in the central section of that land mass. If you consult one of these old maps, you will notice, south of the "Mountains of the Moon" and north of the land of Moologa, a large territory labeled the UNEXPLORED REGION. Apparently, there yet remained a portion of the continent unoccupied by the soldiers and merchants of colonial powers.

The topic of this themed section, Interpersonal Communication in the Workplace, also resembles a largely "unexplored region." The reasons for our scanty knowledge are complex. Certainly, it is not due to a lack of research: The two articles comprising this section offer useful bibliographies concerning numerous studies examining the people skills, the "soft" skills, and the personal skills often associated with interpersonal communication. Yet the studies fail to provide us with clear definitions of these skills, their interrelationships, and their relevance to communication. In fact, much of the cited research informs us that managers and human relations professionals maintain that "interpersonal skills" and communication represent two distinct sets of behavior. It has proven difficult to explore the terrain of interpersonal communication when we can't agree on a common nomenclature with which to ask questions, frame hypotheses, conduct studies, and report findings.

[1]St. John's University, USA
[2]BNY Mellon Corporation, USA

Corresponding Author:
Sam H. DeKay, BNY Mellon Corporation, 101 Barclay Street, Floor 9E, New York, NY 10007, USA
Email: shdekay@earthlink.net

Nor is our knowledge of interpersonal communication in the workplace an unexplored region because the topic is deemed trivial. In their presentation at the Association for Business Communication's Annual Convention in Montreal, Reinsch and Gardner (2011) reported the results of a national survey revealing that senior business executives maintain that employees with strong interpersonal skills are most likely to be considered for promotions. The study also indicated that writing ability—the development of which occupies considerable attention in most business communication courses—was not viewed as a primary concern when considering executives for promotion. The articles in this theme section extend the findings of Reinsch and Gardner by indicating that employers would rather hire employees with well-developed interpersonal skills than those with demonstrated writing ability.

I recently conducted an informal experiment to gain some sense of the significance of interpersonal communication skills in work-related environments. For a 5-month period—from February through June 2012—I collected every e-mail message received from vendors of business communication training. (I work in a technical communication function.) During that period, I received 38 offers from service providers. Here are the results, arranged by type of training offered, number of offers, and the percentage of total offers represented by each specific type:

Having Difficult Conversations	*17 (44.7%)*
Speaking as a Leader	*7 (18.4%)*
Giving Presentations	*5 (13.3%)*
Coaching/Motivational Speaking	*4 (10.6%)*
Communicating With Customers	*3 (7.8%)*
Facilitating Meetings	*2 (5.2%)*

I found the results interesting because they reveal the sorts of communication training that, to the thinking of profit-minded companies that specialize in providing instruction to large corporations, will be most wanted.

All of the training offerings focus on speaking skills—none were concerned with writing. The most popular topic, "Having Difficult Conversations," comprised a mélange of courses, each focusing on very specific problems: reducing "drama" in the workplace, giving and receiving criticism, dealing with insubordination, handling employees with "bad hygiene," resolving conflicts, making the transition from "buddy to boss," dealing with rude employees, disciplining workers, conducting performance reviews, counseling employees, handling terminations, avoiding "bad boss" behaviors, working with disabled employees, and repairing relations with other departments. Most of the vendors promised that these issues could be resolved by the use of videos, audio programs, written scripts, flash cards, or a combination of these methods. In most instances, course content focused on various "rules" that would permit managers to modify the undesirable behaviors of employees. (Some courses, though, devoted attention to rules intended to modify the behaviors of managers.)

The listing of possible "difficult conversations" presents a brief catalog of certain interpersonal communication in the workplace—especially those dealing with situations that hold the potential of embarrassing managers, employees, or both. But the other types of training offerings, including "Speaking as a Leader" and "Coaching/Motivational Speaking," are also forms of interpersonal communication. Clearly, from the standpoint of vendors whose business consists of providing corporations with the kinds of training deemed most saleable, interpersonal communication in the workplace is considered a moneymaker. These trainers for hire agree with Reinsch and Gardner (2011), as well as the articles in this section: Interpersonal skills are critical attributes, necessary for successful employees.

But even this plethora of behavior modification training does not add greatly to our knowledge of interpersonal communication. We are merely told that certain "rules" or scripts, if followed correctly, will cause certain problems to disappear. In short, the vast terrain of interpersonal skills in the workplace remains an "unexplored region."

The two articles presented in this section represent genuine attempts to explore the terrain and invite future researchers to join this ongoing effort.

Robles contributes to our knowledge by developing a clear nomenclature with which to discuss "interpersonal skills" and its relation to communication. According to Robles's formulation, the term *soft skills* is a composite of *interpersonal (people) skills* and *personal (career) attributes*. Personal attributes consist of behavioral traits unique to an individual, such as effective time management. Interpersonal skills, however, involve traits exemplified when the individual engages in social interaction. The ability to communicate effectively—to handle difficult conversations in such a manner that problems are resolved—is an interpersonal skill. "Soft skills" refers to all attributes or traits associated with personal skills as well as those dubbed "interpersonal."

Hynes describes a consulting engagement in which she developed a curriculum intended to provide training in interpersonal communication competencies to employees of a major corporation. Her discussion emphasizes that assessment is a complicated matter when interpersonal skills are the focus of instruction. (The nettlesome topic of assessment was never broached by the 38 vendors who forwarded to me their training proposals.) Hynes reveals to us that thorough assessment involves not only the reactions of employees who have been trained but also the observations of managers who are requested to assess employees many weeks after training has concluded. Conducting surveys and interviews and then collating and interpreting their results are time-consuming tasks.

Both Robles and Hynes, working independently, reach similar conclusions. One of these findings, which may also partially explain why the topic of interpersonal skills is largely an "unexplored region," is that organizations have not developed methods for measuring the long-term value of training. Many of the participants find employment with other companies; others transfer to different departments within the organization. Thus, the actual return on investment of interpersonal skills training is elusive.

The second finding, with which both authors concur, is that business communication curricula at the college and graduate school level are well served by including an interpersonal skills component. As Hynes indicates, most curricula currently include instruction in business writing and verbal presentations. However, given the significance attributed to interpersonal communication in business environments, the topic should not be ignored or given short shrift. Perhaps, if this recommendation were seriously considered and implemented by instructors of business communication, the topic of interpersonal communication in the workplace would not remain largely unexplored.

Reference

Reinsch, N. L., Jr., & Gardner, J. A. (2011, October). Do good communicators get promoted? Maybe not! In L. G. Snyder (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 76th annual convention of the Association for Business Communication*. Retrieved from http://businesscommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/2011-ABC-01-REINSCH.pdf

Bio

Sam H. DeKay, Section Editor, is a vice president for corporate communications at BNY Mellon Corporation in New York City. He is also an adjunct associate professor at the Graduate School of Education, St. John's University, Jamaica, Queens, New York.