Communications in the Business Curriculum

Judi Brownell
Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, jlb18@cornell.edu

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**Abstract**
Good managers must have good communication skills, but that means more than just writing a nice essay or making a clever speech. As a result, hospitality educators' view of communication must be expanded.

**Keywords**
hospitality educators, communication education, management skills, hospitality industry

**Disciplines**
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**Comments**

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Communications in the Business Curriculum

Good managers must have good communication skills, but that means more than just writing a nice essay or making a clever speech. As a result, hospitality educators’ view of communication must be expanded.

by Judi Brownell

EFFECTIVE communication is essential to effective management. The tools that managers need come down, in the final analysis, to insight, understanding, and behavior. These tools can be addressed in meaningful ways in the communication classroom.

I contend that communication instruction that focuses exclusively on developing skills without regard for process, content, and context is largely misdirected. If students leave our communication courses for a life of effective writing and clear speaking, we are delighted in deed. The fact that these are the most obvious goals for our courses often creates the impression that they are also the most important goals. They may well have been so, in the past. Now, as communication educators contribute to preparing students to be leaders in the hospitality field, we are becoming in increasingly concerned with the long-term view—with helping students become more responsible, and more effective, communicators.

In this article, I will discuss several topics as each relates to the development of future hospitality leaders. First, I will cover the cultivation of two characteristics—empathy and trust—that encourage healthy organizational relationships. Then I will examine the shift in management style from a directive to a more participative approach, as it influences our understanding of a manager’s communication needs—particularly since the most effective managers are known for their coaching skills. I will also consider the role intuition plays in effective management practice. Lastly, I will explain why I believe the communication classroom is the appropriate setting for considering ethical issues, as students explore the consequences and implications of the choices they make.

Weltanschauung

Over 25 years ago, Rensis Likert talked of “linking pins,” individuals who are particularly valuable to an organization because they are able to bridge gaps in the perceptions and attitudes of various groups and facilitate understanding among those with different “world views.” Managers who can listen carefully to the concerns of servers, for instance, and explain those issues clearly to the director of food service, or managers who can help frustrated front-desk personnel see the situation from the customer’s viewpoint, are recognized as valuable employees. The term “world view” today has a new connotation—that of the gulf that is created as managers work in foreign facilities and deal with cross-cultural differences. In the communication classroom, Likert’s concern for linkage translates into the development of empathy—an indi-

Judi Brownell, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration.

individual's ability to see things from the other person's point of view in an open, nonjudgmental way.2

Empathy is as much an attitude as a skill. We can teach individuals to analyze their reader, to listen carefully to the customer, and to employ paraphrasing and perception checking as communication skills.3 Unless students have a basic concern for the welfare of their colleagues, however, their communication skills will never really develop. In a survey of Fortune 500 companies, empathy was reported to be one of the most important management characteristics.4 It has also been shown to be the most difficult to instill.5

How do we teach attitudes or move students from an egocentric position to one of sincere concern for others? Attitudes develop over time in response to an environment in which certain behavior is valued. The student-teacher relationship in the communication classroom can influence this attitude development. As students participate in experiential activities and as they present their ideas and opinions both orally and in writing, the communication classroom becomes a laboratory in which students are able to see immediately the effect their behavior has on others in the class.6 As an open, “safe” environment, the classroom provides students an opportunity to recognize and appreciate individual differences.

If empathy is at the heart of a new management focus, the concept of trust is its soul.7 We recognize that for personal growth and risk-taking, it is essential not only to

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5Hunt and Cusella, loc. cit.
6For an example of a laboratory approach, see: Michele Tolela Myers and Gail E. Myers, Managing by Communication: An Organizational Approach (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982).
understand your peers and co-workers, but also to trust them.

Gordon Shea proposes that trust is the "ultimate intangible." He adds that trust:

... has no shape or substance, yet it empowers our actions. And its presence or absence can govern our behavior as if it were a tangible force.

... Trust is a social-survival mechanism that allows us to cooperate for mutual benefit."

Collaboration

One of the best ways to encourage interpersonal trust in the classroom is by emphasizing collaborative rather than competitive approaches. How inconsistent it is for the student to spend an academic career learning to achieve through competition, only to be told upon graduation that the primary goal of management is to make each employee a team player!

Kenneth Blanchard, author of The One-Minute Manager, tells the story of a fourth-grade teacher who was quizzing her students on the names of state capitals. "Why not let them work together and share their information?" Blanchard suggested. "Better yet, why not let them use a dictionary?" "Well," the teacher snapped, "isn't it obvious? If I let them do that, everyone would get the right answer." 11

Opportunities abound in communication courses for building a collaborative spirit as students work together and as their interactions are observed and processed. Curtis Tarr, dean of the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University, believes that only cooperation "gives way to tactics that guarantee success." He adds that it is important for young people to "work with and help fellow students in an atmosphere of mutual support." 12 When this attitude is carried over into a hotel or restaurant job, it forms that basis for an emphasis on service.

If one role stands out for managers in the next decade, it is that of coaching. Eric Allenbaugh writes that coaching is a "positive process of enabling strengths to be used productively." 13 It is the ongoing, face-to-face process of influencing behavior in which manager and employee collaborate in improving the employee's job performance. As Tom Peters and Nancy Austin put it in their best-selling book, A Passion for Excellence, coaching is leadership that pulls people together and encourages them to "step up to responsibility and continued achievement." 14

Barbara Hoover, director of personnel for the Dallas Hyatt Regency, recently noted that the hotel had come to depend on the coaching relationship for the bulk of its training. Effective coaches are able to use every contact with employees as an opportunity to improve their effectiveness. Peters and Austin explained that coaches find and nurture "champions"—outstanding employees—by building personal relationships with them.

Coaching requires not only skill but also interpersonal sensitivity. If we can assume that the coach-manager has developed both empathy and trust, we can move to look at other, more observable requirements for excellence in coaching:

EXHIBIT 1
Traditional and expanded views of communication education

Traditional view
1. Concerned with effective communication
2. Necessary skills:
   —Analyzing reader or listener
   —Establishing credibility with audience
   —Organizing ideas
   —Developing ideas with appropriate evidence and support
   —Expressing ideas clearly and concisely
   —Using appropriate language
   —Using appropriate tone

Expanded view
1. Concerned with effective leadership
2. Employs traditional skills, plus the following:
   —Establishing empathy with others
   —Creating atmosphere of trust through consistent actions
   —Using intuition and logic to solve problems
   —Assessing the effects of one's behavior on others
   —Adapting to a variety of individuals and contexts
   —Moving from a specialized area to a more general view
   —Showing a sincere interest in others' welfare

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11Kenneth Blanchard, "Putting the One-Minute Manager to Work," (presentation in Dallas, Texas, January 18, 1987).
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aspect balanced by a greater con-
would like to see the quantitative
ness—than ever before, as they put
 increases since our first recruiter’s
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what management communication
means for the hospitality field has
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visit. Students will always benefit
from being able to speak articu-
lately and to organize a memo. But
the competitive, aggressive individ­
ual may no longer be as welcome as
in the past. Managers and leaders
are finding that more can be ac-
complished through collaboration
than competition, and that manag­
ers can function as coaches by de-
veloping sensitivity, along with
technical expertise. In this evolu-
tion, our students stand to gain
personally and professionally.
Those who have had caring in-
structors, who have been chal­
enged to confront difficult ques-
tions in the classroom, and who
have been encouraged to use their
imagination as well as their calcula-
tors—these are the leaders we
need. And the communication ed­
cuator plays a vital role in their de-
velopment.

The Communication Classroom
Finally, as the communication class­
room serves as a context in which
students develop collaborative
methods and practice coaching
skills, it also emerges as a place
where specialists congregate. Com­
munication courses use as their
substance the entire range of busi­
ness concerns. It is logical, there­
fore, that this environment pro­
vides one of the few places where
students can view issues from mul-
tiple perspectives. Years ago, El­
wood Murray wrote of the impor-
tance of a relational orientation in
decision-making.17 He stressed that
specialists working too close to
their areas of expertise were dan­
gerous organizational decision­
makers. Only managers who are
able to see the consequences of
their choices on all parts of the sys-
tem can act wisely. The communica-
tion classroom is a place where
such consequences can be ex-
plored. It is also a place where ethi-
cal questions can be raised. Clearly,
all faculty members share the re-
ponsibility for helping students
work through the implications of
the decisions they make. As Tarr
stated so convincingly, faculty
members must “consider the time
they spend with students as the
most important dimension of their
professional lives.”18 If we are to af-
te students’ values and behavior,
we must assume a mentoring role.
Opportunities to help students ex-
plore important ethical issues must
be recognized both inside and out-
side of the classroom. The interdis-
ciplinary nature of their subject en-
ables communication educators to
share heavily in this responsibility.

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ers, we look for effective communi-
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