

## PROMOTING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AMONG TEACHERS

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### Abstract

Competently communicating is a prerequisite for faculty today. Effective communication must entail not only clarity and efficiency but also empathy and concern to people around. Effectiveness, appropriateness, and empathic concern form the building blocks of interpersonal communication. Empathy and tolerance among faculty define the interpersonal communication environment. In the absence of the above, human relationships will become destructive. This does not augur well for teachers, the department, or the organization. In this paper, the relevance of effectiveness, appropriateness, empathy and ethics are discussed for an ethical workplace.

**Keywords:** Effectiveness, appropriateness, competence, skills, ethics.

### INTRODUCTION

Effective and appropriate interpersonal communication is essential today at the work place. Effective interpersonal communication helps us to achieve goals at the workplace. Appropriate interpersonal communication helps us to achieve our goals by following proper norms and rules. Our behavior should not violate others' expectations. The pivotal importance of clarity and efficiency in communicating our ideas is often stressed. We are told to be clear and brief to the point. We are further told to be open minded and maintain utmost clarity while communicating. However, does this hold good all the time especially in relationships that are interdependent whether at home or office? Communication researchers believe affinity, affiliation, along with collaboration influence the process of communication. It is of course good to be clear in what we say or think. Individuals who are unambiguous in what they say or feel are appreciated. A high

sense of clarity and efficiency in getting things done is what people seek. However, is this really true? To what extent can we be clear in our messages? Can a frank, upfront, in-your-face attitude towards others really increase interpersonal communication among colleagues? Faculty communicate every day for various reasons. Ranging from class adjustments to taking casual leaves or medical leaves, colleagues at the work place need to talk to each other for umpteen reasons. Some times, we need to talk in a circumlocutionary manner so as not to sound rude or offensive. In life, we cannot speak as we like or express our views too boldly in the name of assertiveness. Hence, the point is whether the role of ambiguity in communication in organizations is essential. According to communication researcher Eric Eisenberg et al (2011), ambiguity in communication is important in organisations. It leaves scope for people to think and reflect what we want to tell them. Opinions and views need not be thrust down on peers or subordinates according to our whims and fancies. People must be given freedom to think, visualize, and be creative. Only then, a sense of belonging to the organizations exists. What is the role of empathy, compassion, and rational arguments in the domain of organizational communication? Clarity, of course, is essential in our lives. For example, doctors who deal with patients must handle complex information while performing surgeries. They need to be clear in the instructions they give or receive. Engineers too need to analyse technical information precisely when dealing with information related to their core domains. However, such accuracy may not be applicable when it comes to dealing with human behavior where feelings and opinions are involved.

### **Ethical Interpersonal Communication**

Since Aristotle's time, the idea of conveying one's views persuasively has been a consistent theme in communication field. Ethical interpersonal communication is communication that is mindful and respectful of others. People who communicate ethically take care not to hurt others' feelings. They do not talk down to people. What is sadly happening in modern organisations is that stress related to work and involving deadlines placing psychological pressure. Employees are required to handle and process data. They are in a world of processing, understanding, and generating solutions all the time. In this process, there hardly seems to be any time for human feelings! So, when disagreements take place, faculty are unable to handle how to handle genuine disagreements! However, for workplaces to function effectively, appropriately, and ethically we need to be composed and empathetic when disagreeing with others. Sadly today, this is not given adequate importance as time seems to be running out and everybody is in a hurry. What others feel, think seem to be ignored or put aside. There is a rush to present our own views and opinions. There is so much undue pressure that our own views, feelings, and opinions count when it comes to data or information. Empathy and patience in handling others seem to be ruthlessly ignored.

### **Communication Competence**

It is in this context that an accurate understanding of interpersonal competence needs to be understood. Scholars have defined communication competence in different ways. For example, according to Prof. Brian Spitzberg, competence is how effective and appropriate we are in our interactions with others (2011). Effectiveness highlights achieving goals. We all have goals in our respective lives and we want to achieve our goals. People who have a high degree of shyness and inferiority complex are hesitant to achieve goals. Their introverted nature may prevent them from talking or standing up for their own rights. Their communication style is characterized by ‘

I lose-you win'. Such people fail when it comes to their goal achievements. On the other hand, there are people who achieve their goals at any cost. They could be impersonal, ruthless, and aggressive in their interpersonal interactions with others. Achieving goals is their only overriding objective. They could in this process, achieve their goals by manipulating, cheating, threatening, and resorting to ugly behaviour. And there are some colleagues who achieve what they want to achieve guile. All these behaviours constitute the 'dark side of interpersonal communication' in interpersonal communication literature.

Hence, it is relevant to realize that in our passion to achieve our goals, we must be ethically appropriate in our interactions. This is an obligatory and a fundamental rule. Goal achievement should not be our singular obsession! Brian Spitzberg defines appropriateness as "behaving in ways acceptable to the norms and expectations of a given context" (Spitzberg and Cupach 2011). In their ruthless rush to achieve what they want, some individuals in organizations are becoming overzealous and manipulative. Thus, the criteria of 'appropriateness' is being neglected. In the view of Prof. Mark L Knapp, a distinguished Emeritus Professor of communication, competent communicators do not "yell abuses at another person." Such people "do not throw temper tantrums at others" (Knapp and Vangelisti, 2005). What sadly is happening in organisations today is the reverse. People are neglecting all norms of politeness, and in convulsions of frustrations, they are being intentionally rude to colleagues. That is precisely why the criteria of appropriateness and ethics are highly relevant in today's organisations! Prof. Julia T. Wood of North Carolina University defines competence in terms of situations and adaptation. We need to adapt our language that does not degrade others. We need to adapt our style according to the context. Communication scholars Ronald Adler, Lawrence B Rosenfeld, and Russell Proctor II define competence as "the ability to get what you are seeking from others in a manner that maintains the relationships on terms that are acceptable to all parties". (Adler, Rosenfeld, Proctor II 2007). This means we are expected to behave in a way that is acceptable to others. Shouting, screaming, abusive, or subtle manipulative behaviours cannot be tolerated in organisations. This is dangerous to colleagues, the department, and the organization itself. Competent communicators in organisations fulfill their goals that nurture interpersonal relationships.

Productivity in organisation is not about profits alone. It is how faculty talk to each other in with trust, mutual respect, and empathy. When our communication is effective and appropriate, our contribution to organizational productivity can increase. It is indeed sad to note that many employees are focusing on effectiveness alone, and neglecting appropriateness. Appropriateness is conforming to norms and expectations people have of us. And, we have a binding obligation to be appropriate in all our interpersonal interactions with others in organisations. According to communication scholars, competent communicators have a wide repertoire of behaviours to choose from, and they choose behaviours that are acceptable in that context. So, while talking to people, we need to choose such behaviours that are appropriate to a particular context. Argyle and Henderson stated that the fundamental social interaction rules in four cultures they studied had these common themes: polite, friendly, pleasant, and taking care not to embarrass or make people feel small (Argyle and Hendersen 1985). This is what they noticed in Great Britain, Hong Kong, Italy and Japan. However, this holds good to all cultures equally. Employees should be polite, friendly, and pleasant in their interactions with others. In addition to these, they should not attempt to make another person feel embarrassed or small.

Faculties cooperate and coordinate with their colleagues in the same department or with faculty in other departments for various task-oriented issues. Organizational communication that is polite, friendly, pleasant, and respectful will help one another to work in an amiable environment. On the other hand, an interpersonal environment without appropriateness and ethics would be a tragic workplace! In such a workplace, emotions run high. People are quick to judge each other. There is a fatal tendency to jump to rash assumptions and view people and events cynically.

Hence, there is an imperative need for ethics in interpersonal communication. Professor Brian Spitzberg aptly remarks that ethical interpersonal communication involves equal access, confirmation of others, veracity, exchange of rational arguments, equality, otherness, freedom, empowerment of all, respect and voice to each irrespective of station of stereotype, dialogue (Spitzberg and Cupach 2011).

Ethical criteria should be seen in all aspects of organizational communication. When faculty work in an environment of mutual confirmation and freedom, they can collaborate with others on organizational tasks and organizational well-being too. When superiors respect the voice of the subordinates irrespective of their status, then subordinates feel happy and valued and can claim a sense of belonging. On the other hand, when faculty are egocentric, there is a danger. Our interactions with people around should be helpful, supportive and not hurting. Communication must be respectful of others, give people freedom to think. It should treat them with equality. In such interpersonal interactions with others, there will be no subtle manipulation. One of the most vital criteria of ethical interpersonal communication is truth. When colleagues give incomplete information to each other and rush them to take decision, it is unethical. Ethical interpersonal communication involves decision making based on ethical information. We must give information that is truthful and complete. Giving incomplete information to people deliberately is wrong. Communication scholars Erina L. MacGeorge, Bo Feng, and Brant Burleson mention the importance of supportive communication:

Through each of our difficulties, along with the lesser challenges of everyday life, we have been repeatedly reminded of how much we rely on interactions with others to sustain us in times of stress (MacGeorge, Erina L., Bo Feng, and Brant Burleson, 2011).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Organisations are not abstract entities. They consist of people who have feelings, ideas, and opinions. They are not about sheer productivity gains, profits, reputation, or just prestige. Organisations are places where people must respectfully talk or disagree politely with one another. When faculty communicates ethically, effectively, appropriately, they become wonderful places to work. However, once the importance of courtesy, empathy, appropriateness are embedded we can remarkably improve our interpersonal communication behaviour in organisations. The *raison d'être* of any organization is what best we can give to one another as colleagues, subordinates, or superiors. Teachers themselves are good role models. However, faculty, ignore notions of appropriateness and ethics in our rush to be merely effective, then we are all setting a wrong precedent for each other! Faculty, hence, must be mindful of ethical and appropriate interpersonal communication. We all do have constraints, but as Mark L. Knapp and Brian H. Spitzberg advocate there is ample scope to strengthen our interpersonal communication relations with others and make our organizations better places to work for one another!

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