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Promote Interculturalism, Leadership Communication, and Professionalism in Your Students: Success with a Corporate Communication Certificate

Lana W. Carnes
Eastern Kentucky University, lana.carnes@eku.edu

M. M. Robles
Eastern Kentucky University, marcel.robles@eku.edu

F. Awang
Eastern Kentucky University, faridah.awang@eku.edu

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Abstract

Business educators share a common interest in encouraging their students to improve intercultural, leadership communication, and professionalism skills to enable and promote increased fulfillment, character development, and advancement toward graduation, in addition to improving student employability after graduation. While career success depends on the standards and knowledge of character and behavioral traits, much more than on technical knowledge, these attributes define the qualities desired across various professions (Barnhart, 2013) in these three areas. For example, Holmes (2015) found that the values and communication rules of discourse systems may be different from that which is expected in the international workplace.

A Certificate in Corporate Communication promotes the skillsets for interculturalism, leadership communication, and professionalism. With the positive feedback already received from several entities, including business executives; the student success of relevant development of skillsets for any business or non-business major; and the opportunity to showcase the communication courses to all students and programs at the University, the Certificate of Corporate Communication has already proven its success.

Introduction

Requirements of the 21st Century workplace directly affect business education curricula (Kelley & Bridges, 2005). Today's businesses face many challenges and opportunities including attracting and retaining the most talented workforce possible to remain competitive. As organizations restructure to become more proactive and innovative, they find it necessary to push decision-making authority to lower-levels, use cross-functional teams, and encourage lifelong learning. This restructuring results in the interrelationships of communication, culture, and strategy becoming more visible as organizations transform their business practices in response to changing challenges and opportunities.

Cornelissen (2014) discussed corporate communication as an integrated approach to managing communication as it transcends the specialists of individual boundaries of practitioners within organizations as well as multinationally to strategic interests of organizations at large. Many more disciplines are involved in corporate communication by design, advertising, internal (employee) communication, crisis communication, investor relations, media, and change communication. An important aspect of this new function is that it focuses on the organization as a whole and how communication imparts to all key internal and external stakeholders, regardless of discipline, hence corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2014).

After knowing that the relationships among communication, culture, and strategy are critical to organizational competitiveness, the following question arises: What roles do interculturalism,

leadership communication, and professionalism play in supporting organizational goals? A research study that determines the practice of different companies would help to create a better overview of what companies think about the importance of these relationships.

Business educators have incorporated the teaching of interpersonal, teamwork, critical thinking, and leadership skills for several years (Moody, Stewart, & Bolt-Lee, 2002); yet, business educators have been criticized for not adequately developing students' relevant, real-world skills emphasizing problem solving and leadership communication skills (Conrad & Newberry, 2012; Hult Labs, 2014). Van Huss and Schmohe (2014) called for re-energizing business education to emphasize those skills identified by Hult Labs (2014) including: communication, self-awareness, cross-cultural competency, team skills, collaboration, the ability to persuade others, and problem solving.

The purpose of this study was to identify perceptions of selected top-level business executives in the Midwest and Southeast regions of the United States regarding specific communication skillsets employees need in the three categories: interculturalism, leadership communication, and professionalism. To bridge the gap between real-world practice and classroom instruction, the results of the research were used to inform curriculum decisions leading to the development of a Certificate in Corporate Communication.

Methodology, Demographics, and Survey

To assess business executives' ratings regarding communication skills needed in the workplace, the primary data for this research were collected from surveying 150 selected top-level business executives in the Midwest and Southeast Regions of the United States including members of the School of Business Advisory Council who provide curriculum advice. Each participant was sent an invitation email and survey link to rate his/her perceptions on the specific skill sets of (a) interculturalism (b) leadership communication, and (c) professionalism. The research instrument in this study included 20 questions on a Likert scale that ranged from strongly agree (SA) to strongly disagree (SD). All respondents also had the opportunity to provide additional comments to further enhance their responses to the item ratings. The survey covered the three dimensions of workplace skills. In total, 78 questionnaires were completed.

Of the 78 respondents, 54 were male (69%) and 24, female (31%). The positions held by the executives included: Director/General Manager, 28 (36%); Vice President, 14 (18%); CEO/Owner/President, 11 (14%); Human Resources Manager, 11 (14%); Communication Officer/Trainer, 5 (6%); Administrator/Office Manager, 4 (5%); Controller, 4 (5%); and Global Head of Research, 1 (1%) for a total of 99% due to rounding.

Items the executives rated in the survey are shown below.

Interculturalism

1. Recognize communication styles and problem-solving strategies for a culture, identify potential for misunderstandings, compare expectations of self and others.
2. Be aware of how judgments of value and reality are made by self and others, become sensitive to different ways of speaking and listening, develop readiness for making encounters and dialogue.
3. Develop language skills, research skills, analytic, interpretive, and rhetorical skills; language-learning, and cross-cultural skills.
4. Avoid idioms and jargon; avoid long, complex sentences; use active voice; avoid referring to readers by nationality.
5. Stress collaboration, use cross-functional teams, and experiment with different forms of organizational structure and leadership.
6. Demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts; being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes.

Leadership Communication

1. Recognize communication skills necessary to organizations' internal and external communication situations.
2. Interact as a team member in solving organizational communication problems.
3. Analyze the communication skills used daily by organizational leaders.
4. Recognize training and development needs of a global workforce.
5. Use appropriate crisis communication approaches in dealing with unexpected internal and external threats.
6. Consider alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences in the business decision-making process.

Professionalism

1. Write clear, accurate, concise, and purposeful documents that have strategic impact and produce effective results.
2. Demonstrate excellent oral communication skills, expressing ideas clearly and precisely, speaking effectively, and presenting professionally.
3. Show the ability to listen effectively; create rapport during a conversation.
4. Practice effective interpersonal skills, including eye contact, body language, voice inflection, and firm handshake.
5. Portray business and/or personal skills of self-confidence, poise, preparation, business attire, appearance.

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Executives' Survey Responses

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The survey responses and supporting literature will be discussed in three areas: Interculturalism, Leadership Communication, and Professionalism.

Interculturalism

One element that business executives desire in their employees is a strong sense of interculturalism, which focuses on their ability to draw similarities and differences among diverse cultures, geographic locations, and people. Guilherme, Keating, and Hoppe (2010) stressed the need for intercultural responsibility in the workplace, recognizing that identities have been socially and culturally built from different ethnic characteristics and influences. This responsibility lies with both employers and employees in recognizing communication styles, acknowledging discourses, and developing professional relationships with one another (Holmes, 2015). Therefore, employees need the background knowledge to work effectively with diverse cultures (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007).

Survey respondents rated the awareness, sensitivity, and preparedness for international dialogues and interactions as the top skill in this category as shown in Figure 1. Executives' second highest rating concerned the ability to demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts and being open to changing cultural attitudes.

Figure 1. Interculturalism	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Be aware of how judgments of value and reality are made by self and others, become sensitive to different ways of speaking and listening, develop readiness for making encounters and dialogue.	45	29	4	0	0	0	5.53
Demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts; being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes and needs.	40	33	5	0	0	0	5.45
Stress collaboration, use cross-functional teams, and experiment with different forms of organizational structure and leadership.	36	36	5	0	0	0	5.40
Recognize communication styles and problem-solving strategies for a culture, identify potential for misunderstandings, compare expectations of self and others.	36	37	4	1	0	0	5.38
Avoid idioms and jargon; avoid long, complex sentences; use active voice; avoid referring to readers by nationality.	36	35	6	1	0	0	5.36
Develop language skills, research skills, analytic, interpretive, and rhetorical skills; language-learning, and cross-cultural skills.	36	26	13	2	0	0	5.25

Research has typically centered on documenting cultural differences that can disrupt intercultural relationships (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002; Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007). It is often challenging to work across cultural boundaries because people

frequently perceive individuals from other cultures as possible adversaries with diverse values, beliefs, and styles of interacting (Li & Scullion, 2006; Toh & DeNisi, 2005; Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007). Guo, Cockburn-Wootten, and Munshi (2014) found that exploiting these different perspectives, instead of managing diverse perceptions, leads to unique perspective and creative outcomes.

The foundation for collaboration in organizations stems from emotional involvement and genuine caring for one another's well-being and the belief that others are responsible and competent (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007). Additionally, interpersonal trust can enable social interactions that facilitate informal collaboration and teamwork, inter-organizational partnerships, and leadership (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007).

Intercultural researchers have studied how diverse employees handle specific events as they work together (Bond, 2003; Smith, 2003), finding workplace communication a challenge (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007); for example, knowing the appropriate non-verbal communication required when greeting someone—whether to shake hands, hug, kiss, bow, or other response (Holmes, 2015). Acknowledging general value differences that may affect intercultural interaction and forming an understanding and basis for working together productively can be highly useful in developing a quality interpersonal relationship (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007).

Ladegaard and Jenks (2015) discussed the importance of multicultural experiences within an organization because interculturalism leads to a more professional, adaptable organization. Interculturalism should be integrated into education for students to be able to better interpret intercultural situations; for example, one effective instructional method might be to use emotional intelligence in case studies (Fall, Kelly, MacDonald, Primm, & Holmes, 2013). In order for employees to be more experienced with interculturalism, it should be included in their education, as well as everyday practice (Tupas, 2014).

Leadership Communication

In the area of leadership communication, executives responded that the most important skill was to recognize communication skills necessary to an organization's internal and external communication situations. Teamwork was the second most valued skill. Highlighting recent business problems related to ethics and crisis communication, executives rated considering alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences in business decision making and communicating through crises as the third and fourth most important skills as shown in Figure 2.

Two executives also pointed out that not all employees are in leadership roles; however, daily communication regarding the status of engagements, problems, obstacles, and other workplace issues is critical. Care should be taken in analyzing the communication skills of leaders as this could lead to a negative attitude and frustration if the leader's skills do not meet the employee's preconceived notions. The executives suggested that a proactive and direct communication strategy with the leader could help to avoid this problem.

Figure 2. Leadership Communication	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Recognize communication skills necessary to organizations' internal and external communication situations.	57	21	0	0	0	0	5.73
Interact as a team member in solving organizational communication problems.	50	25	3	0	0	0	5.60
Consider alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences in the business decision-making process.	42	30	5	0	1	0	5.44
Use appropriate crisis communication approaches in dealing with unexpected internal and external threats.	38	34	6	0	0	0	5.41
Analyze the communication skills used daily by organizational leaders.	27	29	18	4	0	0	5.01
Recognize training and development needs of a global workforce.	23	26	23	6	0	0	4.85

Three other skills were mentioned by executives as being important for leadership communication: conflict resolution, problem solving, and specific corporate communication for international issues. An overall important comment was made by one executive who emphasized that employees should recognize the goal for the company is more important than a personal immediate goal. Leaders and employees should collaborate to develop common goals, shared tasks, integrated roles, interpersonal relationships, team identity, and collective recognition that reinforce those cooperative goals (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007). Further, leaders should see and pursue opportunities that change creates and must mobilize the resources of others to achieve their objectives (Dees, 2001).

Because employees respect leaders who take the time to have a conversation, the most effective way for leaders to communicate internally is with information-focused face-to-face dialogue (Men, 2014), where leaders express their ideas and beliefs openly (Dees, 2001). Mayfield, Mayfield, and Sharbrough (2015) also found that internal motivational communication that conveyed top-down strategic information was a factor leading to success in leadership communication.

Professionalism

Discussions of professionalism are present in many studies across academic disciplines (e.g., communication, management, education, and cultural studies). Despite this vast research, the concept of professionalism needs further exploration in relation to individual identity (Banghart, 2013).

Professionals not only perform a job, but also exhibit a particular set of mannerisms set forth by the larger professional community (Banghart, 2013; Kelley & Bridges, 2005). Robles (2012) made an important distinction between two skillsets, describing "hard skills" as technical competency specific to one's job and "soft skills" as interpersonal/people skills or personal attributes of individuals. While studies propose that professionalism involves numerous competencies, skills, and characteristics, there is a trend toward the interpersonal competence, or the "softer" skills, weighing more profoundly upon the notion of professionalism (Banghart, 2013).

Professionalism can be defined by the specific expectations for communication and behaviors associated with professionals (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007) that is learned through self-regulation and improvement as a means to succeed with the help of skillsets, motivations, interests, etc. (Kelley & Bridges, 2005; Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). Professional skills necessary for successful career progression include listening, writing, speaking, and etiquette skills (Clark, 2010; Kelley & Bridges, 2005) as well as courtesy, posture/body language, and attire/appropriate dress (Clark, 2010).

The area of professionalism drew the highest ratings of the three categories, indicating the importance executives place on these skills. Employees' ability to express ideas clearly and precisely in written and oral communication were critically important to the organization. Additionally, the ability to listen effectively and create rapport during a conversation was highly valued by the executives as shown in Figure 3. As one executive stated, "Walk, Talk, and Look the Part!" Another respondent indicated that being able to present and sell ideas, persuade, effectively collaborate, and build consensus are the keys to success.

Figure 3. Professionalism	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Demonstrate excellent oral communication skills, expressing ideas clearly and precisely, speaking effectively, and presenting professionally.	72	6	0	0	0	0	5.92
Show the ability to listen effectively; create rapport during a conversation.	71	7	0	0	0	0	5.91
Write clear, accurate, concise, and purposeful documents that have strategic impact and produce effective results.	62	15	0	0	0	0	5.81
Practice effective interpersonal skills, including eye contact, body language, voice inflection, and firm handshake.	62	16	0	0	0	0	5.79
Portray business and/or personal skills of self-confidence, poise, preparation, business attire, appearance.	58	16	3	0	0	0	5.71

Other advice from the executives included the following: work to gain confidence in communicating as no one can do this for you, it must come from within; recognize that developing professionalism is a life-long course that must be continuously refined in the classroom and workplace.

One of the most important elements business executives look for in employees and recent graduates is the level of professionalism of the job candidate (Kouchaki, 2015). Professional skills are highly valued by employers, and employers expect college graduates to have these skills as a condition of employment (Evetts, 2011; Kelley & Bridges, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2000).

Corporate Communication Certificate Developed Based on Executives' Responses and Literature Review

Educators have written extensively on the topic of how to bridge the gap between what skills employers want and what skills are taught in higher education (Kelley & Bridges, 2005).

Sigmar, Hynes, and Hill (2012) stated that learning these skills while in school is essential to developing future employees who are able to deal with extensive networks, intercultural issues, diverse teams, and business etiquette and professionalism.

Based on the results of this research, executives find the three areas of skills defined in this study to be important to the success of their organizations and employees in the workplace. To help students develop these three skills areas, a Certificate in Corporate Communication has been developed to emphasize the highly valued items in this survey. The Certificate is offered to any undergraduate major, including business majors, to help prepare them for employers' expectations in the workplace.

A nine-hour Corporate Communication Certificate was created by the Department of Management, Marketing, and International Business. Students earn the certificate after successfully completing three courses: Professional Communication (CCT 201) or Managerial Reports (CCT 300W), International Business Communication (CCT 310), and Integrated Corporate Communication (CCT 550). The CCT 201 class is for any major; the CCT 300W is for business majors only. CCT 310 and CCT 550 can be taken by either business or non-business majors. These courses emphasize the three areas included in the survey. The course descriptions are shown below:

- Professional Communication. Principles and practices of modern professional communication; various types of professional letters and reports are studied; emphasis on writing letters and reports.

- Managerial Reports. A writing intensive study of applications of communication theory, research methods, and information technology to communication within organizations. Includes common communication tasks faced by managers; communication task and

audience analysis; collecting, organizing, analyzing, and interpreting data. Emphasizes written and oral reporting.

- International Business Communication. Characteristics of cultural differences that alter communication symbols and meanings for international business activity. Topics include culture profiles and conducting business, business protocol, international documents/U.S. documents, negotiation strategies, and oral presentations to intercultural business audiences.

- Integrated Corporate Communication. Examines effective integrated communication skills to achieve organizational objectives. Emphasizes analysis and application of communication process and strategies for managerial decision-making. Examines change process, corporate culture, and negotiation issues. Provides corporate training component.

The certificate helps students develop in the areas of interculturalism (e.g., international business communication, diversity skills); leadership (e.g., crisis communication, stakeholder communication, corporate training); and professionalism (e.g., written reports, oral presentation, interpersonal skills).

This Certificate in Corporate Communication is applicable to students in any major, including nursing, psychology, teaching, social work, police studies, education, aviation, physical and occupational therapy, among others. Flyers were created and distributed to Advising Offices across campus, to support staff in Administrative Offices, and to Recruitment Offices. Flyers were also posted on Bulletin Boards throughout campus buildings and displayed on electronic monitors.

Upon completion of the three required classes, students receive a certificate signed by the Department Chair and the Corporate Communication and Technology Coordinator in recognition of their accomplishment.

Conclusions

Business executives value and are seeking professionalism, intercultural skills, and leadership communication abilities in their employees. Seeking business executives input into curriculum issues can provide valuable information to help faculty understand the demands and expectations of the business workplace. Developing and offering a Certificate in Corporate Communication is one strategy to help students succeed in meeting these employers' expectation.

Students, advisors, alumni, campus administrators, and business executives have responded favorably to the certificate. In fact, executives have asked that the offerings be expanded to non-credit classes for workplace employees who need to develop their communication skills, refine their professionalism, and build their confidence. While a certificate promises no

guarantee of a graduate's future behavior, just as a high GPA does not ensure intelligence, the expected correlation offers prospective employers with an extra, beneficial indicator.

Although student success is the primary goal for the certificate, a secondary benefit is the opportunity to showcase the communication courses to all programs on campus. Business communication educators must promote their programs, classes, and quality of instruction. A Certificate in Corporate Communication will help achieve these goals.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions above, business educators should explore ways to develop students' professionalism, intercultural skills, and leadership communication abilities. The following recommendations are made for business educators who are seeking to promote student success through the development of these three skills and abilities. Recommendations are also made for business educators who are considering creating a Certificate in Corporate Communication. Additionally, suggestions for future research are provided.

1. Incorporate elements of professionalism in courses included in the certificate program while stressing to students the importance of life-long learning. Include as many real-world exercises and cases as possible.

2. Encourage and practice active listening in all communication courses. Consider creating classroom etiquette rules that promote active listening skills.

3. Stress the importance of focused conversations with colleagues and supervisors in the workplace. Encourage students to disengage from social media and electronic devices while engaging in face-to-face conversations in the classroom and beyond.

4. Consider creating extra-curricular professional development opportunities to enhance students' communication, leadership, intercultural, and professional skills. Such activities might include workshops, seminars, lecture series, case competitions, student organizations, etc.

5. Seek buy-in from administrators who are decision makers for your discipline area.

6. Consider how to maximize the resources you have and minimize the need for additional classes or faculty.

7. Involve business executives in your planning; they will provide advocacy for your cause.

8. Communicate with advisors throughout campus to encourage support for the Certificate.

9. Encourage faculty to help promote the Certificate in their classes and in advising sessions with students.

10. Visit area high schools and freshmen summer orientation classes to inform students about the opportunity to complete the certificate.

11. Design future research projects to expand the involvement of business executives in various geographic areas and industries.

12. Compare and contrast the research results from future studies conducted in different cultures and countries.

13. Explore business executives' ideas regarding future alliances needed between businesses and educational institutions to help promote student success.

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