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Instructors, Students, Managers, And the Basic Organizational Communication Course: Are We All Working Together or Working Apart?

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Having communication and interpersonal skills along with the ability to work well within a team was recently reported as the top two attributes by job recruiters as very important for job seekers to possess (Alsop, 2004). Human resource practitioners report that communication (e.g., getting along with people, listening, networking in an organization, and overall ability to communicate) is important for obtaining and keeping a job (Gaut & Perrigo, 1998), while others consider good communication skills the most sought after ability in potential employees (Maes, Weldy, & Icengole, 1997). Given the practical importance of communication skills in the workplace, it is not surprising that scholarly efforts to document key workplace skills have repeatedly pointed to communication (David & Miller, 1996; Holter, 2001; Maes, Weldy, & Icengole, 1997; Messemer, 1999; Rohrs, 2000; Verespej, 1998). While the communication major as a whole teaches many of theses skills, the basic organizational communication course ([BOCC], Treadwell & Applbaum, 1995) is designed specifically to address organizational communication issues.

Basic courses in organizational communication promote the understanding and application of communication theory and skills in the workplace (Pace, Michal-Johnson, & Mills, 1990; Reinsch, 1991; Rogers & White-Mills, 1998; Treadwell & Applbaum, 1995; White-Mills & Rogers, 1996). Such courses are distinct from business communication courses that are taught in business departments and emphasize written message exchange (e.g. memos) (White-Mills & Rogers, 1996). The BOCC is further differentiated from advanced organizational communication courses that focus on highly theoretical or highly specific aspects of organizational life. The BOCC is either the first course taken in an organizational communication sequence (Pace & Ross, 1983), or it is the only organizational communication course offered by a department (Pace and Ross, 1983; Treadwell & Applbaum, 1995; White-Mills and Rogers, 1996). Thus, for many students, the BOCC is either a foundational course for their major or in other cases their only exposure to the field of communication. For these reasons, studying the BOCC from the perspective of a "basic course" in communication is both fruitful and important.

A dynamic interplay exists between theoretical principles of organizational communication, as taught in the BOCC, and the lived experiences of communication practitioners. In general, the classroom functions as an intersection of theory and concepts addressing communication knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary in the workplace. The ultimate goal of the BOCC is to prepare students for work-life. Whereas managers might feel as though higher education does its greatest service by embracing a vocational perspective, the BOCC in-

structor and scholar recognize that theory serves to equip the students with a more holistic set of knowledge constructs that are relevant to the workforce. A very important focus for a course like the BOCC is to present relevant and applicable communication theories and concepts that will equip the student with the necessary communication skills to thrive and succeed in the workforce.

Academia serves an invaluable purpose by espousing theory as a framework for housing knowledge of issues and skills for application on the job. The purpose of this study is to identify popular information promoted in BOCC textbooks, student perceptions of information in the BOCC, and managerial perspectives on important knowledge and skills students need to have upon entering the workforce. The ultimate goal is to update and extend past research in this area in order to provide information to BOCC instructors that will help them to improve their course by incorporating communication topics that are highly applicable to organizational demands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although past research on the BOCC has varied, much of it has focused on the textbooks used in the course (Downs & Larimer, 1973; Pace & Ross, 1973; Pace et al., 1990; Treadwell & Applebaum, 1995; Willer et al., 1987) while others have concentrated on what skills students need to acquire to be successful in the workplace; often focusing on managerial interviews (David & Miller, 1996; Holter, 2001; Maes et al., 1997;

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Messemer, 1999; Rohrs, 2000; Rost, 1991; Verespej, 1998). Examining textbook information and managerial perspectives for what is important in the workplace provides useful information for the BOCC. Valuable information also can be obtained by examining the student in the BOCC because their perceptions of the information in the course can help to inform BOCC instructors of how to approach their curriculum.

Published Information

Published information is vitally important to organizational communication instruction because it is often the basis for what is covered in the course. Textbooks contribute much to the student's holistic understanding of communication for the workplace since they often serve as a foundation for understanding the history of how communication has been studied in the organizational context, clarify the primary management philosophies used in business past and present, and summarize recent communication research findings useful for the modern organization. As a result, organizational communication textbooks are important not only because they indicate what is taught in the organizational communication course, but they also catalogue the information students are exposed to that influences their understanding of business processes. Indeed, past studies have identified information in textbooks that was deemed important for readers to have (Downs & Larimer, 1974; Pace, Michal-Johnson, & Mills, 1990; Treadway & Applebaum, 1995).

The Student

One of the issues facing both academic institutions and private organizations is the "fundamental disconnect" or gap between the two (Public Forum Institute, 2000, p. 2). There is the expectation that universities will prepare students for the workforce by teaching what to expect in the workplace and the skills necessary for thriving. The information instructors provide to students should demonstrate how different theoretical, philosophical, and conceptual perspectives apply to workplace issues. Additionally, a portion of those different ideas presented should have relevance for the students. It is the job of authors of BOCC textbooks and instructors to demonstrate the importance and relevance of course content.

With the exception of determining what year in school students are that take the BOCC (Pace, Michal-Johnson, & Mills, 1990) or undergraduates' view of content after graduation (Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997), little is known of how students process course content. Students attribute importance to the topics addressed in organizational communication textbooks with the likely result of leading them to believe that those topics are more relevant for the workplace (Keller, 1983; Willer et al., 1987). Indeed, the more relevant a topic seems, the more motivated students are to focus on the topic (Frymier & Shulman, 1995). Further, it is important for students to learn information that they can transfer from the classroom to the job. It is this idea of transference that is paramount for students; for if students can transfer important and practical information that they have learned in class to how they function on the job,

they will likely succeed. By investigating students' views of organizational course content, instructors may take a more active role in creating realistic expectations for students as they move into the workforce. In particular, identifying what students perceive as important when taking the BOCC and comparing this to employer expectations provides instructors an analysis of where student perceptions are aligned with the realities of the workforce and where there is a disconnect.

The Employer

Employers and managers are included in organizational communication research because they have specific ideas about what characteristics and skills, particularly communication skills, employees should bring to the workplace (Hanna, 1978; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997). A primary employer function is to assess the overall effectiveness of new employees, their employability, and their communication competencies. Thus, the employer or manager consistently strives to balance organizational needs with employee capabilities. It is from this evaluation of workers and knowledge of the organizational climate that employers identify what communication skills graduates need to succeed. Although there is typically lag time between translating employer recommendations into organizational communication pedagogy (Keller, 1994), assessing managerial perspectives allows for identification of theories and concepts necessary for today's workforce and thus, swift implementation.

While the preceding discussion addressed the uniqueness of some of the different contributors to the

BOCC, they are also strongly linked. Textbooks impact students' thinking about organizational communication. In turn, students take this information into the workplace. Employers in some form assess the readiness and capability of the college graduate, and thus assess the level at which college is preparing individuals for the workforce. In turn, academia can recognize and respond to the skills and knowledge companies seek and require. By acknowledging published (textbook) information, students, and employers as impacting one another, this study sets out to articulate to what extent the parties (dis)agree upon the content perceived as important in the BOCC.

To wit, multiple goals are accomplished by this project. First, while past research has content analyzed the topics appearing in organizational communication textbooks, study one of this project updates this research by examining organizational communication textbooks published since 1990 as indication of what is currently being covered in the BOCC. Second, study two conducts a descriptive analysis to determine the knowledge and skills students think are important for work-life before and after taking the BOCC. Third, while past research has analyzed what knowledge and skills are considered important by managers, an updated thematic analysis is performed whereby managers are asked what communication knowledge and competencies are most useful for those entering the workforce. Fourth, and the unique aspect of this project, the results of the three studies are compared and interpreted and implications of the findings for the BOCC discussed. The ultimate goal of this project is to enhance the BOCC by identifying the theories, concepts, and content that will provide students

with the knowledge and skills to make them successful in the workplace.

STUDY ONE

One way to determine what is being taught in the BOCC is to examine its textbooks. As Carney (1979) notes, "a field is effectively defined by the consensus of its leading and published practitioners" (p. 200). In times past, Downs and Larimer (1974), Pace, Michal-Johnson, and Mills (1990), and Treadway and Applebaum (1995) have all conducted content analyses of texts published during different time periods to distinguish the theories and skills that are covered in BOCC classes. In this tradition, Study One updates past research of BOCC textbook content by focusing exclusively on BOCC texts published since 1990, a time period yet to be analyzed. Consequently, the research question advanced for Study One was:

RQ1: What topics are currently being covered in textbooks used for the BOCC?

Procedure and Design

Organizational communication textbooks were selected from 1990 through 2002. Using past research (Carney, 1979; Downs & Larimer, 1973; Pace & Ross, 1973; Pace et al., 1990; Treadwell & Applebaum, 1995; Willer et al. 1987) as a guide for determining appropriate texts for the course, a preliminary list of BOCC textbooks was generated in three steps. First, a list of texts was compiled by contacting 39 different book pub-

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lishers and requesting a list of organizational communication textbooks printed from 1990 forward that are used in undergraduate organizational communication classes. Second, Worldcat, an online library database, was accessed to identify textbooks which may have been overlooked that are appropriate for the BOCC. And third, these lists were then combined and duplicate citations were eliminated to prevent repetition of entries. A total of 57 organizational communication texts were identified and reviewed for their content.

One researcher evaluated the 57 texts based on criteria established by Carney (1979), Pace and Ross (1983), Pace et al. (1990) Treadwell and Applebaum (1995), and Willer et al. (1987). To be included in the study's sample, textbooks must: (a) have content associated with the BOCC; (b) be written for an undergraduate and not a graduate audience; and (c) represent the most recent edition of a text. Textbooks that were purposed for related but different courses (e.g., organizational behavior, business communication, or management courses as defined by White-Mills & Rogers, 1996, 1997) were eliminated. Any uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of a text was resolved after consulting with a second researcher. Based on the above criteria, 23 textbooks were included in the study's sample.

In accordance with past BOCC textbook content analyses (Pace & Ross, 1983; Pace et al, 1990; Treadwell & Applebaum, 1995), the number of pages dedicated to a *topic* (a classification category established by Carney [1979] and Falcione & Greenbaum [1976]) was used as the unit of analysis. A code book and code sheets were constructed to define and code such topics as interpersonal communication, group communication, organiza-

tional goals, and leadership. The manifest content (i.e., "visible, surface content;" Babbie, 1986) of each topic was content analyzed. Additionally, the number of textbooks in which a topic appeared was also recorded.

One of the authors and a graduate student in Communication functioned as coders in the study. A coder training session was conducted to ensure clarity of topics and establish intercoder reliability. Topics demonstrated face validity in that each was supported by past research coding schemes (Pace & Ross, 1983 ; Pace et al, 1990; Treadwell & Applebaum, 1995, Willer et al., 1987) and distinguishable from the explanation provided by the code book. In accordance with Kaid and Wadsworth's (1989) guidelines for assessing intercoder reliability, the textbooks were manually coded and reliability calculated. Using Holsti's formula (North, Holsti, Zaninovich, & Zinnes, 1963), reliability was determined to be acceptable at +. 85 across all topic categories.

Results

Research question one entailed, "What topics are currently being covered in textbooks used for the introductory organizational communication course?" A total of 63 topics were represented in the textbooks. The topics identified most often are rank ordered in Table 1. For sake of comparison, the number of pages dedicated to each topic is provided in Column One, and a rank order of the number of textbooks in which a topic appeared is provided in Column Two. Past precedent established by Pace et al. (1990) was followed in that topics whose page totals were less than a page on average

Table 1
A Three-Study Comparison

Topic	Rank by Pages[1]	Rank by Textbook[2]	Ranked by Students	Ranked by Managers
Leadership	1	2	1	8
Small Group communication	2	1	3	2
Decision Making/Problem Solving	3	5		7
Morals, Ethics, or Values	4	5		
Conflict/Conflict Management	5	2	2	8
Communication Networks	6	4		
Communication Technology	7	5		4
Organizational Change	8	20		
Verbal Communication	9	13	4	5
Systems Theory	10	11		
Diversity	11	20		10
Human Resources Theory	12	8		
Classic Management Theory	13	10		
Interpersonal Relationships	14	13		
Human Relations Theory	15	8		1

Topic	[1]	[2]	
Stress and Burnout	16	19	
Interviewing	17	20	
Organizational Structure	18	17	
The Theory of the Organization	18	26	
Impact of Gender or Minority Issues	20	13	5
Motivation	21	11	
Socialization	21	26	
Nonverbal Communication	23		
Groupthink	24	17	
Critical Theory	24	20	
Listening	26	25	2
Interpersonal Barriers	27	31	
The Future of Organizational Comm.	28	26	
Creativity	28	31	
Organizational Communication Defined	30	13	
Communication Audits	31	26	
Organizational Climate	31	26	
Writing			6

[1] Rank by number of pages dedicated to a topic in the text
[2] Rank by number of textbooks in which topic appears

(and appeared in fewer than five textbooks) were not included in these results.

Discussion

The findings of this study reflected similar topics to the most recent quantitative assessment of BOCC textbooks conducted by Pace et al. (1990). Both this study and Pace et al.'s results prioritized content addressing group communication, conflict management, and communication networks as prevalent topics. Whereas Pace et al. also ranked communication theory and organizational communication theory as two topics appearing most often in organizational communication textbooks published in the 1980s, textbooks since 1990 exhibit greater specificity by dealing with particular theoretical areas, for example, Classic Management Theory, Human Relation Theory, and Human Resources Theory. Further, Study One's results differed in some respects from Pace et al.'s results. For example, organizational climate, interpersonal communication, motivation, and nonverbal behavior did not remain among the most often mentioned topics addressed in organizational textbooks of the 1990s. Instead, these topics were replaced by leadership, decision-making, morals in the workplace, and communication technology. Overall results are encouraging in that they reflect a move toward more topics in BOCC textbooks and these topics overall are addressed in greater detail.

STUDY TWO

One way to demonstrate how connected or disconnected students might be to organizational life is to examine how students relate to course topics and how consequential they perceive the subject matter to be for their success in the workplace. Something that students find highly relevant might be something that employers report as unnecessary to succeeding in the workplace. Additionally, what students do not report as important might be more telling than what they report as necessary for the workforce. As a case in point, if students do not report that communication skills are important, then their recognition of what skills and knowledge are necessary for job success might be distorted. When preparing students for the workforce, the BOCC instructor must demonstrate to the student a link between what is taught in the course and how this information applies in the workplace, thus making it more motivating for students to learn (Frymier & Shulman, 1995). Understanding what the student believes is important can help the instructor ascertain where there is a disconnect and what steps need to be taken to rectify the situation.

Study Two identifies the topics and knowledge students perceive as relevant for workplace success so that it might be compared with the topics that appear most often in undergraduate organizational communication textbooks and the knowledge that employers feel is most important for the job. In so doing, a better understanding of what students believe is important for organizational life will be gained. The research question advanced for this study entails:

RQ2: What topics do students in the BOCC perceive as important for preparing them for life in an organization?

Participants

Participants ($N = 48$) were individuals enrolled in a BOCC. The sample was comprised of 31% male and 69% female participants with a mean age of twenty-two years old ($SD = .48$). All participants had been employed in a diverse range of fields or were currently employed.

Procedure and Instrument

On the first and last day of class, students enrolled in an introductory organizational communication course were asked to respond to an open-ended question and demographic items. The pretest question asked participants, "Which topics or subjects related to this organizational communication class do you believe needs to be covered because they will be informative and valuable for preparing you for life in an organization?" The posttest question asked participants, "What topics or subjects in your organizational communication class did you find very informative and valuable for preparing you for life in an organization?" Participants were given as much time as needed to respond to the questions. After completion, participants returned the survey to the researcher and were thanked for participating. Using a pre and posttest design allowed for analysis of participants' preconceived notions of what is important for organizational life and how perceptions change after having an organizational communication course. The

course was consistent with the BOCC standards described earlier and used the book "Organizational Communication: Approaches and Processes" (Miller, 2003).

Results

Using an inductively driven categorization procedure, a coder grouped participants' pre and posttest responses and labeled the groupings, resulting in eight different categories (Table 2). A second coder, using the inductively determined categories, deductively determined which responses belonged in what categories. This approach served as a reliability check for the coding. There was 98% agreement between the two coders. Coders discussed to agreement the disputed 2% of responses.

Table 2

Topics Students Thought Were Valuable Before and
After Their Organizational Communication Class

Topic	Pretest %	Posttest %	Significance
Communication	60%	31%	$p < .05$
Leadership	58%	46%	$p > .05$
Conflict Management	19%	35%	$p < .05$
Small Group Communication	2%	33%	$p < .05$
Diversity	0%	25%	$p < .05$
Quality of Life	0%	6%	$p > .05$
Culture	10%	4%	$p > .05$
Interpersonal Relationships	6%	2%	$p > .05$

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Using a before-after design (Sheskin, 2000) with dependent samples and qualitative data, the responses were transformed into categorical responses, meaning participants either listed the topic or they did not, allowing the data to be analyzed using the McNemar test (McNemar, 1947) without violating any statistical assumptions. As demonstrated in Table 2 by the posttest percentages, students felt that learning about (a) leadership, (b) conflict management, (c) small group communication, (d) communication, and (e) diversity were the most important topics for organizational success. Regarding significant differences from the pre and posttest, small group communication, conflict management, and diversity issues significantly increased in terms of perceptions of importance while communication significantly decreased.

Discussion

That communication significantly decreased is a finding that is difficult to interpret. One interpretation is that after discussing various aspects of organizational communication in class, participants may have felt that communication was not as important as they originally thought. Another interpretation is that participants that originally listed communication as important in the pretest were inclined to believe that communication was intrinsically associated with the other topics they now listed. Thus, they may still feel communication is important, yet fail to list it separately. Another explanation is that after completing the course, students were able to respond with more complexity what they felt was important for succeeding in an organization, which is similar

to Wicker's (1969) argument that exposure or experience in an area allows for more complex cognitions in that area. Future research using a close ended measure that lists all the topics discussed in class asking participants to report what they believe was important could assess which interpretation is correct.

The reporting of conflict management, small group communication, and leadership are consistent with the skills reported as necessary for graduates to possess. Notably, students reported with low frequency that interpersonal issues were important for their organizational success. This highlights an important divergence between student perceptions of what is important in the workplace and what skills managers desire in employees (Alsop, 2004; David & Miller, 1996; Holter, 2001; Maes et al., 1997; Messemer, 1999; Rohrs, 2000; Verespej, 1998). How this compares to the content analysis and the managerial interviews will be addressed in the general discussion.

Overall, why students reported certain topics for organizational success is a question for future research. One reason is because the instructor may have presented the information in a way that made those topics seem more important. Another reason may be that the textbook used may have presented certain topics in a way that caused students to believe these topics were vital for organizational success, which is consistent with arguments made elsewhere (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Keller, 1983; Willer et al., 1987). What is evident, however, is that participants did not feel everything in the book was important. Topics such as socialization, social support, critical approaches, and a host of other topics, were presented in the textbook and discussed in class,

but participants did not perceive these topics important for organizational preparation. Participants clearly did not simply regurgitate the textbook and lectures. Conversely, a number of topics in the textbook and presented in class did resonate with student perceptions of what was important. The same textbook was used for all students, but using a different textbook might result in different perceptions of what is important. If different perceptions are found based on textbook usage, then it is further evidence for the assertions in this study that textbook information impacts students' perceptions.

STUDY THREE

The past decade has seen a shift in the literature and business's attitudes regarding what students need to know to be productive in the workplace. One recently interviewed manager emphasized the role of communication in today's workplace this way: "If you don't understand the importance of communication, you're probably not a very good communicator." Providing a theoretical foundation helps individuals distinguish the importance of communication. Much of the current literature (David & Miller, 1996; Holter, 2001; Maes et al., 1997; Messemer, 1999; Rohrs, 2000; Verespej, 1998) stresses the need for communication skills for workers to be successful but does little to differentiate among various skills. The goal of Study Three was to determine what communicative competencies managers, functioning on behalf of the employer, believe college graduates need to be successful in the workplace. The research question advanced for this study entails:

RQ3:   What specific communication knowledge or skills do managers see as important for employees as they enter the workplace?

Respondents

A sample of 15 managers, eight men and seven women, from the Midwest and Western United States employed in various sized organizations and industries and directly involved with hiring were identified. Fifteen-minute phone interviews were conducted with middle to upper level managers regarding their perceptions of the value of communication for the workplace. Organizational experiences, roles, cultures, and sectors contributed to the various perceptions of the interviewed managers regarding their descriptions of communication use. All fifteen respondents have five to thirty years experience in management positions in various organizational sectors including banking, contracting, architecture, health care management, accounting, entertainment, postal service, educational consulting, airline industry, governmental agency, manufacturing, advertising and public relations, insurance, and technology support.

Procedure and Analysis

The study utilized open-ended, structured interviews to procure insights from managers and explore their perspectives relevant to employability. The interviews established a "conversation" with the participants of a particular organizational culture (Hymes, 1978) and served as legitimate tools for gaining information about

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the events and the participants' perspectives (Geist & Dreyer, 1993; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; 1995; Patton, 1990). An interview protocol served to generate a standardized focus and direction for the interviews with open-ended questions ranging from a general, introductory opening question to more prompted content and knowledge based questions. These questions originated from the literature, an interview guide, and the topics generated from Study One's content analysis. The managers' in-depth accounts and examples provided firsthand knowledge of what they recognize as essential for individuals to do well in the workplace.

This study used Taylor and Bogdan's (1984) three-step comparison approach to working with the data (discovery, coding, and discounting) to unearth germane themes, topics, or skill sets emergent from the interview transcripts. These emergent themes were not intended to represent mutually exclusive categories (Agar & Hobbs, 1982) but rather interdependent sets of knowledge and behavior that overlap in their communicative functions. In this process, interview transcripts were first carefully read. Next, various communication behaviors or skills identified by the managers as useful for employees were highlighted in the transcripts. Then researchers categorized individual communicative behaviors into sets with related subject similarities. To ensure some degree of intercoder reliability, examples of the acknowledged communication behaviors were read out loud to additional coders for them to verify and revise the thematized categories. Finally, a frequency count was conducted to determine the presence or absence of each thematized category per manager (e.g., Did the first manager interviewed mention listening as an im-

portant skill? Did the second manager mention listening?). The total number of managers who mentioned each communication behavior or skill was summed and these totals were ranked to provide a comparison with the results from Study One and Study Two (Table 1).

Results and Discussion

Overall, managers overwhelmingly agreed that communication skills and knowledge are vital for success in the workplace. As one manager observed, "If you're an excellent communicator, you're quickly differentiated from those who may be are just average in their communication skills." From the interviews, "Communication skills are paramount. And I mean, I think you don't realize how important they are until you find people that don't have good ones." Several managers stressed the connection between poor communication skills and the bottom line. They saw actual declines in revenue because of their employees with inadequate communication skills. The majority of the managers also emphasized the usefulness of experiential learning to supplement classroom material by suggesting that mock interviews, job shadowing, internships, mentoring, role playing, and case studies provide invaluable, practical glimpses into the "real world" for the graduating student.

The data revealed ten distinct communication behaviors. When rank ordered for comparison based on their frequency, managers gave attention to: (a) interpersonal relationships, (b) listening, (c) presentation, (d) critical thinking, (e) verbal communication, (f) writing, (g) teams, (h) diversity management, (i) conflict man-

agement, and (j) leadership. The communication behaviors tend to be distinguished as context dependent, role referred, personality based, task related, and, at times, industry specific. A summary of each category clarifies how the managers referenced them during the interviews.

Interpersonal communication behaviors were noted as impacting an assortment of internal and external stakeholders. Interpersonal communication included face-to-face exchanges as well as mediated channels. Managers spoke of the importance of monitoring non-verbal cues in relational exchanges such as gestures, facial expressions, spatiality, and vocal qualities. The managers revealed that they look for employees who are able to communicate with fellow employees as well as the public in a respectful, professional manner.

Listening appeared next most often. The managers felt extremely ardent about the significance of listening and the consequences of poor listening skills in the workplace. As one manager stated:

> [Listening] is absolutely important. When dealing with your customers that's how you detect what the problems are. And before you can solve the problems you have to listen and zone in, and realize that, yeah I understand what this person is saying. So, listening skills are very important.

Managers connected listening to problem solving, customer service, and work performance, claiming listening is a part of everything an employee encounters.

Critical thinking was mentioned next often. Managers pointed out that they looked for creative individuals that are strategic thinkers and who display the ability to adapt when communicating at work. They empha-

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sized the capabilities to ask the right questions, have the right information, prioritize thoughts, and solve problems.

Verbal communication skills, also a prized skill that managers referenced, entailed employee attention to grammar, word choice, diction, and clarity. As one manager stated, "I notice that quite a few [students] when we hire them have bad verbal skills. They say 'she don't' or 'he don't' and it's embarrassing." The importance of effective verbal skills seems obvious, but the managers made it a point to call attention to the necessity for employees to express themselves well on the job.

Written communication also garnered managers' attention in the interviews. There was no hesitation on the managers' part when they stressed the urgency of being able to write well, and that in general, employees lack that ability. An employee without developed written communication skills becomes an organizational liability while an employee with "good writing skills is an absolute plus."

Presentation skills, likewise, play a large part if students are going to function as productive employees. Managers talked about the employees' ability to publicly communicate in various organizational contexts, via the appropriate channel choice, and to a wide range of audiences. A number of the managers highlighted that employees must be able to choose the appropriate media as well as know how to use that technology to communicate effectively. If they cannot, it will be to their detriment.

Team building, another key to workplace success, involves understanding group responsibilities, group roles, and the dynamics of teamwork. It is inevitable

that an individual in an organization will be part of a team at some point. In one manager's words:

> Either self-directed, cross-functional, you know whatever the buzzword happens to be. It's really true. That you will be a participating member in a group working on a project…You are going to be working with people who may have a different background than you, have different skills sets, and you use those different skills sets together to solve the problem on the project.

Another manager underscored the team concept with a sports analogy by noting that it does not matter how many home runs a player hits, if the team does not make it to the World Series.

Diversity management and culturally sensitive communication were also noted by managers for employee success. One manager said it this way: "I think diversity is just a fancy term we put on going back to what we more commonly say on the street is 'where's that person coming from?'" The managers used words such as respect, dignity, open-mindedness, and kindness when describing the role of diversity management skills. By understanding another person's perspective and communicating across cultures, organizational employees are typically more productive.

Conflict management, next noted as important for employees, is needed especially in a competitive environment. Conflict in the workplace is foreseeable and can cause major issues if not properly addressed. "Conflict management is very important especially when you have people working together. You're always going to have little conflicts, and if you can't figure out how to get over or by it, you're in trouble."

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Leadership, mentioned the least of the communication categories, was recognized as useful, but some managers wondered if leadership could be taught. They made it a point, though, to differentiate between leadership and management. They thought the distinction was something the employees should be aware of as they enter the workplace.

> They need to understand the differences between…. leadership and management. And what it takes to be the real deal. It's important to have good leaders and managers. Not everybody wants to be a leader or manager. So, they need to have an understanding of what it is.

Managers felt that some understanding of leadership communication was beneficial for students seeking employment whether or not an individual could emerge or be developed as a leader. Even though Study Three was conducted using a convenient sample of 15 managers, this number seems to adequately represent managers' views about the importance of effective communication in the workplace because a redundancy of mentioned behaviors and skills occurred during the interviews. As the interviews progressed, the researcher encountered a degree of "informational sufficiency" (Snow, 1980). Managers' comments became repetitive in topic. "No new or relevant data seemed to emerge regarding a category" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 212) suggesting a point of saturation in the findings. These results indicate that managers felt strongly that employees should have a working understanding of key communication concepts that help them become proficient in a number of communication skills as they build organizational relationships. Not once did the managers diminish the

worth of "hard skills," but they did say that employees have to go beyond specific-task related proficiencies in order to be successful in today's workforce.

OVERALL DISCUSSION

The textbooks, students, and managers exhibited some overlap on the following communication knowledge and skills necessary for successful employment: small group communication, leadership, conflict management, and verbal communication. Conversely, results also reflect numerous dissimilarities. Communication technology and decision-making frequently appeared in organizational communication textbooks and was deemed important by managers, but students made little to no mention of the topics. Diversity management and interpersonal issues were mentioned often by students and managers, but were overshadowed by many other topics appearing in organizational communication textbooks. Table 1 contains the comparison among the three studies.

Several high ranking topics appeared in only one study but were barely mentioned or not mentioned at all in either of the other two studies. Notably, interpersonal skills and listening were reported by managers as among the most important skills for employees to possess, but students only barely mentioned interpersonal issues and were lower on the rankings for textbooks. Although managers felt employees should be equipped to write effectively for the job, it was not a topic of focus of introductory organizational texts and neither was it mentioned by students. Students spoke of quality of life

as a topic of importance for organizational communication classes, but it did not exist as a major finding in the content analysis or manager studies. Communication networks and value-related content were both frequently referenced in textbooks; however, they were not mentioned by students or managers.

Understanding the skills graduates need to possess to be successful by assessing managerial perspectives serves to increase the amount of overlap between what is taught in the BOCC and students' perceptions of organizational expectations. The necessary skills managers cited in this study for being successful in an organization are consistent with past reports (i.e., David & Miller, 1996; Holter, 2001; Maes, Weldy, & Icengole, 1997; Messemer, 1999; Rohrs, 2000; Verespej, 1998). Based on the similarities and differences in results of the three studies it would seem that the BOCC textbooks address relevant and important information for students, but could improve by adding or focusing on some additional important communication issues that are often referred to in business lingo as "soft skills." For example, emphasizing discussions about interpersonal issues, dealing with conflict, and listening (refer to table 1 for other examples), can improve the applicability of the textbooks.

Regardless of the emphasis textbooks place on a topic, and although not examined here, instructors do impact student learning and perceptions through what they emphasize and choose to present in class. The BOCC instructor can serve a pivotal role, in conjunction with the textbook, in preparing tomorrow's workforce by functioning as a "translation specialist" (Rost, 1991, p. 187). Playing the role of translation specialist means the

BOCC instructor is a medium between student and the workforce. The BOCC instructor ascertains information necessary for the students to be prepared for life in an organization and presents them that information in a meaningful and useful manner. In sum, the instructor translates pertinent information that students need for organizational success and provides them with that information. For example, based on the results from this study, BOCC instructors should consider emphasizing interpersonal relationships and listening in the workplace by conducting exercises in class that demonstrate their importance. The ultimate result will be what a manger interviewed for this study hopes occurs, that "they [students] get a realistic picture of what to expect once they graduate."

As translation specialist, instructor and scholar are responsible for discerning and determining what content and knowledge is most essential for the developing student. The academy needs to be responsive to the needs of the workforce and translate or interpret what is relevant for organizational success to the classroom in a meaningful, congruent manner for the student. The instructor and scholar are ideally suited to be a translation specialist since they are the ones that go to managers, inquire what skill sets are needed for the workforce, and translate this information into an appropriate form for the BOCC students.

Although this study focuses on the BOCC, other communication courses such as interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public speaking, might find the information here useful because soft skills are becoming increasingly important in the work place. Because a number of communication courses fo-

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cus on soft skill behaviors, instructors of these courses may find the results of this study applicable to what they teach in their courses.

The goal of this study was to identify topics that are important to present to students in the BOCC so that students will be prepared for the demands of organizational life. This research suggests that an on-going dialogue among students, managers, and instructors of the basic organizational communication course will help to achieve alignment between the academy and the workplace. Clearly, effective communication skills are necessary for survival in the workplace and this study provides information to educators' of what to teach in the BOCC to make graduates successful, or at least prepared, for life in an organization.

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