

## **The Application of Basic Communication Skills to Higher Education Administration**

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*Communication skills are a core requirement for administrators in higher education. Evidence for this proposition can be found in the job announcements for administrators and in the conferences they attend. The Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences' (CCAS) annual conference is a place for deans and other administrators from around the country to gather to work on becoming better at "deaning." For the past few years, a pre-conference workshop titled "Conflict Management for Deans," has been offered, and serves as a perfect example of the importance of our discipline to higher education administration. In a quick review of the job advertisements in the Chronicle of Higher Education, it easily becomes clear that "communication skills" are a basic requirement for most leadership positions in higher education. Here, we take that notion one step further by discussing some specific communication concepts, theories, and strategies that reflect those skills and that show the significance of effective communication in higher education administration. We focus on five areas of communication and how they have impacted our transitions into administration: presentation skills, interpersonal skills, small group skills, affinity-seeking behaviors, and listening.*

**Key Words:** Affinity-seeking, Administration, Communication Theory, Communication Skills, Deans, Listening

**Editor's Note:** The authors of this article were panel members at an ACA-sponsored panel in 2013. Each has transitioned from teaching these important skills and concepts to their students into faculty members who also serve their universities in administrative capacities. In this article, they discuss their own use of specific communication theories and constructs and how they have applied them to our administrative responsibilities. Each brings a different level and type of administrative experience to the discussion, and the universities at which each serves are varied. The one thing they have in common is that their *communication* backgrounds have work fit in their administrative roles, and the purpose of this article is to share with readers how they have done this.

A number of administrators in higher education are from the Communication discipline. We have often discussed, with much pride, how our academic home has prepared us to serve in leadership roles. Because of our ability to merge theory with practice, we prepare and deliver engaging presentations, develop and manage meaningful relationships, and facilitate small group

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processes that bring about desired results. Table 1 lists and describes these skills and how they allow administrators to accomplish specific processes, and it explains the theories that ultimately allow administrators to adapt those skills appropriately and effectively.

### **Presentational Skills**

As deans, we use a number of different presentational speaking skills and styles, ranging from presiding over formal ceremonies such as opening convocations with faculty and donor recognition dinners, to presenting the college's strategic plan to the university community, to persuading the Council of Academic Deans that building a new School of Music should take priority over other's building needs. Whether the goal is to entertain, inform, or persuade, educational administrators need to understand how to "adapt ideas to people and people to ideas." (Bryant, 1953)

Our ability to influence and persuade others through presentations is the direct result of our academic training and understanding Aristotle's "modes of persuasion" (1991). Every presentation begins with understanding the audience and considering what it will take to influence others to bring about the desired outcome. For example, if a dean needs to persuade the provost to reallocate office space to his/her own college (when space is at an all-time premium), a logical appeal is needed. When persuading a college support group to change its mission from a membership service organization to a scholarship organization, an emotional appeal is needed. When a dean is new, establishing *ethos* or credibility is of the utmost importance.

### **Interpersonal Skills**

Quality *relationships* have always been at the core of effective leadership. Work gets accomplished through the relationships we develop and maintain with others.

Through teaching, research, and skill development (affirming, listening, and responding to others), we learn a valuable skill set that allows us to manage conflict, delegate work, and influence others. Being aware of how our inherited temperaments influence our interpersonal communication allows us to remain open to others, even in tense and hostile situations. Our interpersonal skills give us confidence to manage bullying faculty members, tenure denials, and sexual harassment claims.

Although interpersonal skills allow for the avoidance of land mines and for the careful navigation of unique and delicate situations, not every situation is successful. When interpersonal encounters do not go as planned, expectancy violation theory (EVT) helps explain, "What went wrong" (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). For example, EVT helped a new dean understand what went wrong in a performance review with a direct report. The dean violated an expectation in that the information was not as filtered and framed as it had been in the past with the prior dean. Because the dean and direct report had a positive relationship, the direct report gave the new dean permission to violate the expectation. Had the relationship not been as positive, the violation would have resulted in a damaged relationship. After a round of performance reviews, the new dean now has a clearer understanding of the expectations, and will know to spend more time on the messaging before conducting another performance appraisal.

### **Small Group Skills**

Higher education is a *collaborative process*. With declining state support for higher education and a burgeoning enrollment, meeting facilitation, group decision-making and problem-solving processes are activities administrators do daily. Because we understand these

**Table 1**

Communication skills, processes, and theories that enhance a person’s transition from faculty member to administrator.

The skills sets I need to be effective	The skills I use daily	These skill allow me to do the following processes	On the job, these skills allow me to	Theories I use to help me understand my effectiveness
Presentational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessing audience</li> <li>• Identifying goals</li> <li>• Developing messages</li> <li>• Adapting messages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instruct/train</li> <li>• Persuade</li> <li>• Entertain</li> <li>• Inform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make informative presentations to faculty (i.e., convocation, strategic planning)</li> <li>• Make persuasive presentations to donors and supporters of the college</li> <li>• Make training presentations that are part of professional development workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aristotle’s modes of persuasion</li> </ul>
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affirming others</li> <li>• Self-disclosing information</li> <li>• Listening</li> <li>• Paraphrasing</li> <li>• Asking questions</li> <li>• Seeking affinity</li> <li>• Asserting</li> <li>• Responding</li> <li>• Giving and receiving criticism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build relationship</li> <li>• Delegate duties</li> <li>• Manage conflict</li> <li>• Influence others</li> <li>• Evaluate others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop employees through coaching and formal performance appraisals.</li> <li>• Influence provost for needed resources</li> <li>• Attract new donors to college.</li> <li>• Preside over formal events.</li> <li>• Create initiatives that foster change and enhance effectiveness among faculty and staff.</li> <li>• Encourage faculty, staff, and students to take perspective during conflict conversations</li> <li>• Diffuse destructive emotions and facilitate difficult conversations such as communicating tenure decisions, negative performance evaluations, or denied appeals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectancy violation theory</li> </ul>

Table 1, Continued.

The skills sets I need to be effective	The skills I use daily	These skill allow me to do the following processes	On the job, these skills allow me to	Theories I use to help me understand my effectiveness
Small Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitating conversations</li> <li>• Advocating</li> <li>• Making decisions</li> <li>• Solving problems</li> <li>• Negotiating and bargaining</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead others</li> <li>• Follow others</li> <li>• Facilitate meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage chairs/directors and faculty in strategic planning conversations.</li> <li>• Plan, facilitate, and follow-up all types of meetings: search committee, curriculum, faculty senate, staff, college council, advisory councils.</li> <li>• Work through the procurement process.</li> <li>• Manage change in college council meetings by making decisions and solving problems.</li> <li>• Advocate for the college’s interests at executive-level discussion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Functional theory of decision-making and problem-solving</li> </ul>

group and team processes, making meetings productive is not the challenge it seems to be for many leaders who do not come from the Communication discipline.

The functional theory of group decision-making and problem-solving (Hirokawa, 1985) informs us about how to develop meeting agendas that promote enough structured interaction to lead to a desired outcome. We use the theory to diagnose “what went wrong” when meetings do not go as planned. As a group, did we fail to identify the problem? Did we fail to analyze the problem? Do we know what “good” looks and sounds like? Put simply, have we invested time in developing criteria that our solutions or decision must meet in order for it to be a good decision/solution?

The following example illustrates how one dean used the small group problem solving process to solve a staffing crisis during a hiring freeze. With a spike in student enrollment, there was an expectation that the college would continue to provide a high level of personalized advising and career services to all college majors. In addition to the burgeoning enrollment, the college was responsible for administering a “Friends of the College” donor group, as well as administering and producing a robust university arts program. Through a number of meetings where the problem-solving and decision-making protocols outlined in Hirokawa’s (1985) functional theory were applied, the college decided to automate a number of processes that ultimately did not add additional duties to an already “maxed out” staff.

### Affinity-Seeking

From our experiences, when others *like us*, they tend to be more compliant and less resistance. This is not to say that we will not have adversaries or that our job performance should ever be compromised at the expense of being well-liked. Because of our communication education and training, we know that liking works as a social lubricant that makes challenging

relationships work with greater ease. Affinity-seeking strategies are the behaviors we use to gain and communicate liking. Bell and Daly (1984) identified 25 affinity-seeking strategies that are commonly used in interpersonal contexts. Some strategies are more appropriate for the higher education context than others. Six strategies are particularly useful for administrators, and should be a part of their communication repertoire: *assume equality, dynamism, inclusion of other, openness, sensitivity, and trustworthiness*.

When using the “assume equality” strategy, the administrator puts him/herself on equal ground with the staff, the faculty, and so forth, as appropriate. This does not allow for egos to get in the way of communicating with direct reports. It allows others to feel important and, as though they are not being talked down to or somehow, made to feel “lesser” than the administrator due to differing levels of education, income, or rank. In everyday terms, one is often considered to be “down to Earth,” a rather positive notion, when assuming equality with others.

To utilize the “dynamism” strategy, an administrator must be positive, optimistic, and enthusiastic. This can be difficult when feeling frustrated or handling tough situations, but it is important for those in charge to remain dynamic and allow that to rub off on others. Humans tend to like people who are positive rather than negative, and being a dynamic leader can contribute to this optimism. An example of utilizing this strategy well is when there is change in an organization. Change is inevitable in higher education and in life, and one who employs dynamism responds positively to change and helps others to remain positive when working through change.

While it is not necessary (or even appropriate) to “include others” in all work-related decisions, people do tend to appreciate it when they are included in some decision-making, events, information distribution, and so forth. Making an effort to include others, to show respect for them, and to seek their input allows for increased affinity. For example, if a new policy is to be implemented, and the staff members are the ones who will implement that policy, it would be wise to include them in the decision-making process about the policy. It makes sense as an affinity-seeking behavior and as a general rule to follow—involve those whom the decisions will impact and they will like you for it. Two things should be noted about this strategy. First, if the effort to include others is not sincere, it will most likely be recognized and perceived negatively. Second, just because others are included in decisions or discussions does not mean the decision is turned over to them. Including others simply provides them with a voice and administrators with the opportunity to learn their perspectives.

“Openness” relates to self-disclosure. Being open in communicating with others, including one’s own faults, can help gain affinity. Administrators who are seen as “human” are certainly more likeable than those who cannot admit their mistakes, or who are overly private. There needs to be balanced here, of course, in that we do not need to disclose too much personal information at the office. Spending 10 minutes showing photos of a recently-attended wedding can go a long way in increasing affinity and building a relationship, but spending two hours out of the day chatting about mutual problems at home is neither professional nor appropriate. Being open, but limiting both the time spent in doing so—and the breadth and depth of those self-disclosures—can help with affinity-seeking and relationship-building.

“Trustworthiness” can go hand-in-hand with openness, as that openness needs to be honest. To use “trustworthiness” as an affinity-seeking strategy, promises need to be fulfilled and followed-through on. For example, in a meeting someone says, “Oh yes, I’ll look into that

matter.” Following through after the meeting on this promise in an effective and efficient manner establishes trustworthiness.

“Sensitivity” means being able to use empathy, understand others, and relate to whatever it is that they have going on in their lives. It does not mean allowing one’s direct reports to “walk all over” him or her, but that if someone has a child who is mentally ill and the person misses work because of it, empathy and understanding are shown (e.g., allowing for the person to use their sick/vacation days as necessary). Being sensitive to a faculty member who has difficulty climbing stairs and moving his/her classroom to accommodate this difficulty is another example of showing sensitivity.

When used appropriately and sincerely, these affinity-seeking skills reflect effective communication. People are more likeable when they effectively use affinity-seeking, but likeability is not the only benefit. When these affinity-seeking skills are combined with other communication skills, one’s goals can be achieved more effectively and efficiently. Listening is a seventh affinity-seeking strategy, but is discussed in greater detail here as it encompasses other areas of communication beyond affinity-seeking.

### **Listening**

Although listening may seem rather basic, the effects of consistent *effective* listening in the workplace are tremendous. Being an effective listener is key to being an effective administrator. To be an effective administrator, information is necessary to solve problems and make decisions. Some of the most important information can only be obtained by listening to one’s staff and faculty. Ineffective listening means missing out on key sources of information. Here, we will discuss listening, obstacles to effective listening, and managing these obstacles.

Listening is the psychological process of receiving, interpreting, and responding to messages (Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 1996). Listening is sometimes confused with hearing, which is the physical process of receiving sound waves. Listening certainly relies on hearing, but one can hear without listening. In the U.S., we tend to place more value on speaking than we do on listening; we are a culture of action, and on the surface listening does not seem very action-oriented. However, listening is the skill that often allows us to take effective action.

Not all listening is the same. There are several types of listening, and part of being an effective listener is using the appropriate type of listening. Three important types of listening are: listening for information, evaluative listening, and empathic listening. *Listening for information* is the use of listening to gather information in a relatively unbiased and objective manner. Evaluation of that information is temporarily suspended. *Evaluative listening* is the process of applying some criteria to the information being presented. Listening for information is an element of evaluative listening, but the goal is to assess the information. *Empathic listening* is done for the purpose of understanding a person from his or her perspective. Again, listening for information is a foundation of empathic listening, but there is a greater emphasis on understanding the feelings and perceptions of the speaker. A key mistake people make is using evaluative listening when one of the other two types is needed. Most people are very capable of engaging in each of these types of listening, but allow common obstacles to get in their way. It is a person’s ability to manage common obstacles that determines one’s listening effectiveness.

There are many obstacles to effective listening and we have found five that we frequently encounter as deans:

- (1) Distractions (environmental and internal)
- (2) Preoccupation
- (3) Pre-judgment

- (4) Message Complexity
- (5) Information Overload

Effectively managing these obstacles improves our ability to listen and to communicate overall. It can be relatively easy to eliminate environmental distractions. Turning off cell phones and closing office doors can eliminate distractions and signal to the speaker our interest and willingness to listen. Internal distractions, preoccupation, and pre-judgment can be managed by being mindful of these obstacles. This means paying attention to the moment—being aware of our behaviors and thoughts. Much of our communication is performed on autopilot. Being mindful means turning off the autopilot. Awareness of judgments allows for suspension of them when evaluation is inappropriate. Being in control of one's thought processes require some practice and discipline. Our minds can quickly wander and become distracted, and it may become habitual. Being mindful and managing distractions are particularly important for empathic listening. Empathic listening requires the suspension of judgment and an effort to understand the situation from the speaker's perspective. It does not imply agreement with or acceptance of the speaker's perspective; it means an effort is made to understand it.

Information overload can be harder to manage. As information complexity increases, our listening capacity is more quickly maxed-out. Speakers can help others to listen by slowing down and allowing for processing time. Listeners have little control over the speed or complexity of the information, but may be able to verbally ask the speaker to slow down, to repeat things, or request a follow-up conversation. Nonverbally, listeners can help manage the speed of speaking through head nods, smiles, frowns, raised eyebrows, and so forth.

In addition to being mindful and reducing obstacles, asking questions, taking notes, and paraphrasing also can increase listening effectiveness. Asking questions is one of the simplest and most effective means of improving listening. If the speaker is considered as a source of important information, questions are the primary tool for accessing that information. Asking questions (not interrogating) also can be a way of expressing interest, caring, and showing openness—all of which can increase affinity. Asking questions is also an effective way of managing information overload. When feeling overloaded, the act of asking a question forces the speaker to slow down and address the receiver's needs. Taking notes can also help with managing information overload as it communicates to the speaker that we are listening and may encourage them to open up and share additional information. Paraphrasing and restating are skills that are particularly important when listening to complex or difficult information. Paraphrasing and restating are ways of checking one's understanding of what the speaker said. This is especially important in empathic listening when it may be difficult to grasp the speaker's feelings or interpretation of events. Paraphrasing may also help the speaker sort out his or her feelings. Again, paraphrasing also communicates to the speaker that one is listening, which itself can facilitate affinity.

Effective listening is a valuable tool for administrators in that it simultaneously allows us to gather important information and to develop relationships with our staff and faculty. Listening allows us to understand our colleagues, the ones who are impacted by *our* decisions. Listening communicates support and caring to those people, which in turn increases their trust and respect for us. Effective listening is far more difficult than most people recognize. It requires a great deal of mental energy and discipline. Many people listen superficially, gathering a minimum amount of information before making an evaluation and then speaking themselves. When engaging in difficult conversations, rarely do speakers begin with the most important

information. If we cut people off after a 30 second assessment, we will never hear the most important information.

### Summary

Mindfully putting into practice the knowledge and skills we acquired during our graduate education, and what we continue to discover through our research and teaching, allows Communication professionals to achieve a level of success in their leadership roles within higher education. Higher education administration, like all managerial roles, is communication intensive. We make presentations to large and small groups; we lead committees and groups, and we work with and supervise a variety of staff and faculty members. To achieve our goals and our universities' goals, we have to have credibility and be trusted. Our ability to effectively listen and to gain affinity directly contributes to our perceived credibility.

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