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An Investigation of the Communication Skills and Communication Needs of Academic and Civil Service Administrators

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IN the past 20 years, communication skills used and required in various organizational contexts have been the subject of many studies. Examples include studies by DiSalvo, Larsen, and Seiler (1976), by Murphy and Jenks (1982), by Smith (1982), by DiSalvo, Larsen, and Backus (1986), and by McDowell and Mizuno (1987). The results of these studies indicate listening, persuading, routine information exchange, small group leadership, small group problem solving and advising were the most important communication activities in various types of business, health care, and extension organizations.

In a recent study Curtis, Winsor, and Stephens (1989) concluded that the communication skills most valued in the contemporary job entry market are interpersonal and public communication skills, listening, written communication and the trait of enthusiasm.

The review of the communication literature indicates that several studies have been completed in business and industry, but no research has focused on the communication skills of the academic and civil service administrators in an academic setting. **This exploratory study is designed to determine the level of importance of communication skills for academic and civil service administrators in an academic setting. The study is designed to answer the following research questions:**

1. What is the level of importance of communication activities used by administrator groups (academic and civil service) when communicating with (1) your immediate supervisor, (2) people outside the organization, (3) other administrators in your organization, and (4) subordinates?

2. In which of the communication activities have you had formal training?
3. List the three communication activities in which you are most, competent.
4. List the three communication activities in which you are least competent.
5. In which communication activities would you like to have training?

PROCEDURES

Two samples of administrators participated in the study, including 120 academic administrators and 120 civil service administrators from a midwestern university. The questionnaires were sent through campus mail to random samples of academic administrators and civil service administrators.

Instrument

DiSalvo's, et al., (1976) instrument was revised for this study. Participants were asked to rate the level of importance of ten communication activities engaged in with superiors, peers, subordinates and people outside the university. Importance was rated on a six-point scale: (0) does not apply; (1) very important, (2) important, (3) uncertain, (4) unimportant, and (5) very unimportant.

Statistical Analysis

Means, percentages and chi square analyses were used to analyze the data.

RESULTS

A total of 90 academic administrators (75%) and 87 civil service administrators (73%) completed and returned the questionnaire.

The results indicate that listening, persuading, small group/conference problem-solving, and routine information exchange are perceived as most important communication activities for the four professional categories (immediate supervisor, outside, same rank administrator, and subordinate).

The chi square analyses, as revealed in Table 1, indicate that several differences occurred between administrator groups in their communication activities with immediate supervisors. Specifically, significant differences ($p > .001$) occurred between groups in rating the level of importance of persuading, interviewing, routine information exchange, and giving orders. Civil service administrators rated interviewing, routine information exchange, and giving orders as significantly more important than academic administrators, while academic administrators rated persuading and small group/conference leadership ($p < .005$) significantly higher than civil service administrators.

Other results reveal that significant differences occurred between administrator groups in rating the level of importance of routine information exchange, small group/conference leadership and giving orders when communicating with subordinates. Civil service admin-

istrators rated routine information exchange and giving orders more important than academic administrators, and academic administrators rated small group/conference leadership as more important.

Exploratory analyses were completed to determine if differences existed between genders. The results basically show that gender is not a good discriminating variable because of the high within group variances and limited between group variances. Overall, approximately 80 percent of the civil service administrators are female, while 84 percent of the academic administrator are male. The results reveal that females rated small group/conference problem solving, routine information exchange, and listening as more important than male administrators when communicating with immediate supervisors and professional outside the academic organization. In contrast, males rated giving orders as more important than females when communicating with subordinates.

Table 2 lists the percentages of academic administrators and civil service administrators who have had formal coursework or training in the communication activities. The results indicate that a majority of academic administrators have had training in public speaking, giving orders, persuasion and instructing, while a majority of civil service administrators have not had training in any of the communication activities.

The next two questions asked administrators to identify the three communication activities in which they are most skilled and the three in which they are least skilled. The results indicate that both groups feel they are most skilled in small group/conference problem-solving (academic administrators, $n=37$ [49%] and civil service administrators $n=41$ [53%]). Academic administrators indicated that they also are skilled in instructing (36%) and advising (31%). In contrast, civil service administrators think they are skilled in routine information exchange (29%). Both groups feel they are least skilled in listening (12%) and giving orders (9%).

The final questions asked administrators to list the communication activities in which they would like training. The results indicate that listening, small/group conference leadership and small group/conference problem-solving are listed most frequently.

CONCLUSIONS

Communication activities dominate the *world of work* of academic and civil service administrators in an academic setting. Previous research indicates this is true for most professional groups.

The results indicate that academic administrators have had more coursework and training in the various communication activities than civil service administrators. Civil service administrators have had limited training in the communication activities. Both groups of administrators recognize the need for training in listening and small group activities.

Over 80 percent of civil service administrators have at least a bachelor's degree, and 97 percent of academic administrators have Ph.D. degrees. The purpose of this study was to determine the level of importance of communication activities of the academic and civil service administrators, as well as their communication needs. Programs need to be developed to help academic and civil service administrators assess their communication skills. Perhaps speech communication professors can help to develop programs in listening, small group conference problem-solving and small group/conference leadership, as well as other communication programs. As experts in communication activities, speech-communication professors can help to improve the communication skills of academic and civil service administrators.

REFERENCE AND NOTES

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TABLE 1
Academic Administrators vs. Civil Service Administrators

Comm. Activities	Professional Category	\bar{X}	(P)
Persuading	Immediate Supervisor	31.96	.001
Interviewing	Immediate Supervisor	23.49	.001
Routine Information Exchange	Immediate Supervisor	97.3	.001
Small Group/ Conference Leadership	Immediate Supervisor	20.54	.005
Giving Orders	Immediate Supervisor	32.90	.001
Listening	Immediate Supervisor	45.83	.001
Giving Orders	Outside	30.32	.001
Giving Orders	Same Rank	25.71	.001
Routine Information Exchange	Subordinate	25.84	.001
Small Group/ Conference Leadership	Subordinate	27.58	.001
Giving Orders	Subordinate	27.38	.001

TABLE 2
Training in Communication Activities

Activities	Acad. Administrator %	C. S. Administrator %
Public Speaking	76	35
SG Conference Problem Solving	27	23
Interviewing	22	29
Giving Orders	59	33
SG Conference Leadership	23	17
Advising	21	14
Persuading	62	34
Instructing	65	21
Listening	9	11
Routine Information Exchange	36	27
