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Cambridge University Press 978-1-107-65662-8 - Communication Skills for Business Professionals Phillip Cenere, Robert Gill, Celeste Lawson and Michael Lewis Index More information

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Chapter 1

Introduction: communication in organisations

Learning objectives

After working through this chapter, as a business professional you will be able to:

- 1. understand the importance of communication skills for business professionals
- 2. appreciate the role of theory in helping to understand the world around us
- 3. gain the power to influence others in business
- 4. understand employer expectations of new business graduates
- 5. engage in critical thinking
- 6. embark on a journey of continuous professional development.

Introduction

Learning to communicate is an important professional and life skill. Organisations today are looking for people with the **communication skills** to be able to contribute productively within the workplace and maintain effective relationships with stakeholders. This chapter provides an overview of *Communication Skills for Business Professionals*, including the benefits of good communications skills and employer expectations of new business graduates.

During the course of your studies, you will no doubt come across *theories*. Theories are not dirty words or something to be feared. They are not, despite popular thinking, hypotheses or unrelated to the 'real world'. In fact, a theory derives from a body of knowledge discovered through research and experience. Theories help explain phenomena within our world. They allow us to learn from the collective knowledge of others.

In his book *Public Relations: Theories, Practices, Critiques* (2012), Professor Jim Macnamara states that practitioners will regularly encounter situations

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that they have not personally experienced before – particularly younger practitioners. Having practical knowledge of every possible circumstance is simply not possible in today's fast-changing world.

Macnamara identifies three very practical benefits that come from a theory (2012, p. 14).

- 1. It helps us avoid mistakes that others have made in the past.
- 2. It is a way to save time as we can leverage off the learning of others and implement proven methods, rather than waste time on unproven or problematic approaches.
- 3. It helps identify best practice in a field.

CASE STUDY: STARTING OUT AS A BUSINESS PROFESSIONAL

Yan (Lily) Wang (Figure 1.1) is a young business professional with experience in the commercial and not-for-profit sectors, having worked as an assistant accountant at Lion Nathan (one of Australasia's leading beverage and food companies) and Canon Australia, and as a volunteer for the Association for the International Exchange of Students in Economics and Commerce (AIESEC), the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) and Robert Menzies College. She has a Bachelor of Accounting from Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, a Master of Professional Accounting from Macquarie University and a Graduate Diploma in Financial Management from Central Queensland University. Lily was born in China and now lives in Sydney with her husband. Below, she describes her experiences starting out as a business professional.

communication skills The ability to convey information effectively and efficiently through verbal and non-verbal communication. There are soft skills (emotional intelligence) and hard skills (technical abilities).



Figure 1.1 Yan (Lily) Wang

Part 1 Understanding communication

Why are communication skills important in business?

That's a big question! I think if you work in business, particularly in a big company, there are so many different roles, functions and departments. You have so many stakeholders – your customers, your suppliers, your managers. You have to communicate with them and work as a team. You have to be able to express yourself – your thoughts and opinions.

English is your second language. How have you improved your communication skills?

It was very hard for me when I first came to Australia because English was not my first language – despite having started to learn English in middle-school. We learned English by reading textbooks and watching videos. However, we didn't have that cultural background. When I first came to Australia, I realised how important it is to understand the culture; the way people live and the lifestyles they have.

I started watching TV (with the subtitles on) and reading newspapers. I joined English conversation groups and Toastmasters International to meet native English speakers. Attending Toastmasters was great because it forced me to step up and speak in front of an audience. It helped me overcome my nerves, build up my confidence, structure my speeches and present myself. Before attending Toastmasters, I wouldn't speak up in meetings. Now I know how to express myself and feel more comfortable talking with people.

While I was at university, we also organised study groups made up of native and non-native speakers and forced ourselves to speak English.

What are some of the differences between the business cultures in Australia and China?

In China, we were taught to obey and respect our managers – even if they were wrong, we would never say 'no' to seniors. In Australia, everyone is on a more equal basis – seniors listen to young people's opinions, young people can feel free to (sometimes) challenge seniors. In Australia, communication is more straightforward. In China, a lot of business is conducted informally. You have to use your social connections.

We have something called *guanxi*, a term which describes very complicated social connections (common in Asian cultures). More and more Westerners want to explore China to study or travel or to do business with Chinese people. They start eating dumplings, listen to Peking Opera, but they often struggle to understand Chinese culture, especially *guanxi* (a practice which stems from the philosophies of Daoism and Confucianism, which teach us to maintain a balance with everything).

A lot of Western people believe *guanxi* is simply about networking or exchanging favours. It is much more complicated than that. The networking and exchange of gifts is dependent on social status, occupations, family background, etc. This philosophy has had a really big impact on Chinese people. For thousands of years, one generation after another, we have been told that we need to follow the rules, the hierarchies, keep the balance, and build our network through *guanxi*. **Chapter 1 Introduction: communication in organisations**

You beat hundreds of other candidates to land positions with Lion Nathan and Canon Australia. Why do you think you were successful?

(Laughing) I have no idea! I think one thing that really helped me is that I was really confident in the interviews. I talked about myself and let the interviewers talk about their stories. I think if you're confident and engage with the interviewers, your character will naturally come out. I also tried to turn any disadvantages in my CV into advantages.

What are some of the communication challenges you've experienced at work?

In my first and second years I didn't always know how to ask for help. I would need to get some information from other people (which often added to their workload) and I didn't know how to make them feel comfortable so they would help me. I didn't understand how important those little hallway conversations, chit-chats and connections were in business and to help me do my job. Sometimes I think those soft skills mean much more than your technical skills. Soft skills allow you to utilise the resources, sources and knowledge of others and get things done as a team.

What are some of the perceptions employers have of generation Y, particularly young business graduates?

I've found that there are two different types of people. One type starts working early – they do a lot of internships while still in school, find their direction and keep improving themselves. This type usually become very successful and land senior positions. The other type of people don't know what they want, don't want to try, they don't have a 'can-do' attitude, they complain and blame others instead of improving themselves. They're very difficult to work with. Not team players. They don't do the right things for the long term. They choose the easy ways out.

So what advice would you give to university business students or new practitioners?

You have to have some sort of work experience. Start early. Do part-time jobs or internships while you're studying – get a taste of the real business world. Find out which area you're really interested in and try and build as many connections as you can, find a good mentor and learn from the best. Once you feel you're not being challenged in your current role, you should be searching for something new.

While you're at university, take advantage of the opportunities around you. Try to work with people with different backgrounds and from other faculties (IT or arts students). Enter business competitions. Join a professional association. Participate and put your hand up. There's an old adage, 'decisions are made by those who show up'.

Always keep an open mind. Keep learning and trying different things. Don't stay in your comfort zone.

Part 1 Understanding communication

PAUSE AND REFLECT 1.1 🥂

'By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the bitterest.' (Confucius)

The importance of communication in organisations

What is 'business'? If we went looking for a definition in the dictionary, we would likely find that business is 'the activity of making, buying or selling goods or providing services in exchange for money' (Merriam-Webster, http://www.merriam-webster. com/dictionary/business). What if we had asked that question of Apple cofounder Steve Jobs? What might he have said? He may have told us that business is the ability to think differently, solve problems, risk failure, work hard, create partnerships, do something that you're passionate about and put a 'ding' in the universe. If we explore deeper, we would also see that at the heart of all of those things is the ability to *communicate*.

Communication has never been so important for business professionals. The late twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century have seen revolutions and transformations in the way business is conducted. In fact, one constant factor in the past 20 or 30 years has been continual change largely due to three interrelated forces: globalisation, the dramatic advances in information technology and industry consolidation (Harrison, 2008).

These forces have resulted in mergers, acquisitions, restructurings, downsizings, outsourcing and major shifts in the missions and cultures of organisations. As a result, organisations have been obliged to adapt to their environment by making many changes to the way they operate. The changes facing organisations are difficult to achieve and need to be managed well through good communication.

Jack Welch, former head of General Electric, once said, 'When the rate of change inside an organisation is slower than the rate of change outside an organisation, then the end is in sight'. Good communication can also impact the talent an organisation is able to attract and retain. In his book *Winning* (2009), Welch relates an anecdote about a job candidate meeting with a group of executives at a Fortune 500 company. When she walked into the interview room, she tripped over the doorstop. Quickly composing herself, she said, 'Hi, I'm Grace the ballet instructor'. Funny, right? Nobody laughed. She went on to ace the interview and was offered the job. She declined the offer because the executives who had interviewed her 'weren't human'.

PAUSE AND REFLECT 1.2 🥣

In their New York Times bestseller *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (2007), Chip and Dan Heath describe an experiment by Elizabeth Newton. In 1990, Newton earned a PhD in psychology at Stanford University for her 'tappers and listeners' experiment.

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Tappers received a list of songs (such as 'Happy Birthday to You' or 'The Star-Spangled Banner') and had to tap the rhythm out on a table to listeners who had to guess the name of the songs. Of the 120 songs tapped out, listeners only guessed three songs correctly (2.5%).

Before the experiment, Newton asked the tappers to predict the odds that the listeners would guess correctly. The tappers predicted that the odds were 50% (1 in 2). When the listeners only achieved 1 in 40, the tappers were frustrated – *weren't the songs obvious?*

Question: Why couldn't the listeners hear the tunes?

Answer: The tappers already knew the name of the song. Therefore, they were *hearing the song in their heads* as they tapped. The listeners didn't have prior knowledge of the song, so they couldn't hear the tunes – just disconnected taps, 'like a kind of bizarre Morse Code' (Heath & Heath, 2007).

As the Heath brothers explain:

Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has 'cursed' us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can't readily re-create our listeners' state of mind.

The tapper/listener experiment is re-enacted every day across the world. The tappers and listeners are CEOs and frontline employees, teachers and students, politicians and voters, marketers and customers ... When a CEO discusses 'unlocking shareholder value', there is a tune playing in her head that the employees can't hear. (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 20)

This textbook will explore how business professionals can unlock the mysteries of communication and communicate better within and outside the workplace. Chapters will focus on:

- the influence of organisational structures and cultures on communication
- understanding communication processes
- understanding audiences
- persuasion and influence
- negotiation and conflict management
- working in groups
- intercultural communication
- research and channel selection
- reports and proposals
- correspondence in the form of letters, memos and emails
- writing for the web
- oral presentations
- communication related to meetings.

Part 1 Understanding communication

Communication is about empowerment

The economic landscape now requires all business professionals – regardless of occupation, industry or sector – to develop their communication skills. Perhaps the advertising campaign 'Be heard. Be Recognised' for CPA Australia (the accounting industry's leading association) tells it best:

It begins the moment we're born, in the playground, on the sports field, in our schools and universities. It's a desire to be heard, the need for recognition and it's a craving within us all. Because being heard can impress those around us and it has the power to influence others, to shape our world. At CPA Australia we teach the skills necessary to stand out because we understand there's noth-

power The six bases of power which could be used to change the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of other people are: legitimate, reward, coercive, referent, expert and information. ing quite as empowering as knowing the room is silent because of what you've got to say. CPA Australia. Be heard. Be Recognised. (CPA Australia, 2014)

Communication is about empowerment. After all, nobody wants to feel disempowered. So how can you acquire power within an organisation and achieve your goals?

In 1959, social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven identified five bases of **power** (Raven, 2004) which could be used to change the beliefs, attitudes or behaviours of a person: legitimate, reward, coercive, referent and expert. They later added a sixth, information power. In order to influence others within organisations, business professionals can obtain the following.

- 1. Legitimate authority: getting appointed or elected to formal positions (supervisor or manager).
- 2. The power to reward: offering intangible rewards (such as positive feedback or approval) and tangible rewards (the promise of a bonus or promotion).
- 3. Coercive power: if the power to reward is the carrot, coercive power is the stick; examples include the threat of being fired or fined.
- 4. Referent power: become somebody to like and respect.
- 5. Expert power: promoting your qualifications, skills and areas of expertise.
- 6. Information power source: providing useful but scarce facts and information.

Gaining access to power is important for many reasons. One reason is that you should never accept a 'no' from somebody who was never empowered to give you a 'yes'.

In Washington, political staffers go to great lengths to be close to power. One famous story is about George Stephanopoulos. When he was appointed as director of communications for the Bill Clinton administration, he ensured that he had the closest office to the president – even though it was the size of a broom closet. Twenty years on, staffers for the Obama administration also fought for that same office.

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PAUSE AND REFLECT 1.3 🛩

Still need convincing that communication skills are important? Look what can happen when we change just the punctuation in a letter.

Version 1

Dear John,

I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy – will you let me be yours?

Gloria

Version 2

Dear John,

I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours, Gloria

Note: This is a well-known example of the importance of using correct punctuation. The version above can be found at http://cmgm.stanford.edu/~lkozar/punctuation.html

Employer expectations

There's no question that accountants need to be able to prepare financial statements and that public relations practitioners need to be able to prepare media releases. These are 'hard' or technical skills required of these professions. However, business professionals also need to possess 'soft skills' to work effectively within the workplace.

Soft skills are sometimes referred to as transferable skills because individuals can take the skills with them not only from one job to another but also across industries and sectors or even professions or careers.

So what soft skills do business professionals need? In 2002, the Australian Government's Department of Education, Science and Training released its

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report *Employability Skills for the Future*, which outlined the key skills and personal attributes that employers look for in candidates. The Employability Skills Framework incorporates the following personal attributes that contribute to overall employability:

- loyalty
- commitment
- honesty and integrity
- enthusiasm
- reliability
- personal presentation
- common sense
- positive self-esteem
- sense of humour
- balanced attitude to work and home life
- ability to deal with pressure
- motivation
- adaptability.

The key skills identified in conjunction with the personal attributes to make up the Employability Skills Framework are:

- *communication* skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- *teamwork* skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes
- *problem-solving* skills that contribute to productive outcomes
- *initiative and enterprise* skills that contribute to innovative outcomes
- *planning and organising* skills that contribute to long- and short-term strategic planning
- *self-management* skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth
- *learning* skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- *technology* skills that contribute to the effective execution of tasks.

These skills and attributes are seen as critical regardless of occupation. For example, accountants are required to 'analyse financial information and prepare financial reports to determine or maintain record of assets, liabilities, profit and loss, tax liability, or other financial activities within an organisation' (O*NET OnLine, 2011). However, they also need to be able to engage with their clients, write emails, deliver oral presentations, make decisions, manage their time, coordinate activities and perform a vast range of other duties (Table 1.1).

Employers want candidates who can do the job. They also want to work with people they like and can get along with.