

Communication Competency: Art or Skill?

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What is Communication?

Communication was recently, clearly, defined by the State of Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. "Communication is thus a process by which meaning is assigned and conveyed in an attempt to create shared understanding. This process, which requires a vast repertoire of skills in interpersonal processing, listening, observing, speaking, questioning, analyzing, gestures, and evaluating, enables collaboration and cooperation" (State of Washington OSPI, 2011). At its core, communication is the act of disseminating information. How it is disseminated and how it is received may differ but, the act is considered communication. What is considered an act of communicating has grown throughout history. As the study of communication has grown, so have the different types of communication. The categories of verbal and non-verbal communication have expanded to studies that include the animal as well as plant kingdoms. We now closely study the differences in passive and aggressive communication, effective and ineffective communication. Can effective, competent communication be taught or does it come naturally to the communicator? This question falls back to the age-old questions of whether people who are successful in their fields talented or merely well educated. How much of an organization's success is dependent on effective communication or skilled workers? Is there a skill or an art to being a competent communicator?

The Difference Between Skill and Art

Communication Skills

Skill is defined as something requiring special training or manual proficiency (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.). Even the most successful of society are taught their trade at some point in their lifetime. Humans are born knowing how to communicate. They are not born knowing

how to dance, sing or play a sport. So it would stand to reason that communicating would not be considered a skill because it is not learned but, inherent. There are five important elements for effective communication: approach, development, clarity, style, and correctness (Howatt, 2009). These elements and the use thereof, are not inherent. They are skills that are taught through many different channels – not just communications or speech classes. However, this inherent ability for communication and learned skills are also missing experiences which can determine how the message is perceived. These experiences cannot be taught in a class.

The Art of Communication

Art has many different definitions but, for the purposes of defining effectiveness and competency, it means to become highly proficient at something through practice (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.). This is where experiences, and critical thinking, come in to play. Experiences communicating and listening to individuals help shape the type of communicator you will become. The athlete or the dancer can learn their craft but, can simply learning the trade pay off in becoming successful at the trade? The same is true for the competent communicator. Communication is also shaped by society and culture (Floyd, 2011). Experience and critical thinking will help the competent communicator determine the subtle nuances and underlying meaning in what he/she may or may not be communicating. A communicator can use the skills taught to go through the process of communications but, the competent communicator becomes competent and effective by experience and practice – adding to the skills first taught through school.

Conclusion

NBA Basketball Player and television broadcaster Norman Allen once said "Skill in the art of communication is crucial to a leader's success. He can accomplish nothing unless he can communicate effectively" (Farren, 1991). Many effective leaders have been competent communicators. Their trade or craft may have been in another field entirely but, their experiences are what made them competent communicators and thus successful leaders. The act of communicating is often referred to as the art of communication because experience and practice have turned skilled communicators into competent communicators who have turned what they do into art. If skills are something you're taught or trained to do and art is a practiced proficiency, then communication competency, or effective communication, can be considered an art rather than a skill.

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Position: Communication Competency is an Art

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Communications Competency

Communications Competency, or effective communications, is an art form. It is a combination of learned skills enhanced by practice and experience. This can be shown by closely analyzing the definitions of a skill and an art. However, in order to understand what communications competency is and classify it as a skill or an art, one must first come to understand what competency means. There are many definitions of competency. Competency has different meanings, and continues to remain one of the most diffuse terms in the management development sector, and the organizational and occupational literature (Collin, 1989). A basic search can come up with many different ways of analyzing competency based on what one needs to be competent in. This is usually true for human resources professionals. They must be able to assess whether an employee, or potential employee, is competent enough for their position.

Understanding Competence

Defining Competence

Being competent is defined as having requisite or adequate ability or qualities (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Competence is a standardized requirement for an individual to properly perform a specific job. It encompasses a combination of knowledge, skills and behavior utilized to improve performance. More generally, competence is the state or quality of being adequately or well qualified, having the ability to perform specific role (“Human Resource Management,” 2008). Human competence is a combination of knowledge abilities and skills influenced by needs, motives, personal goals, values, standards and attitudes” (“Human Resource Management,” 2008).

The definition of competence includes the necessity of learning a skill. However, having the necessary skills alone does not place you at the level of being competent. They include a myriad of other traits that cannot be taught.

Becoming Competent

The process of becoming competent cannot be placed within a defined period of time such as a year-long or semester course. Becoming competent involves a history of practice and experience – not rote repetition. There are five levels of competence in competency development:

1. Novice: Rule-based behavior, strongly limited and inflexible
2. Experienced Beginner: Incorporates aspects of the situation
3. Practitioner: Acting consciously from long-term goals and plans
4. Knowledgeable practitioner: Sees the situation as a whole and acts from personal conviction
5. Expert: Has an intuitive understanding of the situation and zooms in on the central aspects (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980).

We can see that competency development takes a person from following a specific set of guidelines – or skills – and not straying from that set of guidelines to straying from those guidelines and using their own understanding and experience to complete the task. From this we can determine that communications competency is a development over time and not the accomplishment of successfully learning a set of skills.

Conclusion

Communications competence cannot be just a skill. In fact, many human resources professionals and scholars believe that skill is just one of the many assets that go into competence development. It is a combination of abilities, goals, experiences and other motivating factors that go into competency development. Much like art, competency is abstract and innate. There is no one defining factor that can be learned or taught in order to become competent. There are many skills taught throughout an academic career that will qualify one as a communicator. Just as an artist defines his art on the canvas using skill, experience, passion and vision, so does the competent communicator use skill and any number of other assets in their arsenal to show that they are competent. This is what makes communication competency an art.

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