# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 13, 1986

## AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO TEACHING SUBORDINATE-ORIENTED COMMUNICATION

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## ABSTRACT

Communicating with subordinates in a helpful And empathic manner is a skill often needed by supervisors in organizations. A model is outlined here which discusses subordinate-oriented communication at five levels off effectiveness. A supervisory training program is also discussed emphasizing the use of role-playing in teaching effective And empathic communication responses. And finally, various training techniques are suggested which will help the supervisor trainee in implementing the concepts learned into actual practice. Pre and post test scores from a recent training program are presented and discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Effective interpersonal skills for supervisors are the art and science of understanding subordinates' needs and the capability to integrate those needs into the organizational goal structure. The very term "supervisor" implies that an effective manager accomplishes goals through the work behavior of others. Thus, a high work commitment from group members comes partially, if not fully, from an atmosphere where personal needs are considered important. Goal commitment through interpersonal influence and communication would seem to be the single most important task 0! supervision.

The qualities of effective communication skills are now known [3,7,11]. What is needed is a plan to teach these qualities and behaviors to supervisors and managers interested in improving their ability to relate interpersonally to their subordinates. As porter, Lawler, and Hackman [6, n. 64] point out, "interpersonal competence, then, can be likened to calculus, in that many people can be taught it hut few people can discover it for themselves." The purpose of this paper is thus twofold: First, the basic points of effective supervisory communications are discussed, and second, an experiential approach is presented for teaching these basic communication tenets to supervisors and managers.

## INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR SUPERVISORS

If organizations are coma to survive and prosper over the long run, individual managers and supervisors must constantly be aware of their role in employee self-development. Thus, the role of A supervisor is primarily one of helping. He/she should constantly help to build self-confidence and self-esteem within each employee in the work group. Much of this self-confidence is brought to the work place from past experiences, hut the supervisor is in a key position to either build upon or destroy the self-confidence already developed. The communication exchange is one of the most important vehicles for enhancing the subordinate's self-worth.

Communication theory suggests that every individual approaches the communication exchange prom a unique, personal perspective [1,2,4]. All communication, either verbal or non-verbal, will be evaluated from the receiver's individual viewpoint. Communication meaning thus becomes very personal. Communication theory also suggests that subordinates tend to polarize objects in their life. Something 15 either 'good or bad," "right or wrong," or "black or white,' but usually not somewhere in between. Subordinates also tend to make up their mind rather quickly and then to freeze that decision in time. It becomes very difficult to change that perception once it has been established.

According to psychological theory. people are prone to be defensive [1]. They are the center of their universe and any attempt to disrupt their self-worth or self-esteem will result in defensive behavior. The supervisor should be aware that even the slightest criticism (even if it is directed toward the behavior and not the subordinate) will usually set off any number of defensive mechanisms.

Most subordinates desire leadership but not to the point of dominance. They want a certain amount of freedom in their jobs and a feeling that they are something more than a "hired" commodity for production. Since each subordinate in the work group is driven by a unique set of motives (some of which may even be unknown to the employee), it is the supervisor's responsibility to discover what motivates each subordinate and thus act accordingly. This is especially important in employee development [9].

Poor communication is perhaps the most prevalent problem in organizations. Yet too few supervisors have the goal of spending X-amount of time communicating with their employees during the day. Given the among of administrative and technical duties required of the average supervisor, communicating on a regular basis with employees is a difficult objective to accomplish [8]. But, the communication-conscious supervisor should always be available to his/her employees. Availability is important to subordinates.

One of the keys to effective problem solving is to actively involve the subordinate in the interpersonal communication dialogue. Obviously this means being a good listener, but it means much more than just good listening. (good communication means being non-judgmental; it means trying to find where the employee is coming from psychologically, what the employee is feeling, and what the employee wants from the communication exchange. Also, the supervisor should be able to accept the employee's behavior. A simple, "I know you must feel terrible," will go a long way toward helping the employee understand his/her own problem and later discovering a solution to it.

Finally, the supervisor should help employees solve their own problems. The supervisor can help by giving constructive feedback, exploring different alternatives, and eliminate faulty assumptions. but, basically, help comes from identification of the dysfunctional behavior that is causing the problem. Once this identification occurs, the supervisor and employee can mutually establish new objectives and/or activities for culture behavior. Both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards play an important role in this last phase of the inter-personal communication process.

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Because the foregoing do indeed generate both individual and organizational effectiveness a training program emphasizing interpersonal communicative problem solving for supervisors through role playing is proposed. Problem solving' here means the highest form of interpersonal communication competence--that is, to have supervisors create an environment which facilitates problem solution by employees themselves. The training sessions should use pre- and post- assessment measures, as well as short lectures/demonstrations; but the primary emphasis should be upon role-playing and discussion feedback. These techniques, used in a 15-20 hour framework, should provide supervisory trainees with the proper behavioral model- ma for interpersonal communication competence.

As in all training and development, the program should exist to improve organizational productivity. Yet the process through which this productivity is achieved exists within the increased communication competence of the supervisory trainees, thereby creating a difference in emphasis and approach. yore specifically, the following objectives should he stated for the training course:
1.  to assess the communication capabilities of the program participants;
2.  to acquaint participants with alternative (and better) communication response behaviors;
3.  to provide opportunities for participants to practice and evaluate better communication behaviors; and
4.  to apply these new behaviors to the improvement of the supervisor's job and hence to the increased effectiveness of the organization.

Prior to or during the first of the training sessions, it is recommended that the communication capabilities of each participant he determined. To do this, an assessment instrument called the Index of Interpersonal Communication Competence can be used [5] This instrument consists of selected supervisory interpersonal communication situations with five alternative responses for each one. Participants select how they would typically respond by checking their choice of responses to each of the simulated situations in which they are placed. Through a process of classification of responses and ordering a score of 8 to 40 can be obtained. Quite obviously, the higher the score, the more capability that participants Possess and vice versa. Yet capability without demonstrated ability does not yield results. Thus, showing 'how to' to participants with high capability would still be necessary. At any rate, such assessments give a good feel for the potential and specific training needs of the participants.

Following the assessment of the participants' communication skills, a concise lecture should be given on the rudiments of appropriate communication behavior. Based upon the author's work to date five basic types of communication responses are presented. As shown in Figure 1, a hierarchy of responses can be discussed with the trainees' profile in mind. However. it should he pointed out that these levels of communication are not equally effective. They do represent. however, responses which supervisors might use in their interpersonal communication encounters with subordinates.[1] As one transcends each level in the

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[1] The model (Figure 1) has been conceptualized from the literature on humanistic communication. For more information, see: Robert Carkhuff, Helping and Human Relations, Vol. 1, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969; Albert Ellis, Humanistic Psychotherapy, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973, William Glasser, Reality Therapy, New York: Harper and Row. 1965; and Carl Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951.



FIGURE 1
TYPES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIVE RESPONSES FOR SUPERVISORS
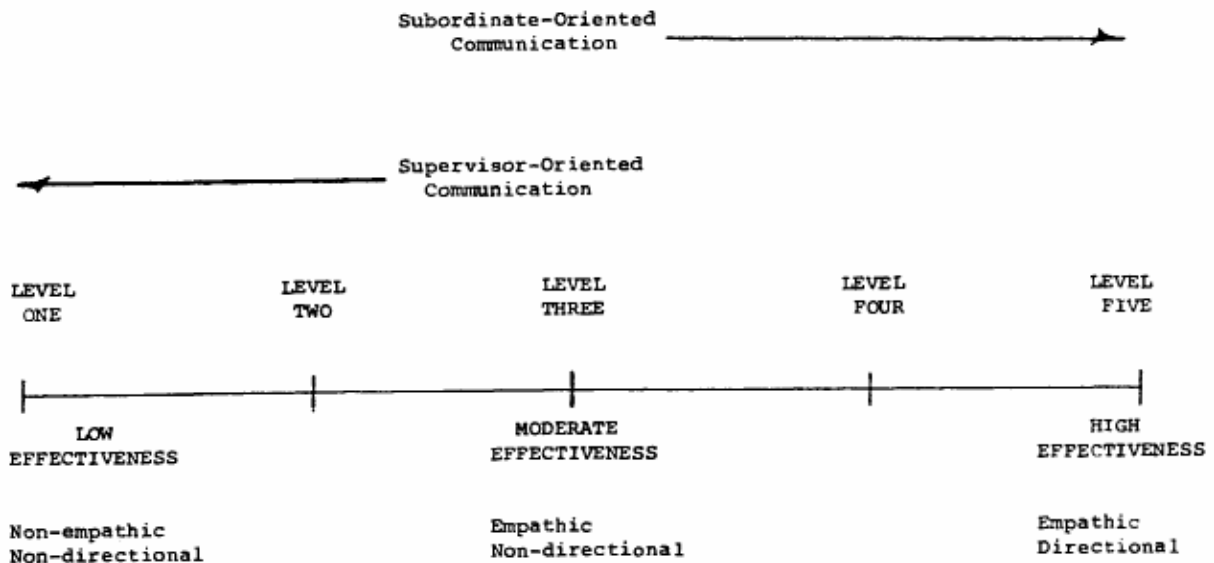
communication hierarchy, the communication pattern becomes more effective. Effective, as used here, means the ability to respond verbally with both empathy as well as direction. Thus, the highest, and most effective, communication response (the one denoted as Level Five) would capture the recipient's feelings, problems, and goals. This level five response places the emphasis on the employee for self direction and growth. In addition, the organization benefits when employees accept more responsibility for their own development.

One thing discovered by this type of communication training is that most people have learned to respond at relatively low levels in the suggested communication hierarchy (10). Perhaps through faulty models, complacency, or lack of demonstrated ability, most people only show that they can behave at levels one or two in the model. For these reasons and others, role-playing is highly recommended throughout the training sessions and particularly in the introductory lecturettes on communication patterns.

Role Playing

As most authorities agree, the role play introduces realism into training sessions; that is, participants can perceive, i.e., see, hear, etc., what is going on and actively participate [12]. As such, this technique avoids high level abstractions and concentrates on concrete behaviors and realities. Moreover, immediate feedback is available to all participants. And both parties can verbalize their feelings immediately after the role is played.

Two longer run advantages also accrue to role playing as a communication training technique. First, feedback in the form of audience perceptions can be obtained. Members of the total training group offer suggestions/comments to role play participants for their consideration of possible communication responses. Thus, more possibilities for alternative choices are available. In effect, the role play allows all people in the training group (even the trainer) to participate. Second, still another longer run benefit of the role-play technique is that repetition using audience and participant feedback is possible. Sometimes, reverse role playing using the suggestions generated, or allowing' different trainees to participate, provides both variety and reality for the alternatives provided. That is, all trainees can "learn by doing" by repeating the role play and integrating new participants and new ideas in the process. These ideas allow the role play to take on a most valuable character when used as a process to teach interpersonal communication concepts.

No doubt there are many supervisory encounters that could serve as examples for effective communication training. That these encounters are legion only underscores the situationally-based character of organizational communication. Yet several situations have been found typical of the supervisor's communication role. Such personal encounters can be used as focal points in the role playing exercises. Eight examples are as fellows:

j. A subordinate who feels that the work group is pressuring him/her into compliance with the group's norms;
2. A subordinate who is habitually late/absent for work because of outside commitments
3. A subordinate who feels that the supervisor is biased to other members of the work group;
4. A subordinate who believes the company has been unfair in not granting a merit pay increase;

5. A subordinate whose work performance has decreased because of a personal problem;
6. A subordinate who feels the company has been unfair in not granting a Promotion;
7. A subordinate whose work performance has decreased because of his/her superior qualifications; and
8. A subordinate whose work performance is not acceptable because of inferior qualifications.

By beginning with these situations, training groups can identify with selected ones or clusters of then. Or the list can be added to by the participants in order to inject realism and relevance to the training. Thus, the situations niav be used as representative of interpersonal encounters or act as primers for further identification of situations in need of interpersonal communication analysis. Yet one point should stand out: Regardless of the situation that is being analyzed, the supervisor must respond to the employee as a total person and human being. As such, the situation accuses more keenly on behavioral ramifications and multiple interactions rather than short-circuited, order-giving encounters.

As situations are selected, role played, and discussed, it must he emphasized that appropriate and effective communication responses are non-judgmental and non-advisory. Through demonstrations and thorough drilling, it must he shown that such evaluative responses only thwart the process of problem solving. A simple "Don't blame me" approach will certainly not do. What is needed throughout the role play is an emphasis on genuine empathy and problem solving as tangible, behavioral communication response--one that participants can identify with and cultivate into their behavioral response repertoire. And there must be concurrence between verbal and non-verbal behavior. !That is said, how it is said, and the body language behind it must he totally', consistent. Such an emphasis transcends a push-pull type of encounter and focuses more specifically one direction in the communication relationship. This direction concentrates on the employee as a vital human resource capable of solving his/her own problems amid the positive environment of mutual respect h" the supervisor.

Because of the dynamic quality of the communication relationship, it is often necessary to warn against certain pitfalls which the supervisor (trainee playing the role) should be aware in the role play process. By being aware of them, the supervisor can control for then to keep his/her responses more appropriately fixed on the employee and the direction he/she should take.

First, the supervisor should not talk too much and in the process become too advisory and judgmental Such a response cuts off the flow of interaction places the emphasis on the supervisor and not the subordinate, *where* it rightfully belongs. In addition, the supervisor must he aware of the natural tendency to evaluate the subordinate as opposed to the subordinate's behavior. The sup visor could appear to be attacking the subordinate as a person rather *than* helping the subordinate formulate a directional stance for problem solving. Whenever there is a decision to be made, it should emphasize the latter and not the former. Lastly, many supervisors try to control the discussion during the role play. This mistake often assumes that the problem, resides in the supervisor and not the subordinate. By giving up the control in the situation and allowing the subordinate to (10 most of the talking, the supervisor can evaluate the alternatives which are heard front the subordinate and thereby take more of a helping stance so that the subordinate

can solve his/her own problems. An awareness of these problems can help supervisors become more facilitative in their communication responses.

Follow-up

To complete the training program, the assessment instrument given prior to the sessions should be repeated. By doing so, the impact of the intervening training variable can be examined. If a discussion of the results is permitted, it will generally show that supervisors have learned basic responses that they can universally apply to a multiplicity of problem areas they encounter. Such a discussion helps to tailor the program to the characteristics of the group being trained. And it serves as a good closure technique. Yet whether the skills are used on the job will depend upon how they are reinforced within the environment of the organizations [9].

A recent training program followed the approach suggested here. Mean test scores prior to the training session totaled 23.2 (Level 3) while post training scores equaled 34.9 (Level 4). Interpreted, these figures suggest that supervisors did have some degree of empathy in communication skills prior to the training but they tended to lack taking initiative in the communication situations they undertook. With the training outlined here, however, they were able to increase their communication skills by 50 percent. Or more specifically, they were able to generate responses that were more objective oriented, personalized, and individualized in terms of the subordinate. Such evidence only underscores that interpersonal communication training for employees can indeed prove productive for both the individual and, hopefully, the organization.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding ideas do not improve that organizations can adopt this approach and thereby solve all of their communication problems. It is believed, however, that subordinate-centered communication training is a big step in the direction of communication effectiveness. It is also believed that the simulation technique of role playing is the best approach to use for teaching this new model of interpersonal communication. Only when learners can see and feel the impact of their behavior on others is change likely to occur. This combination of program content and role playing methodology is necessary if teachers and trainers are to have an effect upon communication competence.

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