

Communication Skills Important to Minnesota County Extension Agents

By Earl E. McDowell and Jeanne L. Mizuno

Communication skills used and required in various organizational contexts have been the subject of many studies in recent years. In order to study such skills, an instrument is needed which is reliable and easily adapted to fit specific organizational settings.

In 1976, DiSalvo, Larsen, and Seiler published a study identifying oral communication skills that are used and required by those entering the business organization.¹ Ten skills were identified: advising, persuading, instructing, interviewing, routine information exchange, public speaking, small group/conference leadership, giving orders, small group/conference problem solving, and listening.

In this study, respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each of the 10 communication activities when dealing with superiors, peers, subordinates, and those outside the organization. Respondents also were asked to rank the five most important skills they perceived as important to future job success; what communication skills in which they thought they should have been trained while in college; and whether their present organization offered communication training programs for employees.

In a similar vein, DiSalvo, Larsen, and Backus² recently (July 1986) published a study identifying the communication skills and problems which characterize health care communication contexts. More specifically, differences among counselors, nurses, and subordinates/health care consumers were studied.

In both studies, listening, routine information exchange, small groups, problem solving, small group leadership, and advising were the most important communication activities.

New Research Interests

In this study we were interested in determining the communication skills needed by county extension agents (CEAs) to perform

Earl E. McDowell, professor, and Jeanne L. Mizuno, are on staff of the Department of Rhetoric, University of Minnesota, St. Paul. Their research, reported here, was funded by the Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station.

communication tasks. More specifically, we wanted to determine 1) the perceived level of importance which Minnesota CEAs assigned to communication activities used with superiors, peers, subordinates, outsiders; 2) if there were any differences in this perceived level of importance according to communication channel direction; and 3) which communication skills Minnesota CEAs consider important for job success. In addition, information gained from the study could be used as a basis of comparison to review the content of current continuing education courses for CEAs, and to revise or create new courses or course units.

Methodology

A questionnaire based upon DiSalvo's et al. 1976 instrument was prepared. The 10 specified communication activities: advising, persuading, instructing, interviewing, routine information exchange, public speaking, small group/conference problem solving, small group/conference leadership, giving orders, listening.

The questionnaire had three main sections. The first asked CEAs to rate, in terms of importance, 10 communication activities engaged in with superiors "CEDs" (county extension directors), peers, subordinates, and people outside the extension organization, such as those with government and business organizations. Importance was rated on a six-point scale: (0) does not apply; (1) very important; (2) important; (3) uncertain; (4) unimportant; (5) very unimportant. The second section asked CEAs to rank the communication skills as to importance for job success. The final section asked CEAs to supply demographic information.

At the time this study was conducted there were 156 CEAs in Minnesota. Since the total CEA pool was too small for a representative random sample, questionnaires were sent to all.

Results

Of the total sent, 126 questionnaires were returned—a return rate of nearly 80 percent. The responses were coded and a computer-assisted analysis performed. For simplicity, the composite means from the communication ratings were changed to ranks—the higher the mean, the lower the rank.

Table 1 reports the perceived importance of the 10 communication activities for these CEAs when communicating with superiors (CEDs), peers, subordinates, and those outside Extension. Receiving the highest ranking, regardless of communication channel direction, was "listening". Small group/conference problem solving was ranked among the top five activities in all communication direction categories, with the highest rankings, two and three, assigned to peer and CED categories respectively.

TABLE 1
Perceived importance of Minnesota CEA communication activities when communicating with others.

| Activities | CEDs | Peers | Subordinates | Outsiders |
|----------------------------------------|------|-------|--------------|-----------|
| Advising | 5 | 5 | 3 | 6 |
| Persuading | 7 | 7 | 7 | 8 |
| Instructing | 9 | 6 | 2 | 3 |
| Interviewing | 8 | 9 | 9 | 9 |
| Routine information exchange | 2 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Public speaking | 6 | 8 | 10 | 2 |
| Small group/conference leadership | 4 | 4 | 6 | 5 |
| Small group/conference problem solving | 3 | 2 | 5 | 4 |
| Giving orders | 10 | 10 | 8 | 10 |
| Listening | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Other highly ranked activities included small group/conference leadership, routine information exchange, and advising. "Instructing" was included among the top five in communicating with subordinates and outsiders.

Finally, CEAs ranked persuading, interviewing, and giving orders as less important than other communication activities.

Table 2 reports the perceived importance of the 10 communication skills for job success by rank. The five ranked highest were listening, instructing, small group/conference problem solving, small group/conference leadership, and routine information exchange. The lowest ranked skills were persuading, public speaking, interviewing, and giving orders.

TABLE 2
Perceived importance of 10 communication skills for job success as ranked by Minnesota CEAs.

| Activities | Rank |
|----------------------------------------|------|
| Listening | 1 |
| Instructing | 2 |
| Small group/conference problem solving | 3 |
| Small group/conference leadership | 4 |
| Routine information exchange | 5 |
| Advising | 6 |
| Persuading | 7 |
| Public speaking | 8 |
| Interviewing | 9 |
| Giving orders | 10 |

Discussion

The data seem to show consistent patterns of relative importance across communication activities/skills in terms of organizational direction and job success. As in past research, listening is perceived as the most important activity/skill regardless of communication channel direction, and in terms of job success. Five other communication activities/skills that were consistently ranked among the top five are: small group/conference problem solving, routine information exchange, small group/conference leadership, advising, and instructing.

Advising Ranked Last

It is interesting to note that the CEAs ranked "advising" sixth in terms of importance for job success and interaction with those outside Extension. When communicating with outsiders, CEAs ranked small group/conference leadership and small group/conference problem solving ahead of advising. It may be the case that Minnesota CEAs spend more time in small group/conference situations (which may or may not include advisory activities) than simply advising on a one-to-one basis. Further research should include questions asking CEAs to estimate the total percentage of time spent in each communication activity, in interacting with each directional group, and in each communication activity for each organizational direction group.

With regard to continuing education classes directed toward CEAs, the instructor may benefit by soliciting specific suggestions from CEAs for revising or creating new courses. The implications of this study suggest that classes in listening, and interpersonal and small group communication might help CEAs to perform more effectively.

¹ DiSalvo, V., Larsen D., and Seiler, W. "Communication Skills Needed by Persons in Business Organizations," *Communication Education*, 25 (1976), 269-275.

² DiSalvo, V., Larsen J., and Backus, D. "The Health Care Communicator: An Identification of Skills and Problems," *Communication Education*, 35 (1986), 231-242.