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Promote interculturalism, leadership communication, and professionalism in your students: Success with a corporate communication certificate

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**Promote Interculturalism, Leadership Communication, and Professionalism in Your Students:
Success with a Corporate Communication Certificate**

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Abstract

Business educators share a common interest in encouraging their students to improve intercultural, leadership communication, and professionalism skills to enable and promote increased fulfillment, character development, and advancement toward graduation, in addition to improving student employability after graduation. While career success depends on the standards and knowledge of character and behavioral traits, much more than on technical knowledge, these attributes define the qualities desired across various professions (Barnhart, 2013) in these three areas. For example, Holmes (2015) found that the values and communication rules of discourse systems may be different from that which is expected in the international workplace.

A Certificate in Corporate Communication promotes the skillsets for interculturalism, leadership communication, and professionalism. With the positive feedback already received from several entities, including business executives; the student success of relevant development of skillsets for any business or non-business major; and the opportunity to showcase the communication courses to all students and programs at the University, the Certificate of Corporate Communication has already proven its success.

Introduction

Requirements of the 21st Century workplace directly affect business education curricula (Kelley & Bridges, 2005). Today's businesses face many challenges and opportunities including attracting and retaining the most talented workforce possible to remain competitive. As organizations restructure to become more proactive and innovative, they find it necessary to push decision-making authority to lower-levels, use cross-functional teams, and encourage lifelong learning. This restructuring results in the interrelationships of communication, culture, and strategy becoming more visible as organizations transform their business practices in response to changing challenges and opportunities.

Cornelissen (2014) discussed corporate communication as an integrated approach to managing communication as it transcends the specialists of individual boundaries of practitioners within

organizations as well as multinational to strategic interests of organizations at large. Many more disciplines are involved in corporate communication by design, advertising, internal (employee) communication, crisis communication, investor relations, media, and change communication. An important aspect of this new function is that it focuses on the organization as a whole and how communication imparts to all key internal and external stakeholders, regardless of discipline, hence corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2014).

After knowing that the relationships among communication, culture, and strategy are critical to organizational competitiveness, the following question arises: What roles do interculturalism, leadership communication, and professionalism play in supporting organizational goals? A research study that determines the practice of different companies would help to create a better overview of what companies think about the importance of these relationships.

Sharp and Brumberger (2013) found that only one of the top 50 undergraduate business schools listed in Bloomberg Businessweek 2011 rankings actually had an official business communication program; none of the institutions had a certificate in business or corporate communication. Van Huss and Schmohe (2014) called for re-energizing business education to emphasize those skills identified by Hult Labs (2014) including: communication, self-awareness, cross-cultural competency, team skills, collaboration, the ability to persuade others, and problem solving.

Business educators have incorporated the teaching of interpersonal, teamwork, critical thinking, and leadership skills for several years (Moody, Stewart, & Bolt-Lee, 2002); yet, business educators have been criticized for not adequately developing students' relevant, real-world skills emphasizing problem solving and leadership communication skills (Conrad & Newberry, 2012; Hult Labs, 2014). Lentz (2013) stressed that business communication professors must facilitate effective writing by nurturing student writing as a habit rather than as a skill set.

The purpose of this study was to identify perceptions of selected top-level business executives in the Midwest and Southeast regions of the United States regarding specific communication skillsets employees need in the three categories: interculturalism, leadership communication, and professionalism. To bridge the gap between real-world practice and classroom instruction, the results of the research were used to inform curriculum decisions leading to the development of a Certificate in Corporate Communication.

Methodology, Demographics, and Survey

To assess business executives' ratings regarding communication skills needed in the workplace, the primary data for this research were collected from surveying 150 selected top-level business executives in the Midwest and Southeast Regions of the United States including members of the School of Business Advisory Council who provide curriculum advice. Each participant was sent an invitation email and survey link to rate his/her perceptions on the specific skill sets of (a) interculturalism (b) leadership communication, and (c) professionalism. The research instrument in this study included 20

questions on a Likert scale that ranged from strongly agree (SA) to strongly disagree (SD). All respondents also had the opportunity to provide additional comments to further enhance their responses to the item ratings. The survey covered the three dimensions of workplace skills. In total, 78 questionnaires were completed.

Of the 78 respondents, 54 were male (69%) and 24, female (31%). The positions held by the executives included: Director/General Manager, 28 (36%); Vice President, 14 (18%); CEO/Owner/President, 11 (14%); Human Resources Manager, 11 (14%); Communication Officer/Trainer, 5 (6%); Administrator/Office Manager, 4 (5%); Controller, 4 (5%); and Global Head of Research, 1 (1%) for a total of 99% due to rounding.

Items the executives rated in the survey are shown below.

Interculturalism.

1. Recognize communication styles and problem-solving strategies for a culture, identify potential for misunderstandings, compare expectations of self and others.
2. Be aware of how judgments of value and reality are made by self and others, become sensitive to different ways of speaking and listening, develop readiness for making encounters and dialogue.
3. Develop language skills, research skills, analytic, interpretive, and rhetorical skills; language-learning, and cross-cultural skills.
4. Avoid idioms and jargon; avoid long, complex sentences; use active voice; avoid referring to readers by nationality.
5. Stress collaboration, use cross-functional teams, and experiment with different forms of organizational structure and leadership.
6. Demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts; being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes.

Leadership Communication.

1. Recognize communication skills necessary to organizations' internal and external communication situations.
2. Interact as a team member in solving organizational communication problems.
3. Analyze the communication skills used daily by organizational leaders.
4. Recognize training and development needs of a global workforce.
5. Use appropriate crisis communication approaches in dealing with unexpected internal and external threats.
6. Consider alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences in the business decision-making process.

Professionalism.

1. Write clear, accurate, concise, and purposeful documents that have strategic impact and produce effective results.
2. Demonstrate excellent oral communication skills, expressing ideas clearly and precisely, speaking effectively, and presenting professionally.
3. Show the ability to listen effectively; create rapport during a conversation.
4. Practice effective interpersonal skills, including eye contact, body language, voice inflection, and firm handshake.
5. Portray business and/or personal skills of self-confidence, poise, preparation, business attire, appearance.

Data Findings and Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative executives' responses and supporting literature will be discussed in three areas: Interculturalism, Leadership Communication, and Professionalism.

Interculturalism.

One element that business executives surveyed desire in their employees is a strong sense of interculturalism, which focuses on their ability to draw similarities and differences among diverse cultures, geographic locations, and people. Executives surveyed rated the awareness, sensitivity, and preparedness for international dialogues and interactions as the top skill in this category with a rating of 5.53. The ability to demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts and being open to changing cultural attitudes was also highly rated by the executives with a 5.45 rating average. In addition, stressing collaboration, using cross-functional teams, and experimenting with different forms of organizational structure and leadership are all highly valued skills with an average rating of 5.40 as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Interculturalism

Interculturalism	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Be aware of how judgments of value and reality are made by self and others, become sensitive to different ways of speaking and listening, develop readiness for making encounters and dialogue.	45	29	4	0	0	0	5.53
Demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts; being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes and needs.	40	33	5	0	0	0	5.45
Stress collaboration, use cross-functional teams, and experiment with different forms of organizational structure and leadership.	36	36	5	0	0	0	5.40
Recognize communication styles and problem-solving strategies for a culture, identify potential for misunderstandings, compare expectations of self and others.	36	37	4	1	0	0	5.38
Avoid idioms and jargon; avoid long, complex sentences; use active voice; avoid referring to readers by nationality.	36	35	6	1	0	0	5.36
Develop language skills, research skills, analytic, interpretive, and rhetorical skills; language-learning, and cross-cultural skills.	36	26	13	2	0	0	5.25

Not surprisingly, the executives also saw the importance of understanding the communication styles of different cultural audiences and the need for targeting communication to the audience using knowledge of the cultural, 5.38 rating; avoiding confusing words specific to one particular culture and demeaning language, 5.36 rating; and developing language and cross-cultural skills to aid in communicating with different cultures, 5.25 rating.

These findings were consistent with previous intercultural studies. For example, Guilherme, Keating, and Hoppe (2010) stressed the need for intercultural responsibility in the workplace, recognizing that identities have been socially and culturally built from different ethnic characteristics

and influences. This responsibility lies with both employers and employees in recognizing communication styles, acknowledging discourses, and developing professional relationships with one another (Holmes, 2015). Therefore, employees need the background knowledge to work effectively with diverse cultures (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007).

Research has typically centered on documenting cultural differences that can disrupt intercultural relationships (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002; Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007). It is often challenging to work across cultural boundaries because people frequently perceive individuals from other cultures as possible adversaries with diverse values, beliefs, and styles of interacting (Li & Scullion, 2006; Toh & DeNisi, 2005; Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007). Guo, Cockburn-Wootten, and Munshi (2014) found that exploiting these different perspectives, instead of managing diverse perceptions, leads to unique perspective and creative outcomes.

The foundation for collaboration in organizations stems from emotional involvement and genuine caring for one another's well-being and the belief that others are responsible and competent (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007). Additionally, interpersonal trust can enable social interactions that facilitate informal collaboration and teamwork, inter-organizational partnerships, and leadership (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007).

Intercultural researchers have studied how diverse employees handle specific events as they work together (Bond, 2003; Smith, 2003), finding workplace communication a challenge (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007); for example, knowing the appropriate non-verbal communication required when greeting someone—whether to shake hands, hug, kiss, bow, or other response (Holmes, 2015). Acknowledging general value differences that may affect intercultural interaction and forming an understanding and basis for working together productively can be highly useful in developing a quality interpersonal relationship (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007).

Ladegaard and Jenks (2015) discussed the importance of multicultural experiences within an organization because interculturalism leads to a more professional, adaptable organization. Interculturalism should be integrated into education for students to be able to better interpret intercultural situations; for example, one effective instructional method might be to use emotional intelligence in case studies (Fall, Kelly, MacDonald, Primm, & Holmes, 2013). In order for employees to be more experienced with interculturalism, it should be included in their education, as well as everyday practice (Tupas, 2014).

Leadership Communication.

In the area of leadership communication, executives surveyed responded with a rating of 5.73 that the most important skill was to recognize communication skills necessary to an organization's internal and external communication situations. Teamwork was the second most valued skill with an above average rating of 5.60. As executives highlighted recent business problems related to ethics and crisis communication, they rated considering alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences

in business decision making and communicating through crises as the third and fourth most important skills with above average ratings of 5.44 and 5.41 as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Leadership Communication

Leadership Communication	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Recognize communication skills necessary to organizations' internal and external communication situations.	57	21	0	0	0	0	5.73
Interact as a team member in solving organizational communication problems.	50	25	3	0	0	0	5.60
Consider alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences in the business decision-making process.	42	30	5	0	1	0	5.44
Use appropriate crisis communication approaches in dealing with unexpected internal and external threats.	38	34	6	0	0	0	5.41
Analyze the communication skills used daily by organizational leaders.	27	29	18	4	0	0	5.01
Recognize training and development needs of a global workforce.	23	26	23	6	0	0	4.85

In open-ended responses, two executives surveyed also pointed out that not all employees are in leadership roles; however, daily communication regarding the status of engagements, problems, obstacles, and other workplace issues is critical. Care should be taken in analyzing the communication skills of leaders as this could lead to a negative attitude and frustration if the leader's skills do not meet the employee's preconceived notions. The executives suggested that a proactive and direct communication strategy with the leader could help to avoid this problem.

Three other skills were mentioned by executives as being important for leadership communication: conflict resolution, problem solving, and specific corporate communication for international issues. An overall important open-ended comment was made by one executive who emphasized that employees should recognize the goal for the company is more important than a personal immediate goal.

Leaders and employees should collaborate to develop common goals, shared tasks, integrated roles, interpersonal relationships, team identity, and collective recognition that reinforce those cooperative goals (Yi-Feng & Tjosvold, 2007). Further, leaders should see and pursue opportunities that change creates and must mobilize the resources of others to achieve their objectives (Dees, 2001). Because employees respect leaders who take the time to have a conversation, the most effective way

for leaders to communicate internally is with information-focused face-to-face dialogue (Men, 2014), where leaders express their ideas and beliefs openly (Dees, 2001). Mayfield, Mayfield, and Sharbrough (2015) also found that internal motivational communication that conveyed top-down strategic information was a factor leading to success in leadership communication.

Professionalism.

The area of professionalism drew the executives surveyed highest ratings of the three categories, indicating the importance executives place on these skills. Employees' ability to express ideas clearly and precisely in written and oral communication were critically important to the organization as rated by the executives at 5.92. Additionally, the ability to listen effectively and create rapport during a conversation were also highly valued skills with a rating of 5.91. Executives rated the ability to write clear, accurate, concise, and purposeful documents that have strategic impact and produce effective results and practice effective interpersonal and non-verbal skills as the third and fourth most important skills with above average ratings of 5.81 and 5.79 as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Professionalism

Professionalism	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Demonstrate excellent oral communication skills, expressing ideas clearly and precisely, speaking effectively, and presenting professionally.	72	6	0	0	0	0	5.92
Show the ability to listen effectively; create rapport during a conversation.	71	7	0	0	0	0	5.91
Write clear, accurate, concise, and purposeful documents that have strategic impact and produce effective results.	62	15	0	0	0	0	5.81
Practice effective interpersonal skills, including eye contact, body language, voice inflection, and firm handshake.	62	16	0	0	0	0	5.79
Portray business and/or personal skills of self-confidence, poise, preparation, business attire, appearance.	58	16	3	0	0	0	5.71

Other open-ended responses shared advice from the executives surveyed included the following: work to gain confidence in communicating as no one can do this for you, it must come from within; recognize that developing professionalism is a life-long course that must be continuously refined in the classroom and workplace. As one executive stated, “Walk, Talk, and Look the Part!” Another respondent indicated that being able to present and sell ideas, persuade, effectively collaborate, and build consensus are the keys to success.

Discussions of professionalism are present in many studies across academic disciplines (e.g., communication, management, education, and cultural studies). Despite this vast research, the concept of professionalism needs further exploration in relation to individual identity (Banghart, 2013).

Professionals not only perform a job, but also exhibit a particular set of mannerisms set forth by the larger professional community (Banghart, 2013; Kelley & Bridges, 2005). Robles (2012) made an important distinction between two skillsets, describing “hard skills” as technical competency specific to one’s job and “soft skills” as interpersonal/people skills or personal attributes of individuals. While studies propose that professionalism involves numerous competencies, skills, and characteristics, there is a trend toward the interpersonal competence, or the “softer” skills, weighing more profoundly upon the notion of professionalism (Banghart, 2013).

Professionalism can be defined by the specific expectations for communication and behaviors associated with professionals (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007) that is learned through self-regulation and improvement as a means to succeed with the help of skillsets, motivations, interests, etc. (Kelley & Bridges, 2005; Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). Professional skills necessary for successful career progression include listening, writing, speaking, and etiquette skills (Clark, 2010; Kelley & Bridges, 2005) as well as courtesy, posture/body language, and attire/appropriate dress (Clark, 2010).

One of the most important elements business executives look for in employees and recent graduates is the level of professionalism of the job candidate (Kouchaki, 2015). Professional skills are highly valued by employers, and employers expect college graduates to have these skills as a condition of employment (Evetts, 2011; Kelley & Bridges, 2005; O’Sullivan, 2000).

Literature Review of Corporate Communication Competence and Certificates

Because corporate communication is a critical competency of leadership positions via a wide array of industries, the ability to communicate effectively is a critical skill (Purdue University Online, 2016). Educators have written extensively on the topic of how to bridge the gap between the skills that employers want and the skills they are taught in higher education (Kelley & Bridges, 2005).

Sigmar, Hynes, and Hill (2012) stated that learning these skills while in school is essential to developing future employees who are able to deal with extensive networks, intercultural issues, diverse teams, and business etiquette and professionalism. While students develop strong writing habits and a

firm foundation of knowledge in their corporate communications classes, they must continue to reinforce those behaviors through continuous practice and improvement (Lentz, 2013).

Corporate or business communication programs, especially if they offer advanced courses in business communication, are particularly well-positioned to develop corporate communication certificates (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013). A corporate communication certificate program enables greater coverage of current topics and further legitimizes corporate communication as a valuable field of study within business. Sharp and Brumberger (2013) suggested that the ongoing lack of certificate programs at the top business schools means that business communication is still seen only as a complement to other business programs rather than a field in and of itself.

Based on the results of this research, executives find the three areas of skills defined in this study to be important to the success of their organizations and employees in the workplace. To help students develop these three skills areas, a Certificate in Corporate Communication has been developed to emphasize the highly valued items in this survey. The Certificate is offered to any undergraduate major, including business majors, to help prepare them for employers' expectations in the workplace. While certificates in corporate communication can be obtained online through graduate schools (e.g., Ball State University, 2016; Barry University, 2016; Concordia University, 2016; Harvard University, 2016; Purdue University Online, 2016; University of Central Florida, 2016), undergraduate certificate programs with structured courses dedicated to corporate communication are scarce (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013).

Certificate Implementation Based on Study Results

A nine-hour Corporate Communication Certificate was created by the Department of Management, Marketing, and International Business. Students earn the certificate after successfully completing three courses: Professional Communication (CCT 201) or Managerial Reports (CCT 300W), International Business Communication (CCT 310), and Integrated Corporate Communication (CCT 550). The CCT 201 class is for any major; the CCT 300W is for business majors only. CCT 310 and CCT 550 can be taken by either business or non-business majors. These courses emphasize the three areas included in the survey. The course descriptions are shown below:

- **Professional Communication.** Principles and practices of modern professional communication; various types of professional letters and reports are studied; emphasis on writing letters and reports.
- **Managerial Reports.** A writing intensive study of applications of communication theory, research methods, and information technology to communication within organizations. Includes common communication tasks faced by managers; communication task and audience analysis; collecting, organizing, analyzing, and interpreting data. Emphasizes written and oral reporting.
- **International Business Communication.** Characteristics of cultural differences that alter communication symbols and meanings for international business activity. Topics include

culture profiles and conducting business, business protocol, international documents/U. S. documents, negotiation strategies, and oral presentations to intercultural business audiences.

- **Integrated Corporate Communication.** Examines effective integrated communication skills to achieve organizational objectives. Emphasizes analysis and application of communication process and strategies for managerial decision-making. Examines change process, corporate culture, and negotiation issues. Provides corporate training component.

The certificate helps students develop in the areas of interculturalism (e.g., international business communication, diversity skills); leadership (e.g., crisis communication, stakeholder communication, corporate training); and professionalism (e.g., written reports, oral presentation, interpersonal skills).

This Certificate in Corporate Communication is applicable to students in any major, including nursing, psychology, teaching, social work, police studies, education, aviation, physical and occupational therapy, among others. Flyers were created and distributed to Advising Offices across campus, to support staff in Administrative Offices, and to Recruitment Offices. Flyers were also posted on Bulletin Boards throughout campus buildings and displayed on electronic monitors.

Upon completion of the three required classes, students receive a certificate signed by the Department Chair and the Corporate Communication and Technology Coordinator in recognition of their accomplishment.

Conclusions

The importance of intercultural skills, leadership communication abilities, and professionalism was relatively clear-cut based on the findings of this quantitative and qualitative data analysis: scores in sub-skills for all three areas were above average indicating the significance executives placed on those skills.

Business executives value and are seeking intercultural skills, leadership communication abilities, and professionalism in their employees. Seeking business executives input into curriculum issues can provide valuable information to help faculty understand the demands and expectations of the business workplace. Developing and offering a Certificate in Corporate Communication is one strategy to help students succeed in meeting these employers' expectations.

The field of business communication is moving forward and the majority of well-respected programs continue to maintain some level of commitment to including business communication in the curriculum. Departments of business communication do not offer undergraduate certificates. Several universities offer undergraduate courses in a sequence, but the courses do not result in a corporate communication certificate.

Faculty in programs for business communication should pursue developing certificate programs to help increase their visibility and comparative influence within their universities. More integration of corporate communication with interculturalism, leadership, and professional communication is necessary if business programs want to graduate students whose communication skills are commensurate with their discipline-specific business knowledge.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions above, business educators should explore ways to develop students' professionalism, intercultural skills, and leadership communication abilities. The following recommendations are made for business educators who are seeking to promote student success through the development of these three skills and abilities.

- Incorporate elements of professionalism in corporate communication courses, while stressing to students the importance of life-long learning. Include as many real-world exercises and cases as possible.
- Encourage and practice active listening in all communication courses. Consider creating classroom etiquette rules that promote active listening and professional skills.
- Stress the importance of focused conversations with colleagues and supervisors in the workplace. Encourage students to disengage from social media and electronic devices while engaging in face-to-face conversations in the classroom and beyond.
- Consider creating extra-curricular professional development opportunities to enhance students' communication, leadership, intercultural, and professional skills. Such activities might include workshops, seminars, lecture series, case competitions, student organizations, etc.
- Involve business executives in your planning of corporate communication course descriptions; they will provide advocacy for your cause.
- Recommendations are also made for business educators who are considering creating a Certificate in Corporate Communication.
- Seek buy-in from administrators who are decision makers for your discipline area.
- Consider how to maximize the resources you have and minimize the need for additional classes or faculty.
- Communicate with advisors throughout campus to encourage support for the Certificate.
- Encourage faculty to help promote the certificate in their classes and in advising sessions with students.
- Visit area high schools and freshmen summer orientation classes to inform students about the opportunity to complete the certificate.

Additionally, suggestions for future research are provided.

- Design future research projects to expand the involvement of business executives in various geographic areas and industries.
- Explore business executives' ideas regarding future alliances needed between businesses and educational institutions to help promote student success.
- Compare and contrast the research results from future studies conducted in different cultures and countries.

Implications

Students, advisors, alumni, campus administrators, and business executives have responded favorably to the certificate. In fact, executives have asked that the offerings be expanded to non-credit classes for workplace employees who need to develop their communication skills, refine their professionalism, and build their confidence. While a certificate promises no guarantee of a graduate's future behavior, just as a high GPA does not ensure intelligence, the expected correlation offers prospective employers with an extra, beneficial indicator.

Although student success is the primary goal for the certificate, a secondary benefit is the opportunity to showcase the communication courses to all programs on campus. Business communication educators must promote their programs, classes, and quality of instruction. A Certificate in Corporate Communication will help achieve these goals.

Not only do business communication faculty need to ensure that corporate communication is represented in the business curriculum at their universities, but they also need to ensure that those courses include topics such as interculturalism, professional, and leadership communication. These issues are central to business communication efforts. Making these subjects essential to the business curricula and developing certificate programs in corporate communication will provide students with the foundation knowledge, awareness, and writing/speaking behaviors they need in today's workplace. Additionally, the inclusion of corporate communication certificates will promote the status of corporate communication as a discipline.

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