

UMUC Business and Executive Programs Podcasts  
**Essential Competencies for the 21st Century Manager**

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**Podcast Title:** Communication Skills: Finding the Message in What Isn't Said

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**Hannah:** Hello! My name is Chris Hannah and I am a professor and program director in UMUC's Business & Executive Programs department. My main responsibility as a program director is to work with and support faculty teaching one of the eight seminars in the MBA program.

My task today is to talk with you about communication and discuss its relative importance for managers or leaders and their organizations. Communication is one of the core competencies in UMUC's MBA program. By this I mean the faculty, in consultation with employers and students, have identified the acquisition of knowledge about and development of skills required for effective communication as critically important for those who graduate with this degree.

Before proceeding, let me tell you the order for this presentation. After a little necessary definitional groundwork I will briefly discuss the relative importance of communication and then focus on one specific aspect of this very broad subject: that is communication at the level of the organization and the associated managerial challenges and responsibilities. Following discussion of a few illustrative examples, I will mention some of the things scholars and practitioners have suggested to help managers be more effective communicators.

Needless to say, this presentation addresses just a small part of a large and very important subject area. Students in our program have many opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills in this competency area.

The theme of my talk today is best captured by this quotation attributed to Peter Drucker, "The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said." Before I discuss this, let me first begin with a simple working definition of our key term. Communication refers to the act of transmitting or attempting to transmit information and understanding, whether intentionally or unintentionally, using verbal or nonverbal means. The word "understanding" is included in this definition, because we are interested in "effective" communication. As we know, people can succeed in communicating feelings and opinions even when they might not intend to. Think, for example, about a wrinkled brow or a shrug of the shoulders. Think as well about a whispered remark or a hug. Depending on the situation, these can convey intended or unintended messages. Finally, it is important to recognize that communication does not just involve the use of spoken language. Indeed, some have claimed that more than 85 or 90 percent of our communication is nonverbal. This point and the implications are easily illustrated if you think for a moment about the frustration you sometimes, and perhaps regularly, feel when trying to communicate via e-mails or chats, but this is a separate and huge topic so let me not digress!

When we think about communication as a key competency we can look at how well people communicate with each other which is interpersonal communication, or how well people communicate within a group, within an organization, or across cultures. We also consider the relative merits of different communication media. If you are a manager or leader in an organization you have a variety of different media available to help you communicate. These include individual or group face to face meetings, telephone calls, emails, chats, video sessions, town meetings, etcetera. Common wisdom has it that the greater the opportunity to both see the

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person and hear the message being conveyed, the more likely it will be understood. This leads most to believe that use of the “rich medium” of face to face communication is optimal. Of course, I suspect we can all think of exceptions to this rule – think about the person whose first response when hearing something undesirable is to yell and who later ends up apologizing. I'd love to discuss this topic of choice of communication media and changes resulting from the pervasive use of technology-mediated “conversations”, but will leave that for another day and time!

So, why is communication so important? You are probably thinking at this point, “What does she think we are, idiots?” The truth is that there really are people who would rank communication skills as relatively less important than, let me see, decision making, substantive expertise in a particular field, strategic thinking, critical thinking, and so on. Perhaps I am being too simple minded here, but it seems to me everything in an organization depends upon communication. To illustrate, think for a minute about an organization with no communication at all, either verbal or nonverbal. The idea is silly! You wouldn't even have an organization and if you had one, well I guess decisions could be made, but they couldn't be implemented without some form of communication. The point is that we as managers need to pay a lot more attention to communication than we sometimes or maybe regularly do.

Now let me say more about communication at the level of the organization and some of the associated challenges and responsibilities for managers and/or leaders. You will have an opportunity to examine this in much more detail in our MBA program, but just let me give you a few examples that I think you might find interesting to think about. Taking our lead from Peter Drucker, for the following statements I would like you to join me in considering what is not being said that it would be important for a manager or leader to hear.

Here is a statement I bet many of you have heard: “These walls have ears”

Typically when you hear this, what isn't being said is: “I don't trust anyone in this organization, including you.” Or, “Rumors and gossip, (i.e., “The Grapevine”) are a dominant force in this organization.”

Some of you will recall playing the telephone game, probably in elementary school but sometimes in workshops. You know, this is the one where you sit in a circle and the first person whispers to the next and the next until at the end when the “message” is revealed it bears little resemblance to what was originally said. Relying on the grapevine as an information mechanism in an organization inevitably means there will be “information distortion.” In other words, misunderstandings and inaccuracies in communication will be the norm. Managers hearing someone say “These walls have ears” need to pay attention. Rather than trying to quash rumors or penalize those who promulgate them, as I have sometimes seen managers do, they need to look at the root cause. More often than not doing so will reveal that people are not getting the quantity or quality of information they need, want, and deserve through proper channels.

Here is our second statement. Please listen with me to what is not being said: “No one knows what is going on around here.”

When you hear this it generally means there is confusion about strategic direction, goals, and priorities. This typically signals a problem with downward communication. People saying this may be expressing frustration about the information they are getting and may feel it is inadequate, unclear, or contradictory. If one were to measure the volume of the information flow

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you could find it to be either overwhelming or minimal. In both of these cases I have heard leaders place the blame for a lack of understanding on “selective listening” on the part of those lower in the organization. They will point to the regular email blasts, the information on the Intranet, the meetings, and wonder how it is possible that people do not know what is going on. Managers and leaders hearing someone say, “No one knows what is going on around here,” need, instead, to listen carefully and consider how important information is being communicated, by whom, and under what conditions. If they don't, chances are they will fail, because people really won't know what they need to do to contribute to the mission and goals of the organization.

Here is a third statement you might have heard: “They don't have a clue”

While this can apply to many groups in an organization, the “they” often refers to leaders and managers. One of the things that isn't being said in such cases is that the speakers (typically those at the operational level and/or close to the customers) believe they have important information that leaders don't know they need and/or haven't bothered to ask for. Often, what also isn't being said is that bad or poor decisions are being made with this inadequate or distorted information. As managers, when you hear this you need to take a look at what information you are getting, when, and from whom. This typically signals a problem with poor upward communication channels.

And, here is the final statement I would like you to join me in considering. What do you think isn't being said when you hear: “Information is power in this organization”

You might not agree with me but I “hear” this as saying people are given to hoarding information and doling it out selectively for self-serving purposes. This suggests a potentially unhealthy communication process, where it is possible for certain people or positions to effectively limit access to important information and manage the “exchange” thereof. If I were a leader or manager listening to this statement I would, of course, be curious to learn which people or groups have this valued information and how it is being used. I would want to make sure information is getting where it needs to in a timely and effective manner.

There is much more we might say about communication within work organizations and its importance for people, groups, managers, and leaders. This will have to suffice for now, but I hope we have the opportunity for further discussions.

If I were to put the lessons from this discussion simply, I would again reiterate Peter Drucker's caution that we “actively listen to what is not being said” and would add that we need to do so with empathy and respect.

Next, in this series is a discussion of Team Building.

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