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MAL 650

Individual Applied Research Thesis: Effective Communication in Higher Education

Due: September 21st, 2014

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Abstract

The intent for this paper is to show that communication within the higher education field is a current problem. By looking first at the different styles, forms, and audiences for communication, the reader will hopefully gain perspective as to why this is such a problem in higher education today. Since the Millennial generation is the newest set of individuals to enter the workforce, this specific group will be looked upon as a possible reason communication in higher education is lacking at the moment, with solutions given that may help to resolve this issue. Organizational change can also bring about confusion in who does what within the organization, especially when those changes have not been voiced properly. The culture within an organization is also important when thinking about proper etiquette when communicating with others, which is why organizational culture may also be a reason communication in higher education is not where it should be. With a project assigned to myself within my own department at a local university in the Seattle area, it is hopeful that this example will provide a learning opportunity not only for myself, but ideally with discovering a way in how to better communicate within our own departments and the university as a whole.

Introduction

Having the ability to communicate properly is one of the most important skills to have within the workplace in order to ensure your wants, needs, and ideas are heard. With a new wave of technology continuing to pour in over the past few decades, different forms of communication have begun to dominate other forms of communication that were once popular, such as texting and emailing. Organizational change, generational differences, and organizational culture are all assumptions made by the author when thinking about why communication in the higher education field has become a problem for staff, students, faculty, parents, and other external customers. This assumption will be explored through research, past situations, and a recent project in which I was assigned to lead my department, the Registrar's Office, through the process of modifying and completing an Electronic Desk Manual, or process documentation.

Communication Styles

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung distinguished four different communication styles, which are based on a person's tendencies to be task oriented versus people-oriented and easygoing versus take-charge. The controller communication style is described as one that is task-oriented, as well as wanting control of themselves, others and situations (Hanke, 2009, p. 23). On the other hand, collaborators enjoy working with other people to come to a consensus and are considered easygoing (Hanke, p.23). Analyzers tend to work best on their own, which also means that it may take longer for them to come to a decision, but are also "detail-oriented, logical thinkers and analyze others and situations" (Hanke, p.23). Those who are outgoing, enjoy meeting new people, and flourish on change are considered socializers, who also "get their energy from others and therefore work best when brainstorming with others to make a decision and take action" (Hanke, p.23). Taking into consideration that not everyone in the workplace uses the same communication style at the same time, it is important to be able to recognize and adapt to one another in order to show that you are taking the time to focus and listen to their needs.

By being aware of one's own preferences when it comes to communication styles with others, it becomes easier to know when the communication style projecting is suitable to the situation at hand. If preferences are not known to a person, it may be difficult to keep from unconsciously wearing a mask to others or even having the thought that others should adapt to them and not the other way around. This can create a behavior pattern in which others may think they are dealing with someone that has multiple personality disorder or bipolar disorder. Bill Bonnstetter shares the idea that "if I do not know the style of the person I am meeting with, I'd start the conversation as if they preferred a High Steady style. Forty percent of the population has a preference for the High Steady style. So I'd focus on reliability, guarantees, and consistency because that will appeal to someone with a High Compliance style too" (Hayashi, pg. 23, para. 12). It is also important to watch for body language signals that may alert one of a different style being used by the other person in the conversation so that adaptation to that style can take place.

By showing one another that you care enough to focus and listen to others, it will likely become a forward step to strengthening relationships within the workplace. Nonverbal behavior can also be an indicator as to what communication style one is following at any given moment. Controllers tend to be louder, with limited emotion, and have a sense of urgency in their voice, but when communicating with them, it is ideal to be direct and communicating with a clear and brief message. Whereas collaborators are often relaxed, highly expressive, and ask a lot of questions possibly due to hesitation in making decisions right away and prefer someone who will listen patiently, appear interested in them, and provide a good feeling about what they are being asked to do. Thinking logically, cautious, soft-spoken and monotone are ways to describe an analyzer, who would ideally collaborate with someone that avoids the small talk, and provides the facts, data, and process that will be needed in order to complete the task at hand. Socializers are quick with making decisions and expressive with feelings through facial expressions, tone and gestures and consider those who show interest, are upbeat, and are able to tie personal experiences to their message an ideal partner when communicating. By having a good idea of what to look for when collaborating with another in person, it is easier to see what style of communication is being used and to ideally adjust to a style that is more compatible with what is being used by the other individual.

Communication Forms

The main forms of communication used in higher education tend to be what most people would think of: person-to-person contact, email, phone conversations, and hand written documents. With the immediate availability that comes with emailing someone, it seems that this tends to be the most often used form of communication. Hand writing a document usually takes a longer amount of time to finish, have the ability to get lost when traveling between one person to the next, and also can be hard to read, depending upon a person's penmanship. Phone and face-to-face conversations can often be best when attempting to explain a more complicated procedure instead of having to send multiple emails between each other in order to everything properly worded. Creating a relationship with another person often involves spending time with them, which could therefore mean that by having more person-to-person contact with a colleague, the more likely one is to create a more meaningful relationship within the workplace.

In hearing the voice of another, one also has the ability to detect certain tones and words being used to indicate what style of communication is being used, which would allow the listener to change their communication style to fit what is being used on the other end. "It's very hard for non-native speakers of any language – however fluent they are – to know exactly what impact they're making, or indeed to understand exactly what their native-speaking partners are saying" (Carte and Fox, pg. 62, para. 18). This is why it is important to think carefully about how one is expressing themselves to others and to watch for reactions from their audience when dealing with a different communication style or native tongue from their own. If it looks like the audience is confused, offended, or irritated, it is best to stop and ask what is wrong instead of carrying on and possibly making things worse between the audience and yourself. Different cultures have a different way of phrasing thoughts, which is why it can be vital to take note of any body language directed to what is being said, as well as to ask what the problem is, so that further explanations can be adapted appropriately. The tone and meaning within a conversation can often get lost in translation due to the fact that non-verbal indicators are not apparent when there are no gestures, facial expressions, and tone to notice.

Different Audiences

It is important to remember that there are often different audiences one must remember when working within a university. With a variety of customers ranging from faculty to staff, as well as students and possibly parents of those students, it can be difficult to pinpoint how to communicate with each audience that will prove effective. Dealing with different types of customers daily can also be hard to manage when it calls upon a person to have the ability to change communication styles and types at a rapid pace. When a conversation is opened up to multiple audiences it can prove to be even more difficult to keep those communication styles and types within an area that will be effective to all customers since it is likely that not everyone will prefer the same style and form of communication being used. Ideally a person would learn how to switch from one communication style to another when a diverse group of people are involved, but it will likely take practice and knowledge on how to switch rapidly from one communication style to another in order to be successful.

FitzPatrick and Valskov state that one of the keys to our influence is having a deep understanding of our audience, that “being able to reflect on how staff feel, what they might understand and how they might react to a message adds value to our advice and differentiates it from the guesswork and speculation of other senior people” (pg. 103, para. 2). It is also ideal to not lump all employees within an organization into one specific audience grouping as “people respond differently to communications based on a wide range of factors including location, role, history, or fundamental attitude to their employer” (pg. 103, para. 3). Having the ability to notice the differences between audiences is key, as well as having the ability to also adapt to each of these audiences appropriately.

Assumptions

The Millennial generation (1981-2000 birth year) will likely benefit from these new forms of communication because they have grown up alongside the technology that has been produced within the technology boom since the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Reliance upon these new forms of technology could create problems within the workplace for Millennials as it may prove difficult to use older forms of communication, such as conversations in person or over the phone, which other generations have become used to since entering the workplace years before. It is therefore assumed that this newer generation, the Millennials, has begun to make its mark within the higher education and has therefore started to change the course of how communication is used within this field.

The Millennials

Currently the work place will include four different generations: the World War II generation, the Baby Boomers generation, the Gen-X generation, and the Millennials. For the baby boomers, the opportunity to be employed is an opportunity for self-fulfillment and accomplishment with the hope to play a more meaningful role within the workplace. The Gen-X generation was brought up during the technology boom and a time when the economy was beginning to expand, but by the time they were ready for the workplace, the economy was in a downturn, leading a large number of this generation to see their parents lose their job or have their whole career go down the drain. In watching their parents go through these situations, this generation has been thought to seek out superior ways to create a work/life balance within their own lifestyle. The second group of offspring from the boomer generation is considered the Millennials, which also saw their parents likely go through job and/or career changes while growing up, as well as a rising divorce rate. This generation has been seen as "goal-focused, anxious to learn, and skilled at collaboration" (The American Society for Training and Development, 2010, p. 360), which possibly stems from receiving a lot of positive feedback from authority figures such as parents and/or teachers. Those from the World War II generation grew up during a period of time in which authority was respected and because of this, an employee rarely questioned their boss. Loyal, hardworking and dependable are all traits that this generation has carried with them into the workplace, with the want and need for clear rules and an employer that provides structure. Baby boomers, the generation that followed, "came of age in an era of social unrest and are often thought of as challenging authority, although most weren't involved in marches or protests" (p. 360). Since all generations are different from one another in many ways, it is essential that leaders take the time to develop a plan for each generation in how to best tackle the learning, development, coaching, feedback, team building, and communication styles for each group.

Since there is a number of differences between the four generations that are now included in a high number of companies at the moment, it is vital to find the similarities between each group and to pair them up accordingly. The leader within the department will also need to take personality and probably even communication styles into consideration when pairing up different employees with each other for a project or task that must be completed. It is also ideal to keep in mind when hiring new employees how their personality and communication style could possibly have an effect on the organizational culture within that particular department. By hiring someone that would be a better fit within that department, it is also likely that there will be less disagreements and personality clashes, which would result in an office that is able to work more efficiently.

Organizational Change

Over the past year and a half, there has been a restructuring within City University of Seattle in order to better align itself with the organization's goals. There have been a number of new positions created, including the Assistant Director of Enrollment as well as the Director of Institutional Effectiveness, in order to better align responsibilities within specific areas in the hopes that it will help to lessen any confusion. However, in the process of doing so, it has become noticeable that a large number of those working at the university have never actually learned what is handled within these new positions because it has never officially been communicated out to a larger audience. The School of Management within City University of Seattle has also been renamed the School of Applied Leadership, which as a result, has been able to add more programs that are now more compatible with what content the school has decided to promote. Academic advisors and admissions advisors have been grouped together as one, now with a combination of responsibilities and tasks within both positions, to an all-encompassing role of enrollment advisor, which means that they will be paired with students from the beginning until they are finished with their school career. It is the hope of the university that this will create a more meaningful relationship between the two, as well as lessen any confusion there may have been about who does what within either the academic or admissions advising positions.

The problem with all three changes is that about half of what should have been made known was actually communicated out to all those affected by the changes. A lot of changes to processes during this time period were not communicated out, possibly because the changes were not considered final, but perhaps also because it was either unknown or forgotten as to who should know about certain changes. There have also been a number of staff and faculty members that have left due to the main campus moving from Bellevue, Washington to Seattle, Washington, as well as various life changes, which has also made it difficult to communicate effectively to everyone that should be aware of the modifications that have taken place. Part of the process of making a change within an organization should be pinpointing who the information should be communicated to, as well as when, where, and why. Since communication is often looked upon as having a central role in developing and maintaining trust, it is that much more important simply because "trust and communication have been shown to enhance such organizational outcomes such as employee participation and job performance" (Thomas, G., Zolin, R., & Hartman, J. L., 2009, p. 288). The more communication out there, especially when dealing with change, employees are more likely to trust their organization which would lessen any worries they had within the workplace, enabling them to focus on their participation and job performance.

Organizational Culture

An issue noticed by many in a recent meeting with the President of City University of Seattle is that communication from higher level employees to lower level employees seems to be working well, but that linear communication between employees at the same level is not where it should be at this point in time. It is assumed that while the university was located in Bellevue, Washington, an organizational culture created this type of behavior and as a result, it was also seen as a normal way to behave. With a lot of employees leaving over the past year and a half and a number of new hires occurring and new positions being created, it makes sense that this type of behavior would become more apparent to someone that had come from an organizational culture that did not accept this type of behavior. Another reason this was probably brought up during the meeting is that there is now an Organizational Effectiveness Office that was created about a half year ago. Now that there is a designated office that will be ensuring the organization is running at its full potential, items such as how to solve communication issues within the university will become a topic more widely discussed. Unfortunately the only way this type of behavior to change is for a higher level staff member to realize the importance in having employees communicate linearly before moving up to higher levels. A change in vision will then need to occur with behaviors being modified to fit the new vision, with communication to other employees throughout the university to do the same.

"Organizational or corporate culture is the pattern of values, norms, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that may not have been articulated but shape the ways in which people in organizations behave and things get done" (Armstrong, pg. 348, para. 1). Organizational culture can often be a huge influence on employees within that particular company, which is why it is important to ensure that values and norms from the start are where the company would like them to be. Culture tends to be learnt over a period time, either through the trauma model, "in which members of the organization learn to cope with some threat by the erection of defense mechanisms" or through the positive reinforcement model, "where things that seem to work become embedded and entrenched" (pg. 349, para. 2).

Examples from Personal Experience

Working within the Registrar's Office requires an employee to be in contact with various customers such as Enrollment Advisors, Faculty, and students. This variety of customers often entails having to adjust a communication style to what is being used by the other person in the conversation in order to ensure processes run efficiently and misunderstandings do not occur. There have been times in which employees are unsure of who should be contacted about specific processes or even what the process actually entails, probably because processes are frequently changed and sometimes those updated changes are not communicated to the correct people. It is difficult to say why this has become a problem as it could be that it is unknown who those changes should be communicated to or whether or not it is just a lack of being proactive in getting the new information out to certain people when those changes occur, which results in the information never being received by those who need to know the most. It is vital to keep everyone up to date about any changes made to processes to ensure that the employees who use those procedures the most frequently are able to complete their tasks more efficiently.

Solutions to Communication Problems in Higher Education

At this point it is probably essential to inform employees within the higher education field that being able to communicate properly will help organizations within the field to navigate towards their goal being successful, as well as creating more fulfilling relationships amongst colleagues and external customers and ensuring that miscommunication does not occur on a regular basis. One solution would be to make a communications handbook available to all staff members within a university on when to use different communication styles and forms with which audiences, as well as when these various forms and styles are appropriate to use. A lot of organizations provide an overview of sexual harassment and diversity on a yearly basis to staff, so it may be ideal to provide the same in the way of communication to help keep this information fresh in their minds. It would also be important to let staff know, particularly in the case of City University of Seattle, that while communication to higher management staff members is okay, one must determine whether or not it is necessary or can be handled by linear communication with staff in a position at the same level. This could probably be determined by letting staff know when it is okay to take different questions or situations to a higher level rather than communicating with those at the same level over what the best way to handle specific situations are before escalating too quickly to a higher level.

Another solution to the communication problems in higher education is to provide process documentation and communicate to everyone as to where this documentation is located. This would involve documenting different processes that occur within universities, who the processes affect, and maybe to even give examples in which one would deviate away from the process in order to better handle a specific situation. The importance in putting this information out to staff and faculty is essential in that it will not only eliminate any questions a person may have had about particular procedures, but it will also help to cut down on time spent trying to figure out who to take questions, ideas, what a process entails, and who is involved each process as well. It may also be helpful to have visual aids within the procedure documentations to help guide visual learners that are able to learn more efficiently through viewing how a certain procedure is completed. Of course, the most important step would be to communicate to all staff and faculty that this type of information is available, as well as where to obtain this information.

Electronic Process Documentation Project for Registrar's Office

One solution the Registrar's Office of City University of Seattle plans to implement is that of an electronic process documentation website that will include all processes that the office handles, as well as policies for the office and who to contact about specific topics for questions and ideas. Each department within the university has their own site within an overall SharePoint site with a number of information included about different items, depending upon the department's decision on what to put there. Right now, the Registrar's office currently includes policies, different program plans used currently (as well as closed ones), different spreadsheets for specific processes handled by staff within the office, as well as a deskbook for the Credentials Evaluator position, which provides information on what the position entails. With a constant stream of questions about who to contact for what process, it has become obvious that the need for an electronic process documentation website is necessary.

Ideally, the whole office will become involved in the creation of this website, with each staff member taking on their specific position area to better explain the finer details of each process and task handled by that employee. Policies will likely be modified and updated by the Associate Registrar with input from the Vice President of Student Services in order to ensure wording and logistics are made understandable by anyone that may read the document. The current plan is to also provide links within each smaller subsite of the page that will take the reader to a separate page to better explain a word or phrase that may not be known to the reader. For example, the process of submitting a petition involves the student and enrollment advisor agreeing upon what course will be looked at in the form of a waiver, direct equivalent, or substitution. All three options have a certain criteria that needs to be met before the petition can even be submitted to Senior Faculty, so it would be ideal to create a separate link that explains what a waiver, direct equivalent, and substitution is when in the form of a petition and what the criteria is for each. Since there is also a form to fill out in order to submit a petition, a link to the form will likely be made available on this process documentation page.

Experience Details

Unfortunately due to the loss of three staff members in the last few months, very little was done with this project so far. More time has been spent focusing on the hiring and training of the new staff members to the Registrar's Office than making the project of process documentation a priority. Fall term also tends to be one of the busiest periods for the office in that new evaluations must occur before students can begin to enroll in courses, which has created a large number of evaluations to take place in the office.

However, it has officially been announced to the office that this project will be taking place by the end of the 2014 calendar year and that I will be heading the project. The only response so far that I've received is that staff members think it is a great idea and should have taken place long ago and that everyone appears to be interested in knowing more details about the project. The main priority I will have for this project will to be communicate deadlines and overall expectations out to the team, as well as to stay up to date on where staff members are with their assignments within the project without micro-managing too much. It will also be my responsibility to keep my own supervisor up to date with how the project is progressing, as well as the Vice President of Student Services, since this project was her idea in the first place. As of right now, we are slated to begin the project more in depth starting in October.

Reasoning for the Project

In a recent meeting amongst colleagues at City University of Seattle in which employees were called upon to list items that were done well at the institutions, as well as areas to improve, the response was overwhelming: communication needed to be improved. A number of reasons could be causing this problem, from the new affiliation created last year with National University which saw a number of new hires due to an increased availability in funding as well as hiring on employees from National University, but also from CityU's move from Bellevue, Washington to Seattle, Washington, which also caused a number of employees to leave the institution. Reorganization within the Advising area in which the positions of Admissions Advisor and Academic Advisor were combined to create a new all-encompassing position of an Enrollment Advisor probably did not help the situation either.

It has become clear to the Registrar's Office that certain details are not being communicated out properly, which has created a surplus of questions coming into the office that should be direct towards colleagues in their own departments or even supervisors, as well as directing questions to a student's advisor instead of contacting the Registrar's Office for an answer since their advisor should be a student's first point of contact. Some of these issues definitely have to do with training within the Enrollment Management and Faculty areas, especially with the organizational rearrangement that occurred over the past year and a half, but there also seems to be a lot of handing off questions to others, just so that if a mistake does occur, they are not involved. The only problem faculty seems to have is that they aren't aware of most policies that the Registrar's Office deals with or they attempt to do more than is needed when it isn't necessary within their own position to do so. Enrollment Advisors have begun to contact the Registrar's Office more often over the past year, possibly due to training issues and those new to the position not knowing who their first point of contact should be, but likely due to the increased responsibility placed upon their shoulders to meet their monthly goals of new students and overall enrollments. Having heard a number of these Enrollment Advisors complain about the stress they are now under has lead me to believe that the increased responsibility in hitting their metrics is the number one source of stress and why they are not actually thinking about how to proceed before doing so. This would not only save them a lot of time by really thinking about who could appropriately answer their question, as well as saving the staff in the Registrar's Office from spending time on a question that may not even pertain to them.

By creating a process documentation for the Registrar's Office, as well as a place to look up general information, policies and more, it is hopeful that less time will be spent answering questions that either should have been known or answered by a colleague or supervisor, or even directing the person to the correct point of contact. For whatever reason, the Registrar's Office seems to be the first point of contact when a student calls in about a transcript, diploma, or evaluation, but half of the time, if the person directing these calls actually listened to what the student or external customer was asking, it wouldn't need to be directed to the Registrar's Office. It is possible that the Site Assistants in charge of answering the main telephone line are not aware that the Enrollment Advisor for each student should be the first point of contact, or that the Business Office should handle any charges on the student's account, which makes it a training issue. If the Site Assistants were able to read the Registrar's Office process documentation site in order to better understand what actually happens within the department and who should answer which questions, it would save a lot of time and even frustration for the student or external customer from having to be transferred around multiple times in order to reach the right person.

How This Project Relates to Communication in Higher Education

Communication styles, forms and audiences should all be considered when dealing with customers in any field within the business world and higher education is no different. Since the Registrar's Office has noticed a steady incline on the number of questions being received by both in-house and external customers, the process documentation project is thought to be a necessary step towards eliminating some questions others have about the department. The idea is to not only give reference to the different processes, policies and positions within the Registrar's Office, but to also educate anyone that views the website in the hopes that one will be able to decide upon who to contact about a particular subject given the information the department provides. Though it is realized that this process documentation may not answer all questions, especially to those who are not a visual or reading/writing learner, it is the hope of the department that it will at least lessen the amount of time spent answering questions to about thirty percent. With City University of Seattle realizing that communication amongst departments is not in an ideal place, it is possible that more departments within the institution will begin to think about creating a process documentation website by using the Registrar's Office as an example for their own.

Program Outcomes to Consider

While leadership decisions have led to a higher number of enrollments since the institution last saw nine years ago and organizational objectives have been clearly stated during quarterly meetings with the whole university, departmental updates may have been necessary to allow everyone an idea of what has changed within each department that may affect others. Sometimes responsibilities within a department shift from one person to another and it is not often communicated out to the whole university that this has happened. If leaders within the university made it a priority to communicate changes out more frequently to those the changes will affect, it may allow the university to run more efficiently and effectively.

It is very rare to obtain a one-on-one meeting with one's supervisor in order to get feedback about the progress being made within their own department. However, each year employees are called upon to create three goals within their position for that fiscal year to better develop themselves within their position. This often involves taking on more responsibilities or to further specific training to better understand the existing task performed within their position. Coaching does not seem to be involved with this process, maybe because it is considered too time consuming to the university, but cross-training, specifically within the Registrar's Office, has been seen as necessary. A lot of cross-training has to do with former positions staff members have had within that department which allows that former experience to help them when covering another, but is also interest-based as well as aligning tasks with other positions that may also be involved in that task to help better understand a position as a whole.

Within the Registrar's Office, there are currently only 11 staff members that make up six separate positions. The Credentials Evaluators team is thought of as a separate team from that of the Technical Support and Records Specialist positions that make up the other half of the office. There is little to no micro-managing within the office unless there is a special project being completed with a tight deadline that involves the majority of the office. At the most, the Associate Registrar will communicate what is a priority for that day, if there are any at all, and the rest is up to the employee to finish their workload in a way that makes sense to them. It is possible that because of this, the office is usually quiet and always in the process of attempting to finish the day's workload.

Conclusion

By giving specific details on how to communicate with different audiences using various forms and styles, a person is more likely to gain a better understanding of the process involved when communicating with others in a higher education setting and in general. An electronic process documentation website will allow more information to be available and to ideally provide anyone that reads it with a better understanding of not only what each position within the Registrar's Office entails, but to also create a more thorough source on what the department's responsibilities are as a whole. In having a website as detailed and thorough as the Registrar's Office plans for it to be, the hope is that it will lessen the time spent on transferring calls or forwarding emails to different employees within the department. This will essentially create an office that runs more smoothly and efficiently with the intent to set an example for other departments within the university to follow suit.

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