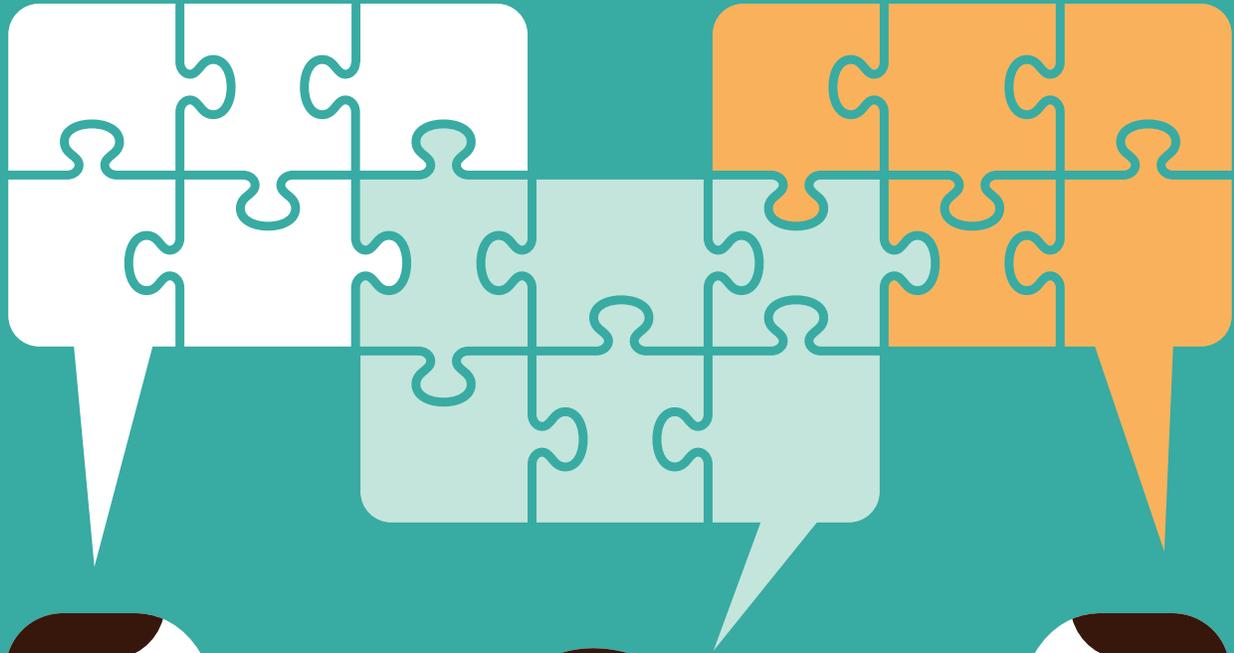


Are Communication Skills Really “Soft” Skills?



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POV Paper

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So-called “soft skills,” like the ability to communicate and influence effectively, often get relegated to the nice-to-have category, especially when you need people to ramp up quickly and master the technical aspects of a job. With so much uncertainty and volatility in the business environment, it can seem as if there’s no time to spend on those interpersonal behavioral skills. Yet meanwhile, communication issues are bubbling to the surface.

So, are you saving time now only to be facing significant time and cost drains tomorrow?

Numerous studies confirm that, even with all the tools now available to facilitate communication, the fact is, skills like collaborating and influencing effectively don’t always come naturally. In some cases, all those tools, combined with an ever-more complex business environment, may only be making effective communication harder.

And while some organizations might think that skills like building rapport, asking good questions and brainstorming are “soft,” the impact of ineffective internal communications is very concrete.

According to an SIS International Research study, the cumulative cost per year due to productivity losses resulting from communication barriers is more than \$26,000 per employee. Not only that, it found that a business with 100 employees spends an average downtime of 17 hours a week clarifying communications. Translated into dollars, that’s more than \$530,000 a year.

On the plus side, Towers Watson has been studying the ROI of companies’ change and communication efforts for a decade and has consistently found a strong correlation between high communication effectiveness and superior financial performance, calling it “a powerful correlation that continues to stand the test of time.”

These aren’t soft numbers; they’re real business factors that every organization should be considering a high priority. And with more business professionals having to collaborate, influence and inspire diverse groups of people both inside and outside the organization, the need to sharpen this “soft skill” has never been more urgent.

“People are now spending about 40 percent of their time at work engaged in non-sales selling – persuading, influencing, and convincing others in ways that don’t involve anyone making a purchase.”

Daniel H. Pink
“To Sell is Human”

“Consider that 40% of the work week is lost to communications inefficiencies and that the majority of respondents are in customer-facing and decision-making roles. The negative impact on critical business processes, new revenue, and customer satisfaction becomes painfully apparent.”

SIS International
Research

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Communication and That 4-Letter Word

You'd be hard-pressed to find a single business professional today who doesn't have to communicate in some form or fashion to do their job. Some of the common areas their communication skills come into play include:

- Day-to-day communications
- Working with others to solve problems and get things done
- Getting answers to questions
- Providing information to others
- Influencing a decision
- Delivering a presentation
- Collaborating internally and externally to address customer issues
- Getting buy-in for ideas and opinions
- Demonstrating credibility and promotability

And the list goes on.

This is all part of the job, so people know how to do it, right? Well, not so fast. According to a survey by Adecco, 44% of senior executives believe employees lack necessary soft skills like communication, creativity, critical thinking and collaboration.

Many leaders, recognizing that this gap is only going to continue to widen as new generations enter the workforce, have implemented new technologies, processes, collaboration tools and training programs to help address the issue. But often they don't deliver the lasting impact and resulting business outcomes they're looking for.

That's because most of the time, they're overlooking two essential factors.

1 To communicate is to sell—and that's a loaded word.

Effectively communicating is, at its core, about being customer focused, whether your customer is an external client or an internal colleague. In fact, whether you're presenting information to someone, trying to get their buy-in on your point of view, listening to understand their needs, or influencing a decision or outcome, what you're really doing is selling.

Tell this to many business professionals, though, and you'll get some pretty strong reactions. To many, "sell" is the ultimate four-letter word, something salespeople do to manipulate others and serve their own interests. Unless you take into account and bring into alignment the person's attitudes and beliefs—and often times stereotypes—about selling, you'll keep running up against a wall with development efforts. While a number of books and programs have popped up in recent years touting the fact that we're all in sales no matter what our role is, no amount of training, tools or processes, on their own, will break through that barrier.

2 Communication—like selling—is a mutual exchange of value.

The second issue naturally flows from the first. Influencing others into action, whether you're communicating with an internal partner or selling your products and services to an external customer, lies in exchanging value and finding common values in every interaction.

As long as communication is viewed as something you do to someone, with a series of techniques and tools to help you manipulate the interaction, the success of training efforts will be limited.

Instead, the most effective communication—the kind that inspires, motivates, builds trust and increases productivity—is rooted in positive attitudes and beliefs about service and collaboration. It's about stepping into the shoes and mindset of others to find the commonalities and create mutually valuable and productive connecting points with them. It's about consistently applying customer-focused behaviors.

This is the kind of approach that gets you and the person on the other end of that communication on the same page. You understand what they care about and what they need. They understand where you're coming from and what you mean. When you're focused on common goals, the result is a mutual way forward without unnecessary misfires, errors and delays.



1 in 9 Americans works in sales.



8 in 9 Americans work in non-selling sales.

» The most effective communication— the kind that inspires, motivates, builds trust and increases productivity—is rooted in positive attitudes and beliefs about service and collaboration



8 Questions for Evaluating Your Communications Training

With 89% of executives in the Adecco survey saying that training programs could help bridge the communication and collaboration skills gap, it's clear they see the need and the urgency to build business professionals' communication effectiveness, and they're looking for ways to do it.

But just telling people that everyone is in "sales" now, or providing a quick-hit communications workshop or online tool isn't the solution.

So, how do you know what to look for?

The first thing to consider when implementing a communication initiative is how well it aligns with your organization's culture, values and ethics. One of the key findings of the Towers Watson study is that "the fundamentals are more effective when grounded in a deep understanding of an organization's culture and workforce." If the skills, behaviors and processes don't match up with the values that are the cornerstone of your culture, you're not just sending mixed messages, you're investing in something that's not likely to deliver the long-term results you need. Even worse, an approach that contradicts your values could slowly chip away at them.

"It's worth the effort to change training and communication approaches, and find a better way."

Towers Watson Change and Communication ROI Study Report (2013-2014)

Here are 8 more questions to consider when evaluating your communications development strategy:

- 1** Is it designed to build a common language across the organization and prepare business professionals for successful dialogue and outcomes?
 - 2** Does it take into account employees' attitudes and beliefs about collaboration?
 - 3** Is it principles-based content that is easily accepted and applied by all employees?
 - 4** Does it focus on behaviors, helping people understand and adapt to others' behaviors to improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of communication?
 - 5** Does it give employees a process for identifying the needs, concerns and opportunities of the people they're communicating with or need to influence?
 - 6** Are there actionable steps to help employees focus their presentations on value versus process or policy?
 - 7** Is there follow-up with accountability for application?
 - 8** Does the solution include coaching resources for managers to help reinforce behaviors and performance?
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The Hard Reality About Soft Skills

The reality is, if your professionals lack the communication skills, behaviors and coaching today's world demands, your organization could be losing millions of dollars every year in lost productivity, opportunities, customers and more. With more cross-functional teaming and complex projects required to meet the day-to-day needs of the business, this is not an issue that's going to go away. If anything, it's only going to get bigger.

Poor communication and collaboration skills may not feel like an urgent problem—until they are. Smart leaders aren't waiting until the organization's health is at risk. Contact us to learn more about how to align your communications training strategy with your business goals.

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For More Information Contact:

JohnnyWalker.Co

(770) 456-5547

www.JohnnyWalker.Co

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For more information, contact:

Integrity Solutions, LLC

615.385.2246 | 800.646.8347

www.integritysolutions.com

1801 West End Avenue, Suite 530

Nashville, TN 37203

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