The purpose of this paper is to advocate and describe a comprehensive communication skills course for future executives. One question which may be asked is, who needs an executive communication course? Here are some quotations from a few individuals that will answer this question.

One person wrote, "...I know now—that the ability to communicate is everything." That man is Lee Iacocca (1984, p. 18). Donald Sethert (1984, p. 182), CEO of J.C. Penney, stated, "Another key characteristic of the typical chief executive officers I know is that they communicate well at every level in the company." (Emphasis in original)

Don Keough, president of Coca-Cola, said that the ability to communicate has been important in the development of his career. He added:

I believe that for a top executive not to realize that he has an enormous obligation to try to communicate as effectively as possible is just not facing up to a major responsibility. It's almost a contradiction in terms to see someone in a senior executive position who isn't able to communicate well. (In Linver and Taylor 1983, pp. 242-243)

Iacocca (1984, p. 15) stated it succinctly: "The most important thing I learned in school was how to communicate." Iacocca said he felt that more and more college graduates could express themselves clearly, but he attended a Dale Carnegie public speaking course to sharpen his expressiveness skills. Another executive, Don Bader of Occidental Petroleum, asserted, "Communication is extremely important to any career, and yet we spend probably the least amount of time in college or school really developing effective communication." (In Linver and Taylor 1983, p. 284)

What the Managerial Theorists Say

Chester Barnard (1938, p. 82) wrote, in his benchmark work, The Functions of the Executive, "The first executive function is to develop and maintain a system of communication." Chris Argyris (1962) devoted an entire book to developing interpersonal communication competence in organizations. Likewise, William Hamer's (1940) enduring work, Communication and Interpersonal Relations, discussed communication theories in organizational settings.

A perusal through classic discussions of management effectiveness (Drucker 1966, Etzioni 1964; Guest, Barney & Blanchard 1977) and contemporary management and organizational behavior texts (Certo 1980; Mathis and Jackson 1976; Riggs, Bethel, Atwater, Smith & Stackman 1979; Smith, Carroll, Kefalas & Watson 1980; Tanski, Chase & Aquilano 1980) shows that communication skills are considered important for managers. Further, at least three recent texts, Organizational Management Through Communication (Allen 1977), Managerial Communication: A Strategic Approach (Smelser & Waltman 1984), and Susan and Kivonos' (1979) Communication for Supervisors and Managers, are centered around managerial communication skills.

Also, there are a number of trade books whose authors espouse the importance of effective executive communication skills (see Burkett 1983; D'Aprile 1977; Hart 1980; Levinson 1981; Rice 1965). A quotation from one trade book author represents this view. Duerr (1971, pp. ix-xiii), wrote:

Management is communication. The one single thing that each and every manager depends on, that sorts the successes from the failures, is the ability to communicate with other people and to organize their communications among themselves.


In spite of the impressive amount of literature that focuses on communication skills for executives, universities do not require a course in executive communication. Most universities do not even offer an elective course in executive, managerial, or leader communication. The next section describes common
Communication Courses

A person might note that executive communication courses are not required because communication in all its contexts is adequately covered in a myriad of other classes. This is true. Let's examine some of these other classes.

Within the business school core lies the aforementioned "business communication" class that stresses business writing and public speaking. Most business schools require this course. The course is often offered by marketing or management departments. Or, if outside the business school, it is housed within the English or communication departments.

These classes focus on theory and application of theory. But, as mentioned before, it cannot adequately encompass writing, basic speaking and all the other types of communication that executives do.

Well, perhaps other business classes cover communication. This is also true. Most management departments offer courses in organizational behavior, theories of management, leadership, and personnel development. These classes mention communication in passing—and some delve into communication theories in depth, but none offer practical experience and application of communication theories in organizational contexts.

Marketing departments emphasize communication in specific contexts. Examples of these include sales management, sales training and development, public relations, consumer behavior, and advertising classes. These courses are good but usually do not center on the executive's roles and behaviors in these communication contexts.

Communication departments offer a variety of classes that pertain to the executive: persuasion; forensics; interpersonal, organizational, group, public, mass, and nonverbal communication; communication and conflict; and negotiation and bargaining. Again, these courses are good. However, a business student would have to declare a double major or take a minor in communication to derive the maximum benefit from these ten courses. This may be a good idea. But, in the case of the management courses, professors usually emphasize theory and not practice. Thus, students leave these classes full of ideas and devoid of skills. They can recite the qualities of a competent communicator, but they cannot demonstrate these behaviors. Later, corporations are forced to send these incompetent executive communicators to communication workshops offered by the Dale Carnegie Institute and other training establishments. Dale Carnegie gets paid to enhance executives' communication performance, not just increase their knowledge base. It would be nice if universities could offer an executive communication course that exposed students to relevant theories and helped them develop their communication skills. At least one Western university does offer such a course.

The Executive Communication Course

At this university, the executive communication course is housed within the marketing department. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the executive is more than just a manager or supervisor. Yes, executives perform all management functions and attend to human resource decisions, but they also lead people. They are the leaders of the organization; they communicate the company's culture and philosophies. O'Toole (1984, p. 233) wrote, "Iacocca's biggest achievement may be that he convinced more people to follow him than any business leader has ever done before." A motivator is a marketer.

Additionally, executives, especially chief executives, give the organization's viewpoints and positions to the public, meet with important visitors, attend professional conferences, and serve as liaisons with other organizations and government agencies. As Lundborg (1981, p. 245) pointed out, "A CEO is called upon to do more things, be in more places, serve on more boards and committees, make more speeches than anyone could possibly do." It is this public communication commitment that justifies placing this course within the marketing department.

Just as in advertising, the top executives are personally marketing the company to its many publics. It is just as Robert Cushman, CEO of Norton Industries, stated it:

...managers of big institutions...must spend more time trying to understand and influence social affairs than they spend on the more traditional job of internal management. (In Steiner, 1983, p. 25)

Increasingly, according to Steiner (p. 57), top executives are discovering the necessity to communicate effectively with the media. Some CEO's are now featured in television advertisements for company products (e.g., Eastern's "I'M NOT YOUR FATHER'S AIRLINES" Avis! David Mahoney, Remington Shaver's Victor Kiam, and of course Chrysler's Lea Iacocca). These campaigns are successful due to the CEO's ability to project credibility to the public. This credibility is based upon the competence and safety of the CEO communicates (Hartel 1984, pp. 150-151). This executive advertising lends itself to a class situated in a marketing department.

Course Format, Content, and Activities

The executive communication course at this university emphasizes knowledge and performance. Students learn theory through lecture; application through readings, films, and discussion; and behavioral skills through structured communication activities.

Students who perform well are invited to participate in a management conference where they compete in three executive communication skill categories. The California Management Conference is hosted each Spring by the University of California, Berkeley. It is open to all undergraduates at Western colleges and universities. The competition is judged by local business executives on the three aforementioned areas. The first area is group problem solving. Students are placed in small groups, given a local business context and a topical news issue, and asked to discuss it. They are judged on how well they
perform. The second area is negotiation and bar-
gaining. Here students are judged by how well
they can bargain in a business conflict of some
sort. Impromptu public speaking is the third area.
Students are handed a current news topic, given
five minutes to prepare, and then deliver a five
minute speech. Students then complete a portion
of the GMAT and meet the sponsoring firms. Winners
are announced that evening. The competition pro-
vides students with an opportunity to show off
their executive skills to company recruiters.
Thus, students have an incentive to perform well
in the class.

The class meets once a week during a ten week
quarter. At the first meeting, students introduce
other students in one minute speeches. They are
instructed to mention something memorable about
the person they are introducing. Afterward, the
professor discusses the importance of awareness,
perception, and knowledge in successful executive
performance. Students are assigned readings. To
become aware and knowledgeable (and to be able to
participate in group discussions), students are
required to read the Wall Street Journal and a
local newspaper on a daily basis. They are also
responsible for the contents of Business Week and
Newweek. Every subsequent class begins with a
thirty minute discussion on current events and how
these relate to business. The first class ends
with a lecture on empathy and listening.

For the second class period, students are required
to read and discuss Iacocca. Discussion focuses
on the communication concepts in the book that are
similar to the competition areas mentioned above.
This book is assigned because Iacocca is a well
known executive that communicates often in public.

In the third meeting, students are introduced to
leadership theories and read and discuss an article
that features a photograph of Iacocca and President
Reagan. The author delineates leadership and man-
agement differences (Gonzales 1985). This article
is succinct and points out that good executives
must manage and lead simultaneously.

The study of leadership is continued in the
fourth meeting. Here, students view a sixty min-
ute videotape starring Captain Kirk of the tele-
vision series Star Trek in a variety of executive
communication situations. It is important for
students to actually see a successful leader's
communication style, even though Kirk is a ficti-
tious character. On this day, students hand in a
short report and deliver a two minute speech on a
famous past or current leader and his or her com-
munication style. Again, the point is to have
students focus on leader communication style in
various contexts.

At the start of the fifth day, students turn in a
self profile which lists their strengths and weak-
nesses. Following Selbert (1984, pp. 24-29), lec-
ture centers around building self confidence
through self appraisal and iterative, hierarchical
successes. For students to compete in a public
arena, they must have realistic self confidence
that is based upon their capabilities and limita-
tions.

The first part of the sixth class revolves around
a lecture on corporate culture. Students view and
discuss the In Search of Excellence documentary
videotape. This is an important class because stu-
dents get the opportunity to see successful compa-

cies run by outstanding executives who know how to
relate with their internal and external publics.
The second part of this class is devoted to lecture
on small group communication theory. This lecture
is necessary as it introduces students to interper-
sonal and group behavioral concepts that they will
need to know before they can practice group interac-
tion competencies in applied settings.

Group problem solving is the agenda item for the
seventh session. Students are assigned to groups of
seven and are subjected to conditions they will face
in the competition at the conference. The entire
class time is devoted to repeated practice and feed-
back from fellow group members and the professor.

In the eighth class meeting, the professor lectures
on group conflict management and students continue
group problem solving practice. In the final hour
of the eighth meeting, the professor gives a lecture
on theories of negotiation and bargaining.

Students are placed in bargaining situations similar
to those they will be exposed to at the conference;
this practice occurs during the first part of the
ninth class meeting. During the second part of the
class, the professor lectures on the nuts and bolts
of public speaking.

In the first part of the final class meeting, stu-
dents view a videotape on persuasive public speak-
ing. Then they are given topics and speak on these
in small groups. The instructor and classmates pro-
vide feedback to speakers. The entire class period
is spent practicing impromptu speeches. For their
final examination, students perform one last round
of impromptu speeches. After that, students are
prepared to compete in the management conference
and in the real world.

Conclusions

To summarize, the aim was to advocate and explicat-
ate an executive communication course that would be
taught in a marketing department. We quoted four
executives who think that communication skills are
essential. We showed that respected managerial
theorists and current management and organizational
behavior text writers recognize the material link
between communication skills and success in manage-
ment. We listed three current managerial commu-
nication books and noted that journals and the popular
press devote space to executive communication.

Further, we established that available communication
courses do not adequately meet the theory/application/
performance requirements of a quality executive com-
munication class.

We explained that a marketing department was the
appropriate place to locate this class because the
course focuses on executives who interact with and
influence the public. We described the course and
demonstrated that it succeeds in interfacing theory
with performance.

This executive communication course provides train-
ing for a management competition where students
manifest their skills in a public setting—and are rewarded for their performance. As their careers progress, they will be rewarded with more communication challenges. Here is a class that makes our students marketable. The question is, will you elect to offer this course?

References


