REMOVING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS THROUGH COURSE INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Educators seek, through course instruction, to improve student communication by helping them identify and remove barriers to effective communication. The core research question addressed in this paper is whether communication can be improved by increasing student understanding of those barriers. A total of 481 students who had studied issues that are possible barriers to effective communication in a Business Cornerstone course were surveyed during their senior year. The results indicated that students perceived they were better able to communicate in situations where those issues often serve as barriers to effective communication. The areas investigated were team dynamics, ethical dilemmas, diversity in the workplace, and intercultural topics.

Introduction

Communication is an important skill because it is integral to conducting daily activities in the workplace, classrooms, neighborhoods, or anywhere else that people interact. And while we all know how to communicate, many are unable to communicate effectively. The communication process involves senders encoding and then sending messages and receivers decoding the messages they receive. Anywhere within that process, interferences may cause the communication to lose its effectiveness or to break down completely. Senders and receivers must learn to deal with the numerous interferences or barriers that may hinder the communication process (Lehman & DuFrene, 2008). These barriers can be internal and/or external, verbal and nonverbal. Verbal barriers include inadequate knowledge or vocabulary; differences in perception, which are influenced by age, socioeconomic background, culture, educational background, and experiences; differences in language; inappropriate use of expressions such as slang, jargon, and euphemisms; and abstraction and ambiguity. Nonverbal barriers include conflicting or inappropriate signals, such as facial expressions, gestures, and attire; differences in perception; inappropriate emotions, such as too much emotional involvement, prejudice, stereotyping, and boredom. Other barriers include physical, competing, and mental distractions.

Effective communicators are aware of the communication process and the barriers that interfere with the successful communication of messages. An important method of effective communication involves four steps: (1) knowing the barriers to communication, (2) predicting when those barriers may occur within any given communication situation, (3) identifying those barriers when they do occur, and (4) developing strategies to overcome them.

Educators seek, through course instruction, to improve student communication by helping them identify and remove barriers to effective communication. Situations that can introduce barriers to successful communication include teamwork, ethical dilemmas, workplace diversity, and intercultural matters. The

core research question addressed in this paper is whether communication can be improved by increasing student understanding of those barriers.

Communication Within Teams

Much has been written about the need to create balanced work teams with respect to gender, ethnicity, culture, expertise, personality, and other characteristics. Teams with a balance of membership may have different perspectives about the problems that must be solved and a variety of ideas about possible solutions to those problems. Teams with diverse personality types, expertise, experience, and other differences among members tend to have more enriching discussions, which can improve decision making (Bell & Smith, 2003). As a result, balanced teams may function more effectively than those that have more uniformity in membership. A study of the relationship between management team gender-balance and small firm performance resulted in the finding that "more balanced representation of both genders in store management is significantly more likely to generate superior firm profitability" (Litz & Folker, 2002, p. 353). While this finding is promising, members of gender-balanced teams should be aware that, in general, women communicate differently than men in work environments, including teams, and should make the most of these gender-based communication patterns to achieve fairness, make the best use of team resources, and successfully execute the organization's mission (Bell & Smith, 2003).

Successful teamwork experiences rely upon effective communication. The same barriers that impact every day communication activities also impact team communication. "Multicultural teams are particularly vulnerable to interaction problems," and members have "different perceptions of the environment, motives and intentions of behaviors, communication norms, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and prejudices" (Matveev & Nelson, 2004, p. 255). These problems can impact team performance negatively.

Numerous studies have focused on the positive and negative aspects of diverse teams, but as Bucher (2000) states,

> Diversity is only an asset when team members develop skills to manage the assets and challenges of diversity . . . and becoming more conscious of diversity . . . will improve those skills that are essential for true teamwork; these include communication, conflict management, empathy, self-evaluation, and leadership (169).

While cultural diversity in teams

> enables an increase in creativity due to a wider range of perspectives, more and better ideas, and less group thinking . . . [and] it has the potential to increase performance . . . heterogeneous teams experience higher process losses compared with homogenous teams because they face additional communication barriers (Erdem & Polat, 2010, p. 406).

Improving one's awareness of diversity impacts the effectiveness of the communication among team members. Rentz, Flatley and Lentz (2011) state "Learning about the ways cultures differ is an important foundation for communicating globally" (pp. 497-498). Diversity awareness can improve diversity skills, such as communication. A study by Matveev and Nelson (2004) provided "empirical support for the communication competence-team performance hypothesis" (266). "Managers experienced in working

on multicultural teams reported a relationship between the level of cross cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance" (266). In view of current research, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H1: Instruction on team building reduces communication barriers among students in subsequent courses.

People make decisions every day, and teams are no different. Decision making is a key activity that all teams do (Thompson, 2004). Teams make decisions as they are forming and continue the decision-making process through all the team building stages, right on to the end of the team's task, goal, or mission. Some decisions are minor and inconsequential to the outcome of the mission, while others are integral to the successful completion of the team's objective. According to Bell and Smith (2003), balanced teams produce a variety of opinion that allows for a more complete discussion of the issues and better decision making. However, even the most balanced teams can fall victim to one or more of the common decision-making pitfalls, such as groupthink, escalation of commitment, unethical decision making, and others. Effective communication among team members can reduce the likelihood of these pitfalls occurring. "Research indicates that teams that use efficient communication strategies and techniques achieve higher levels of decision making performance (Jeffery, Maes, & Bratton-Jeffery 2005, p. 44).

Effective communication and effective teamwork don't occur automatically. When people from different backgrounds work in teams, many problems related to team interaction can occur, including disorganization, miscommunication and misunderstanding, and inadequate participation in the process for and development of procedures for problem solving (Cooley, 1994). Other communication issues (or barriers) involve different communication styles of team members from different cultures. Aritz and Walker (2009) studied the differences in participation and contribution patterns of native East Asian and native English speaking team members in small decision-making groups in undergraduate business writing and business communication courses. Findings indicated that "contribution diminished and participation indicators decreased in frequency as speakers of the East Asian languages became a minority in a group" (p. 110). The most researched characteristics of team diversity are the surface-level sources, such as ethnicity or gender, but other deep-level sources of diversity also affect team processes and perceptions. Rink and Ellemers (2010) examined the conditions under which the less visible, or deep-level sources of task-related diversity affected team communication and performance. Differences in personal knowledge (information) and cognitive decision schemas (decision rules) are important sources of deep-level diversity. In their studies, "collaboration partners and team members will openly discuss their differences in personal decision rules and actively integrate their unique information into the decision process when both sources of diversity are present, and will subsequently evaluate the collaboration process positively" (Rink & Ellemeres, 2010, p. 348).

Introducing decision-making strategies to team members can enhance the effectiveness of team communication, thus leading to better decisions. Cooley (1994) investigated the effects of training an interdisciplinary team in communication and decision-making skills. Participants found the training to be "useful, enjoyable, and practical" and "considered the targeted skills to be relevant and worth integrating into their day-to-day work routines" (p. 21). Problem solving and decision making in teams often are data-based driven. Todd, Horner, Newton, Algozzine, Algozzine, and Frank (2011) examined the effects of problem solving training program on elementary school administrative teams, where data-based decision making and problem solving are continuous and central activities in schools. After the

Team-Initiated Problem Solving (TIPS) training, "each school documented immediate and sustained improvements in the thoroughness of their decision making" (p. 53). Another strategy for improving team decision making is by using collaborative modeling based on mental models. Mental models involve objectives, decision structure, solution alternatives, information requirements, processes and procedures, and others. Jeffery, Maes, and Bratton-Jeffery (2005) stated that "team decision-making performance relies on recognizing the collaborative modeling needed, effective communication, and the success of building shared mental models among team members through collaborative modeling" and that "team performance can improve through the application of collaborative modeling" (p. 46). Teams that develop effective communication and collaboration strategies that create shared mental models will become more effective decision makers. In view of current research, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H2: Instruction on making decisions in teams reduces communication barriers among students in subsequent courses.

Communication About Ethical Issues

Ethical issues in business arise at all levels and with a variety of stakeholders. CEOs of large corporations, small business owners, sales representatives, and others must make decisions regarding what is and what isn't ethical when interacting with employees, vendors, consumers, members of the public, and others. Business involves economic relations and transactions that take place in markets and organizations, and those situations often raise ethical issues for which the ethics of everyday life has not prepared people (Boatright, 2007). As well-publicized ethical meltdowns of Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Madoff, the financial industry, and others have continued, business and education leaders have reiterated the necessity of business ethics instruction at all educational levels. Waples, Antes, Murphy, Connelly, and Mumford (2008) write that the "education of students and professionals in business ethics is an increasingly important goal on the agenda of business schools and corporations" (p. 133). In many cases, ethical problems may be avoided if communication among individuals is more efficient. Knowledge of the barriers that can break down communication is helpful in situations where people from different cultures, disciplines, and skill levels are interacting with each other. Effective communication in business and professional disciplines can play a vital role in reducing the instances of poor ethical decision making that may result in harm to individuals, companies and organizations, and society as a whole.

Effective communication in the health care industry is vital, as poor communication can impact life and death situations. A study by Astrom, Duggan, and Bates (2007) examined communication problems among healthcare professionals (HCPs) and investigated ways to improve communication within secondary care. The study states "Poor communication has been shown to lead to disruptions in the continuity of care, delayed diagnoses and duplication of or unnecessary interventions" (p. 279). Ethical dilemmas may arise with respect to diagnoses and treatments when healthcare professionals fail to communicate clearly and regularly with each other about patient symptoms, medical tests, possible diagnoses, and treatments. The study documented clear issues involving the ways professionals communicated, including the "fact that some professionals do not read or act on others' messages" (Astrom, Duggan, & Bates, 2007, p. 284). For example, an ethical dilemma may result when the information about a patient's condition is communicated in a message by a nurse but is not acted upon by a physician because he/she failed to read the communication. If the patient suffers harm as a result of the inaction that was directly related to the communication failure, an ethical dilemma may arise as

to how the miscommunication is documented to determine liability. Failures in communication may be due to differing practices between professions, or social or psychological barriers to communication (Astrom, Duggan, & Bates, 2007). Increased communication should be promoted as good practice, and a strategy to boost the day-to-day contact of these professionals is by a process called joint communication note (JCN), where they can transfer and acknowledge important messages (Astrom, Duggan & Bates, 2007). This JCN—a place for each HCP to communicate, request comments and decisions from fellow HCPs, and to follow up on monitoring—formed the basis of the "intervention" that was implemented to improve communication among the participants of the study.

Another strategy to improve communication by clarifying and evaluating people's responses to controversial and ethical issues is to use the Ethical Process (Brown, 2003). When ethical issues are encountered, most people will rely on their background, experiences, and available information to decide how they should proceed. One of the factors that impacts decisions regarding ethical issues is cultural plurality. "There is ample evidence to suggest that cultural factors have an effect on the ethical beliefs and attitudes of managers (Walker & Jeurissen, 2003, p. 114). Decisions are as good as the resources used to make them, and poor decisions often are made because of a lack of important resources. The Ethical Process invites alternative points of view, uses dialogue with others, and enhances knowledge, which will increase the likelihood that the decisions made will be the right ones (Brown, 2003).

Students in the Business Cornerstone course are introduced to the Ethical Process as a way to enhance and improve the decision-making process. The Business Cornerstone course was introduced in 2000 and is a pre-requisite or co-requisite for all other College of Business courses. Therefore, all students entering the College of Business as juniors must take Business Cornerstone. Communication barriers, such as cross-cultural differences, are discussed in context with using the Ethical Process in the Business Cornerstone course. In teaching business ethics to students, "an awareness of cultural perceptions is a prerequisite for understanding and interpreting ethical behavior within the workplace" (Walker & Jeurissen, 2003, p. 114). In view of current research, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H3: Instruction on the detection and analysis of ethical issues in business reduces communication barriers among students in subsequent courses.

Communication in a Diverse Workplace

Diversity awareness is an integral component of any diversity training or education program. Generally, people consider three dimensions (characteristics) of diversity—race, gender, and ethnicity—when discussing diversity. However, the dimensions of diversity include all the ways in which people are different. Bucher (2000, p. 15) describes diversity as including whatever we think distinguishes us. Awareness of one's own diversity is the first step in the process of becoming aware of the diversity of others. Increasing one's diversity awareness can impact one's ability to interact with others. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001) report "Working in the 21st Century," the labor force is getting older, more women are working today than in the past, and minorities are the fastest growing part of the labor force. As our countries, communities, schools, and workplaces become increasingly diverse, a person's ability to be aware of one's own diversity as well as the diversity of others is exceedingly important.

According to Milliken and Martins (1996), diversity in the workplace focuses on observable attributes such as race/ethnicity, nationality, age, and gender, as well as underlying attributes such as values, skills, knowledge, and cohort membership. "These attributes form our identity and influence our relationships in the workplace [and] our identity and our relationships form and are formed by our communication with one another" (Thomas, 1996, p. 371). Successful communication is achieved when the receiver of a message interprets the message the way the sender intends. Lehman and DuFrene (2008) stated "Differences between the sender and the receiver in areas such as culture, age, gender, and education require a sensitivity on the part of both parties so that the intended message is the one that is received" (22). Hopkins and Hopkins (1994) studied the impact on organizations when large numbers of nontraditional employees were introduced to a workforce where diversity levels have been traditionally low. The result was a disruption of the communication processes created by barriers that racial, cultural, attitudinal, and behavioral differences had on communication effectiveness.

Barriers to successful communication span the dimensions of diversity and include differences in culture, race, ethnicity, gender, age, education, experience, and socio-economic status, among others. Communication includes both verbal and nonverbal messages. Verbal messages include written and spoken words, whereas nonverbal messages include metacommuncation (inferences that accompany spoken words) and kinesics (body language). Problems associated with communicating verbally in a diverse environment include a lack of language training and translation limitations. Issues with nonverbal communication in a diverse society include interpretation of time, personal space requirements, metacommunication, and body language (Lehman & DuFrene, 2008).

Among the barriers impacting communication in a diverse workplace are international issues, intercultural issues, intergenerational issues, and gender issues (Lehman & DuFrene, 2008). International issues may occur for U.S. firms with facilities in foreign countries and by U.S. workers employed in facilities owned and operated by foreign interests, while intercultural issues may result from the changing demographics in the U.S. that "require businesses to face ethnic diversity in the workplace" (Lehman & DuFrene, 2008, p. 23).

Intergenerational issues are becoming more evident as older people are working longer and more young people are entering the workforce. A study by Myers and Sadaghiani investigated the interactions of Millennials (born between 1979 and 1994) and older Baby Boomers and Generation X coworkers (2010). Much has been speculated about the possible communication issues between Millennials and older generations, and some empirical evidence supports the differences in attitudes toward work and preferences of communication. For example, Millenials are unusually and extraordinarily confident of their abilities and resist the idea of paying their dues by working hard to demonstrate their worth, while Boomers are ambitious workaholics who may be critical of coworkers who don't share those values, and Generation X workers are skeptics who like to work autonomously and notoriously dislike meetings and group work (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). One of the most discussed aspects of intergenerational differences between Millennials and Baby Boomers regards communication and information technologies. Millennials are more technologically savvy and more visually oriented due to their lifetime experience with new interactive and networked media than are older generations (Lehman & DuFrene, 2008; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

Including instruction on the differences among races, cultures, genders, and generations and suggesting strategies to overcome communication barriers related to these differences at business schools, companies, and organizations can increase the effectiveness of classroom and workplace

communication. Educators search for meaningful ways of demonstrating to students how ethnicity, culture, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and other diversity characteristics can impact their interactions with fellow students, coworkers, and others in their day-to-day activities. Social perception biases, such as stereotyping, often inhibit the effectiveness of those interactions. Peoples' values can have an impact on how they view others, particularly others who are different from them. Age, gender, race, and religiosity were studied to see how an individual's values influence attitudes toward others. Sawyerr, Strauss, and Yan (2005, p. 510) found that age, gender, and race have a significant impact on the relationship between individual value structure and attitudes toward diversity, while religiosity had no significant impact. Spelman (2010) discusses the impact that emotion has when students discuss diversity in classroom situations. His commentary suggests that teachers should help students develop the capacity to interact in emotional situations about challenging intercultural issues with people from other identity groups by getting students to look at themselves, particularly their cultural identities, and how those identities can be threatened during diversity discussions (p. 882). Awareness of one's own diversity is also important to overall diversity awareness. Diversity-awareness training aims at raising the awareness of social perception biases, thus increasing the sensitivity toward the beliefs and feelings of others who have differing diversity characteristics. Knowledge of the biases influencing social perception is an intermediate goal, which is expected to "induce a positive change in trainees' behavior related to the treatment of culturally different individuals" (Sanchez & Medkik, 2004, p. 518). Teaching students to be flexible and to consider how other people's backgrounds affect their behaviors, as well as how their own backgrounds affect their behaviors, is an important part of any diversity awareness curriculum. Diversity education includes raising diversity awareness by focusing on diversity skills such as flexible thinking, communication, teamwork, and leadership as well as developing the ability to overcome personal and social barriers (Bucher, 2000, p. 21). In view of current research, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H4: Instruction on diversity awareness reduces communication barriers among students in subsequent courses.

Communication in the Global Marketplace

Cultural differences can influence the effectiveness of communication in the global marketplace. "Managers with the desire and the skill to conduct business in new international markets and to manage a diverse workforce effectively will confront problems created by cultural differences" (Lehman & Dufrene, 2008, p. 25). Communication among people from different cultural backgrounds may be hindered by various barriers that interfere with the communication process. Some of the barriers to intercultural communication are ethnocentrism, stereotyping, interpretation of time, personal space requirements, body language, translation limitations, and lack of language training (Lehman & DuFrene, 2008). Culture affects behavior, morale, productivity at work, and includes values and patterns that influence company attitudes and actions (Liu & Lee, 2008).

The increased impact of the global marketplace has prompted many organizations to move from a multinational strategy to a global one. This change in strategy requires that organizations have a plan for understanding and improving global intercultural communications (Harvey & Griffith, 2002). Business educators must equip their students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in these organizations. Strategies for teaching students the most effective methods of intercultural communication coincidentally should include instruction about the barriers to communication created by cultural differences. "Cultural differences can create [the] potential to make intercultural

communication very difficult, and sometimes impossible" (Chitakornkijsil, 2010, p. 7). Culture strongly affects people's values, beliefs, world views, nonverbal behavior, language, and relationships with others; these elements may become barriers to communication.

A variety of strategies for enhancing intercultural communication have been suggested in the research literature. Goby (2007) contends that we "devise as many ways as possible to introduce authentic multicultural components into our courses so that students can experience navigating the passages of international communication" (p. 435). Connecting business students internationally via e-mail, implementing study-abroad programs, and even creating better cross-campus communication via interaction within a multicultural group of students are all strategies for improving intercultural communication (Bennett & Salonen, 2007; Goby, 2007). Interaction among students of different cultures within the traditional and virtual classrooms can provide for rich experiences that demonstrate both their differences and similarities. These experiences give students the ability to break down the cultural barriers to communication that can hamper success. A study by Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007) discussed four educational programs and activities developed to foster interaction between local and international students in Australia. One program—an exchange program developed for an undergraduate advanced level Spanish language course—allowed students to interact with members of the target culture to enhance their cultural awareness. The program "enabled them to lessen their stereotypical views of others and develop tolerance towards other cultural practices," (p. 423) and it "gave them a deeper interest in getting to know members of the Spanish speaking communities" (p. 423) In addition, "students were positively surprised to discover the many similarities that exist in terms of life experiences and cultural values between Australian and some Hispanic societies" (Eisenchlas & Treaskes, 2007, p. 423). In view of current research, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H5: Instruction on cultural differences reduces communication barriers among students in subsequent courses.

Research Methods

Two courses offered by the College of Business and required of all Bachelor of Business Administration majors were used in this research study. The Business Cornerstone course, which is a pre-requisite or co-requisite for all other College of Business courses and is required for all students entering the College of Business as juniors, introduced students to communication barriers in the context of challenging situations faced in workplace. The Business Strategy course, which is the capstone course for the College of Business and is required of all seniors in their final semester before graduation, served as the medium for gathering the sample.

The survey method was chosen as the best way to measure student perceptions of the use and benefit of instruction they had received in the Business Cornerstone course regarding the removal of barriers to communicating in four challenging situations: within teams, about ethical issues, in the diverse workplace, and in a global business context. The questionnaire contained two statements in each area for a total of eight statements. Students were asked to indicate the strength of their agreement/disagreement with each statement.

The sample included all students enrolled in Business Strategy, the capstone class for the College of Business. This course was chosen since only seniors nearing graduation are permitted to enroll.

Administering the survey to this group ensured that students would have had the maximum opportunity to use and/or benefit from the instruction given in the Business Cornerstone class on improving communication in these settings. According to Holter and Kopka (2001), a period of time must elapse and additional courses must be completed before students recognize the value of the course. The questionnaire was administered during the Spring, Summer, and Fall semesters. Of the 863 students enrolled in the Business Strategy course, 481 students completed the questionnaire for a return rate of 55.7%. Of those participating in the survey, 54% were women, 68% were 23-30 years old and 33% were Hispanic. Other age and racial groups completing the questionnaire were represented in proportions consistent with the age/racial mix of the university. All possible majors within the college were represented with percentages comparable to the size of the program. For example, accounting and finance are the college's largest programs and represented the largest percentage in the sample. As expected, most (71%) of the students had taken the Business Cornerstone course 2-3 years earlier as a pre-requisite or co-requisite for all other College of Business courses. This would be consistent with continuous full- or part-time enrollment from the beginning of their junior year when the Business Cornerstone course is completed to the end of their senior year when the Business Strategy course is taken. Finally, 91% of the respondents had completed 20 or more semester credit hours since taking the Business Cornerstone course.

The data was summarized using frequencies and means. The mean scores were tested against the neutral position of neither agreeing nor disagreeing using a t-test.

Findings

The frequencies indicated that most respondents perceived that their instruction had helped them in subsequent situations to communicate more effectively. They had used the tools and knowledge regarding team decision-making, ethical analysis, diversity consciousness, and cultural differences. A total of 70% of the respondents reported using team building and team decision-making principles in their upper level classes. Another 65% indicated that they were better able to identify ethical issues in a business problem. The same percentage of respondents perceived that diversity education had improved their interactions with others of diverse backgrounds. Finally, 69% indicated that learning the components of culture provided the basis for discussing the role of culture in a business setting. A complete list of the frequency results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage of Agreement on Removal of Communication Barriers

Statement	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree
Communication within Teams			
In my upper level classes, I have used some of the team building and/or team decision-making concepts covered in the Business Cornerstone class. (H1)	70% (335)	16% (78)	14% (66)
Instruction regarding the pitfalls of team decision making helped teams in my upper level business courses make better decisions. (H2)	57% (269)	28% (132)	15% (69)
Communication about Ethical Issues (H3)			
What I learned in the Business Cornerstone class about business ethics has made me better at recognizing ethical issues in business problems.	65% (311)	22% (105)	12% (59)
Use of the ethical process for decision making has facilitated successful completion of team projects in my upper level business classes.	57% (269)	28% (131)	15% (72)
Communication in a Diverse Workplace (H4)			
Workplace diversity discussion provided a foundation of knowledge that was helpful in the completion of situational analyses and cases in my upper level business classes	60% (288)	27% (128)	13% (61)
Examining the perspective of diversity as an advantage in workplace, school, and social situations has improved my interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.	65% (309)	25% (117)	10% (49)
Communication in the Global Marketplace (H5)			
Understanding globalization and its impact in various areas of business decision making has been valuable in the completion of assignments in my upper level business classes.	61% (287)	29% (136)	11% (49)
Knowledge of the components of culture has provided a foundation for future discussions about the significance of culture in business.	69% (326)	21% (98)	10% (49)

All five hypotheses were tested using a 2-tailed t-test of the mean score on each question at an alpha of .05. All of the responses were statistically lower than the neutral position of 3 indicating a positive perception that the education in the class had reduced communication barriers. Specifically, a statistically significant majority of respondents agreed that instruction on the team building and/or team decision-making concepts (H1) and the pitfalls of team decision making (H2) was used in team communications. Instruction on how to recognize ethical issues and on a process for addressing ethical issues in a problem helped the respondents to communicate more effectively in a problem-solving situation (H3). Learning how diversity in individual backgrounds influences how people interpret and

give meaning to language was considered helpful in working with business problems and social situations (H4). Finally, the respondents' mean scores indicated that understanding the globalization of business and the role of culture in business customs and practices had provided a needed foundation in future discussions (H5). Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations for the test of these hypotheses.

Table 2			
Means and Standard Deviation for Statements Regarding Removal of Communication Barriers			
Statement	**Mean**	**Std Dev**	**2-tailed T test (Significance)**
Communication within Teams			
In my upper level classes, I have used some of the team building and/or team decision-making concepts covered in the Business Cornerstone class. (H1)	2.28	1.062	Y
Instruction regarding the pitfalls of team decision making helped teams in my upper level business courses make better decisions. (H2)	2.50	.994	Y
Communication about Ethical Issues (H3)			
What I learned in the Business Cornerstone class about business ethics has made me better at recognizing ethical issues I business problems.	2.31	.987	Y
Use of the ethical process for decision making has facilitated successful completion of team projects in my upper level business classes.	2.48	.997	Y
Communication in a Diverse Workplace (H4)			
Workplace diversity discussion provided a foundation of knowledge that was helpful in the completion of situational analyses and cases in my upper level business classes	2.39	.980	Y
Examining the perspective of diversity as an advantage in workplace, school, and social situations has improved my interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.	2.29	.970	Y
Communication in the Global Marketplace (H5)			
Understanding globalization and its impact in various areas of business decision making has been valuable in the completion of assignments in my upper level business classes.	2.34	.986	Y
Knowledge of the components of culture has provided a foundation for future discussions about the significance of culture in business.	2.27	.944	Y

Discussion and Conclusions

Removing barriers to effective communication is important in building business relationships. The instruction provided in the Business Cornerstone course introduced students to concepts and principles that they could use in subsequent courses. As the data indicates, even a limited introduction in a course that covers many other topics can have a lasting impact. Each potential obstacle to communication is discussed below.

Students working on a team project can be mired in a frustrating spiral of misunderstanding or an equally disappointing world of polite agreement. In each case, students perceive that they are not moving forward toward an informed decision. Although disparate preparation may pose problems for the team, there is also the potential for inertia caused by students simply not knowing a process by which to discuss a scenario or the problems that are inherent in group discussions. Explicit instruction on team decision-making provides students the framework by which they can begin and advance the discussion of business problems and move toward a resolution. The instruction on decision-making removes a barrier to effective communication by providing a process by which to organize and proceed. It answers the question "where do we begin." Similarly, instruction on the known pitfalls inherent in group discussions creates awareness. Awareness of known pitfalls in group decision-making allows self-diagnosis of interactions and the resulting opportunity to address the symptoms when they arise. Through awareness, self-diagnosis and treatment, the team can remove the barrier and move the discussion forward toward a decision. The survey results indicate that the decision-making process that was taught in the course was easy to remember and use. A total of 70% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that that they had used some elements of the process. The responses also show that the pitfalls of team decision-making are both more difficult to identify and resolve. Only 57% of respondents indicated that they had been able to use what they had learned about pitfalls. This suggests an area for enhancement in the course with more opportunity for students to identify pitfalls and ways to avoid or address them.

Not knowing how to approach a discussion of whether an action or decision is ethical is a barrier to effective communication. Reluctance to share one's values or challenge another's values can cause people to avoid communication on a situation. The first barrier to be removed is failure to look for ethical issues in making a business decision. Explicit instruction on business ethics makes students comfortable with raising ethical issues. It removes the question of whether the issue is one of personal or individual values. Since personal or individual values may vary, the student may be reluctant to raise the question. However, if the student knows that there are codes of ethical conduct agreed upon in business, then they are comfortable raising the question. A total of 65% of the respondents agreed that the instruction on business ethics had made it easier to recognize ethical issues. Removing the barrier of whether this is an ethical issue from a personal or business perspective, allows the discussion to begin. However, as with communication in teams, the discussion of ethical issues can be difficult since the discussion can naturally evolve into personal values. Knowledge of a framework for the ethical discussion can reduce the probability that the discussion will be mired in a stalemate of my values versus your values. A stalemate can lead to withdrawal from communication or an emotionally-charged argument. In either scenario, the discussion cannot move forward. The framework provides students with the opportunity to use a neutral standard to bring the discussion back to a pathway that could lead to careful and thoughtful analysis of the ethical issues. However, as the survey results showed, knowledge of the ethical process can be difficult to apply. Additional exercises may be necessary to re-enforce the effective use of the ethical process for decision making.

The last two barriers to effective communication share commonalities and will be discussed together. Diversity and cultural differences require us to understand that the words, expressions, and body language we use may not be interpreted as we intend. Knowledge that communication is heavily influenced by age, gender, culture, and ethnicity alerts the student to potential problems in understanding and being understood. Many college students first encounter diversity and cultural differences in the college classroom. Since high schools tend to be neighborhood based, there tends to be more homogeneity in backgrounds. However, at college, students begin working with people of different ages, from different countries and different ethnicities. In studying diversity and cultural differences, students often remark that they simply had not thought about how these differences influenced speech and body language. Although the instruction provided was of an introductory nature, the student was able to use diversity and cultural differences as an advantage rather than a disadvantage in subsequent assignments. At least 60% of students agreed that their instruction had changed a potential barrier into an enhancement. They were able to use their knowledge of diversity and cultural differences to improve their interactions with other students.

It is important to remember that the successes reported in this study in removing barriers to effective communication were not the result of a communication course. To some extent these communication results were a byproduct of learning specific content. The course was designed to prepare students for the business curriculum. Business ethics, working in teams, diversity in the workplace and the global marketplace were core concepts the university wanted all students to learn as they began their study of business. These were considered fundamental to learning discipline-based knowledge, such as management or accounting. The good news is that by addressing these topics early in the business curriculum, the students perceived that they were more effective communicators in their subsequent business courses.

There are limitations to this study to be noted. First, the survey questions posed to students did not specifically target communications. Although it is reasonable to infer that communication would be part of the inquiry, there could also be other aspects influencing student response. For example, the respondents were asked whether "the ethical process for decision making has facilitated successful completion of team projects." Certainly communication would be part of that process, but there could also be a knowledge component that contributed to the successful completion of the project. Secondly, the survey method only inquired into student perceptions or opinions about the change. There is no direct measure of whether the change occurred. Finally, there was no attempt to determine the degree to which communication improved. The anchors for the options were degree of agreement with the statement rather than the degree of improvement. These limitations suggest opportunities for additional research in evaluating the actual change in communication skills that resulted from the course of study.

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