A Communication Audit Assignment to Enhance Virtual Teaming and Individual Communication Skills

Abstract:

Students close the gap between actual communication behaviors and inflated self-perception of communication behaviors during virtual meetings using a communication audit assignment. A remote team meeting is recorded. Students then pair to audit (using a provided form) an assigned section of the meeting. The independent audit sections are tallied into one comprehensive audit for the team meeting. Students are often surprised when they see the combined audit results and are confronted with the actual communication dynamics of their team.

3 keywords: virtual-meetings, communication, assignment

Introduction:

Student success academically and professionally depends on communication and teaming skills. Students may recognize appropriate and effective team communication but be unaware of their own communication tendencies. A communication audit helps students recognize individual and team communication realities allowing for growth of teams and individual communicators. The exercise has been used in an upperclassmen, undergraduate (third year) cohort but would be equally relevant and impactful for graduate students or underclassmen. The assignment works well in a virtual environment and could be adapted for traditional classrooms.

Theoretical Foundation:

Virtual meetings are a professional reality for our students. Neil Patel (2014) wrote that, "The remote work sector has grown by 79% over the past ten years, and it's still on the rise. Millions of workers are now 100% remote, completely sidestepping the traditional commute, the claustrophobic cubicle, and the 'cake in the breakroom' phenomenon."   It's an undeniable fact that our students WILL work virtually with teammates, clients, and customers at least some of the time. Even their employment interviews are likely to be conducted virtually.   Susie Clarke, career advisor and former director of Kelley Undergraduate Career Services at Indiana University, recently shared that more and more students are being asked to interview by Skype or some virtual platform and employers use a candidate's virtual savvy (or lack thereof) as part of their evaluation criteria. For example, the interviewer may think a candidate isn't taking the position seriously if (s)he fails to find a quiet, uninterrupted place to be during the videoconference or telephone interview. While companies are increasingly using remote or even AI interview for recruitment, interviewees would prefer an in-person interview (*NASDAQ OMX's News Release Distribution Channel, 2019*). Business educators owe it to our students to prepare them to communicate professionally in virtual contexts because, despite their technological savvy, they are not engaging in professional communication behaviors during virtual meetings.

Students often neglect basic professional communication skills in virtual settings. In a review of over 200 recorded student meetings, a violation of common professional communicative behavior ("phubbing"—or ignoring those in the meeting in favor of cell phone, multi-tasking to the point of distracting other meeting participants, participating from loud locations, not engaging in appropriate turn-taking, joining the video-conference from one's bed,

etc.) occurs in over 50% of the meetings. Despite these rather egregious behaviors, students seem unaware that they lack professionalism or that their behaviors have a negative impact on others.

Self-evaluation of communication behaviors is often inflated. Indeed, people find it challenging to judge their own competence at almost anything. We often overestimate our own abilities because of a lack of candid feedback and because when we're incompetent, we're not in a position to recognize our own incompetence (Carter and Dunning, 2008). Bolivar-Cruze et al (2015) studied self-assessment of oral communication skills, specifically, and the findings coincide with Carter and Dunning's assertions. Self-assessments were higher than teacher or peer-evaluations. Likewise, self-assessments of leader performance (including communication skills) are more favorable than were assessments by team members (Kolb, 1995)

Students may be able to identify (when shown) exemplary communication behaviors; however, they do not necessarily engage in those behaviors unprompted even though they believe they do. A gap exists between perceived and actual communication behaviors. Nonverbal listening cues (nodding, eye contact, staying focused) are lacking in student online team meetings. Students are surprised by their participation (or lack thereof) during team meetings when faced with an objective assessment of those behaviors. For example, a student who claimed to be optimistic and encouraging found that his comments were more often cynical or pessimistic. A students who thought herself fully engaged was shocked by how few times she actually spoke during meetings.

As educators, we can use self-evaluations, like the communication audit, to provide a mirror into which students may see themselves more clearly. Introducing a means for students to accurately and objectively assess their own meeting dynamics and communication behavior is a way to increase self-awareness. Boud (1989) suggests that one of the responsibilities of educators is

to teach students to operate as professionals including the capacity to give and receive feedback and assess their own work and that of others. Teaching methods which incorporate the student into her own assessment develops these valuable job-market skills. Students will benefit from self-assessment opportunities even before they go on the job market, though. Student self-assessment increases students' involvement in their learning, their perception of learning, and their confidence, in some skills (Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans, 1999; Falchikov, N., 2005).

Learning Objectives:

After completing the communication audit students can:

1. Self-monitor their nonverbal and verbal communication behaviors
2. Identify strengths and opportunities for their team to enhance social and task performance

Exercise Overview:

Teams of 4-6 students participate in a virtual meeting (using Zoom or other video-conferencing software with the functionality to record the proceedings.)   The agenda of the meeting should require participation of all students for optimal outcome (a team quiz, for example.) The meeting should last approximately 45-60 minutes. Following the meeting, student pairs "audit" an assigned section of the meeting using a provided communication audit form. The independent audit sections are tallied into one comprehensive audit for the team meeting. Teams then discuss the combined audit results. Teams may recognize that they lacked sufficient attempts to challenge other's ideas or words of encouragement. They might see a need for a gatekeeper if a few people dominate the conversation. Finally, students individually conduct a

non-verbal audit in which they scan the meeting and critique their own body language, facial expressions, and vocalics.

Session Description:

10 minutes: explain the assignment and student reflections on the assignment

10 minutes: participants watch footage of a meeting and complete an audit using the form developed for a leadership course

10 minutes: discuss possible uses in participants' curriculum, brainstorm adaptations of the audit form, create reflection questions, and consider ways to assure change of behavior following the audit

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