

# Developing Supervisors as Skilled Communicators: The Role of HR

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## Developing Supervisors as Skilled Communicators: The Role of HR

### ABSTRACT

Effective communication is a major factor enabling supervisors to act as a conduit in promoting HR policies to their subordinates. In particular, given managers are now expected to take a major role in developing subordinate commitment, communication skills have become an important part of the process. This paper reports data from a small sample of HR managers as to what actions they take to develop communication skills in their managerial staff. Findings suggest that HR practitioners regard communication skills as subsumed under a generic idea of leadership. They focus on these skills at two main times- at managerial hiring when communication ability appears synonymous with verbal fluency and confidence, and during leadership development training when communication skill is incorporated into the general rubric of interpersonal behaviour. None report any specific focus on communications skill levels, nor any attempt to formally or quantitatively measure their presence in their managers.

**Keywords:** *Communication skills, commitment, HR managers*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Developing committed employees has gained importance for managers in the last few years as committed employees are seen to exert extra effort that can translate into positive organisational outcomes such as reduced turnover, improved performance and work involvement (Parker, Baltes et al. 2003; Cohen and Hudecek 1993; Suliman and Iles 2000; Brett and Stroh 1997). The most frequent mechanisms to generate commitment are through HRM practices that communicate (McElroy 2001) and provide development opportunities (Burke and McKeen 1995) In most cases these are communicated and personalized via managers to their staff.

Yet the relationship between HR practices and their impact on stimulating commitment is not straightforward for two types of reasons. The first reason results from different HR practices contributing to the development of different types of commitment. For example, offering HRM practices such as performance appraisal and the provision of training and development opportunities (Baruch 1999; Meyer and Smith 2001; Oakland and Oakland 2001; Pettijohn, Pettijohn et al. 2001) can assist in employees' career development can have a positive influence on employee's affective commitment. However there is little conclusive information about their effects on other types of commitment. The second reason derives from the implementation process itself. The part played by managers in personalizing this type of information has not been investigated and it is this behaviour that forms the basis of this paper.

### ***Background***

That HR practices can impact on employee commitment is now well established in literature (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001; Meyer and Smith 2001). Furthermore there is a growing body of evidence that indicates it is how these practices are perceived that is the critical dimension in the development of commitment (Meyer and Allen 2000; Meyer and Smith 2001; Meyer, Stanley et al. 2002). One recent

review, for example, illustrated that organisational commitment was a consequence of positive perceptions of HRM practices that emphasised fair transactions (Lease 1998). However, this is not the only mechanism and other research considering the effectiveness of communication between management and employees and its impact on commitment (Brunetto and Farr-Wharton 2004) suggests that it is the way these HRM practices are communicated that is a key concern.

The potentially pivotal role of managers leads to questions about the extent to which HR staff emphasise communication skills in the selection of managers, or, whether and if so how, they provide training for managers to be competent in this type of communication. Such concerns have led to a twofold aim for this paper. The first aim is to investigate the extent to which HR practitioners require and measure communication skills in their selection of new managerial staff. This will help ascertain to what extent organisations deliberately select managers against criteria that emphasise their potential role in generating positive employee perceptions and commitment (affective-attachment and normative-obligation as opposed to continuance-low alternatives and high sacrifice to leave). The second aim is to gather information on the way HR staff prepare managers to undertake the task of stimulating and improving staff commitment through offering them training to undertake a pivotal role in the career development of their subordinates

### ***Role of The Manager In Developing Employee Commitment***

Managers typically give feedback on performance, execute performance appraisals, provide information, and offer development opportunities that facilitate subordinate career development. These actions in turn facilitate developing subordinate organisational commitment as literature has illustrated that it may be the way these practices are perceived that influences levels of commitment (Tansky and Cohen 2001; Meyer and Herscovitch 2001). In essence, perception is dependent on how information is categorised and interpreted (McShane and Travaglione 2003) so the way feedback or any other HR practice is carried out becomes crucial. For example, Francis-Smythe and Smith (1997) and Beck and Wilson (1997) concluded

that it was the quality of the feedback employees received that had a positive relationship to their level of attachment or affective commitment to the organisation.

When organisational practices are communicated as being supportive, the result has been the development of affective commitment. Developmental opportunities have influenced employee affective commitment when they have been perceived to be supportive (Tansky and Cohen 2001; Meyer and Herscovitch 2001; Wayne, Shore et al. 1997). Organisational procedures that are perceived to be just and fair have also contributed to organisational commitment, as illustrated by Schappe (1996) who investigated employees in a Mid-Atlantic Insurance company, and found that the fairness of organisational procedures influenced their level of affective commitment.

However linking organisational practices with the development of normative commitment (responsibility to repay a debt) has not been the focus of much prior research. In general, earlier investigations have assumed that normative and affective commitment are closely allied. Literature on continuance commitment on the other hand, has shown that perceived practices may have a negative effect (high sacrifice to leave, availability of alternatives). For example, Allen and Meyer (1990) illustrated that supportive practices such as management receptiveness and feedback were negatively correlated to continuance commitment, while Eisenberger, Fasolo et al. (1990) and Smith (1995) demonstrated that perceived support was also linked to calculative factors and continuance commitment respectively.

The greater part of the literature has investigated individual's interpretations of organisational practice through their perceptions and in turn how this influences employee commitment but more recently there is a small amount of research that has considered commitment resulting from effective communication. For example, Brunetto and Farr-Wharton (2004) noted that satisfaction with effectiveness of communication processes between management and superiors influenced affective commitment for both public and private sector administrators as well as influencing continuance commitment for public sector administrators.

Further, studies that have investigated communication and commitment have linked two behaviours to commitment, individual voice (freely speaking of ones concerns) and argumentativeness (ability to argue the issues governing those concerns) (Gorden and Infante 1991; Infante and Gorden 1991). The major thrust is to stimulate open communication. Stevens and Campion (1994) found from a review of the literature and the HRM practices needed in the team oriented environments of today included an open communication style, listening skills that did not judge but probed, reflected and deflected, that reinforced verbal messages. In effect it is the nature of the superior-subordinate relationships that influences employee attitudes and commitment (Dubinsky and Yammarino 1992).

### ***The Role of HR in Selecting And Assisting Managers To Develop Communication***

#### ***Skills***

Managers play a key function in daily implementing HRM activities and their role has become important in ensuring that HRM strategies and policies are able to be implemented successfully (Hope-Hailey, Gratton et al. 2002). Yet although communication is a desired management competence for effectiveness, it has not been considered as a major dimension (Gerstein and Reisman 1983), has rarely been made explicit and is often used at an intuitive level. Nor has the extent to which managerial communication skills form any key role in their selection received much research attention. Dulewicz's (1994) study was the exception when he studied 100 managers in the UK and found that communication played a major part in managers' performance. Interpersonal factors such as oral communication (oral expression and presentation), interpersonal sensitivity (perceptive listening, sensitivity), and management (developing, motivating, leadership) were the three out of twelve 'supra-competencies' (p24).

Yet successful communication has become more critical as manager's roles move from controlling to facilitating, (Storey 2001). Moreover, training for this switch in emphasis has been overlooked by many organizations as established by the Europe wide investigation by Brewster and Larsen (2000). Their findings indicate that senior management saw little reason to train line managers because they

believed that these managers either had sufficient knowledge of the HRM role or would learn their role on the job through practical supervisory activities.

While traditional HRM practices have concentrated on improving HR functions such as performance appraisal, selection and recruitment, training, development etc, the focus of the emerging HR practice is more toward improving the flow of communication and is exemplified in such HR activities as programs to achieve empowerment, employee development and procedural justice (Ulrich 1998). Managers are involved in assisting to minimize distortion, through supplementary input in the form of face-to-face communication (Daft, Lengel et al. 1987).

Managers are being urged to adopt a relaxed affirming style with attentiveness and friendliness but concurrently blended with low levels of verbal aggression and high levels of argumentation (Infante, Anderson et al. 1993), in contrast to a former dominant leadership style exemplified by high levels of verbal aggression, motivated by control (Javidi, Jordan et al. 1994). Present day leadership practice implies a people-centred approach where open communication and the frank expression of opinions whether about work processes or about the superior's leadership style is encouraged (Mullins 2001). A changed managerial role has emerged whereby managers have now become conduits of HR messages to promote HR philosophies through acting as the information channel through which practices aimed at stimulated subordinate commitment are transmitted and personalized. This paper strives to assess the degree to which this change is reflected in HR managerial selection and development practices.

The aim of the paper is to:

- a) ascertain to what extent organisations deliberately use communication skills as a key criterion in their selection of managers. By so doing they are emphasising the key role of managerial communication in generating positive employee perceptions and commitment (affective-attachment and normative-obligation as opposed to continuance-low alternatives and high sacrifice to leave).

- b) gather information on the way HR managers prepare managers to undertake the task of stimulating and improving staff commitment in terms of training them to undertake career development

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper presents, empirical findings from 32 qualitative interviews, conducted with senior HR managers in large to medium sized organizations in Southern Australia. Thirty two HR managers in public and private organisations of 100 or more employees were interviewed concerning how they prepare managerial staff to deliver HR practices. One to one and a half hour semi-structured interviews were conducted and interview data were analysed using template analysis (Crabtree and Miller 1999) which facilitates the understanding of the process of engendering positive perceptions and commitment. The interviews consisted of in-depth discussions to promote exchange of information and elaboration by the respondent on the prime areas of this investigation (Cooper and Schindler 1998). Two main themes were addressed:

- a) the criteria HR managers use to select and recruit new managerial staff and the areas that they strive to develop during training to prepare managers to encourage subordinate commitment;
- b) the way HR managers expect supervisors to manage career development so as to stimulate and improve staff commitment .

Questions focused on the organisations' criteria for selection, recruitment and training to clarify how these behaviours were presently evaluated Questions considered the communication abilities/traits that HR managers look for in selecting and recruiting new managers, and the training provided by HR staff to improve communication skills. Whether this is compulsory? When it is offered? Whether subsequently audited? These questions highlight the extent to which current practices emphasise these abilities.

Response categories were determined from the interview responses for each of the interview questions. Categories used both manifest content (elements that are physically present and are

countable) and latent content (meaning conveyed by the message) (Berg 1995). Internal reliability was achieved in the manner suggested by Drew, Hardman et al. (1996). The interviews were recorded with interviewee permission and coding of the interview question responses was checked for accuracy and congruence of perceptions using two researchers.

**RESULTS**

**Selection criteria**

When selecting new managers in supervisory roles HR staff reported they focused on influencing and leadership skills (see Table 1). When asked to what extent they specifically considered communication skills, responses indicated interpersonal and verbal skills played a major role in communication with written and listening skills playing a secondary role. Table 1 presents an analysis of their comments, with categories ranked according to the occurrence of the response.

Table 1: Communication criteria and measure

Question	Category	Percentage - ranked
<b>The criteria that organizations use to select</b>		
Skills – abilities and traits	Influencing	35
	Leadership	35
	Coaching	12
	Problem solving	12
	Resilience	12
Skills - Communication	Interpersonal	63
	Verbal	63
	Written	47
	Listening	32
Measure communication	Yes – performance and informally	50

Two elements that were crucial for managerial selection were leadership and influencing skills. Both these skills were considered essential due to the rate of change permeating most organizations. Managers in this environment were needed to “lead change, lead cultural shifts, and the commitment to values, that they’re consistent with where the organisation’s trying to go” and influence change by “presenting persuasive points of view” internally or externally when “dealing with other bodies”. However, it was generally assumed that “good leaders” were seen to be “good communicators.”

Communication skills were predominantly assessed as part of verbal fluency and confidence in interpersonal behaviours. It was evident “the ability to engage people” to get things done in organisations meant that interpersonal skills were essential. In other words, “if someone is not engaging, if somebody’s not making eye contact, if somebody’s not tailoring their voice to the audience, if somebody’s not speaking with confirmation or speaking clarification” no offer to employ was tendered.

Though written and listening skills were rated highly they were seen as less valuable than verbal skills. In most organizations written skills were an expectation because of the nature of management and the formal reporting mechanisms it requires so that managers are “able to write reports, particularly to funding bodies, to be able to complete contracts, to be able to write monthly reports, etc.” Listening, in turn gained importance for the benefits of improving processes and problem areas within operations. HR managers encouraged “managers and supervisors to not intimidate employees or subordinates, but to listen to their issues and their solutions, even though they might be totally inappropriate”.

Yet as important as communication skills were perceived to be, only 50% of the HR managers assessed communication skills in any form. Measurement of these skills was predominantly indirect and informal as measuring communication skills was considered to be very difficult. In general, assessing communication skills at the selection process was “intuitively through the questioning you put to them and the responses you get”. Otherwise, for internal applicants, a form of assessment centre exercise at or, “getting feedback from staff” at the time for performance appraisals was the preferred method. Fifty percent of HR managers either had no means of measuring communication skills or were in the process of developing performance management processes that would consider communication skills as a part of that manager’s leadership behaviour.

### ***Training Managers To Develop Subordinate Commitment***

In most cases, some form of leadership and management training was offered to managerial staff (established for 67% of the cases, see Table 2) with activities designed to include the competency of

communication. However, the focus of the developmental training was leadership and management with communication being only one variable amongst “a wide spectrum of things”. Where there was no provision for specific communication training (33% of the cases), it was either due to “not currently within (the business) scope”, “the budget’s just been approved for this financial year as a management development program across the department” or due to the expectation that a good selection process would bring a person with “a high level of communication skills with them”

Table 2: Areas developed when training managers

Question	Category	Percentage - ranked
<b>The areas that organizations develop in training managers</b>		
Training for managers	Leadership	50
	None or inconsistent	33
	Management	17
	Communication training	73
Audit effectiveness of communication training	Yes	73
	Feedback for development	70% of audited cases
	informal	10% of audited cases

Seventy three percent of HR staff maintained they provided communication training for those in managerial roles, but this training was synonymous with leadership and management training. These organizations audited the effectiveness of communication training indirectly, mostly through surveys, performance reviews and changes to the individual’s behaviour. Surveys were used to gauge subordinate satisfaction, opinion, morale and organizational climate and used to alert the organisation to “hot spots where communication for example (wa)sn’t going too well”. Performance reviews illustrated changes in behaviour through 360degree feedback. As one HR manager commented:

“I guess, we look at the outcomes and see whether or not there has been any change in skills or behaviors or the way that the individual manager manages their staff.”

Or in other cases where the review after a training program assessed behaviour such as:

“about 3 months after the program we will work with a sample group to understand have they changed their behaviors as a result of going on the program, what have their managers observed”

Otherwise, the organization was “not specifically keeping track of it at the moment” or the audit was about to be put in place but “that wasn’t in place yet”. Auditing communication training was not always considered to be a priority in comparison to the business as one HR manager remarked:

“No, the only audit would be how successful we’ve been in the business, .... I s’pose, I speak to everyone, I’m always around the side talking to everyone and hearing problems and that’s what I’ll hammer people over, that attitude and communication.”

***The Impact Of Communication Training On Managerial Ability To Develop Commitment***

Though imprecise and irregular nonetheless a small number of HR staff do attempt to evaluate the impact of communication training either through its effect on subordinate perceptions, its ability to improve subordinate commitment or through its impact on career development practices for subordinates.

**Shaping subordinate perceptions**

Most HR staff evaluated subordinate perceptions as very important, one of the reasons being the changing needs of the generation X and Y as HR staff considered that “one of the key retention strategies for us is addressing a lot of those issues around you know communication, the staff member having regular communication with their manager. Having the opportunity to sit down and talk about their career, having the opportunity to pursue training and development activities.” These data are reported in table 3 below.

Table 3: Shaping employee perceptions and commitment

Question	Category	Percentage of cases - ranked
<b>Shaping employee perceptions and commitment for the organizations that provided communication training</b>		
Perceptions	No evidence	44%
	Surveys	31%
	informal comments	16%

Commitment	Yes	69
	No	30

However, changes to employee perceptions as a result of communication training were not evident in 44% of the cases (Table 3) as the general comment was:

‘We haven’t, we don’t have a system as such to say’

Alternately, changes were gauged rather than measured through surveys (31% as outlined in table 3) that considered manager’s leadership and informal employee comments (16% as outlined in table 3). There was “a growing satisfaction on leadership competencies, particularly in the areas of communication” which was considered to illustrate positive employee perceptions as “the larger gaps of communication skills of managers are larger indications of dissatisfaction of those sorts of elements of communication”. Some organizations followed the surveys with focus groups “who provided feedback ... to tell us what they thought underneath this rating might be” but this was rare.

Informal employee comments about their supervisors also alerted the change in employee perceptions. It was the change that employees saw that influenced the way these supervisors were now perceived. For example, a general comment that encapsulates the informality of gauging employee perceptions was:

“he runs regular team meetings and is more negotiable now and he now runs, sometimes its simple things like that, or that they now listen more to their people and they’re much more effective at delegating the problem and the solution and so forth. I mean there’s little things like that that people have told me, and people tell their managers who are telling me, you know, that it’s really working.”

### **Shaping subordinate commitment**

Evidence that communication training for supervisors changed subordinate’s desire to stay was evident in 69% of cases (see Table 3). Those HR staff who could not provide evidence were in the

minority. Those who did provide examples of employee commitment commented that supervisors' training had an impact on whether or not a person decided to stay or go,

“it's about how they're (employees) treated, about whether we're open and honest ...it's about fairness and open handedness.”

but generally added that training managers in communication was only one part of a complex picture.

“it's more than the way things are communicated. It is a mixture of issues such as the provision of information and career development and training that generation X wants”

In most cases there was a feeling of an exchange taking place. HR staff spoke of employees' commitment as an emotional exchange rather than a repayment of debt. A general comment about managers' communication training resulted in subordinates feeling:

“that the organization is prepared to invest in them, time and money, then they are prepared to invest their emotional self into the organization. Because it's an emotional contract and it's not just a contract of employment, it's an emotional contract that says 'they're doing right by me; I'll do right by them'. Now it's not a conscious thing, but it is what people see and feel and want to participate in”

### **Shaping career development**

In most cases career development was part of the performance appraisal system or was being changed to accommodate subordinate “development plans” to be in line with organizational objectives. The important factors that were noted in the way career development was carried out related to the quality of the two way interaction. Again communication was considered as a two way process “spending time with an individual, that is what they want, undivided attention, somebody to talk to them, listen to them, show an interest in them”. The way this time was spent was of the utmost importance and managers voiced the importance of a caring culture that says “you're important, you've gotta be involved” and “recognising that people are individuals and their development and career development

needs to be tailored to their progression”. This culture incorporated honesty, openness, and being genuine.

Table 7: Career development

Question	Category	Percentage - ranked
<b>How HR managers expect managers to enact career development</b>		
Career development	Managers to facilitate career development	93
Important way to carry out Career development	Two way quality communication	41
	Positive culture	34
Commitment result	Want to stay	47
	No evidence	22

Commitment as a result of the way career development was carried out was positive and employees wanted to remain with the firm. The positive culture was a good indication of feeling supported through the caring environment so, the general feeling was that “in terms of their career development and there are opportunities for them, then yes, certainly, it does develop attachment”. Another important factor for employees wanting to remain with the organisation related to having “a future not just in (their) current role, but beyond (their) role in the organization”. In other words it was a combination of opportunities and the way these were presented that kept individuals in the organization. One HR senior staff comments sum it up “I’ve had great opportunities here, great development and ... There would be other people that say, look I’ve had great development but there’s no opportunities here for me so I’m leaving. And there would be the other group of people who say, look I’ve had no development, waste of time staying here”.

## **DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION**

The first aim of this paper was to find the extent to which HR practitioners require and measure communication skills in their selection of new managerial staff and in their training programs to assist managers generate positive subordinate perceptions and commitment. The results of this study strongly suggest that though communication skills played an important role in managers’ selection, these were not

accurately measured. Interpersonal and verbal skills were assessed by personal judgment based on the impression given out by candidates. Written and listening skills were assessed through the application itself and during the interview. Measuring communication skills was considered very difficult and mostly undertaken informally via individual judgments. Such measures are notoriously unreliable as has been established in literature for a number of decades (Patrickson and Haydon 1988). There is no real evidence of interview judgments as either valid or reliable measure so the claim that they measure communication may be little more than wishful thinking rhetoric.

The second aim of this paper was to find the extent to which HR managers offer supervisors communication training that will prepare them to improve staff commitment through the ways in which they promote subordinate development practices. Findings indicate the majority of HR staff provide no specific training on communication skills when they prepare managers for this role. Normal practice is for any communication training that is undertaken to be incorporated into a more general approach to leadership training. There were no specific programs reported that explicitly targeted communication skills.

Nonetheless leadership and communication ability are related, and more so for the interpersonal aspects of behaviour between manager and subordinate. Verbal communication skills are a key ingredient in leadership (Hackman 2003; Topping 2002; Kotter 2003). Sending a message through a chosen media to provoke a response and to create an ongoing dialogue is based on communication theory. Yet measuring individual verbal abilities and examining their impact on commitment remains largely unexplored.

To stimulate effective communication it is important that organizations recognize the key role managers' play. The majority of HR staff in our sample report only a loose interpretation of how this operates in management practice. They show little awareness of the components of successful communication and even less awareness of how to measure these reliably.

Nonetheless, managers who are effective communicators do well (Goleman 1998; Kikoski 1998). Until we can clarify exactly what needs to be evaluated and how to measure for effective communication, it will remain something vague and elusive. Contrary to Brewster and Larsen's (2000) European findings, training for managers was evident in most organizations in the sample. Yet what was being offered remained non specific and was generally only a small part of a more generic approach to leadership and management training. Despite expectations for managers to ably perform two-way communication exchanges and maintain a positive culture there was little targeted training to develop these skills. Rather the preferred HR actions were to try and select managers with the needed leadership skills at the time of hiring.

HR managers reported they were convinced that quality superior-subordinate relationships and a positive culture (Stevens and Campion 1994) helped influence employee attitudes and commitment (Dubinsky and Yammarino 1992). They direct effort to fostering a supportive environment with characteristics of honesty, openness, being genuine. In turn they believed this led to employees remaining with the organisation (Eisenberger, Armeli et al. 2001). However, measuring the effectiveness of how to do this was performed in less than half of the organisations and when it was undertaken it tended to be imprecise, vague and reliant on personal judgment.

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