

Developing Interpersonal Skills For Business Success

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Abstract

This paper describes the Genesis and conceptual background of a new course. The idea sprang from a meeting with the Executive Board of the Business School who suggested that personal conduct in the world of business by new hires is one of the top three requisites for new employees. Later, a focus group of community executives produced the same result. As a result of these inputs, the principal author volunteered to design a course to meet the need described by these senior executives. This paper is a discussion of the prototype course that was developed.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1999, the Executive Board, a group of business executives from the community who advise the school were asked in a meeting what executives want from new graduates from our business school. After a pause, the Council answered almost in unison, "we want people who write well, speak well, and can comport themselves well in the world of business. We will train them to do the rest."

In the spring of 2000, under the aegis of the Dean of the Business School, the principal author facilitated a focus group of local senior executives who were not on the Executive Board, and posed the same question. The question received exactly the same response pattern and answer.

Because the university foundation curriculum includes required courses that deal with writing and speaking skills, we decided to do some additional investigation of what was meant by the executives when they spoke of comportment being one of the most important requisites for a new hire. Since the principal author was present at both critical meetings, he was asked to conduct further research to determine exactly what was meant by comportment.

The principal author is a retired Senior Executive from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) where he was responsible for large numbers of employees. Thirteen of his 32 years with the FAA were in Human Resources. As a result of his experience, he felt he knew what the executives meant. However, he went forward with the study to assure ourselves that we were correct.

II. DESIGN OF THE STUDY

We constructed a survey instrument to validate his theory about that these executives meant by comportment. The survey instrument (appendix 1) listed 16 characteristics the researchers hypothesized constitutes positive comportment in the workplace. These are:

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| 1. Self-direction and initiative | 9. Interpersonal Skill |
| 2. Ability to meet and deal with others | 10. Work Ethic |
| 3. Time Management | 11. Ethical Standards |
| 4. Creativity | 12. Customer Orientation |
| 5. Personal Discipline | 13. Keeping Commitments |
| 6. Self-Efficacy | 14. Dependability |
| 7. Appearance | 15. Positive Mental Attitude |
| 8. Flexibility | 16. Accountability |

On the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate these characteristics on a six-point Likert Scale as being characteristics of business comporment with 1 denoting irrelevant and 6 denoting essential. They were also asked to suggest other relevant factors.

III. SURVEY RESULTS

We sent the questionnaire to 40 senior executives in the community, several of which were members of the Executive Board. We received 19 responses. The item responses on each element ranged from a low of 4.71 (appearance) on the six-point scale to a high of 5.88 (ethical standards). There were no additional elements suggested by those surveyed. Appendix 2 is a summary of the survey results. While the survey was too small to be statistically significant, the inferential results support the elements hypothesized by the researchers.

IV. THE PROTOTYPE COURSE THAT RESULTED FROM THE SURVEY

In response to the survey results, we decided to design a prototype course incorporating the elements on the survey for junior and senior students in preparation for them to enter the world of business. If the prototype is successful, we plan to propose that the course be approved by the faculty as an upper-division requirement for business majors at our university.

The course is entitled, Personal Effectiveness in Business. It is a senior level course in the Management curriculum that was taught in the fall 2001 semester, and the second iteration is being taught now. The course is designed to incorporate all of the elements in the survey.

One of the challenges in designing this course was the selection of text material. We were unable to find a text that covered all of the elements. However, we adopted two texts that cover many of the issues. The first is a human relations text entitled, Your Attitude is Showing, 10th ed., Chapman, Elwood N. and O'Neal, Sharon Lund, Prentice-Hall, 1999. The second text is brand-new and fit some of the interpersonal skills areas. It is entitled Interpersonal Skills in Organizations, de Janasz, Suzanne C., Dowd, Karen O., and Schneider, Beth Z., Prentice Hall, 2002. This book is primarily based on experiential Organizational Behavior principles.

To fill in the gaps unfilled by text material, we used materials from Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, David J. Schwartz's The Magic of Thinking Big, Susan Bixler's The New Professional Image, Dale Carnegie's How to Win

Friends and Influence People, and Charles Garfield's Peak Performers. In addition, we used relevant articles during the course of our studies.

An exciting element of the offering is that 10 senior executives from our state spoke to the class addressing one or more of the topics. Hearing from such executives first-hand was very meaningful for the students.

In addition, we established learning teams for students to facilitate sharing their experiences and impressions. This helped them with understanding the importance of openness and communication with others.

As a part of the course, the students wrote and refined a personal mission statement to put them in touch with their values and a direction for their lives. In addition, they developed a plan to help guide them toward an established career. Lastly, they developed a very professional resume to use in their initial job search.

Of necessity, the course outline was not fixed as to dates. This was to incorporate the flexibility necessary to have high-level executives present to our students. Obviously, while they were scheduled, had to travel or had other very important obligations that forced occasional rescheduling their presentations. However, all but one of them appeared.

The prototype class had 20 students. They were uniformly enthusiastic about the course material. At the conclusion of the course, we carefully evaluated it and weighed its value to the students. Several of the students from the prototype course have contacted us to discuss how valuable the course material was in getting a start on their careers. This feedback has been some of the most rewarding aspects of the course. After all, making a difference in the lives of the young people entrusted to us is our *raison d'etre*.

V. A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE FROM THE PROTOTYPE CLASS

Many students of the Meinders School of Business knew that there was an integral part of their business education that was missing. Stated plainly, the students did not know what to expect or how to prepare for "real business world." As a result, when the students were informed about the new class, they were all very excited about the opportunity to learn more. Therefore, with interests high and an invigorated professor whom had already paved the way, the class was launched.

As the class began, expectations were high, and then remained high. The students wondered how the professor would convey the information that was critical to our future success. How was he going to give us the confidence we needed to be one step ahead of the rest. To most of our surprise, the first step was getting to know ourselves. We learned how important and critical it was that we get in touch with our values, our "center" in life through development of a personal mission statement. It is the consensus of the students that we would have never done this if it had not been called to our attention. As a result, we can now build upon each one of our unique foundations of values. It is now possible to set goals and be able to achieve them knowing why and how. It is now possible to pursue direction and an end knowing where we are going.

After we learned about ourselves, we began to focus on another principle. That principle is the belief in our values and ourselves. We began studying a book called *The Magic of Thinking Big* by David D. Schwartz, Ph.D. Through studying this book we began to learn about self-efficacy. Again, the students did not realize that believing in

one's self was so critical to one's success. Now, there is no doubt in our minds that if we believe we can do something, we can do it if we put our full effort towards achieving it. We know that you cannot solve a problem with a self-defeating attitude.

As a result of the class discussions and group interaction, the students have each drafted a personal mission statement, career plan, and resume. Each one of these has built upon the other. The mission statement gave us insight to our values, principles, and goals. Then, with the guidance of our values and goals, we crafted career plans that aimed directly at our goals. After both of these were completed, we crafted and fine tuned our resumes that would inevitably aid us in initiating our careers correctly.

Furthermore, our professor has provided us direct insight into the business world as well as examples of how these principles and methods are concrete via the use of local senior executives. The students have had the opportunity to interact directly with people who lead everyday in the corporate world. As a result, we have been able to learn what employers look for in new employees. We have also learned how to differentiate ourselves from others that might be competing against us for a job. The executives not only have given us corporate advice, they have also given us personal testimonies as to how they have used the principles we are learning about to achieve their own success in life. For students to be able to see numerous examples of how these principles have actually worked in these successful people's lives leaves an indelible impression upon our lives and ways of thinking. It is also great to know that we are receiving the opportunity to start pursuing these principles much earlier in life than did most of the senior executives.

There is no doubt in the minds of the students that this class will prove to be one of the most valuable classes that they took in their college careers. We know that one can possess all the knowledge and skills available, but unless one possesses self-knowledge, personal direction, and comportsment skills in the world of business, one may not be successful. This class has invoked a paradigm change in the way we, as students, view the business world, our lives, and the outcome of our future.