COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: BUSINESS SAVVY AND THE TECHNICAL WRITER

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There is little debate about the characteristics of successful technical communication: it is clear, precise, and concise; it follows established structures and conventions of language; and it is efficient and effective in transmitting messages from writers to readers. Often it is institutionalized in terms of format and vocabulary. Such writing is directed toward an audience, through a channel, in a code or text, on a topic--all prescribed by organizations. Like format and vocabulary, the purpose of technical writing is clear. Efficient transfer of information, unhindered by excess and unnecessary discourse, is the goal of technical communication. Writers, then, must be aware of the degree to which they and their readers share a world of discourse and information. In addition, however, writers, especially recent graduates and new professional technical writers, must establish the extent to which they and their audiences share styles of interpersonal communication and what the accepted lines and channels of communication are within the corporate culture of the workplace.

When graduates of colleges and universities, even those who included communication courses in their programs, leave our institutions, can they really communicate well? Are the principles of clarity, precision, and conciseness which they mastered in the communication classroom enough to make them effective communicators? Consider a fictional example.

In a recent novel, Robert Parker introduces a recent graduate who enters a corporate culture, one in which word order, punctuation, furniture, and privacy are keys to status. The graduate quickly learns things not included in his formal education: within minutes he can differentiate between the Manager, Advertising and Sales and the Advertising and Sales Manager. The latter has a lower rank, and because of this does not enjoy the status symbols of the former: a chair, a water carafe, and a partitioned office. (1983, 83-84). The new employee must learn how to communicate within a corporate environment which pays special attention to inversions of word order in titles as well as office layout and furniture. How is Parker's new graduate occupying his first professional position--"sales promotion editor"--to communicate within this organization, and how should he represent the organization to clients? Will his communicative competence help him to achieve an inverted title and an office with privacy? And--will the rules of communication and behavior learned in one organization assure success in another?

Of course, communication which is effective in one setting may not succeed in another. Any of us who have consulted for industry and government know that the tone, approach, and material which works well in the classroom can alienate professionals off-campus. "Students" become "course participants," and "assignments and exercises" become "problem-solving workshops." We notice that the term "hands-on" strikes a responsive chord. We are careful, when we establish groups for "hands-on problem-solving sessions," that the composition of the groups is voluntary and comfortable. (I was once advised by one agency that it would not be a good idea to put managers in positions in which their work would be criticized by people who work for them; another agency encouraged such cooperative "problem solving.") Clearly, these are separate corporate cultures. Can students recognize them? Is this awareness something we bring back to the classroom from our consulting stints?

When we analyze the reasons we consult with business and industry, most of us cite as a major one the opportunity to garner "real world" examples for class use. We want, as much as possible, to inject a degree of verisimilitude into our classes. We want our students to become familiar with communication as it takes place "downtown." We hope, I assume, to facilitate the move from the academic setting to business or industry or government; we hope to minimize the degree of "culture shock" our graduates experience.

The move from an academic setting to industry often includes culture shock--corporate culture shock. Deal and Kennedy (1982), in analyzing the concept of corporate culture, have identified unique cultures within and among organizations. They determine the strength of the culture by noting the degree of endorsement of corporate philosophy, goals, missions, and measures of success.

People in different organizations interact differently; professional communication that works at IBM, for example, would not work at Digital Equipment Corporation. That is clear because the former is an established and relatively old company while the latter is younger, more innovative and entrepreneurial. The interactions among colleagues would be different in each environment. What, then, are the implications of a study of corporate culture for technical and professional communication --in practice and in the classroom? What can we teach about business communication models and practices to lessen the "culture shock" of our graduates as they join organizations? Can we teach them to be generally competent communicators and assume that they can deal with particularizing this competence within a specific culture once they are "on the job"? The answer to this question, as to most, is "yes and no." Yes--we can teach competence; but no, we cannot teach "competence at Gulf" or "competence at Husky."

We can, however, alert communicators to the implications and "hidden" meanings in messages. These "meanings" indicate attitudes about role and status, about relationships, about levels of authority and responsibility. Communicators who have business savvy, or a clear sense of the corporate culture within which they function would never "command," for example, when a "request" is appropriate. They may "remind" rather than imperiously "inform." These communicators are aware that the tone of a memo or report implies a "function" or "act" that, if suitable, ensures the effectiveness of the document. Often the relationships implied in the "cc." or "distribution" list of a memo contribute to the success or failure of the communication. Perhaps, in the process of "informing" some individuals on the list, the writer has "reminded" others, and even "commanded" one or two. Are all these "acts" appropriate in a given corporate environment?

Might not the appropriate use of names and titles in business communications be as important as the information in a document? Does the corporate culture encourage the use of first names--both orally and in written correspondence? How crucial are titles? When are titles abbreviated? Are punctuation (commas and capital letters) and transpositions in these titles crucial? Should each memo be signed or initialed; should some; should none?

It becomes clear, then, that a hierarchy of considerations establishes ways in which successful communication is to be achieved within specific corporate cultures. Technical professional communicators must make decisions on five levels: cultural, rhetorical, structural, grammatical, and lexical. To be competent communicators, they must consider the situation which warrants communication, along with the participants in and the purpose of the communication. They must engage in these considerations before they consider the language itself: grammatical and lexical choices are made after the cultural, rhetorical, and structural. Where are they made in the technical writing syllabus?

We should consider these levels.

1. The Cultural Level

This is the "how we do things around here" level. Academically trained professionals need to be skillful on the corporate level. How do they initiate and respond to exchanges, and relate to colleagues and supervisors? These communicators need to know what is expected of them at meetings, at lunch with clients or with colleagues, or even on the department softball team. Corporate "savvy" is acquired as these fledgling technical professionals interact. They need to know whether the corporate culture is separate from or integrated with what goes on at the softball game or at the company picnic.

We can teach cues of "how things are done around here" and introduce the variety of components that make up a corporate culture.

2. The Rhetorical Level

This is the level on which decisions are made about the appropriate style and tone of communication: what is the assertive force of an argument, and how does the relative role and status of the communicator contribute to this force? What types and levels of proof are required in an argument? Who will read a document: as addressees or as referrals? What tone and level of language will be most communicative in an argument?

As we deal with purpose in communication, we address all these questions.

3. The Structural Level

At this level, the communicator must make decisions regarding the vehicle of a message (if written--a memo, letter, proposal, or report; if oral--a phone call, a visit, with or without an appointment). How are these messages and documents organized? How do the form and structure of written or oral communication contribute to the message? Are all components of the message necessary in all instances? Which components are crucial, and are any optional? How successful would a report or proposal be, for instance, without the executive summary? Without appendices and with data that should be in the appendix in the body? When is a memo no longer a "memo" but a "short report"--at two pages? three? four? ten?

Communicators need to know the many ways of sending messages and then need to make appropriate choices.

4. The Grammatical Level

Hairston (1981) has proven that tolerance for, and even recognition of, errors are not black-and-white issues. A problem exists, I think, for those of us who teach in English departments and who see adherence to traditional standards of usage as a component of our course material, particularly as we attempt to strike a balance between traditional "laws" of correctness and more recent understandings of them.

Perhaps we can move from "correctness" to "effectiveness" and deal with emphasis and pace on a grammatical level within the sentence. The communicative impact of punctuation applies here as well, as does the choice between active and passive voice. The emphasis should be on how effectively the grammatical choices lead to communication, not on how "correct," in a traditional sense, they are.

5. The Lexical Level

Here communicators must choose appropriate vocabulary: they must decide between general and technical terminology; they must establish what is slang and what is not--decide between "ball park figures" and estimates, between "touching base with" colleagues and meeting them. Gilsdorf (1983) has established that "the positive attitudes towards business slang ... decrease somewhat as the job level of the respondent rises." The communicator must consider the ultimate audience of technical and professional communication, both internal and external, and decide what is the most appropriate and efficient level of language. If the audience is a CEO in the Fortune-List (Gilsdorf's sample), perhaps slang should be eliminated.

These levels are hierarchical. An understanding of the communicative atmosphere of the corporate culture precedes rhetorical, structural, grammatical, and lexical choices. When this hierarchy is addressed in planning corporate communication, the communicator will exhibit business "savvy" and improve the likelihood of transmitting clear, concise, and precise messages--the goal of professional technical communication.

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