

BreakThrough Communication in a Hybrid World: Amplifying Interactive, Experiential Learning

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Abstract. This paper describes the research foundation and instructional design of BreakThrough Communication, an evidence-based hybrid learning enterprise that builds organizational capacity by boosting communication skill in individuals and teams. BTC's tiered talent development program combines asynchronous, self-paced video instruction in foundational knowledge; live virtual workshops customized to engage learners in practicing new skills on organizational challenges they face; and change-sustaining follow-through to embed new skills through assessment, video reinforcers, and real-time practice sessions. A certificate program that prepares internal trainers to assume communication coach roles completes the process. The BTC learning system is grounded in the traditional pedagogy of the communication field, aligns with adult learning theory, and reflects recent neuroscience research on how the human brain most efficiently learns. Three distinct areas of communication skill comprise the program's subject material: interpersonal conflict; teamwork; persuasive speaking. The communication models within each area have been validated in both experimental and field studies, shown to change behavior and affect outcomes.

Keywords -- competency-based instruction, experiential learning, hybrid learning, virtual learning, remote learning, conflict resolution, teamwork, persuasion, leadership.

Performance Centered Learning

From the beginning, teaching in the field of Communication has centered attention on performance, on developing an individual's effectiveness in expressing themselves through speech. The oratory

experts of ancient Greece and Rome, charged with preparing the offspring of the elite for their future roles as political leaders, devised methods that today would be called experiential learning. Every student engaged in multiple practice rounds of presentation and debate and received ongoing feedback from teachers and peers on their performance. The process is much like skills training for athletes or musical ensembles. Mastery is cultivated through individual study, collaborative group learning, public practice, and continuous feedback.

As the scope of the field expanded to include interpersonal and group communication and the role they play in relationships and organizations, the question of everyday communication mastery and whether it is teachable became pertinent. Research sought to identify the specific communication behaviors that constitute competency in one-to-one and group interaction and what instructional procedures increase the chances a newly acquired skill will transfer from the classroom to the communicative life of the learner.

Shaping Communication Competency

Compatible with communication's performance focus, behavioral competency approaches to skill development target specific linguistic and nonverbal behaviors associated with successful outcomes in a particular context, such as interpersonal conflict, team dynamics and persuasive messaging. A *shaping* process moves learners from intellectual understanding of a competency to closer and closer approximations of its use in real life [1]. Shaping follows a sequence: direct instruction in a target skill's component parts; identification of need for the skill in a learner's life; written scripting of personal word choices for each component; observation of models--effective and ineffective; practice with peers; and recurring performance feedback from instructors and peers.

Evaluation research of behavioral competency approaches has shown it to be effective in increasing communication skill as perceived by learners and those who interact with them. For example, in assessing a conversational skills training course for "communication apprehensive"

adults—individuals for whom shyness was so debilitating it was adversely affecting their social relationships and work performance—researchers employed multiple measures: learner questionnaires and self-monitoring; lab samples of social interaction; evaluation by confederates and coder ratings, to assess ability on completion of a program that targeted skills which previous research showed to be key: complimenting; agreeing; asking questions; describing shared experience; expressing opinion. The findings showed clear support for the efficacy of this approach. The program produced greater improvements in comfort, conversation skill and positive impact on others for those who had completed the full learning sequence than for those in a control group who had received direct instruction only. Improvements were shown to have endured in a follow-up evaluation five months after the program's end [2].

Over the last two decades team-based work has come to dominate organizational life across sectors. With that has come increased demand for a constellation of interpersonal and group process skills. Team members need to be able to effectively express viewpoints, facilitate team process, build consensus, handle conflict, share leadership and create safe work environments [3]. Research sponsored by a leading technology firm showed that with technical skills sets being equal, communication skills that equalize participation and create psychological safety for members are the two factors distinguishing the firm's most effective teams from all others [4]. Increasing organizational capability today means team members must learn new set of basic skills, for collaborative problem-solving, joint decision making and strong interpersonal relationships.

The pandemic and mass exodus to remote work that it triggered, has created further need for communication skills that support teamwork and talent development. A northeastern software developer now trains its managers to work with distributed teams, with an emphasis on conversations that establish team cohesion and build personal relationships. A national insurance firm trained all its managers to facilitate career development for their employees, creating templates for conversations about skills and interests. They also developed a fully virtual four-week leadership course and made it

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available to employees at every level of the firm [5].

Field research in team development has shown that using the shaping process to teach concrete communication skills to intact teams can yield outcomes with long-term effects. Longitudinal study of a teambuilding intervention with a conflict-ridden public service organization, whose members were taught basic interpersonal skills and group problem solving methods, found lasting results. Three years after the initial intervention, comprehensive interviews with team members revealed four consistent impressions: increased ability to raise issues and manage conflict; increased mutual praise, support and cooperation; clarified roles and responsibilities; enduring commitment to teamwork and innovation [6].

A communication-based intervention in a large governmental organization treated five variables of organizational culture that take shape through communication practices and interaction rituals (supervision, teamwork, morale, involvement, information flow) in an initiative aimed at shifting the culture from hierarchical and authoritarian to participative and involved. One year after the organizational intervention members at all levels and external public officials who interact with them indicated movement toward participative culture on five dimensions. Three variables, morale, involvement, and information flow showed statistically significant change [7]

