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Personal Inner Values – A Key to Effective Face-to-Face Business Communication

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Personal Inner Values: A Key to Effective Face-To-Face Business Communication

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Abstract

Effective face-to-face oral communication is crucial for organizational performance. Managers must communicate effectively with their subordinates, their peers and superiors to link organizational direction to those at all levels of the organization. In addition, face-to-face oral communications are fundamental to the messaging process between business entities (e.g., suppliers, vendors, customers, etc.), whether a person is acting for oneself or representing his/her company. Face-

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to-face oral communication that builds empathic trust and mutual confidence is essential in business, especially in light of the recent “crisis in trust” caused by the 2008 financial market “meltdown” and the widely publicized ethical failures in business that have occurred in the past decade. This need is now being successfully addressed and taught to business executives using the neuro-scientific-based communication technique of compassionate communication, in which two or more people speak slowly and briefly as they remain in a deep state of relaxation and nonjudgmental attentiveness. The twelve components of compassionate communication are reviewed along with the supporting research of earlier studies, with emphasis on a unique inner values exercise that appears to be a key to its successful use in business situations. The authors discuss how compassionate communication is being taught in Loyola Marymount University’s Executive MBA program and report on their experience from three years of training Executive MBA students to do an inner values exercise over a 10-day period.

Introduction

Effective oral and written communication is a crucial skill required of managers, especially in today’s world of instant information and increased time pressures for shorter messages. A major objective of Executive MBA programs is to develop management skills in high-potential managers. Unlike full and part-time MBA programs, students in Executive MBA programs usually have more extensive management experience and often hold responsible management and leadership positions in organizations. Hence, the communications with people under their supervision, with peer managers in their organizations, and with senior managers to whom they report, often have greater and quicker impact. Misunderstood or miscommunicated messages, or lack of trust between sender and receiver, can have significant impacts on business decisions and can negatively affect managerial performance.

In addition, face-to-face oral communication is fundamental to the messaging process between business entities (e.g., suppliers, vendors, customers, etc.), whether a person is acting for oneself or representing his or her company. Thus it is important, both within and between business entities, that messages be clearly communicated and understood in a manner that furthers trust between the sender and the receiver.

This need for communication that furthers trust is now being successfully addressed and taught to business executives using a neuroscientifically-based technique called *compassionate communication*, a mindfulness-based dialogue practice that offers a cost-effective way to train individuals to talk more effectively with others while fostering higher levels of openness, trust and interpersonal rapport. The authors define *compassion* as a neurological state of empathy in which a person can perceive another person's emotional state (positive or negative) and respond to it with feelings of kindness and loving concern. This definition and the neural correlates relating to compassion have been discussed by Lutz, Greischar, Perlman, and Davidson (2009).

Mindfulness, as defined by Kabat-Zinn (2003), refers to “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience, moment to moment” (p.145). Bishop et al. (2004) define mindfulness as the directing of attention toward one's ongoing present experience, in a manner that is “characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (p. 232). The authors define mindfulness, within the compassionate communication dialogue process, as the conscious intention of two or more individuals to pay attention, moment to moment, in a body-focused state of awareness, to the unfolding experience of talking and listening, without judgment, as they communicate in a manner that is characterized by openness, curiosity, and acceptance.

By shifting into a body-focused state of awareness, a different form of intuitive wisdom takes over that may actually give a person a more accurate assessment of reality (Pachur, 2010). This “intrapyschic task of paying attention to one's bodily felt experience,” says psychologist Mia Leijssen (2007)., “may involve an awareness of a transcendent dimension that leads one to spiritual growth” (p. 255). Spirituality is defined here as the fundamental principles we use to guide our life in a meaningful way, either in a secular or religious sense.

When a person mindfully suspends everyday consciousness — which is the normal “default” mode of thinking used for reading, writing, speaking, and analytic judgment — one enters a state of enhanced *experiential* cognition in which creativity, intuition, and social empathy predominate (Pretz, 2008). Intuitive thinking is also a language driven process (Ilg et al., 2007), and it appears to have neurologically different but equally beneficial qualities that are essential for strategic planning, decision-making, and problem solving (Kuo, Sjöström, Chen, Wang, & Huang, 2009). According to researchers at Max Planck Institute

for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, intuitive logic gives us an informed perspective of a situation while we are in the discovery process of the experience (Volz & von Cramon, 2006).

Mindfulness is also a form of experiential creative thinking which has been found to be directly related to personal growth (Norris & Epstein, 2011). The research consistently shows that mindfulness not only fosters psychological development and self-empowerment, it also sets in motion the mechanisms of empathic attunement and interpersonal collaboration (Elliott & Greenberg, 2007). Experiential thinking is also strongly related to relational tolerance, agreeability, and trust (Pacini & Epstein, 1999).

As a society, we are word-dependent; we are unaware that words play only a partial role in the overall communication process that can now be tracked and mapped in a person's brain. One of the most important components is the sender's skill in conveying an *intended* message, and the receiver's skill at *inferring* what that message will be (Levinson, 2000), both of which happen *before* any words are actually spoken. Thus, the most essential components that we need to convey are nonverbal – messages that are filled with presumptions, meanings, associations, feelings, attitudes, preferences, biases, and implied relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 2001). This predictive inference process continues throughout the dialogue, and the neural systems governing it are separate from the language centers that are most often cited in the literature (Noordzij et al., 2009).

Compassionate communication places greater emphasis on nonverbal cues (facial expression, tone of voice, hand and body gestures, etc.) and less emphasis on the words themselves. In addition, the rate of speaking is consciously slowed down, which research has shown to enhance listener comprehension (Gibson, Eberhard, & Bryant, 2005) and lower physiological stress (Knowlton & Larkin, 2006), a major factor for burnout in the business world. By also limiting the time and number of words a speaker is permitted to use, *compassionate communication* insures that a person consolidates and conveys to the listener the most essential elements of information in less time, with greater empathy and accuracy.

Compassionate communication can positively influence the quality of how messages are conveyed to others within organizations, as well as between business entities. This enhances managerial performance by increasing trust between the sender and receiver, improving the clarity of the message, and decreasing the possibility of misunderstanding the content of messages communicated face-to-face.

By inwardly creating an *intentional state of communication awareness*—where a person consciously maintains an awareness of what is

happening in the present moment, a conflict-free conversation emerges in which all of the above points automatically fall into place. The essence of *compassionate communication* can be summarized by the following three guiding statements:

1. Stay relaxed and present as you slowly and briefly talk with a warm demeanor.
2. Listen deeply, paying close attention to the person's facial expressions and tone of voice.
3. Stay positive, and remain true to your personal and relational values.

After reviewing the literature leading to the successful teaching of *compassionate communication* to the Executive MBA students at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in the Fall of 2010, we review its twelve "components" in Section III. Section IV discusses in more detail the importance of a person focusing on one's own *inner values*, one of the twelve components reviewed in Section III. Section V reports the experience of the LMU Executive MBA students with a 10-day inner values exercise and Section VI discusses and concludes.

Literature Review

The compassionate communication technique was first developed by Waldman and Schuitevoerder in 1992, when they introduced it to members of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology (Waldman, 2000, 1998). Individuals paired off with one another and were first guided through a series of relaxation exercises. They were then asked to take turns, slowly and briefly speaking to each other as they remained in a relaxed state. They were instructed to listen non-judgmentally and to spontaneously respond to what the other person had just said. Within this framework, participants stated that they attained greater relational intimacy within five to ten minutes of following this protocol. Later research, explained below, confirmed this anecdotal finding.

Between 1998 and 2004, other therapists and teachers developed similar forms of relational, interpersonal, and "dialogue meditation" exercises (Kramer, Meleo-Meyer, & Turner, 2008; Lysack, 2008; O'Fallon & Kramer, 1998), but none have been clinically tested or researched. All of these speaking strategies incorporate the principles of mindfulness as defined earlier in this paper.

Research shows that mindfulness training increases social empathy and decreases social anxiety (Dekeyser, Raes, Leijssen, Leysen, & Dewulf, 2008). Mindfulness has also been correlated positively to lower levels of verbal defensiveness (Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, & Lance, 2008), while Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan and Orsillo (2007) offer further theoretical and experimental support for using meditation, relaxation, and other mindfulness-based methods to enhance relational empathy.

Other researchers and practitioners have used the term “compassionate communication” during the past decade to describe a variety of communication processes. Marshall Rosenberg (1999, 2003) describes his Non-Violent Communication process as “Compassionate Communication.” Rosenberg’s process applies the concepts of observation, self-awareness of feelings and needs, and communication of needs. More recently, Katherine Miller (2007) used the term “compassionate communication” to represent a process in which the speaker pays attention to the emotional state of the person he or she is talking to, and to respond to the other’s emotional state during conversation. Miller’s communication process consists of *noticing* the need for compassion toward others who are suffering in the workplace, *connecting* through empathy and understanding, and *responding* by using verbal and non-verbal communication strategies.

These processes differ from the *compassionate communication* technique described in this paper, which includes many strategies not addressed in other dialogue techniques: the emphasis on body relaxation, soft eye contact, consciously maintaining a half smile and a positive attitude, and slow speech limited to a few sentences alternately spoken by two people in close physical proximity to each other. This regulated dialog facilitates a balanced exchange during the communication process. Also, the *compassionate communication* dialogue begins and ends with each person giving a compliment to the other person and showing appreciation for what each other has said. This encourages the initiation of an emotionally positive conversation, a key component described in the research on mindfulness-based psychotherapies (Morgan & Morgan, 2005).

One of the unique components to *compassionate communication* is the limitation of speech to less than 30 seconds per utterance. This limitation on speaking time is based on a well-established memory and consciousness theory known as “chunking.” The brain is only capable of consciously holding approximately four “chunks” of information in its working memory, and the information can only be held for twenty to thirty seconds (Cowan, 2001; Gobet & Clarkson, 2004). Thus, it was hypothesized that if each person takes turns talking for no more than

30 seconds, both individuals will be able to follow and respond to the totality of information being conveyed to each other, and thus respond in a more comprehensive way.

Clinical observation shows that people who remain in a relaxed state tend to talk slower, and slower speech rates lower muscle tension, heart rate, and self-reported tension in the listener (Knowlton & Larkin, 2006). Slower speech rates were also shown to have a robust effect on listening comprehension (Gibson et al., 2005). In addition, studies of mindfulness-based interventions show substantially reduced symptoms of stress (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998), depressive relapse (Teasdale et al., 2002), personality disorders (Linehan, 1993), and other mood disorders (Teasdale, 1999); symptoms that are commonly found in individuals experiencing inharmonious relationships.

Newberg, Newberg, Waldman, Cotter-Lockard, and Baker (2010) surveyed 121 individuals, both before and after they received only one hour of training and practice in the components of *compassionate communication* discussed above (staying relaxed, speaking slowly for less than 30 seconds, listening deeply without judgment, then spontaneously responding to what was just said). The primary outcome measure used for this survey was a modification of the Miller Intimacy Scale, a well-established tool for measuring social friendship, closeness, and defensiveness (R. S. Miller & Lefcourt, 1982). It has been shown to be a valid indicator and predictor of healthy psychological and physiological functioning (Fischer & Corcoran, 2007) and has high internal reliability for assessing levels of friendship in a variety of non-marital dyads (Downs & Hillje, 1991). By applying standard statistical t-tests to these Miller Intimacy Scale survey results, these 121 individuals demonstrated an 11 percent overall improvement in intimacy and closeness, with older individuals showing greater improvement than younger subjects. The demographic characteristics of these 121 individuals (36 males and 85 females, etc.) showed that, in general, the *compassionate communication* technique appeared to work regardless of gender, race, or socioeconomic background. This research suggests that both men and women have similar capacities for developing intimacy.

Components of Effective Compassionate Communication

Over the last three years, and incorporating some of the latest research findings concerning speaking and listening comprehension, the *compassionate communication* technique evolved into twelve evidence-based strategies for building trust, resolving conflicts, and increasing social intimacy in personal and work-related environments (Newberg & Waldman, 2012). These 12 components were successfully taught to Executive MBA students at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in Los Angeles during the fall of 2010 and 2011 to improve their communication skills. The first 6 are preparatory – to be practiced before a person enters into a conversation with another – and they should also be incorporated with the second 6 components that are used as the dialogue begins to unfold:

1. Relax
2. Stay present
3. Silence inner voices
4. Be positive
5. Focus on inner values
6. Recall a pleasant memory
7. Maintain eye contact
8. Be complimentary and express appreciation
9. Speak with warmth in your voice
10. Speak slowly
11. Speak briefly
12. Listen carefully

1. Relax

Stress is now considered the number one killer in the world, and any form of tension will impair one's ability to pay attention to the dozens of subtle cues that are part of any verbal exchange (Lunney, 2006). Therefore, the first step for ensuring effective communication is to maintain a deep state of relaxation throughout the entire dialogue process. It takes less than a minute to become deeply relaxed, but it will take some practice to maintain it while one is talking and listening to others. Focusing on one's breathing and using conscious muscle relaxation to help the individual remain in a state of stress-free alertness is a key component in

most mindfulness-based therapies and university-based stress-reduction programs (Benson, 1997).

Compassionate communication incorporates yawning as an additional strategy to speed up the relaxation response and facilitate feelings of empathy (Platek, Mohamed, & Gallup Jr., 2005; Schürmann, Hesse, & Stephan, 2005; Walusinski, 2006). Yawning reduces hypertension in the throat (Boone & McFarlane, 1993), which further helps both speakers to remain calm. Yawning stimulates activity in the precuneus, an area of the brain that is directly involved in generating introspection and increasing social awareness (Platek et al., 2005; Schürmann et al., 2005; Walusinski, 2006). Furthermore, the precuneus is associated with the human mirror-neuron system (Schulte-Rüther, Markowitsch, Fink, & Piefke, 2007; Uddin, Kaplan, Molnar-Szakacs, Zaidel, & Iacoboni, 2005), which suggests that preparatory yawning (conducted prior to a face-to-face meeting), may enhance empathic abilities between individuals during the communication process.

2. Stay “Present”

When a person focuses intently on his or her own breathing and relaxation, their attention is pulled into the present moment. Usually, a person’s conscious mind spends most of its time thinking about future possibilities and comparing them to past memories and events, with the result that inner thoughts fill up most of their conscious awareness (Borghi & Cimatti, 2010; Morin & Michaud, 2007). This experience limits a person from being fully aware of what is actually happening in the present moment. In contrast, when a person becomes completely absorbed in doing something as simple as breathing or a specific body movement, the inner voices appear to stop, replaced by a *moment-to-moment awareness* of each part of the activity in which the person is engaged.

3. Silence Inner Voices

For most people, even those with advanced training in mindfulness, staying in the present moment only lasts for brief periods of time. Then, it’s interrupted by one’s inner voices that never seem to stop. A good strategy to deal with this annoyance is to consciously and deliberately suppress this type of “noisy” thought. As researchers at Emory University

found, thought suppression can even protect the brain “and reduce the cognitive decline associated with normal aging” (Pagnoni & Cekic, 2007, p. 1623) By consciously interrupting inner speech, the insula and anterior cingulate are stimulated, which increases the person’s expression of compassion and empathy (Wyland, Kelley, Macrae, Gordon, & Heatherton, 2003).

4. Be Positive

Fredrickson (2009) identified one of the most important factors for predicting success in both personal and business relationships. It’s called the *3-to-1 positivity ratio*, which is the comparison of the number of positive thoughts versus negative thoughts expressed when engaged in a conversation. If a person expresses less than three positive thoughts or behaviors per each negative one (including facial expressions and body gestures), the relationship or interaction is likely to fail. This has been independently confirmed by Losada’s (Losada & Heaphy, 2004) research with corporate teams and Gottman’s (1994) research with marital couples. If an individual wants his or her business or personal relationships to flourish, that person needs to generate five or more positive messages for each negative feeling or utterance made, for example, “I’m disappointed” or “that is not what I had hoped for.” If the ratio falls below 3-to-1, individuals are also likely to be diagnosed with depression (Schwartz et al., 2002). This suggests that every member in a work-related environment should provide as much positive, ongoing feedback to others as possible.

5. Focus on Inner Values

When people are out of touch with their own personal, professional, and relational values, life loses meaning and joy for them. As will be discussed more fully in the next section, when managers and executives enrolled in LMU’s Executive MBA program focused on their inner values, their stress levels dropped and their productivity increased.

According to researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, “Reflecting on personal values can keep neuroendocrine and psychological responses to stress at low levels” (Creswell et al., 2005, p. 846). Inner values are shaped by both genetic and environmental influences (Knafo & Spinath, 2011; Schermer, Feather, Zhu, & Martin, 2008), and they are

essential for providing meaning and purpose to life. Without them, we're more inclined to exhibit antisocial behavior (Grant, 2008; Kuperminc & Allen, 2001; Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2007). But if a person's values become too rigid, or turned into "shoulds," he or she will experience a myriad of conflicts with others (Neumann, Olive, & McVeigh, 1999). Negative values can also disrupt many structures and functions in both a person's body and brain, and the underlying destructive emotions interfere with memory storage and cognitive accuracy, thus disrupting a person's ability to properly evaluate and respond to social situations (Davidson et al., 2002).

Before engaging in a communication, it is beneficial for a person to ask in advance: "What is the most important value that I need to bring into this specific conversation?" This sets the stage for exploring the arena of communication values as early in the relationship as possible (Newberg & Waldman, 2012). Together, a template for future conversations can be agreed upon by participants, especially the difficult ones. Values stated in advance, whether identical to another's or not, serve as a beacon to guide individuals toward the best possible communication. In regard to the workplace, company efficiency and profitability, researchers at UCLA advise that when management strategies match the values of an organization's workers, greater job satisfaction is reported, and people are less likely to quit (McNeese-Smith & Crook, 2003).

6. Recall a Pleasant Memory

When a person thinks about someone he or she loves, or any memory of a pleasant enjoyable feeling, it elicits a slight half smile similar to da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* painting. This type of smile changes the electromagnetic activity of your brain (Ekman, Davidson, & Friesen, 1990) and it causes the muscles around the eyes to soften (Kontsevich & Tyler, 2004). At the Institute of Neuroscience in Taiwan, researchers discovered that imagining a loved one promotes greater empathy and compassion for others by stimulating activity in the anterior cingulate and the insula (Cheng, Chen, Lin, Chou, & Decety, 2010).

It takes a special inner feeling, a feeling of genuine enjoyment, to generate a *Mona Lisa* smile. This "felt" smile, as researchers call it, can be stimulated by a pleasurable experience, image, feeling, or thought. When a person experiences this type of smile, their empathy toward others increases (Surakka & Hietanen, 1998). When a person learns how to

consciously generate and maintain this smile throughout the day, he or she will feel more positive, and work will feel more pleasant (Soussignan, 2002). This practice will improve the demeanor of anyone you talk with because smiling has a contagious affect (Wild, Erb, Eyb, Bartels, & Grodd, 2003). It also strengthens the brain's ability to maintain a positive outlook on life (Okun et al., 2004).

When an individual practices these first six strategies, they create an ideal inner state of mind that causes other people to neurologically resonate to them the moment they see that person's face or hear his or her voice (Newberg & Waldman, 2012).

7. Maintain Eye Contact

When you begin a conversation with another person, your eyes should remain gently focused on the other person's face. Maintaining sustained eye contact throughout the entire conversation is an essential component of compassionate communication because it stimulates the social-network circuits in the brain (Senju & Johnson, 2009). It also decreases the stress chemical cortisol, and it increases oxytocin, a neurochemical that enhances empathy, social cooperation, and positive communication (Ditzen et al., 2009; Hurlemann et al., 2010). Sustained eye contact initiates an "approach" reaction in the brain and signals that the parties are interested in having a social engagement (George & Conty, 2008). But if one person averts his or her eyes, it signals an "avoidance" response to the viewer (Hietanen, Leppänen, Peltola, Linna-Aho, & Ruuhiala, 2008). An averted gaze also sends a neurological clue to the observer that the person may be hiding something or lying (Einav & Hood, 2008).

8. Be Complimentary and Express Appreciation

The first words a person speaks will set the tone for the entire conversation, and a single compliment may be all that is needed to enhance cooperation, trust, and mutual collaboration. Compliments increase relationship satisfaction, while complaints decrease it (Flora & Segrin, 2000). Yet few people begin their conversations on a positive note. Most people are inclined to speak out when bothered by something, not realizing that this immediately creates a defensive reaction in the listener's body and brain. For compliments to be effective, they must all be genuine, extending

beyond the mere formality of being polite. In addition, compliments received at the end of an interaction are more easily accepted and believed than those given at the beginning of a dialogue in work related situations (Hudak, Gill, Aguinaldo, Clark, & Frankel, 2010).

9. Speak with Warmth in Your Voice

Speaking with a warm tone in one's voice conveys compassion, sensitivity, and self-confidence through the sound of the voice (Ekman, 2007). While very little research has been conducted on this essential component of communication and speech, enough evidence has been accumulated to predict many of the emotions that are conveyed by facial expression (Sauter, Eisner, Calder, & Scott, 2010).

Thus, by looking for discrepancies between the face and the voice, a person can come closer to identifying the truthfulness, sincerity, and trustworthiness of a speaker. Unfortunately, the limited information available regarding this topic makes it difficult to create a documented "training" program to help people accurately vocalize or recognize basic emotional expressions (Patel, Scherer, Björkner, & Sundberg, 2011). Nevertheless, it has been successfully demonstrated that by lowering the voice pitch and talking slower, the listener will hear more empathy in someone's voice and will respond with greater trust (McHenry, Parker, Baile, & Lenzi, 2011). A warm supportive voice has also been shown to be a sign of transformational leadership because it increases satisfaction, commitment, and cooperation between members of a team (de Vries, Bakker-Pieper, & Oostenveld, 2010).

10. Speak Slowly

Fast speech rates lower a person's ability to comprehend and understand the context of what the other person is saying, both for young and old adults (Gordon, Daneman, & Schneider, 2009). For people with any form of language or speaking disability, it is essential to speak slowly, consciously articulating one word at a time (Sawyer, Chon, & Ambrose, 2008; Van Nuffelen, De Bodt, Wuyts, & Van de Heyning, 2009).

Interestingly, faster speakers are often viewed as more competent than slower speakers (Street, Brady, & Putman, 1983). But this may be a culturally entrained behavior; one used to mask the speaker's true

intentions and inadequacies. In the 1970s, researchers argued that fast speech was more persuasive, making the speaker appear more credible and knowledgeable (N. Miller, Maruyama, Beaber, & Valone, 1976). This is not necessarily true. In the 1990s, researchers found that rapid speech was only more effective when people were attempting to persuade others who *disagreed* with them. In contrast, when a person wants to impart information that supports his or her inner values, slower speech will deepen the other person's respect for the speaker (Smith & Shaffer, 1991). A slow, warm voice has a calming effect on another person who is feeling anxious, whereas a loud fast voice is associated with anger, excitement, and fear (Siegman, Anderson, & T., 1990; Siegman & Boyle, 1993). Speaking slowly also permits both parties of a business dialog to pay closer attention to the other person's face.

11. Speak Briefly

Whenever possible, people engaged in a dialog should limit their utterance to 30 seconds or less, *especially if they need to communicate something essential to the listener*. As discussed earlier, a person's working memory can only retain a tiny bit of information for 30 seconds or less (Gilchrist, Cowan, & Naveh-Benjamin, 2008). Then it's filed away in the unconscious mind as new words (of data, information, and meanings) are uploaded into working memory. When researchers at the University of Missouri tested young and old adults, they found that even a single sentence composed of ten words was difficult to recall accurately (Gilchrist et al., 2008).

The solution is to speak only a sentence or two. It forces a person to be exceptionally articulate. More important, when the speaker pauses and listens to the other person's response, the speaker will be able to hear if he or she understood the brief communication. If so, the speaker can continue with a few more sentences. If not, then the speaker has an opportunity to clarify. If two people agree in advance to use this same technique, an enormous amount can be accomplished in a short period of time, *even when not using most of the other compassionate communication strategies!* This has been found to be particularly effective in high-conflict situations, as demonstrated when this strategy was taught to attorneys and therapists who were members of the Coalition for Collaborative Divorce group. Newberg and Waldman (2012) found that if a mediator insisted that all parties (including the negotiator) be restricted to

speaking only one sentence, a rapid exchange of crucial information took place in a manner that suppressed the ability to engage in non-productive emotional behavior or argumentative speech.

12. Listen Carefully

To listen deeply and fully, a person must train his or her mind to stay focused on the person who is speaking: to the words, gestures, facial cues, and tone of voice. Then, when the other person pauses, the individual can respond specifically to the meaning of what the first person said. If the receiver shifts the conversation to an irrelevant topic, this can interrupt the neurological “coherence” that occurs when two people communicate (Jacquemot & Scott, 2006). When this happens, short-term memory is disrupted, and the flow of dialogue is derailed.

When practicing *compassionate communication*, there is no need to interrupt. If the other person doesn't stop talking, he or she may be giving the other party an important clue. Perhaps his or her mind is preoccupied, or perhaps he or she is deeply caught up in private feelings and thoughts. If this is the case, it's unlikely that the individual will be able to listen deeply to anything the other party might say. As long as the listener stays fully immersed in the experience of what the other person is saying, it won't be boring and it will give the speaker a profound sense of being empathically responded to. As the research suggests, most people, when they list what they want most from another person, say that they want to be fully listened to and understood (Jonas-Simpson, 2001; Kagan, 2008).

Why Is Focusing on One's *Inner Values* So Important for Effective Face-To-Face Organizational Communication?

Inner values used to be a popular topic in the 1950s and 60s, when books by Frankl (1963) and Maslow (1964) were best sellers. For the past 20 years, values-based research almost disappeared until recently. With the global meltdown of financial institutions that occurred over the past several years, magazines like *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* have regularly called for open discussion of corporate and leadership values, and the business world has responded.

Harvard business professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter, considered by many to be one of the 50 most powerful women in the world, recently posted a blog entry about the importance of directly addressing values in the boardroom: “In organizations that I call ‘supercorps’ — companies that are innovative, profitable, and responsible — widespread dialogue about the interpretation and application of values enhances accountability, collaboration, and initiative” (Kanter, 2010).

Dr. Kanter finds that when people share and discuss their deepest values in the business world, it strengthens the alignment of the entire group. Employees’ personal values become integrated with the company’s policy, and this helps to guide the ethical choices of the corporation. Discussing business values openly, Kanter argues, eliminates the need to impose impersonal and coercive rules.

In Kanter’s experience, discussions about values help to decrease incidents of interpersonal conflict. Cooperation grows, everyone feels like he or she is a part of the team, and the financial stability of the company tends to soar:

The organization becomes a community united by shared purpose, which reinforces teamwork and collaboration. People can be more readily relied on to do the right thing, and to guide their colleagues to do the same, once they buy into and internalize core principles. People can become more aware of the drivers and impact of their behavior. And, as I have seen in leading companies, active consideration of core values and purpose can unlock creative potential. (Kanter, 2010)

Beginning in the Fall of 2009, LMU’s Executive MBA students are now guided through the following *inner values* exercise:

1. Students being trained in compassionate communication are first asked to close their eyes for a full 60 seconds and to think about their answer to the question:
2. *What is your deepest innermost value?* During this brief self-reflection, participants are also asked to watch how the inner voices in their mind respond to them being asked this question. Participants are also asked to repeat the question to themselves for about a minute so they can notice what thoughts and feelings come into their mind. After doing this for 60 seconds, participants

are then asked to open their eyes and write down a single word or brief phrase that captures what that *inner value* is for them.

3. After they write down the word that captures their personal innermost value, students are again asked to close their eyes, and repeat the same question to themselves: *What is my deepest, innermost value?* If a different word comes to mind, they are asked to write it down. This step is repeated several more times so participants can notice if other values essential to them rise into their consciousness.
4. Participants are then asked to look at their list of words, and circle the one word value that feels the truest for them at that moment. Lastly, participants are again asked to close their eyes one last time to repeat their circled word or phrase to themselves, silently and aloud, to notice how it *feels* to them when they say it, and to also compare it to the other words they have written down.

So how can the observed *value* of doing this *inner values* exercise be explained? By simply pondering and affirming their deepest values, a person will improve the health of his or her brain, and the propensity to ruminate about failure is reduced (Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999).

The 10 Day *Inner Values* Exercise

After being led through the above *inner values* exercise on the first day of class, the Executive MBA students at LMU were then instructed to do the same exercise on their own for the next 10 days shortly after they awoke and took a few moments to stretch, breathe deeply, and relax. The exercise was optional for these EMBA students, with it being made clear that no grades would be given. On the 11th day, these students were asked to briefly answer the following eight questions, using only a single sheet of paper and to turn the assignment in anonymously. Their responses are reported in Section V that follows. (EMBA students were also encouraged to be spontaneous and reminded that there was no right or wrong response to get the most honest responses possible):

1. What was your initial reaction to this assignment?
2. Did your “value” words change from day to day?
3. Was the exercise enjoyable, boring, interesting, annoying, etc?

4. How long did you spend, each day, contemplating your inner values?
5. Did the exercise have any affect on other aspects of your day, work, or life?
6. How do you define the word “value?”
7. Did you discover anything about yourself?
8. Did the exercise influence the way you think about business values?

EMBA Experience of 10-Day *Inner Values* Exercise at Loyola Marymount University:

The above 10-day *inner values* exercise was assigned on the first day of class of LMU’s Executive MBA program’s beginning in the fall of 2009 and later refined for EMBA classes beginning in the fall of 2010 and 2011. It should be kept in mind that much is demanded of LMU’s Executive MBA students during their first semester of a program in which students need to spend 30 hours each week preparing their EMBA assignments on top of their “day job” and family responsibilities. Since most EMBA students have been out of school for 8–15 years, the burden for them to keep up with EMBA assignments on top of their otherwise very busy lives is not only a huge shock to them physically, emotionally and mentally, but it also cuts deep into their normal sleep and rest time throughout their first semester of the program.

Under these stressful, time-constrained conditions for EMBA students, the authors consider it remarkable that 90 percent of the EMBA students (in both the Fall 2009 and 2010 EMBA classes) responded to an *optional* assignment asked of them on the 11th day after they had completed the 10-day inner values assignment. In addition to answering the eight questions listed above on the 11th day, the EMBA students were asked to keep a “diary” of their personal experience over the 10 days they did the *inner values* assignment and to turn that in also.

Nearly all the EMBA students found it useful, enlightening, and enjoyable, but it rarely started out that way for them. Some students started out feeling intrigued, others were bored, and a few actually became irritated with the assignment. One student, who was a chief operating officer at a mid-sized corporation, put it bluntly: “What the *#!* does this have to do with financial planning?” But by the end of the 10 days, he wrote the following in his diary: “I think that this exercise should be taught to every MBA student in America.” He was not alone, as the following EMBA diary excerpts illustrate:

At first I thought, “Who has time for this?” I barely have enough minutes in the day to run my company, and the workload for the [EMBA] class is overwhelming. But those couple of minutes each morning helped me stay calm and focused for the rest of the day. I plan to do this exercise for the rest of the school year.

The moment I awake, my mind rushes to plan the day. This exercise made me realize that I’m undermining my health. I get the most from it when I practice 5–10 minutes a day, and I’ve noticed that the quality and quantity of my sleep improved. I know I have strong values, but I’ve never taken the time to acknowledge them.

I really became more conscious about my emotions, and how they could sabotage my evenings with my wife. Once, after having a fight with my wife, I spent 30 minutes sitting alone thinking about the value of my marriage. I went back and apologized and we worked our problem out.

I used my positive word all day long. I felt calmer, less stressed, and it seemed to help when it came to solving difficult problems at work. I loved the self-awareness it brought, and the way it made me feel throughout the day.

The core values that kept coming up for me were honesty, integrity, and family. It made me think about my business ethics and values, and what was really essential for work. I realized that I’d rather climb the ladder of success more slowly so I can support the people I meet along the way and give more time to my family.

This exercise grounded me in the principles of goodness and the desire to live by my deepest principles. For me, work can drown out the self-talk of my core values. When that happens, I can’t truly express who I am or realize my greatest potential.

At first I hated this exercise, but it forced me to re-examine my priorities. I realized that business is not just about numbers and money. I think everyone needs to find at least two minutes a day to think about their values and principles and how to use them to build a life-sustaining career and personality.

More than a third of the EMBA students said that the exercise inspired them to become more involved in spiritual pursuits like meditation. We found this surprising, especially since terms like “spirituality” and “meditation” were deliberately excluded during the introductory lecture and the presentation of the *inner values* exercise. Even more surprising, several people wrote that they were going to restructure their companies to be more values-oriented. One CEO required every member of his company to write up a personal “Mission and Values” statement which he collated and distributed to the group.

Discussion

What is a Value?

When groups were asked to do this *inner values* exercise, they often asked that the term or word “values” be defined for them. It is important that groups not be given either a definition or examples when this question arises. Definitions or examples would cause the exercise to become outer-directed, rather than inner-directed in order to be most effective. In the reports given to the authors after doing this exercise, 80% of the students described remarkable self-discoveries. When asked two years later, they felt that the insights they gained were still valid.

Inner values are shaped by both genetic and environmental influences (Knafo & Spinath, 2011; Schermer et al., 2008), and these are the ones that provide the deepest meaning to a person’s personal life. Unfortunately, personal values tend to make people more resistant to change (Sverdlik & Oreg, 2009). Thus, people are faced with an inner dilemma when they meet someone else. If the person met has different values, the human brain will trigger a prejudicial reaction. People encountered with different values activate different structures within the brain (Chiao et al., 2009). It has been shown that people with different cultural values activate different areas in the visual cortex (Hedden, Ketay, Aron, Markus, &

Gabrieli, 2008). They may actually “see” the world in a fundamentally different way. And yet we know that a mind without values leads to anti-social behavior, whereas a person who embraces pro-social values will experience enhanced relationships and improved job performance (Grant, 2008; Kuperminc & Allen, 2001; Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2007).

Us Versus Them: Dividing the World into Opposing Values

The propensity to believe that other people’s values are misguided has fostered centuries of animosity throughout the world. The brain is partially responsible for this problem. It has a tendency to reduce everything down to as few components as possible, whereby everyone tends to automatically evaluate themselves and others in limited and superficial ways (Newberg & Waldman, 2009). People make broad, general assessments, often assuming that other people’s assessments reflect their own. Deeper analytical thinking requires a more comprehensive approach to problem-solving that can be achieved through a deliberate retraining of the way people habitually find solutions.

In parts of the inferior parietal lobe, there’s even a cognitive function that places abstract concepts, like values, into polarized dyads – another way that the brain reduces information into generalized categories. People automatically assign values into opposing groups: good or bad, right or wrong, positive or negative, and so on (Newberg & Waldman, 2007). Thus, when a person encounters someone with a different value, no matter how small, a fight-or-flight response is triggered in the emotional centers of the brain.

It’s a form of biological stereotyping, and once an oppositional dyad is created, the brain automatically favors one perspective or value over the other. Individuals root for their favorite baseball team, and disparage the challenging team, even though both sides share the same value: winning. Thus, whatever side or team people align themselves with, they are neurologically inclined to treat the “other” perspective with less fairness and more hostility (A. G. Miller, 2004). While people can change their inborn propensity toward prejudice, they first have to recognize their destructive inner voices unconsciously influencing the way they “value” others.

A person’s normal way of responding to different worldviews is to reject the “other” perspective. If a person can get the other person to embrace his or her values, both people will feel more inclined to cooperate and trust each other. When it comes to personal relationships

or business ventures, it's wise to explore each other's values *before the two parties* contractually engage with each other.

Professional Values

All people seem to share similar communication values, but research is beginning to show that, for most people, their personal and professional values differ from each other (Rassin, 2008). This can present a problem, because when there is incongruence between *inner values* and work-related values, emotional burnout is likely to take place (Altun, 2002).

In the medical community, this happens frequently. Physician burnout has been estimated to be close to 50 percent in some areas; when 3,200 Canadian doctors were studied, it could be *predicted* who would experience exhaustion, cynicism, and poor work performance by simply identifying the people whose personal values conflicted with the values promoted in the work environment (Leiter, Frank, & Matheson, 2009). This has strong implications for the business world. Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, noted that when management strategies match the value placed on a firm's workers, greater job satisfaction is reported, and less people are likely to quit (McNeese-Smith & Crook, 2003).

The Value of "Making Money"

Interestingly, making money rarely shows up on an individual's personal or professional values list. So why do so many people equate money with personal satisfaction, even though the research is clear that social satisfaction is more rewarding? Neuroscience provides a possible explanation. It turns out that monetary and social rewards stimulate the same neural circuits in the brain (Lin, Adolphs, & Rangel, 2011). Every time a person contemplates his or her personal and social values, it stimulates the same reward circuit in the brain (Sescousse, Redouté, & Dreher, 2010). This research strongly suggests that the *inner values* exercise is both pleasurable and rewarding, and that it should neurologically reinforce behaviors that are associated with the values individuals believe in the most (Elliott, Agnew, & Deakin, 2010).

Spiritual Values

While making money rarely shows up on an individual's *inner values* list, spirituality does show up frequently with 80 percent of those surveyed considering themselves spiritual. Yet, Newberg and Waldman (2009) find that no two people share the same spiritual values, with only a 5–15 percent similarity. Other research supports this and elaborates further:

Spirituality points to our interiors, our subjective life, as contrasted to the objective domain of material events and objects. Our spirituality is reflected in the values and ideals that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here — the meaning and purpose we see in our lives — and our connectedness to each other and to the world around us. Spirituality also captures those aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such as inspiration, creativity, the mysterious, the sacred, and the mystical. Within this very broad perspective, we believe spirituality is a universal impulse and reality (Astin & Astin, 2007).

From their experience with the Executive MBA students at LMU, the authors conclude that the *inner values* exercise component of the *compassionate communication* technique is one of the most effective ways to identify, and put people in touch with their personal values, business values, relationship values, and spiritual values. When people share their inner values with others, they become more aware of the remarkable similarity, thereby glimpsing the true nature of human values that encapsulate the spirit of humanity.

Summary

Effective face-to-face oral communication that builds empathic trust and mutual confidence is essential in business, especially in light of the recent “crisis in trust” caused by the 2008 financial market “meltdown” and the widely publicized ethical failures in business that have occurred over the past decade. This need for communication based upon trust is now being successfully addressed and taught to business executives at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles using a neuro-scientific-based technique called *compassionate communication*, a mindfulness-based dialogue practice that offers a cost-effective way to train individuals to talk more effectively with others while fostering higher levels of openness, trust, and interpersonal rapport.

Experiences documented in the three successive Executive MBA classes at LMU in 2009, 2010, and 2011 demonstrate the importance of awareness of *inner values* as a basis for the *compassionate communication* strategy reviewed above. Furthermore, when one's *inner values* are shared with others, it assists the individual in becoming more aware of the remarkable similarity in most people's values and to glimpse the true nature of human values that encapsulate the spirit of humanity.

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