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COMMUNICATION SKILLS AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF SELLERS

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Abstract

The aim of our paper is to draw attention to the fact that the level of expertise and professional skills represents merely a basic prerequisite for success in managerial work. While the expertise and experience have their essential role, they are not enough to achieve excellent results. Based on this fact, we have carried out our research examining the relation between the level of social skills in selected agricultural managers and their position in the management hierarchy. The level of social skills was evaluated using Riggio's Social Skills Inventory. Our results demonstrate that communication skills constitute one of the key advantages of the sellers.

Keywords: communication, marketing, sellers, competitive advantages

JEL classification: D83, M31

Introduction

Most American company human resources specialists consider skills in the area of interpersonal communication and other so-called soft skills the most important skills in job applicants today. In this context, Wilding (2010) quotes Wall Street Journal stating the fact that even despite this, these are the skills that are largely absent in MBA graduates. The author further states that while large commercial and economic schools supply the market with graduates with excellent analytical skills and excellent knowledge in the area of finance, marketing and strategy, only superficial attention is often paid to teaching soft skills as communication, people management and building team spirit.

Similar parallels are found in training of graduates in our high schools and universities, in particular in the area of sales and marketing. Future employees in this sector have been traditionally expected to dispose of professional and practical preparedness that is primarily aimed at attracting the largest number of customers possible. However, topics aimed at assessing and developing communication skills are only rarely included in curricula.

Training of graduates could take inspiration from numerous research projects and relevant empirical data that show that both the turnover and the profit from products are multiplied by the communication skills of sellers.

For instance, research carried out with insurance company employees and IT salesmen has shown that those with good skills in the area of interpersonal communication

had a 90% greater chance of doubling their sales commissions (Wilding, 2010). In other research aimed at validation of the Social Skills Inventory used for measuring basic communication skills, the overall result achieved in this test was related to the rate of success of students in the role of sellers (Riggio & Carney, 2007).

Types of communication knowledges

Communication skills, the level of which is one of the determinants of quality of work of sellers, can be divided into general, which form the necessary basis for all the others; special, including assertiveness, empathy, the ability to listen, formulating feedback, the ability to motivate; and applied, which reflect the specific requirements of a given activity or a professional role.

General communication

General communication skills include verbal, but also nonverbal manifestations. We distinguish among three levels of general communication skills:

- linguistic level of communication;
- paralinguistic level of communication;
- extralinguistic level of communication;

Linguistic level includes speech and writing, *paralinguistic level* is related to verbal manifestation and encompasses selected means of speech such as the tone of speech or speech tempo, and *extralinguistic level*, also known as nonverbal communication, involves e.g. facial expressions, glances, changing distance from the communication partner, adjusting one's appearance, touch, posture, movements, etc.

While the linguistic level is a determining element of social communication, *paralinguistic* and *extralinguistic* level are equally important. Peltová (1999) presents a finding that during standard communication:

- words used represent only 7% of the overall content of the message;
- the pitch of voice and gestures account for 38%;
- and facial expressions, surprisingly, make up 55%;

General communication skills are not only important because of receiving and communicating information, but they can also affect attitudes, values and emotional equipment.

Assertiveness

Assertive communication is understood as communication activity of a person aiming to achieve the best possible result for them while respecting the opinion of others (Porvazník, 1999). It is an ability to express oneself confidently without manipulating someone or without having to resort to passive or aggressive behaviour (Bishop, 2000).

Gruber (2005) characterizes assertiveness as a set of rules and negotiation techniques leading to healthy, appropriate self-assertion in communication without being too submissive or aggressive.

Nowadays, both in theory and practice, ten assertive rights are used, which are based on a principle that no one can successfully manipulate us unless we allow them to. These basic "ten commandments" integrate mistakes that people often make in interpersonal interaction, and thus also in communication, and that are better avoided.

According to Bedrnová & Nový (2004), assertive approach manifests itself on the level of communication in particular through the following social skills:

- being able to express oneself spontaneously;
- mastering self-opening appropriately;
- being able to push through a justified demand;
- being able to ask for a favour;
- being able to refuse without excessive feelings of guilt and without excessive excuses and explaining;
- being able to give feedback (in particular criticism);
- being able to receive feedback;

According to Wilding (2010), assertive communication style means that:

- we like to look for such solutions to problems that will please everyone;
- we are strong enough to be able to defend our rights calmly;
- we are able to accept the fact that other people also have their rights without feelings of bitterness;

The author further mentions two basic reasons why it is a good decision to use assertive communication style:

- it is generally effective, we are more likely to achieve a desired result using it;
- it is a style that is most appreciated by other people because it applies that if we communicate assertively, it is less likely that people will avoid dealing with us because they will be able to rely on us remaining calm and trying to achieve a good result for both parties;

Novák & Capponi (2004) note that three basic goals of assertiveness are usually quoted in various contexts and modifications:

- raising self-awareness of one's personal rights;
- improving the differentiation among assertiveness, non-assertiveness (usually referred to as passivity) and aggressiveness;
- training individual assertive skills, generally in groups;

Empathy

Empathy should be another strong element of sellers' activities. According to Wood & Tolley (2003), it is an ability to penetrate the mind and personality of someone else and, by doing so, to experience their subjective feelings or inner emotions using one's imagination.

Vymětal (1996) characterizes empathy as an internal setup of a personality connected with an active effort to perceive, grasp and understand someone else's inner world with its subjective meanings and emotions and communicate this understanding in a conversation directly and considerately.

As Wilding (2010) claims, empathy is without a doubt a fundamental building block of positive relationships, as it stimulates motivation. If we are able to perceive emotions of other people and understand them, we are more likely to be willing to act for their benefit, help them and support them. The author states the following applies to empathic people:

- they have a close and trust-based relationship with other people;
- they are able to clearly and openly communicate with most people;
- they are interested in other people's interests and concerns;
- they are able to understand the attitude of someone else even if they personally do not agree with it;
- they are able to forgive others without feelings of bitterness or remorse;

According to several authors, women are better in empathy than men. For instance, Argyle, 1994; Timmers & Fisher, 1998; Johnson & Scholman, 1998 (In Pospěchová & Blížková, 2003) state that besides the fact that women are more oriented at the relationship and keeping conversation going, they are also more open in interaction and express more empathy than men. Woody & Tolley (2003) mention the following key skills of empathy:

- being sensitive and perceptive towards others;
- taking into account needs and interests of others;
- supporting development of others;
- being socially and politically familiar with situations we encounter;

The aforementioned authors emphasize that empathy does not end with reading the emotions of others and the effort to understand their opinions. It also includes using these findings for one's own benefit, but also for the benefit of other people, groups or organisations.

Although empathy was considered an innate ability in the past, the experts are currently in agreement with the fact that the skills of empathy and empathic communication can be learned (Wilding, 2010).

Ability to listen

Listening is a necessary foundation for an effective communication. Without careful and quality listening, no successful and good communication is possible. Listening is a concentrated active process during which we not only hear words transmitted to us, but also analyse them. A good listener should never be merely a passive receiver of information, but they should be able to signal to the speaker that they are listening to them. Bedrnová & Nový (2004) claim the following to be necessary in active listening:

- showing an accommodating attitude;
- paying attention, observing the speaker's face;
- showing watchfulness, but also pleasant behaviour;
- nodding, if confirmation of the speaker's words is in place;
- not avoiding eye contact;
- not letting ourselves distracted by anything;

Unless we are listening effectively, we:

- will annoy the person spending their time in conversation with us;
- will miss important information conveyed to us by the other person;
- won't understand their attitudes and opinions;
- will lose an advantageous negotiation position;
- will weaken our mutual relations (Wilding, 2010).

Creating feedback

Feedback informs the sender of information about receiving and understanding the information by the receiver. In theory of communication, Taylor (1999) defines it as "information on receiving of information." Secondly, feedback may be a reservoir of information on attitudes, responses and moods of the receiver at the time of receiving the sent information.

Feedback is a part of every communication act between a seller and a customer. The way the receiver understands the information, however, does not necessarily need to be identical with the communication intention of the sender. Deviations occurring in this process are contained in feedback. If they are large, the seller needs to repeat the information, select other communication channels, communication tools and communication situation in order to achieve

the desired extent of understanding the information and subsequent identification with its content.

In general, the quicker the feedback, the better it is. The data conveyed by it should always be reliable and comprehensible (Bedrnová & Nový, 2004).

Feedback is an important part of every effective communication. The difference between an effective and ineffective feedback is described by Luthans (1992, In Bedrnová & Nový, 2004). According to him, an effective feedback is aimed at helping the other person. It's specific, descriptive, future-proof, given in a situation when the other person is able to receive it, clear and valuable. An ineffective feedback seeks to humiliate the other person. It is general, evaluative, poorly timed, given randomly, incomprehensible and inadequate.

Ability to motivate

Motivating is the willingness to make a considerable effort in order to achieve results while also satisfying the needs of individuals (Robbins & Coulter, 2004). Motivating and rewarding customers represent one of the most important tasks for sellers. In order to “get someone moving”, we need to encourage them by various offers and conditions, address their inner attitudes and build on their personal values and needs.

According to Gruber (2005), the ability to motivate and lead others to achieving desired results is an art, in which a number of motivational techniques need to be mastered. The author also emphasizes that many motivational techniques are based on communication skills. The ones that, as the author claims, motivate others using a so-called “method of the greatest good” include, for instance, the following:

- empathising with the feelings of the other person;
- better listening;
- talking about what others are essentially interested in;
- not persuading someone who is in a closed psychological state, a so-called “closed mind”;

Assessment and development of communication of sales

In the following lines we will present you assessment and development of communication of sales.

Assessment of communication of sales

If we want to learn about the extent of development of communication skills in sellers, we can use one of assessment methods.

The most frequently used methods include:

- observation;
- interview;
- sociometric methods;
- questionnaires;
- tests;

One of progressive and increasingly frequently used methods of assessment of communication skills is, for instance, Riggio's Social Skills Inventory (SSI).

This standardised psychological test is used for assessing six basic communication skills – the ability to receive, send and control information at two levels - nonverbal (emotional) and verbal (social):

- *emotional expressivity* – used in nonverbal communication, refers to the skill of sending emotional messages, expressing emotional states nonverbally, or encouraging others to express their feelings;
- *emotional sensitivity* – the skill of receiving and interpreting expressions of nonverbal communication of other people, deciphering and interpreting emotional cues, beliefs or attitudes;
- *emotional control* – the ability to regulate emotional communication, nonverbal expressions and also the ability to hide emotions;
- *social expressivity* – the skill of expressing oneself verbally, engaging others in a mutual conversation, initiating a conversation;
- *social sensitivity* – the skill of interpreting verbal communication and sensitivity within social rules and norms, interpreting the appropriateness of one's own social behaviour and social behaviour of others;
- *social control* – the skill of playing social roles, the skill of self-presentation and regulation of verbalisation;

These methods may be used during assessment and self-reflection of job applicants in the area of sales, but also by sellers themselves. Obtained results may help solve a disagreement between the internal setup of seller's personality and information sent outwards or at least help them map out their personal communication or perception style. They may be equally useful as background material for training and development programmes.

The most common aim of training programmes is currently the development of personal competences and social competences. Training programmes focus to a varying extent on supporting and developing self-reflection, reflection of social processes, self-management and social processes management (Orosová - Katreniaková - Sarková - Madarasová - Gecková, 2006). One of the most popular training programmes is the practice of mental health principles, dealing with high pressure situations, development of creativity as well as programmes aimed at social perception, social communication - verbal, nonverbal, active listening, social interaction and, in particular, empathy and assertive communication.

Development of communication skills

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- Empathy development programmes – are organised in the knowledge that different people are variously sensitive in relation to this aspect of interpersonal communication. It becomes obvious that people with higher level of empathy (the ability to empathise with the feelings of others) are generally able to perceive more signs than people not having this ability. The ability of empathy can be affected and improved by training. It should be present in personal equipment of every seller because it is a necessary prerequisite for effective dealing with customers.
- Assertive communication development programmes - According to Novák & Capponi (2004), the most frequent goals of assertive training include:

- acquiring the ability to push through one's justified desires and demands;
- acquiring self-esteem;
- improving one's relationship with other people;
- removing subjective difficulties;

Furthermore, the authors note that assertiveness is modern and, to a certain extent, a trendy method attractive to general population. The lecture form of learning about assertiveness will attract the listeners' attention, but won't affect their social skills. Training courses during which attention needs to be paid to complex adjustment of communication are more appropriate.

The following techniques are most frequently used in programmes aimed at the development of assertiveness:

- *Broken gramophone record*

A technique based on calm repetition of what we want to achieve. It teaches endurance in pushing through one's own desires without prepared arguments or angry feelings. It enables one to ignore manipulative and argumentative pitfalls and stick to one's position.

- *Open door*

This technique teaches accepting manipulative criticism by calmly admitting that there might be a little truth in what our critic is saying. It allows us to pass the final judgement over ourselves and our actions. It enables us to receive criticism calmly, without anguish and, at the same time, does not strengthen our critic in any way.

- *Self-opening*

This technique facilitates social communication and reduces manipulation by mentioning positive and negative aspects of our personality and behaviour. It enables us to calmly express things that used to cause feelings of unknowingness, anguish and guilt before.

- *Free information*

This technique teaches identifying elements in conversation that are interesting and important for our partner and also offer free, unsolicited information about ourselves. It reduces shyness when initiating a conversation and makes it easier for both parties.

- *Negative assertion*

This technique teaches accepting our mistakes and errors in a way that we expressly agree with the criticism of our actual negative qualities, whether it is constructive or aggressive. It enables us to assess our own behaviour without defence, anguish or denying the mistake while reducing anger and aggressiveness of our critic.

- *Negative inquiring*

A technique leading to active support of criticism with the aim to use or exhaust obtained information. This leads our critic to greater assertiveness and reduced dependence on manipulative moves.

- *Selective ignoring*

Using this technique, we are able to deal with criticism, while not responding to one that is manipulative, nonfactual or too general. We signal having heard it; however, we don't comment on the merits.

- *Acceptable compromise*

If our self-esteem is not at stake, it is appropriate in terms of self-assertion to offer a compromise acceptable for both parties. Where self-assessment is at stake, there are no compromises in acting assertively (Porvazník, 1999).

Besides programmes developing general and special communication skills, there are also programmes aimed at the development of applied social skills. It is the practice of techniques applicable in a certain position (e.g. managerial position) or in specific situations (leading company meetings, job interviews, assessment interviews). However, general and applied

communication skills can be hardly separated in real work situations because they mostly interact, and influence and complement each other.

Conclusions

Many research results show that the turnover and profit from products are multiplied by the communication skills of sellers. Effective communication skills appear as the most powerful instrument across the entire spectrum of work-related skills that are of determining importance for the overall success in sales activities. Without a high level of general, special and applied communication skills, no seller can be sufficiently efficient in their work. This is an area that may be a determining competitive advantage of employees and companies and that should become the focus of high schools and universities preparing the future salespeople in the years to come.

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