Self-reflection Essay: Interpersonal Communication

This essay is a self-reflection analysis of my communication skills based upon information generated from the five diagnostic tools presented hereafter and focusing on two communication issues drawn from the results of the diagnostic tools. The two communication issues in need of my personal communication development are public speaking anxiety, more precisely giving a presentation and low tolerance for disagreement. Moreover, this essay consists of literature review focusing on key concepts and theories related to the communication issues. Through this process of reflection, I have gained knowledge of activities I can implement to tackle the communication issues. These activities are reflected in an action plan after the literature review.

I have used five different diagnostic tools to analyze my communication in various communication situations. First tool was a Self-Perceived Communication Competence Questionnaire which is an indicator of how people analyze their own communication competence when confronted with a plethora of communication situations with an array of receivers (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2013). The second tool was a Personal Report of Communication Apprehension which measures an individual's feelings towards communication by asking the individual to analyze diverse communication situations and how one would behave in them (McCroskey, 2007a). The third tool was a Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety which gives, as the name entails, an estimate of individual's level of anxiety towards public speaking (McCroskey, 2007b). The fourth tool was the Willingness to Listen Diagnostic with which one's orientation towards listening can be examined (Richmond & Hickson, 2001). Lastly, the fifth tool was a Tolerance for Disagreement providing information on how well people can tolerate disagreement and conflicting ideas which one believes to be true (Teven, Richmond & McCroskey, 1998).

The results from all the questionnaires where quite accurate and I recognize my communication style and preferences from them. As the results from Self-Perceived Communication Competence show, I am at my most comfortable when talking with friends and having interactions on a one-to-one basis, whereas, I am somewhat uncomfortable talking in public, in large groups of people or meetings. The results from the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension further verifies that I have a slight apprehension when it comes to public speaking or speaking in meetings. My overall communication apprehension score was 70 which falls in the category of a moderate level of communication apprehension. The public speaking anxiety score of 115 demonstrates that I experience moderate levels of anxiety when giving a presentation which is aligned with the scores from the apprehension report. The fourth diagnostic tool, Willingness to Listen provided me with a score of 72 indicating a

moderate level of willingness to listen. Lastly, the tolerance for disagreement score puts me also in the moderate scale with a score of 42.

Although the scores for public speaking anxiety and tolerance for disagreement fall in the category of moderate, I perceive myself needing to improve those areas of communication and I strongly feel that by doing so, it will be beneficial for my business communication to reduce the level of anxiety from moderate to low. When it comes to tolerance for disagreement, I have always had the tendency to avoid conflicts and disagreements in my interpersonal communication and try to solve any issues as diplomatically as possible. However, I believe disagreements are inevitable in business context and especially in decision-making and finding the right way to communicate when disagreeing opinions arise, is crucial.

Reflecting on the public speaking anxiety, giving a presentation in a meeting, I would like to provide the following example of what happened six months ago while I was working as a Legal Assistant in one of the business law firms in Finland. I was given a task to present findings of what could be improved in the procedure of sending responses, claims and pleas to courts on the designated due date. I was to present the findings of the survey in the partner's meeting. Prior to the meeting, I felt quite nervous because I knew I needed to articulate my findings in a comprehensible way as the partners, all of whom are lawyers, had a limited amount of knowledge of the administrative tasks assistants do. Furthermore, judging by my previous experiences, lawyers are a demanding audience, and this only added the pressure to communicate and deliver the presentation as clearly and accurately as possible. Although I was prepared for presenting, I found it difficult to concentrate and remember what I was meant to communicate.

The second example of a communication issue is related to tolerance for disagreement and it took place in the same law firm. I was given a task which I knew did not belong to me, however, to avoid arguments with one of the managers, I ended up completing the task. This is a classic example of my behavior to avoid communicating my disagreeing view of the issue to the other party. I was clearly trying to avoid a possible interpersonal conflict by submissive behavior and communicating to the manager what she wanted to hear. Now, reflecting on the situation, I could have presented a solid argument with evidence to support my view, where it might not have led to a conflict at all.

Communication apprehension (CA) can be defined as an anxiety or fear towards expected or unexpected communication situations with a person or group of people (McCroskey, 1977). Due to these negative associations towards communication, an individual with elevated levels of CA will abstain from voluntarily engaging oneself in oral communication as identified by McCroskey (1977).

Furthermore, McCroskey (2001) identified four types of CA which are anxiety related to trait, audience, context and situation. Trait related anxiety refers to the individual who is avoiding public speaking because of lack of knowledge or experience but with practice will be able to perform in public speaking situations. Audience anxiety is to do with the people in the audience causing the nervousness of the speaker, whereas, context anxiety is caused by, for instance, novelty or uncertainty of the situation. Lastly, the situation anxiety is created by combination of factors such as cultural, social and psychological factors (McCroskey, 1977). The ability to communicate is conceptually distinct from communication apprehension, however, there is strong negative associations between the two and the cause for this phenomenon is believed to be individual's ability to momentarily overcome anxiety and continue to perform in an unpleasant situation in which the negative associations evolve (Gardner, Milne, Stringer & Whiting, 2005).

Public speaking competence is a necessity in business life as researched by Marinho, Mesquita de Medeiros, Gama and Teixeira (2017). Their research also concluded that a predominant element for success in professional life and establishing creditability and is the ability to communicate fluently. Another research conducted by Russ (2012), found out that in an organizational setting, the level of CA individual has effects on the interpersonal workplace relationships and effectiveness as a manager. Another research conducted by Russ (2013), concluded that managers who have prominent level of CA, are less likely to include others in their decision-making process, moreover, they are less likely to propose collaborative communication with their subordinates. From these research results can be concluded that the extent to which communication apprehension influences individual's actions is significant and, subsequently, how important it is to lower the levels of CA so it does not pose far-reaching negative implications for one's professional competence at the workplace.

The tolerance for disagreement was conceptualized following research conducted of group communication and communication in an organizational setting (Teven at al., 1998). Disagreeing is circumstantially dependent meaning that the way one disagrees differs depending on who is the opponent in the disagreement, for instance colleagues or family members, where the disagreement is taking place, and in addition, whether it is disagreeing face-to-face or online (Marra, 2012). The background of the participants, their position in the company and the communication style are factors further identified having an influence on the formation of disagreement by Angour (2012).

The theoretical framework around interpersonal communication regarding disagreement and conflict is not unambiguous since there are many components affecting the situation, whether a discussion evolves into disagreement or conflict (Education portal, 2016). Education portal (2016), identifies

four interpersonal communication factors affecting the emergence of possible disagreement or conflict at the workplace which are verbal communication, non-verbal communication, emotions in communication and listening. De Vries, Bakker-Pieper & Oostenveld (2010) studied different verbal communication styles and identified several factors affecting communication which were preciseness, expressiveness, argumentativeness, assuredness, supportiveness and verbal aggressiveness. These factors have an impact on communication and especially in the business context, the factors dictate how employees perceive their managers. Within a company, knowledge sharing and team commitment are largely influenced by manager's communication style (De Vries et al., 2010). According to another study conducted by Hartman & McCambridge (2011), the effective communication is the number one skill companies seek in managers and it is directly linked to team efficacy and it increases the opportunity for promotion. Hartman and McCambridge (2011), also found that when communicating in different types of situations, one should identify the needs of the audience and adjust communication style accordingly.

Positive non-verbal communication, for instance nonverbal immediacy, may prevent disagreement due to its effect of bringing forward positive signals and attitudes (Jia, Cheng & Hale, 2017). Nonverbal immediacy can be defined as an act of expressing positive signs such as smiling or nodding when listening or talking (Jia et al., 2017). Another component of interpersonal communication affecting the emergence of disagreement in negotiation is emotions as identified by Van Kleef & De Dreu (2006). According to Van Kleef's and De Dreu's findings (2006) in a negotiation situation, those individuals who expressed disappointment or worry in their interpersonal communication persuaded the opponent to adopt the opposing view. As stated above, individual's ability to listen is one of the factors constituting interpersonal communication. As commented by Roberts and Vinson (1998), there are individual variations in the individual's ability to listen and to which extent one lets external stimulus subconsciously effect listening.

After identifying the two communication issues needing development, I have created an action plan for the next six months to overcome these issues. Firstly, keeping a personal journal would be beneficial throughout the process to keep me on track with what I have accomplished and where I can reflect my own progress. At the end of the six-month period, the journal would be a useful tool to identify the areas where I have improved and if there are issues I need to work on, the journal would act as a framework for future planning. Secondly, having a mentor to oversee the process and using the mentor's expertise to overcome the speech anxiety issues and learn confidence strategies for presenting, would make the process effective. I am going to hire Peter Dhu as my mentor who has a Diploma in Professional Coaching and he has accumulated 20 years of experience working with

people over various communication issues (Peter Dhu & Violet Dhu - Corporate Communication Experts, 2016). I would participate to his six-week training program and receive advice on how to give presentations with confidence and reduce communication apprehension.

Mental practices and strategies have been used successfully to improve athletes' performance (Cocks, Moulton, Luu & Cil, 2014). Based on this evidence, I would like to integrate these practices to my action plan to reduce the communication apprehension by visualizing in my mind the upcoming communication situation that I feel anxious about and to relief the stress level. I would also like to get acquainted with the literature regarding communication apprehension and interpersonal conflicts. I have chosen the following three books to read "Communication Apprehension, Avoidance, and Effectiveness" by Richmond, Wrench and McCroskey (Amazon.com, 2017a), "Umm . . .: A Complete Guide to Public Speaking" by O'Loghlin (Cengage Learning, 2017) and "Managing Interpersonal Conflict (Interpersonal Communication Texts)" by Donohue (Amazon.com, 2017b).

I will participate in an interpersonal communication course "Effective People and Communication Skills" conducted by Odyssey Training (Odyssey Training, 2017) to improve my professionalism and effectiveness in communication at the workplace. Furthermore, this course enhances the ability to change communication style depending on the communication situation, one of the skills that the research showed to be highly valued in managers by companies. I will also take part in another course "Public Speaking - Individual Training" by The Voice Business (The Voice Business, 2017) to reduce the public speaking anxiety and gain more knowledge of how to prepare for the presentations in an effective manner. This course also provides advice for how to monitor and become aware of the non-verbal communication I am using. Moreover, I am given advice on how to structure the speech. All these aforementioned activities and the time of conducting them are illustrated in Figure 1.

I believe the best way to evaluate my progress after completing the six months, are the future presentations at university and in the workplace and the feedback received from them. I also believe that learning about communication is a lifelong process, hence, interpersonal communication skills should be practiced whenever one is given a chance.
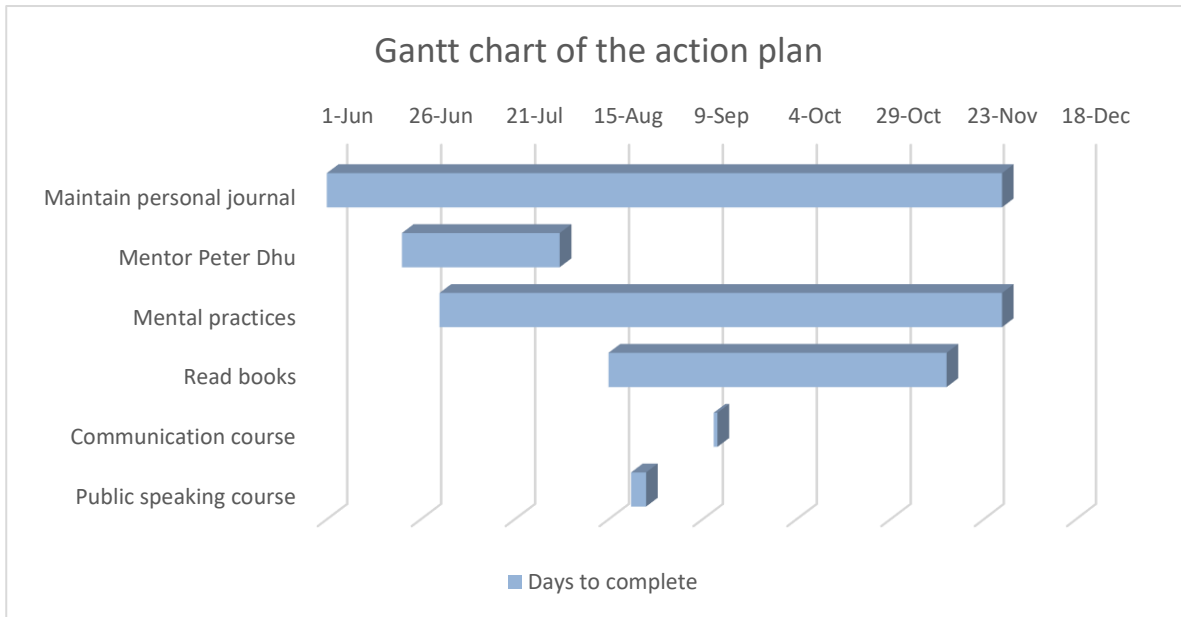
Figure 1. Gantt chart of the action plan

In conclusion, this essay gave a brief insight to the five communication diagnostic tools I used to gather information of my communication issues. The two key communication issues I identified where public speaking anxiety and the tolerance for disagreement. These two issues relate to the theories of communication apprehension and disagreement in interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication being a vast area, the literature review focused on the components of verbal and non-verbal communication, emotions in communication and listening, whereas the communication apprehension addressed the distinct types of CA and the ability to communicate as well as public speaking competence. Lastly, an action plan was created based upon the results of the analysis.

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