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Consultancy skills in the light of emotional intelligence and communication skills of students specialised in human resources consultancy

In our research we examined two groups of students specialised in human resources studying at University of Győr. We analysed the self-reflective communication developmental plans of 32 students (group 1) because we wanted to learn which communication needs they could identify and are ready to overcome. We also looked at the emotional intelligence of 44 students (group 2) drawing on Bar-On's model which focuses on the harmony of intrapsychic and interpsychic skills. After comparing the two areas we could identify relations between the self-reflective description of communication and empathy, self-esteem, adaptability and handling stress and emotions. There are also links with age-related characteristics, and it points at the importance of learning through life experience while becoming an effective consultant.

Consultancy skills

"*Human relations management is a highly communication-intense activity, (…) in fact all of its functions are realized through communication*" (Borgulya Istvánné Vető, 2010, p. 62). To confirm the above quotation we must identify the place and importance of communication within the existing communication models developed for the HR profession. De Caluwé and Reitsma (2010) compiled a list of 56 consultant competencies in their study based on empirical research. They interviewed 40 older, highly experienced Dutch consultants, who together represented more than 900 years of consultancy experience. The ten domains and the competencies the researchers identified were: "*Enterprising, Showing resilience, Organizing, Performing, Analysing, Considering, Facilitating, Influencing, Managing, Inspiring confidence*" (de Caluwé and Reitsma, 2010, pp. 9−11).

The consultants interviewed agreed that there are 17 basic competencies all management consultants need which belong to six of the ten domains: showing resilience, analysing,

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considering, facilitating, influencing and inspiring confidence. "*They should, therefore, be part of every training program for consultants*" (de Caluwé and Reitsma, 2010, p. 18).

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) also devised a competency model designed for HR professionals to serve as a source for development at four career levels. It identifies nine competencies: "*Human Relations Expertise/Knowledge, Ethical Practice, Leadership and Navigation, Business Acumen, Consultation, Critical Evaluation, Communication, Global and Cultural Effectiveness, Relationship Management*" (SHRM, 2016, p. 11). Communication falls into the Interpersonal Competency Cluster and has 12 skills among which there are skills like verbal and written communication, persuasion, presentation, active listening, effective and timely feedback (SHRM 2016).

Ulrich et al (2013) identified six domains of HR competence and translated them into roles showing what HR professionals must focus on. The roles are as follows: „*Strategic Positioner, Credible Activist, Change Champion, Human Resource Innovator and Integrator and Technology Proponent*" (Ulrich et al, 2013, p. 463). What the present research looks at more closely is the Credible Activist's role where communicational skills, like building relations and persuasion, earning trust or the ability to develop based on self-knowledge, are the most central to high performance. The authors see it as the core of all other roles because HR specialists operate at a personal level throughout the organisation and deal with individuals (themselves and the workers as well) helping them reach personal and business goals.

In Hungary Tokár-Szadai (2013) conducted a three-wave research from 2001 to 2012 among consultants and their clients. To make her results internationally comparable she used 21 traits previously identified by Höselbrath (2000). She found that the most important characteristics of consultants are: communication skills, team spirit and entrepreneurship, IT proficiency and ethical behaviour. According to Tokár-Szadai while the competencies were slowly changing in the given decade, the differences are not significant between the first and last surveys.

As research shows communication skills are present in every model as they are basic skills of HR specialists which they must exhibit if they are to perform well in their roles. In order to get a better understanding of our topic it is necessary to clarify the relationship of communication skills with personality traits.

Communication skills and personality traits

To our understanding a certain degree of assertiveness is needed in a job in which the professional is put in a situation where the two players are unequal. During consultancy the client is asking for help so their relation is asymmetric from a psychological perspective. However, it might happen that it is the consultant who is blinded by the client's prestige or position of authority and see himself/herself as subordinate or underprivileged. As Mészáros et al (2016) say in this case the consultant may become the "*client's scribe*" (Mészáros at al, 2016, p. 129) and wants to satisfy the client's unspoken requests thus mirrors their own wishes. Accepting the client does not mean to agree with them but to accept them as clients and still represent the consultant's expert opinion.

It has been a question whether communication skills and assertiveness are strongly interrelated or not. A group of Turkish researchers investigated the relationship of locus of control, social support and communication skills with assertiveness of female nursing students. They found that *"communication skills have a direct path to - and also were the strongest predictor of - assertiveness. (...) Assertive behaviour can be developed by learning how to communicate in all interactions"* (Kukulu, 2006, p. 36).

Further promising results for educators come from a survey in which the big-five personality factors (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and autonomy) and a measure of assertiveness on the one hand and the mastery level of communication skills, on the other hand were investigated. As Kuntze et al (2016) state it is even surprising for them that none of the above mentioned variables could significantly predict the mastery of communication skills by psychology students. It means, that „*acquiring communication skills is not influenced by personality*" (Kuntze et al, 2016, p. 39), so training in communication skills is equally useful for different personalities. The researchers tried to find an explanation for their results and hypothesized that adequate social behaviour which is often associated with assertiveness does not mean the ability of adequately applying communication skills in a professional situation.

General intelligence as specified by Lubinski (2004) as the aggregation of three separate abilities: verbal, numerical and spatial, can also be seen as a predictor of success in communication skills training. Kuntze at al (2018, p. 11) in their study expected "*verbal intelligence to predict the mastery of communication skills*", but their results show that "*after the course in basic or advanced communication skills, verbal intelligence did not influence the mastery level of basic communication skills anymore*" (Kuntze at al, 2018, pp. 13−14).

To sum up, communication skills and assertiveness are interrelated but it is the communication skills which can and should be developed to establish a strong base for becoming more assertive. As research shows intelligence and other personality traits do not affect the possibility to improve communication skills, thus everyone can become a better communicator and consequently be more assertive. Beyond the more conscious personality dimensions, our study focused on the relationships with emotional intelligence.

The phenomenon of emotional intelligence

An early interpretation of the concept of emotional intelligence considers it as a determinant of individual effectiveness, approaching it as a manifestation of social and emotional competences (Goleman, 1998). Good emotional intelligence means paying close attention to ourselves and the world of others while developing social and emotional skills.

Credited for inventing the term emotional intelligence, Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) describe it as "*a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions*". This definition has also been explained as having "*four branches: (a) perceiving emotions, (b) using emotions to facilitate thought, (c) understanding emotions, and (d) managing emotions*" (Salovey and Pizarro, 2003, p. 263).

The Perceiving branch addresses the perceptual skills of self-identification of emotions in thoughts, identifying emotions in other people, accurate expression of emotions, and the ability to differentiate and discriminate between accurate and inaccurate emotions. The second branch, Using Emotions, advocates their use in prioritising thinking by directing attention to important events/factors. The third branch, Understanding Emotions, is based on the ability to understand complex emotions and emotional 'chains', the transition of emotions through stages, the ability to understand relationships among emotions, and interpret the meanings emotions convey. The fourth branch, Managing Emotions, encompasses the ability to reflectively monitor emotions and stay open to them, and the ability to engage or detach from emotions. The branch also advocates the ability to solve emotion-based problems without necessarily suppressing the negative emotions (Caruso et al, 2002).

Of the other ways of defining emotional intelligence, we regard Bar-On's ideas highly relevant, who likes to refer to it as emotional-social intelligence. According to his definition, "*emotional-social intelligence is an array of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills and behaviours that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves,*

understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands, problems and pressure" (Bar-On, 2012, p. 31).

Bar-On thus considers other important mechanisms to be related to emotional intelligence, basing its model on five main factors:

– Intrapersonal skills – "t*he ability to recognize, understand and express emotions and feelings*";

– Interpersonal skills – "*the ability to understand how others feel and relate with them*";

– Stress management – "*the ability to manage and control emotions*";

– Adaptability – "*the ability to manage change*";

– General Mood – "*the ability to generate positive affect and be self-motivated*" (Bar-On, 2006, p. 3).

Bar-On's complex system of the concept of emotional intelligence was also the focus of our study, as we identified the skills of the students in the context of these sub-areas, and determined their relationship with coping skills.

Caruso and Wolfe (2001) see emotional intelligence as a determinant of career development, and state that emotions play a crucial role in career development and selection. If individual emotional and social skills can be realized from time to time, they can even be shaped, which is very important in the long term for meeting career challenges and career development.

Of course, individual emotional intelligence is a significant support for a person in every area of life: it helps you to process your harder experiences, to shape your feelings, to tame any negative feelings and thus to find a new balance and develop resources. Based on Bar-On's dimensions, several studies have sought to clarify possible relationships. Given that we have addressed human resource counselling students in our work, we summarize the results for this target group. The emotional intelligence components that determine workplace success include: (1) among HR consultants: self-actualisation, happiness, optimism, self-knowledge, assertiveness, stress tolerance; (2) among management consultants: assertiveness, emotional awareness, happiness, optimism, empathy, interpersonal relations (Balázs, 2014).

Research Design

Our research basically consisted of three phases:

(1) we analysed self-reflective narratives focusing on the participants' present communication tools, desired communication skills and opportunities for development

in the field, with which we sought answers to what communication needs they could identify and what problems they wanted to overcome in order to communicate better in their present and future professional situations;

(2) based on the Bar-On model we also conducted an emotional intelligence study;

(3) then we analysed the relationships between the two areas.

The participants were 1st year students on Master's Degree Programme in Human Resources Consulting at Apáczai Csere János Faculty, University of Győr (first phase: 32 students, second phase: 44 students).

Analysis of the self-reflective narratives

The students were tasked with a kind of guided writing, in which they had to name two areas they wanted to develop in order to become better communicators. They also had to explain how these weaknesses appear in their daily communication, and what symptoms, effects and outcomes they perceive. They had to explain how they could progress and what or who could help them. Finally, they had to describe the desired state and how long they thought it would take to achieve it.

As a research tool we used qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) for our goal was to find patterns based on the answers and to identify the main themes of communication development plans. Lasswell's formula on the analysis of written communication: 'Who says what, in what way, to whom and with what effect?' (Lasswell, 1948) was also used with a focus on what was being written. As the texts examined explicated self-developmental plans, they were primarily addressing the writers themselves and were intended to have a self-motivational and self-awareness effect on them. Communication development plans therefore had to be placed in this context.

Analysis of emotional intelligence

We used the Bar-On Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire, which identifies the fit and emphasis of each skill area on a five-point scale based on the Bar-On model.

Research results

Features of the self-reflective narratives

Looking at the present communication techniques we have to interpret the answers according to course types. Full-time students basically complained on their own insufficient conflict

management, high stress level when talking in public and some bad practices aimed at the communication partner, like impatience and aggressive communication style. For correspondence students we can see the same problems with conflict management and high stress level when talking in public, but instead of mentioning their bad practices in connection with the communication partner they went into more details about their shortcomings, like lack of assertiveness, inefficient emotional control, disability of expressing thoughts clearly, speech impediments (too quick or too quiet speech) and inconsistent body language.

In terms of desired states all students, irrespective of their course types, want to have more self-confidence and self-assurance, states describing positive characteristics of the communicator. If we look at good practices aimed at the partner, full-time students were much more attentive and emphasised the need to listen to the partner actively, to check their understanding and to relate to them with empathy. Correspondence students also mentioned the same categories except checking understanding, but they did it less frequently compared to their number. To highlight some further characteristics of the results it must be stated that there was a general willingness and desire to have a better self-knowledge expressed by almost all participants.

As there are clear differences between the two groups of informants (full-time and correspondence students), it is worth looking for some kind of explanation of this phenomenon. To our understanding the differences can be due to their different backgrounds and the different tuition at university. Correspondence students have longer work history thus more personal experiences of workplace communication, so they might have a more detailed picture of their own communication style and the challenges they face. At the same time the two groups attended courses with different design owing to the special circumstances of full-time and correspondence programmes. The full-time courses are longer so the students are given more lessons, thus go deeper into the topic both at a theoretical and a practical level. These courses are also more interactive because of the smaller number of students and can meet the students' needs better as they are more personalized.

And finally one more remark about the results of this research phase. There were 32 participants and only two of them were male students. This is normal as women have increasingly been moving into HR recently (Ulrich et al, 2013) and bring their own communication style. On average, women use more expressive, tentative, and polite language than men do, especially in situations of conflict (Basow and Rubenfield, 2003), they use less powerful speech (Lakoff, 1975), tend to interrupt less than men do (Thorne and Henley, 1975),

and often weaken their statements (Pearson, 1985). As a result they might feel that they have less power and lower self-esteem, reflected in their narratives.

The results of emotional intelligence and their relation to communication

Using the Bar-On Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire among our students, our goal was to determine the individual sensitivity of them. On a 5-point scale with grades 1 to 5, the students' average score is 3.85, which indicates to us the existence of a fundamentally high level of emotional intelligence among them, but also shows opportunities for further development.

Along the various emotional intelligence subscales, the following features emerged from the students' responses. The table below summarizes the typical averages for each dimension, as well as shows the emphasis of the subscales by indicating the order of the first five (**in bold**) and the last five (*in italics*) dimensions *(Table 1)*.

Bar-On's EQ-dimensions		Mean	Rank
Intrapersonal skills	*Assertiveness*	3.52	*11*
	Emotional Self-Awareness	3.99	
	Self-Regard	3.62	*10*
	Independence	3.31	*14*
	Self-Actualisation	4.35	**2**
Interpersonal skills	**Empathy**	4.29	**3**
	Social Responsibility	4.45	**1**
	Interpersonal Relationship	4.25	**4**
Adaptability	Reality-Testing	3.62	
	Flexibility	3.45	*12*
	Problem-Solving	4.05	
Stress Management	*Stress Tolerance*	3.3	*15*
	Impulse Control	3.45	*13*
General Mood	Optimism	4.03	
	Happiness	4.19	**5**

Table 1: Results of the examination of emotional intelligence

It is evident that alongside the emotional intelligence components the skills of the human resource counselling students are shown to be more relevant mainly to social skills – e.g. social

responsibility or empathy –, furthermore the possibility of experiencing happiness is included in the first five dimensions. It should also be noted that the subscale of self-actualization is also ranked high, so it can be assumed that the related internal resources can be properly accessed by the students in this group, and this can help them develop both professionally and personally.

Subsequent items in the order of the subscales include basically the stress management subscales and several components from the intrapsychic range: assertiveness, independence and self-regard. All of that point out that help is still needed to deal with the difficulties and conflicts that arise, and in parallel some intrapsychic skills also need to be strengthened, so the communication skills that are at the centre of our study will certainly require assisting intervention.

Summary

Our study of the relationship between communication skills and emotional intelligence among human resource counselling students has pointed out some interfaces between the two areas, particularly in the following dimensions:

(1) **Assertiveness**, as self-confidence and self-assurance are commonly desired states in most narratives and it is the dimension taking the 11th place on the EQ scale, so it is definitely a week resource of the participants.

(2) **Stress management**, as it is a common problem mentioned in the narratives, while stress tolerance and impulse control are ranked 13th and 15th on the EQ scale, so stress-related problems are issues which should be dealt with according to the participants.

(3) Beyond the overlapping areas we have also seen one particular difference which relates to empathy.

(4) **Empathy** is one of the desired skills mentioned in the narratives of full-time students, which highlights that some of them lack it in their communication. At the same time it is the dimension on the EQ scale which is ranked 3rd, so empathy is a strong resource of the participants filling in the emotional intelligence questionnaire. At the moment we cannot provide an explanation for this contradiction and further research would be needed to get a more detailed picture of this skill or to understand the contradicting results.

What is clear for us, researchers and tutors of future human resources consultants, is that good communication practices need to be affirmed and EQ skills need to be strengthened or built up. With the help of similar assignments and questionnaires we can raise the awareness of our

students and offer developmental opportunities so that they become successful consultants. Let us finish with a quotation which guide our work and we do agree with. „Academic qualifications, practical experience and personal development should be seen as the building blocks of a professional career" (Boxall and Burch, 2007, p. 30).

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