

CITY FINAL

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Where The West Begins

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Communication skills

Workplace still demands that employees be capable of conversing

BY CATHY O'NEAL

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If you have a wonderful idea, and you can't communicate it, it's no good. That may sound simple, but it's a point that hit home with Leon Abbott, program director for university partnerships at Lockheed Martin. Lockheed's top engineers were recently faced with tough competition for a contract, and it was up to them to present information to high-ranking executives at the company they were courting. Although they were good engineers, they were limited in communication skills.

"We even considered bringing in actors to do the presentations," Abbott said. "But we realized actors couldn't answer the technical questions. We needed the people who were going to present to be the ones with the technical knowledge—the ones who designed the systems."

It may be a high-tech world, but communication skills are as important as ever, maybe even more so.

A recent survey of human resource directors at top companies showed that businesses are spending an average of \$300,000 a year on communication skills training for employees, particularly managers. Another human resources survey revealed that when employers hire, the first thing they look at is the candidate's attitude followed by communication skills. Experience and training were in third place.

Training was the answer to the presentation challenge at Lockheed. Abbott brought in communication consultant Dianna Booher, who customized training for the engineers to help them with their presentations. She helped them with presentation skills, content and how to field questions effectively. Abbott said she also helped the presenters deal with any feelings of

intimidation they may have had about speaking to high-ranking officials.

With 21 years in the communication business, Booher and her company, Booher Consultants, have trained a client list of more than 200 fortune 500 companies, including IBM, Texas Instruments, Exxon, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Ernst & Young, Nokia, Frito-Lay and PepsiCo. The company offers a variety of interpersonal skills training, such as listening, conflict resolution, leading effective meetings, communication differences between genders and customer service. Booher said she is most often asked for help with oral presentations and written communications.

"Work doesn't get done if you don't write,"

she said. "You see results from what you write or present. Everyone's opinion—your boss, your co-workers, your peers—rests in your ability to communicate."

Booher said that an area of concern for companies should be e-mail. She has written a new book devoted to e-mail do's and don'ts called *E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication*. Being able to produce clear, concise e-mails will save time for the writer and readers. Booher says companies should pay attention to the fact that employees are communicating directly with customers via e-mail.

"That drastically affects the company's image," she said.

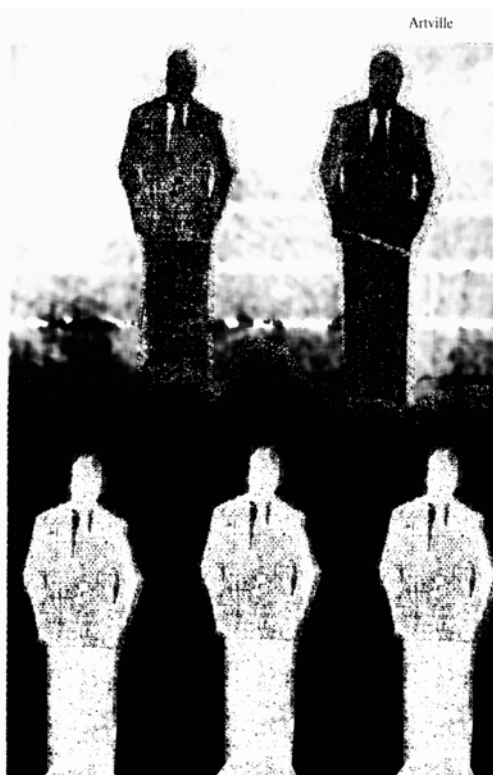
Typically, Booher's training begins with a company's executives. They receive an overview, practice a few techniques, and give and receive feedback. Usually, Booher said, they then mandate that their employees attend skills training.

"People see every day of training as future dollars in their pockets for their careers," she said.

Booher said that the benefits for companies and employees who hone their communication skills reach to many areas of an organization. Employees with good communication skills are more productive. Communicating well helps create a positive image with customers and the general public. And good communication can help with employee retention.

"If communication on the inside is poor, it destroys morale and creates discontent, and employees leave," she said.

"Communications skills is one of the most critical skill sets employees can have," Abbott said. "It's not just about formal presentations, it's informal communications in meetings and being able to communicate concerns and ideas. What a waste if ideas are not being heard."



Cathy O'Neal is an Arlington-based free-lance writer.