

## Chapter 10

# How to Identify and Teach Abstract Skills: A Case Study of Personal Practice

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**Abstract** In this chapter I discuss recent research in an Australian industry sector which focused on the development of a skills recognition framework for the Australian rail industry. The research process identified that many people who are technical experts become managers in the industry despite lacking the abstract, tacit, holistic or soft skills that are required to manage and lead people. Skills recognition assessments (which include recognition of prior learning and recognition of current competencies) are a valuable component of training, human resource management and workplace development. They also have a place beyond programs that are designed to formally accredit pre-existing learning. I consider ideas and practices around recognition of learning, skills and capability as the foundations for a wider view of skills recognition; one that is forward looking, focused on learning and is more connected with workplace issues and practices. I draw attention to the tacit skills and soft skills (abstract skills) that are less likely to be recognised in formal competency-based frameworks, or even to be acknowledged as vital components of the suite of skills and experiences needed by people in managerial and senior roles in general. I identify a process for educating managers to accept that abstract skills are a vital function of management. I explain the use of informal skills recognition assessments as a means by which abstract skills – or lack thereof – can be evaluated, and detail how to teach some aspects of these skills.

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## **Introduction – Skills Recognition**

Skills recognition (SR) processes have emerged as valuable components of training, human resource management and workplace development programs and they have a place beyond assessments that are designed to formally accredit pre-existing learning. They can be undertaken informally to assess the skills and knowledge that people do – or do not – have, and hence can be used to identify where gap training would benefit an employee.

There are various views about what skills recognition is and what processes may be involved. In Australia, they have generally been referred to as recognition of prior learning and recognition of current competencies. To make this a little more complex, both here and internationally, additional terms are used to describe aspects of skills recognition. These include, among others: assessment of prior learning, accreditation of prior experiential learning, accreditation/assessment/recognition of prior (experiential) learning, accreditation of prior learning and achievement, prior learning assessment and recognition, recognition of non-formal and informal learning and validation (Maher and Morrison 2010, pp. 7–8). In this chapter I will use the term ‘skills recognition’ as it encompasses all of the above activities.

### ***Abstract Skills***

While undertaking a 3-year research project into workforce development strategies in an Australian industry sector, we were interested in learning whether non-technical skills, also referred to as abstract, soft, holistic, tacit and employability skills, were recognised and valued. We were also looking to ascertain how these abstract skills were currently being assessed in formal and/or informal skills recognition processes, and if these processes could be improved.

The term abstract ‘skills’ is referred to variously in the literature and in workplace practice and often clusters with soft, tacit, holistic and/or employability skills. The Australian Quality Framework (2013) defines employability skills as communication, teamwork, problem solving, having initiative and enterprise, the ability to plan and organise, self-management, learning and technology. These are currently under review. The Australian Council for Educational Research (2013) measures people’s aptitudes in the area of abstract skills by testing their ability to identify abstract patterns and rules and relationships, to generate and evaluate hypotheses and to draw conclusions.

In the relevant literature, abstract skills are also considered to include organisational skills, the ability to engage in positive verbal communication via active listening, to work collaboratively, to use tact and diplomacy in negotiations, to be able to give and receive feedback, to write fluently when producing reports and business cases and so on, to think metaphorically, to have well-developed analytical skills, personal critical insight, situational awareness and to take responsibility for one’s

decisions (Metz et al. 2012; Sowa 1984; Logsdon n.d.). Metz et al. also underlined the importance of people in technical and engineering roles having well-developed abilities to ‘visualise in three dimensions’ (2012, p. 1). This proposal is particularly relevant to this chapter as the research in which this chapter is partly centred was undertaken in the Australian rail industry.

In 2012 a final report based on research funded by the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) found that there were still inconsistent definitions of employability skills, and defined them as ‘the non-technical skills and knowledge necessary for effective participation in the workforce, as distinct from those required more broadly in society’ (2012, 20). They noted too that the workplace context was a key factor when assessing these skills. In summary, they proposed that there was a need to develop a framework to allow employers to have an enhanced understanding of what these abilities are, to increase consistency of interpretation and assessment of employees and potential employees. This was closely allied to some aspects of our investigations.

In his research in the Australian rail industry, Short (2012, p. 1) found that ‘meta-competencies’ – allied to abstract skills – which are those abilities that encompass relationship building, interpersonal communication and self-awareness were not skills that all managers had developed, and that their importance was not understood. Related to this, he also proposed that well-developed self-awareness and strong levels of self-efficacy were essential psychological attributes for modern managers (Short 2012, p. 2). Short and Piip further proposed that the additional non-technical skills that managers need also include ‘situational awareness, workload management, working with others, decision making, conscientiousness, communications and self-management’ (2013, p. 2). For clarity in this chapter, the term ‘abstract skills’ encompasses all of those referred to above.

In this chapter I examine some of the findings from the research in the rail industry. I then focus on how abstract skills can be identified through the use of informal skills recognition assessments. I conclude by detailing how some elements of abstract skills – such as the ability to listen actively and to undertake positive negotiations – can be learned by employees in their organisational settings.

## The Context

The context of our research emerged as crucial. While skills recognition assessments often focus on technical skills, some of the participants in our research, who included learning and development managers, human resource managers, trainers/assessors and some SR recipients, also considered that the possession of what they often referred to as soft or abstract skills was vital for people in their industry. Moreover, they agreed that these skills should be assessed and recognised more readily both within formal and informal skills recognition assessment processes and in workforce development more broadly.

One participant, who was a trainer/assessor from a large state passenger rail company, suggested that abstract skills were vitally important in the safety-critical rail industry. He proposed that learning from aviation in this regard would be useful and explained that: 'I mean good decision making in aviation makes the difference between life and death, and it can be the same here'. In the following discussion, I summarise the findings about abstract skills in the rail-centred research.

### ***Lack of Awareness of the Relevance of Abstract Skills***

Some managers and employees showed a lack of awareness about what constituted non-technical or abstract skills, why they were valuable, how to assess their presence, and/or how they could be learned. These findings suggest that there is a need to for managers and employers to understand and acknowledge that abstract skills are essential to safety-critical work such as risk management and decision making and in safety-critical sectors such as transport. As one industry expert put it:

I mean the whole law is based around risk management, risk assessment, making decisions, but that is as a core skill set is one that, you know, probably dangerous for me to say this, but it's not well developed across the industry.

A trainer/assessor from a passenger rail company stressed that the industry needed to improve training and assessment of what they called soft skills such as situation awareness. Furthermore, they summarised their own experience as being that, while the technical aspects of rail work were not necessarily highly demanding, when things went wrong it was tacit or soft skills that were needed to enable people to make rapid, relevant responses and to take a lead in crucial decision making.

### ***Difficulties with Identifying, Assessing and Training Abstract Skills***

Views of trainers and assessors about what and whether abstract skills could be taught or gained through experience varied. While some trainers stressed that employees can be trained to have heightened awareness and decision-making capacities to handle demanding situations, other interviewees suggested 'common sense' – which they colloquially referred to as 'soft skills' – was innate and could not be learned. One learning and development manager from a medium-sized state passenger rail service noted that assessors were not provided with information and guidance on how to assess soft skills:

OK, they're your employability skills which are built into each unit of competence, right, so there are five employability skills which are assessed holistically, and that's the reason why they were developed that way. So you've got problem solving, you've got team work, you've got being able to use technology in the workplace, you have, what are the other two,

the other two, language, literacy and numeracy, and I forget what the fifth one is. They're what you call your soft ones, but they are a strong part of the assessment guideline, under the assessment criteria of any unit of competence. They must be assessed in accordance with the performance criteria ... How do you measure it though? ... Alright, that's always the problem ... Any training that's involved with designing and developing assessment tools does not cover off on this effectively.

The notion of teaching these skills was also seen as potentially problematic, as teaching them was not well understood across the industry:

I mean we teach them non-technical skills. I don't think people here understand what non-technical skills really are; I don't think they understand ... Non-technical skills is something you can teach across all Australian railways, that is something you can teach across those, I guess you'd call them 'soft' skills.

By contrast, another participant stated that they did not think that abstract skills could be taught:

I look at skills and some skills can be learnt and some cannot. Like you've either, you know, got common sense or you don't. You can't actually train, and I train lots of people, you can't train the common sense into somebody.

The above statement also suggests that the participant did not understand what abstract skills were. Similarly another participant explained:

We've got lots of technical knowledge but we've got no natural leadership, we've got no ... behavioural-based skills that would enable this business to go further, so you need to really look at (1) in the role that you're recruiting for, can the technical side of that be trained? Well the majority of the time it can be a behavioural characteristic such as leadership or drive or motivation. Can that be trained? Well not necessarily because, you know, by the time these guys get to the point where they're at ... it's very hard to mould somebody.

Another industry expert also explained that different roles and areas of rail varied in terms of soft skill requirements. In particular he pointed to how infrastructure working differs from other operational areas of rail; sound team-working skills were required when dealing with the things that could occur suddenly in this sector. From another perspective, a learning and development manager who specialised in leadership and management suggested that among several reasons for the technical focus was that it was relatively cheap and easy to teach and assess technical experience, whereas assessing the presence of abstract skills was difficult. This understanding about an underlying pragmatism in relation to employee development was a very useful insight.

Comments from other participants suggest however that perhaps a different kind of training, one that facilitates the gradual building of responsibility and decision making, might foster the development of behavioural skills that their industry training often did not include. A train driver trainer/assessor who previously worked in aviation compared training and assessment in rail with that of aviation. He noted that in aviation employees are supported to gradually take on greater responsibility for independent decision making, whereas it was his observation that in rail trainees were fully supervised and were then abruptly left to their own devices at the end of their training period.

### ***Including Abstract Skills in Skills Recognition Assessment***

As a number of interviewees pointed out, although soft skills such as team work or communication skills may be written into assessment criteria, they are not necessarily used or assessed adequately. One compliance/competency officer suggested that this was due to the industry failing to appreciate the value of abstract skills. She suggested that these had lost their focus by being embedded in narrower range employability skills, rather than being addressed as separate key competencies. This reflected the findings of the research funded by DEEWR referred to above.

Under the Australian Qualification Framework, specific abstract skills that were clustered under the heading 'employability skills' tended to be considered to be a low priority by rail managers and trainer/assessors. Few of the 74 research participants raised the matter of employability skills, and those who did often suggested that such skills were not well identified or well assessed in rail. Moreover, by being placed within the limitations of eight specific employability skills, other important abstract skills could be overlooked. A learning and development manager from a medium-sized passenger rail service explained: 'It's the qualitative abstract part, the employability skills part that you want in the individual that can't be measured out of straight performance criterias [sic]'.

Another interesting perspective explained by a trainer/assessor from a large public state passenger rail company highlighted a 'triangle' of three key area of competence: soft skills, technical skills and 'the rules'. The rules loomed large in this industry! As several interviewees pointed out, a big obstruction to giving skills recognition to *technical* competencies is that technical skills and legal obligations were perceived to vary from company to company, state to state, passenger to freight, and between locations. Non-technical, certified skills were on the other hand seen to be transferable.

Some interviewees did inform us of the ways in which soft skills were being recognised and harnessed to identify employees suited to higher-level roles and responsibilities more readily. A learning and development manager from a multinational freight company outlined how they were using what they referred to as soft skills identification to build a more robust training system among train drivers.

### ***Abstract Skills and Management Positions***

Having well-developed abstract skills was highlighted as crucial in management and corporate positions. Some interviewees suggested that one of the problems with management in the rail industry was a lack of focus on soft skills, or more specifically business acumen, among managers. The current culture of seniority was seen to promote rail employees on the basis of longevity and accrued seniority rather than the acquisition of the kinds of abstract skills required to manage at higher

levels. A learning and development manager from a large public state passenger rail company commented:

But you know it's like a lot of places, there are a lot of people that are, say, technically or operationally very, very competent and very clever and very smart but their soft skills, their business acumen, that's like been something that's not, you know, not huge at [our organisation].

A learning and development manager from a medium-sized state passenger rail service also explained that, as the rail industry currently valued on-the-job experience over education, it was difficult to develop leadership programs that focused on needed abstract skills as there was 'quite a strongly held view that training should be done on the job, and that's all you need to know'.

One interviewee, a human resource manager from a large state passenger rail company, pointed to what she referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' – the skills and knowledge that are related to specific organisational expectations as distinct from workplace knowledge that employees bring into their workplaces. Another difficulty that was cited was that a manager needed some degree of personal critical insight and relevant education to understand the importance of abstract skills.

In summary, while there were some differing perspectives, it emerged in general that the participants in this research who were involved in workforce development thought that abstract skills were required in almost all roles in the industry to a greater or lesser degree, and that promoting people on the basis of years of service and highly developed technical skills did not necessarily lead to the right people going into management.

## **From Research Findings to Professional Practice**

In the following section, I describe hands-on methods that identify abstract skills – or the lack thereof – informally, and how some aspects of abstract skills can be taught in the workplace.

### ***Some Informal Techniques That Can Be Used to Identify Soft Skills***

A key to assessing abstract skills well is for the assessor to be well versed in what constitutes these attributes, and to apply their knowledge judiciously in informal ways for the benefit and development of employees. It is also essential that employees understand that abstract skills are central to effective management and that they can be learned. Managers also need to understand that having well-developed abstract skills are crucial to being a successful manager or leader.

**Table 10.1** Informally identifying your skills and experience

People skills and experience	Financial skills and experience	Software skills and experience	Technical, hardware skills and experience	Project management skills and experience
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In a former occupation, I often facilitated workplace interviews in which technical personnel felt that, as experienced and successful software engineers, programmers and technicians, they should be able to move upwards to go straight into management positions. They were motivated not only by an increased sense of personal kudos, but also by the higher salaries that were usually paid to managers and some salespeople, when compared to technical employees. Given the frequency of this request to be promoted into management, I developed the following techniques which have practical utility across a broader range of contexts.

### ***Using Informal Skills Recognition Assessments to Evaluate Abstract Skills***

My initial conversation with the aspirational employee was a general discussion in which I asked them to tell me about themselves, their career goals and what they considered their personality to be like. I followed this by asking them why they wanted to go into management and what skills they thought they could bring to a management position.

The following diagram illustrates a grid of skills required for managers that I developed through questioning our successful project managers and senior employees about what they proposed were the necessary skills and attributes of a successful project manager and manager in general. Importantly, the fact that I asked for their input increased the likelihood of their buy-in to the process. At that time I was a member of the board for the University of South Australia's Bachelor of Business Information Systems degree and Master of Business Information Systems, from which I also derived pertinent information. I also undertook a literature search to further develop the components of this table. I used this table (Table 10.1) in meetings with our employees so that we could both – and I use the word 'both' deliberately – begin to understand what skills they had, and what was required in general for a project manager in that industry sector. (Note: I tailored this table slightly for differing roles.) At all times, I explained that this was not a test scenario, but one in which I could then identify areas in which they may need more training or more management experience than they currently had. I also explained that I might also be able to identify people who were ready to go into management roles. Rather than using the (then) very embryonic and at times differing criteria as detailed in early iterations of project management certifications, I used non-educational jargon to



detail the attributes that were required of a sound project leader or manager to undertake their roles successfully.

The first step was to obtain their workplace curriculum vitae – which were updated at each performance review – to ensure that they reflected their current skills and experience. I then gave them a copy of this, and asked them to talk me through it, then to transpose the information that was in it into a table as below. They were also asked to add additional columns or rows where necessary.

At the completion of this exercise I verbally prompted them if they had not transposed all of the relevant examples. Following this exercise, I then gave them a copy of the following table (Table 10.2) which detailed the skills and aptitudes that I had identified as being required to be a successful project manager.

I gave a copy of this table to the applicants who were interested in management positions and asked them to rate themselves for each component, with a total score out of 100 %. I also told them to add any skills that they had that were not documented.

**Table 10.2** Detailed lists of necessary skills for successful project managers

<b>People skills</b>	/100
Show leadership in the workplace	
Demonstrate the ability to establish and maintain people networks	
Demonstrate highly developed interpersonal skills for customer service, client negotiations, dealing with difficult people in the workplace, relationship management	
Demonstrate the ability to give and receive constructive critical feedback	
Demonstrate the ability to give positive feedback	
Demonstrate the ability to receive negative feedback	
Take ultimate responsibility for decisions	
Manage client escalations	
Undertake performance management or development reviews	
Demonstrate understanding of organisational behaviour and change management strategies	
Undertake management of industrial relations (senior managers only)	
Develop teams and individuals	
Coach and mentor people	
Demonstrate highly developed listening skills	
Demonstrate highly developed critical self-insight	
Demonstrate the ability to delegate interesting technical tasks	
<b>Financial skills</b>	/100
Demonstrate accounting skills	
Demonstrate budgeting skills	
Undertake forecasting	
<b>Software skills</b>	/100
Demonstrate expertise in the use of spreadsheets, e.g. Microsoft Excel	
Demonstrate highly developed writing skills using relevant technology PM software, e.g. Microsoft project	
<b>Technical, hardware skills</b>	/100
Have domain knowledge and experience with the client industry	

(continued)

**Table 10.2** (continued)

<b>Project management skills</b>	/100
Apply contract and procurement procedures	
Demonstrate the ability to apply project scope management techniques	
Demonstrate the ability to apply time management techniques	
Demonstrate the ability to apply cost management techniques	
Implement operational plans	
Identify risk and apply risk management processes	
Run status meetings and write and deliver reports	
Manage services and sustainability	
Implement and monitor environmentally sustainable work practices	
Use a project management methodology e.g. PRINCE2 or PRISM (Projects integrating Sustainable Methods)	
Use and manage any of the following methods:	
Critical chain project management	
Event chain methodology	
Process-based management	
Agile project management	
Lean project management	
Extreme project management	
Benefits realisation management	
Apply quality management techniques: the ISO standards ISO 9000, a family of standards for quality management systems, and the ISO 10006:2003, for quality management systems and guidelines for quality management in projects	
Understand and manage ethics and values, both local and international	
Take ultimate responsibility for failures	
Monitor a safe workplace	
<b>Self-rate your ability below in each of the five rows, with 100 % being perfect level of skills and attributes</b>	

They invariably rated themselves as having 120 % (or similar) skills and abilities in the column headed technical skills, and often added special skills and experiences that they had, which were often of a technical nature. While they may have over-rated their level of technical competence, this also suggested that they overrated the relevance of their technical skills to project manager positions. Many were unaware of the importance – or even existence – of the highly developed interpersonal skills and critical self-insight that are required to be a successful and engaging manager or leader.

Several different research projects in the Australian rail industry also reported this lack of understanding about the crucial need for people in managerial positions to have well-developed abstract skills and critical self-insight (Short 2012; Short and Piip 2013; Davies and Maher 2013; Davies et al. 2013). I will now describe how informal SR assessments can be used to determine the presence – or lack – of abstract skills, and how to teach and facilitate the learning of abstract skills in a practical manner in any number of organisational contexts.

### ***Informally Assessing Abstract Skills: Probing Questions***

Some of the engineers asserted that they had highly developed people skills. In cases where I had not observed these in the workplace I probed with questions such as:

- How would you show your leadership in the workplace?
- How would you deal with someone who is so stressed that they come into your office and start crying?
- How would you explain to a member of your team in a performance review that they are not developing their skills as quickly as the other members of the team?
- How would you respond to a team member who tells you that ‘everyone says behind your back that you aren’t a good manager’?
- How would you deal with a team member who has pasted very critical comments about you on their Facebook page and in their tweets?

### ***Examples of Difficult Workplace Scenarios***

I also asked them to give me examples where and when they had used their people skills. If they were unable to provide many, I used scenario-based exercises and asked them to explain to me how they would manage these situations and why they would do so in their chosen way, as follows:

- You are undertaking a performance review of a team leader. It has been your observation that the team leader is too blunt and inflexible when giving directions to the team and they have complained about this to you. You explain this, but the team leader is defensive and refuses to accept these as being valid observations. What do you do?
- A client phones you and states angrily that the ‘expensive, experienced programmer’ that you sent out to their site arrived and looked flustered and said ‘but I’ve never programmed in Java at this level before’. How do you react to the client? What do you say to the programmer?
- When a team is left short of people because they are off with illness, a woman who is competent technically, but who is known to be very negative about her job, is sent in to back fill your team. You greet her and say, ‘Thanks, we need you here for the next few days.’ She replies, in earshot of everyone: ‘This isn’t what I was hired to do. I’m only here because I have to be.’ What is your response?
- You have been asked to prepare a 1-h PowerPoint presentation to show to potential new clients – a team of five people – who have booked to fly in from interstate for 1 day to see your proposed software solution for their problem. You need to detail how you will undertake their proposed project. You will need people, costing and time frame, key gates and importantly the benefits that they will reap by using your solution. This presentation is in 2 days’ time. You are

already committed to focusing on two other time-urgent issues that blew up the day before, and you assured those clients that you would resolve their issues very quickly. What would you do?

- You note that one of the members of the team appears to engage in ‘presenteeism’, that is, they are physically at work, but appear to spend time in non-productive ways. How do you address this?
- You have a graduate programmer who is rapidly outstripping their team colleagues in their programming ability, interpersonal skills and business acumen. How do you acknowledge this without annoying the other members of the team and potentially causing divisiveness and lowered morale?

The responses to these scenarios – which are not unusual for managers to experience in workplaces – often indicated that they would not be able to manage them, and were floundering as to what to do. This exercise readily identified the need for training and/or gap training, which they readily accepted as they now understood why they needed it.

Other participants in the exercise were honest about their lack of knowledge in non-technical areas and often explained variations of the theme that they had not thought about the need for those skills and attributes. Many tended to focus on how difficult it is to take responsibility, give corrective and/or negative feedback, and negotiate with clients. Many identified that they would have a lot of difficulty in delegating interesting technical tasks. Others focused on their lack of knowledge about or experience with accounting and/or project management methodology. Having identified their own gaps, they self-identified that they were not yet ready for management positions without undertaking more education and work shadowing to gain experience.

At times, some people complained that their own managers did not have these skills and attributes either; however I pointed out that this was a conversation for a different time and place, as we were currently focusing on them and their skills today, to assist them to identify areas in which they could develop their potential as managers by undertaking relevant training, work shadowing, having a mentor and so on. This process was an informal process of skills recognition and gap analysis; it worked well and was well received.

### ***Teaching Active Listening Skills***

As a result of these activities in which they self-identified a need for some form of gap training, I developed a series of workshops that initially focused on one aspect only of interpersonal skills, so that they had time to practise one element over 3 h, rather than deluging them with highly complex information in one session. It should be noted here that these participants all worked together in the organisation with varying degrees of familiarity with each other, and hence I did not need to engage in as much trust building as I would do when facilitating a session with people who did

not know each other. Given that, in general, the employees were rational, pragmatic men (many of the women being employed in sales and education in the organisation) I used personality indicators to determine their personality types. They invariably disclosed as having internal values related to logic, rational thought and basing judgement on hard-nosed evidence, which they termed 'fairness'. It was interesting to quiz them to respond to the following question: 'Which statement can you relate to best?'

- 'If I am fair, everyone will be happy.'
- 'If everyone is happy, then I have been fair.'

This activity gave me some insights into what their drivers were in workplace relationships, and how they might approach people-centred problems in their teams. Those who chose the former emphasised what they perceived as fairness (i.e. everyone gets treated based on merit and rational business decisions in a meritocracy) and that this choice would make the team happy. However they might be unable to understand that, for some people, fairness occurs when everyone is happy with the decision. Those who chose the latter tactic may not have been aware that choosing decisions that make everyone happy is not always the best way to make decisions and can lead to disputes and/or poor business decision making. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the majority of the people who self-described as rational and logical decision makers opted for the former statement. At times, some questioned whether anyone would choose the latter! These conundrums are frequent events in many workplaces and it can require highly developed abstract skills to know when and what kind of decision process to take in any given situation.

With this kind of information and given a propensity for them to use 'unasked-for advice giving' freely in any human interaction, I developed highly interactive sessions that focused on the ability to develop active listening skills (Bolton 1986). These were well attended sessions, in which in the initial half hour I outlined (on PowerPoint and with verbal description), a simple grid of what constituted active listening and what and why some other activities blocked interpersonal communication. Many found this information to be quite a revelation; they now understood why their partner/wife/husband reacted in the ways in which they often did, when they were 'only trying to help by finding a solution'.

I used the following grid (Table 10.3) on a PowerPoint and also as a handout to give a simple visual representation of which responses in human verbal interactions block communication and/or aid communication and, importantly, why this is so. The scenarios were based around a person coming into your office to tell you some news about themselves. The important caveat here was that if the person who came into your office clearly asked for your advice by saying something like 'what do you think I should do?' or 'I need your advice about something', then you were free to give advice. But this is not the case in the scenarios that follow in Table 10.3.

In the following handout (Table 10.4), I gave specific examples.

We then discussed these scenarios. I then broke the participants into groups of three or four people and asked them to develop their own scenarios on the following worksheet (Handout 3). I told them to choose one about a person who felt that they

**Table 10.3** Communication blockers and communication enhancers (Handout 1)

Communication blockers		Communication enhancers		
Giving <i>unasked-for</i> advice	Talking about your own example (fake empathy) and taking over	Trivialising the situation	Checking that you understand by asking for more information	Mirroring the emotional content of what the speaker is telling you
What I would do is ...	Yes, when that happened to me, I did ...	That happens to everyone	Am I correct in saying that you just said ...?	Nodding, agreeing
Why don't you do ...	That happened to a friend of mine, and they did ...	So, what's new? I've already been there, done that	So do you mean that ...?	Reflecting the same emotions on your own face
If I were you, I would ...		It could be worse	Actively listening to the other person	Actively listening to the other person (and not saying much at all!)
<b>The message that is received</b>				
You are too stupid to have worked out what to do, so I'm telling you what to do (because I'm so wise and experienced)	Your example is more important than the teller and you are taking over. You are no longer listening and now it's not about the original teller	You aren't strong enough, you don't know about the real world (whereas I do)	You are interested; you are trying hard to listen well	You are focusing on them and what they are telling you, and you are reflecting what they feel (anger, sorrow, joy, etc.)

had been unjustly treated at work, and one about a person who had some exciting news to tell them. Importantly, I reminded them that they had to refrain from giving advice up to the stage (if it ever occurred) when the teller finally said something like 'so what do you think I should do?' (Table 10.5)

The teams swapped scenarios, and the teams then had to develop communication blockers and, more importantly, active listening responses, that is, those that would enhance communication in these scenarios, and explain how these worked.

They were then divided into teams of two, and had 4 min to develop a different example of one person with some important or exciting or personal news, and how the other could respond to it in a way that demonstrated active listening and hence enabled communication. They then role-played these to the class, each role-play taking 2 min. The participants often engaged in very funny and highly spirited attempts to reflect what the person opposite them in role-plays were feeling, rather than giving *unasked-for* advice. It took a lot of practise, and after 3 h they were all keen to try their new skills in the workplace and at home. Realising that if,

**Table 10.4** Specific examples of communication blockers and communication enhancers (Handout 2)

Communication blockers		Communication enhancers		
Giving unasked-for advice	Talking about your own example (fake empathy) and taking over	Trivialising the situation	Checking that you understand by asking for more information	Mirroring the emotional content of what the speaker is telling you

**Example: Kim comes into your office to tell you that they have just been told to work back through the weekend, despite already having done so for the past 2 weeks**

What I would do is just tell them that I refuse	When that happened to me, I was	I've already worked over 3 weekends	What! Do you mean that they are expecting you to work yet another weekend?	Look of shock on your face, looking equally
Why don't you tell them that your child is sick and you can't do that?	working in another company and we all got asked this on a regular basis	I've seen it all before	That is crazy!	aghast, saying 'that's awful!'
If I were you, I'd speak to HR	and you will never believe what happened ...			

**The message that is received**

You are too stupid to have worked out what to do, so I'm telling you what to do (because I'm so wise and experienced)	Your example is more important than the teller and you are taking over, no longer listening and now it's not about the original teller, but is about you	You aren't strong enough, you don't know about the real world (whereas I do)	You are interested; you are trying hard to listen well	You are focusing on them and what they are telling you, and you are reflecting what they feel (anger, sorrow, joy, etc.)
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**Example: Kim comes into your office and tells you that that she has just found out that she is going to be an Aunt for the first time**

Trust me; don't let them use you as a free babysitting service	When that happened to me I was over the moon. Here is the latest photo of my nieces and nephews. They are all so bright!	I already have 6 nieces and nephews	Wow, the first one, that's great news!	Look happy and pleased to hear this news, jump up and shake hands
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**Table 10.5** Developing a scenario (Handout 3)

Communication blockers			Communication enhancers	
Giving unasked-for advice	Talking about your own example (fake empathy) and taking over	Trivialising the situation	Checking that you understand by asking for more information	Mirroring the emotional content of what the speaker is telling you

**Example: feeling unjustly treated at work ...**

**Example: happy, positive news ...**

for example, they were in stressful situations they may revert to their old habits, I ran top-up sessions 4 weeks apart, adding new information to each session about another aspect of communication, until they felt that they were more fluent in this aspect of interpersonal exchanges.

### *Is It Possible to Teach Personal Critical Insight?*

In performance reviews managers often identified the need for their team workers and support staff to develop personal critical insight so that they could engage with their team members and clients more positively and with increased confidence. This was suggested to overcome what was identified as an often high degree of defensiveness about perceived criticism of their work. Context here was again critical. These intelligent, tertiary-educated engineers and software developers identified themselves as being just that, intelligent and highly skilled, and they focused on their technical skills and intellectual ability as the core of their identity. Any critique, however constructively given, was perceived as an attack on their entire being.

Given the complexity of teaching critical self-reflection and self-insight to people who were not engaged in the kind of occupations that require constant personal reflection such as teachers, health workers and so on proved challenging. After thought and discussion with the education manager, we decided instead to build on their developing active listening skills, and adopt an approach of facilitating sessions centred on learning how to be a skilled negotiator as practical skills such as negotiation skills can be taught relatively easily, and skilled negotiators become more confident in their roles.

Hence we broke down theories about what underpins negotiations to untangle them and make them more comprehensible to our employees. To ensure that the information was clear and easy to follow, we focused on distributed negotiations and integrative negotiations (Brett 2007, pp. 2–3).

In handouts and on PowerPoint (see Tables 10.6 and 10.7) we initially explained that in ‘distributed negotiations’ one person wants to win as much as possible of the



**Table 10.6** Developing a scenario that illustrated a distributive negotiation (Handout 4)

A distributed negotiation		
The players	The bargained-over resources	The tactics used (be specific and relate to your scenario)
e.g. Player 1: salesperson (be specific about context)		
e.g. Player 2; potential client (be specific about context)		
<b>Questions for you</b>		
What is Player 1 likely to be feeling during the process?		
What is Player 2 likely to be feeling during the process?		
Is this good or bad for your business relationship?		
What is the likely outcome?		

**Table 10.7** Developing a scenario that illustrated an integrative negotiation (Handout 5)

An integrative negotiation		
The players	The bargained-over resources	The tactics used (be specific and relate to your scenario)
<b>Questions</b>		
What is Player 1 likely to be feeling during the process?		
What is Player 2 likely to be feeling during the process?		
Is this good or bad for your (business) relationship?		
What is the likely outcome?		

resource about which they are bargaining. This is a win-lose approach. Saner (2000) explained that the kind of tactics that are often employed in distributed negotiations include starting with a very high demand which you realise you will not be likely to achieve, but it sets the bar desirably high on your side. Other tactics include using force or threats to intimidate the opponent (my deliberate use of the word in this context) and prolonging the bargaining process, while making only minor concessions, which you pretend to be major to placate the opponent.

'Integrative approaches' by contrast are negotiations in which a win-win scenario is sought. Problem-solving strategies such as looking at all aspects of the negotiation rationally, without resorting to the kind of tactics described above, are intended to end the negotiation with all parties satisfied with the outcome. They emphasise the use of sharing information and openness (Lewicki et al. 2003; Walton and McKersie 1965). Following the information and discussion, we then broke them into groups of two to do the following exercises. We asked them to develop their own scenarios, as this unpicking of the constituents of a negotiation aided their understanding and ability to relate the contents to their peers later. They were then again

broken into groups of two, and were asked to complete the following exercise about an integrative negotiation.

This exercise was repeated three times. In the second two instances, we asked them to develop a scenario of their own, which they then had to swap with other pairs – without their responses to the questions – who then had to put in their responses in the above grid. After some weeks, we quickly went through a shortened version to remind them of these simple approaches to negotiations in the workplace. The essence here was, again, to start with simple methods that they could understand and practice, so that they were learned. This raises the question of how long it takes to learn something. The literature varies, but there is agreement on several factors. Understanding may be difficult, but learning something can be much more difficult as, in summary, it takes, time, rehearsal (practise) and revision, meaningfulness of the information, content relevance and, importantly, motivation. In addition to this, awareness of one's own learning strategies is central to successful learning (McInerney and McInerney 2006, pp. 96–123, 126–132, 144–149). Following the brief revision, the participants were then scaffolded through more complex scenarios, all of which they had to develop as in the previous sessions, until they were more confident in their interactions. These sessions were highly successful.

During performance reviews and later discussions about their potential to enter management positions, they were all much better equipped to discuss their developing skills in the areas of active listening, which is so central to team work and listening to clients, and of negotiations in their own workplace and with clients and customers in other organisations. Even more importantly, they had developed a much greater understanding of the relevance of having well-developed abstract skills when in managerial positions, and that they still needed more development in this area themselves.

## Conclusion

It has emerged from the literature, from the findings of a 3-year research project and my own workplace experiences that managers in technically focused organisations often do not understand the importance of having well-developed abstract skills. This is poor role modelling for younger employees, particularly those who are new to the workforce and who aspire to management roles.

Formal skills recognition to assess evidence for the awarding of an accredited certification is obviously important, but informal uses of skill recognition can also identify why, where and how employees need to undertake further training and education to develop those abstract skills. These can be learned. But, as with any new skill, it takes time, effort and practice, the material must be meaningful and relevant, and the rationale for undertaking it must be compelling. At the centre of this process is acceptance by management that this is useful. Also, the skill of the assessor, educator or workforce development person must be high.

**Note:** All direct quotations from participants in our research are used with permission, granted via signed permission forms approved by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee and signed by the people who were interviewed during the research.

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