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Communication Skills of Heads of Departments: Verbal, Listening, and Feedback Skills

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ABSTRACT

Background: Managers' communication skills are one of the most important topics in educational sector of universities of medical sciences and may have considerable effect on faculty members and employees. This study was performed to determine the level of communication skills (verbal, listening, feedback) of the heads of department of faculties and its relation with some demographic variables.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted from June 2009 to January 2010. We enrolled all of the heads of departments (N=60) in Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, western Iran. The participants received a self-administered 24-item questionnaire in Likert format (six general items and 18 items related to communication skills). Data were analyzed with SPSS software using Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests.

Results: The average scores of verbal, listening and feedback communication were 22.5, 16.1 and 21.1, respectively. Accordingly, 78.3% of participants in verbal communication, 16.7% in listening communication and 73.3% in feedback communication had high status. There were significant differences between the average score of listening skills and age ($P=0.013$) as well as gender ($P=0.042$). In addition, there was a significant statistical difference between verbal skills and gender ($P=0.021$).

Conclusion: The overall communication skills of more than half of the heads of departments were moderate. This needs designing some programs for improving department managers' communication skills.

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Introduction

The need for more effective leaders and managers has been brought into sharp focus by the current quick changes in the organization and management fields¹⁻⁵. These changes require present and future managers to be more adjusted to developing high-involvements teams and to be able to cover wider spans of control⁶. This is right for all businesses, as well as academic organizations. Effective academic managers are now

an important demand in medical sciences universities.

It is widely accepted that business management and business educators perceive communication skills as highly significant to human resources and organizations equally⁷. In the daily work, managers spend most of their time for communicating with other employees. Effective communication is therefore a very important skill.

According to the results of previous studies, faculty members should be democratic, tender, patient, reliable and humorous to their students during the interaction process, and they should use ways of communication skills and activities effectively⁸⁻⁹. In universities, research has shown faculty and managers identify that communication skills are very important to students' ultimate job success¹⁰.

Communications is a process of creating information and transmit. It is psychosocial process that set two Individual and group into relationship¹¹. Faculty members' poor communication skill is a major concern in medical education system¹²⁻¹³. Only 17.5% of faculties had good communication skills¹⁴. Managers' and employees' communication and listening skills are fair to poor (the lowest two categories on a 5- point scale)¹⁵.

Managers with high communication skills may help organizations to develop the existing human resources more productively and to deal effectively with environmental forces and enhance employees' job satisfaction. As faculty members, it is important that faculty members may be able to master every form of skills including verbal, listening, and feedback communication skills¹⁶. However, effective communication skills have an important place in terms of teachers' professional and personal characteristics¹. Subsequently, teachers with good teaching techniques will be able to draw the students' attention in the teaching and learning process^{17,18}.

Effectiveness of a head of a department as a faculty member is related with student achievement and satisfaction¹⁹. On the other hand, faculty members who are satisfied in their work and have a good relationship with their colleagues will strive harder to achieve excellence. In spite of the general agreement on the importance of communication skills, present evidences show that employees with long time recruitment and those just entering the employees from university still need these skills⁷. Thus, it is very important to give appropriate recognition to effective faculty members as a head of department in their job because only managers with high communi-

cation skills are able to achieve department objectives and create effective leading^{16,20}.

The present study was conducted in order to identify the factors affecting heads of departments' communication skills¹¹. The main objective of this research was to examine the relationship between heads of departments' communication skills and their demographic variables. In this research, verbal, listening, and feedback communication skills of the heads of departments were investigated in all faculties of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences.

Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted in Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, the west of Iran, from June 2009 to January 2010. We enrolled all the heads of departments (N=60) including 29 participants from Faculty of Medicine, six participants from Faculty of Health, eight participants from Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, 12 participants from Faculty of Dentistry and five participants from Faculty of Paramedical Sciences.

The "Communication Skills Inventory" developed as a means of data collection by Burton²¹. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this data collection toll was 0.71. This questionnaire was used to measure head of departments' perceptions of their communication skills. In this 18-item instrument, the participants were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated better level of proficiency in communication skills. Communication Skills Scale had three sub-section: (a) verbal communication skills were measured based on 6 factors including: using local phrase and proverbs, presenting ideas in general terms, feeling of embarrassment and bafflement when talking, speaking slowly, and using example during taking; (b) listening communication skills were measured based on 6 items including familiarity with common language, attention to multiple meanings of words, attention to interesting points; (c) feedback communication skills were measured

based on 6 items including reflect the realities during feedback, delay feedback for more thought to the subject. The highest possible score for each sub-dimension was 5; those with score of 3.4 to 5 (61% to 100%) were considered to have "high" communication skills, those with scores of 2.6 to 3.39 (41% to 60%) were labeled as moderate and those with scores less than 2.6 were considered to have low communication skills. Personal information form, which was developed by researcher, was used to assess the effect of other covariates under study including age, gender, education level, faculty, management experience and filed. We interviewed with all subjects who participated voluntarily in this survey.

Table 1: Frequency and relative distribution of the subjects based on demographic characteristics

Variable	Number	Percent
Age (yr)		
25-34	9	15.0
35-44	26	43.3
45-55	25	41.8
Gender		
Male	43	71.7
Female	17	28.3
Educational level		
MSc	13	21.7
PhD	47	78.3
Faculty		
Health	6	10.0
Nursing & Midwifery	8	13.3
Medicine	29	48.3
Dentistry	12	20.0
Paramedical sciences	5	8.3
Management experience		
Yes	10	16.6
No	50	83.4
Educational filed		
Management sciences	4	6.7

Table 2: The distribution of verbal, listening and feedback communication skill levels and their associated score means

Items	Communication skill level			Score mean (95% CI)
	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)	
Verbal	0 (00.0)	13 (21.7)	47 (78.3)	22.5 (21.77, 23.23)
Listening	29 (48.3)	21 (35.0)	10 (16.7)	16.1 (15.13, 17.07)
Feedback	1 (1.7)	15 (25.0)	44 (73.3)	21.1 (20.40, 21.80)
Total	2 (3.3)	34 (56.7)	24 (40.0)	59.6 (57.78, 61.42)

Non- Management sciences

56

93.3

SPSS 16 software program was used for data analysis. Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were used for comparison of subgroups at 0.05 significance level. This study was approved by the Vice-Chancellor for Research and Technology of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences (No, 137991).

Results

From 60 participants, 71.7% were male, and 78.3% had PhD. The mean age of the volunteers was 34.8 [95% CI: 32, 37.6] ranging from 25 to 55 yr. Most of the participants (43.3%) aged 35-44 yr old. Only 16.6% of participants had management experience. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 2 shows the descriptive data on communication skills scale. The mean score of communication skills was 59.6 [95% CI: 57.78, 61.42]. The scores obtained by the participants were high in 78.3%, 16.7% and 73.3% for verbal, listening, and feedback communication skills respectively. Almost 48.3% of heads of departments had a low listening skill score.

Table 3 shows the relationship between managers' communication skills and demographic characteristics. The listening skill level had statistically significant correlation with age ($P=0.013$). In addition, there was a significant correlation between verbal and listening skills and gender ($P=0.021$ and $P=0.042$ respectively). However, there was no statistically significant relationship between the other communication skills and the remaining demographic characteristics.

Discussion

Successful communication is the main input for planning, leading, organizing, and controlling the resources and processes of any organizations in order to achieve the main goals²². In educational organizations; communication skill is one of the most important aspects in improving the teaching profession¹⁶. It is very important to have good com-

munication skills in order to achieve the department goals and to increase the faculty members' performance. Hence, the objectives of this research were to measure the level of heads of departments' communication skills and its relationship with their demographic characteristics in all faculties of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences.

Table 3: Relationship between the levels of communication skills and various demographic characteristics

Variable	Verbal			Listening				Feedback				Total			
	M ^a	H ^a	P value	L ^a	M ^a	H ^a	P value	L ^a	M ^a	H ^a	P value	L ^a	M ^a	H ^a	P value
Age (yr)			0.542				0.013				0.765				0.063
25-34	3	6		8	1	0		0	3	6		1	7	1	
35-44	6	20		14	10	2		1	7	18		1	16	9	
45-55	4	21		7	10	8		0	5	20		0	11	14	
Gender			0.021				0.042				0.162				0.736
Male	6	37		23	11	9		1	8	34		1	24	18	
Female	7	10		6	10	1		0	7	10		1	10	6	
Educational level			0.368				1.000				0.438				0.513
MSc	4	9		6	5	2		0	5	8		1	7	5	
PhD	9	38		23	16	8		1	10	36		1	27	19	
Faculty			0.554				0.353				0.193				0.212
Health	2	4		3	1	2		1	0	5		1	3	2	
Nursing & Midwifery	3	5		5	3	0		0	4	4		1	5	2	
Medicine	6	23		13	10	6		0	8	21		0	17	12	
Paramedical sciences	0	5		1	2	2		0	0	5		0	1	4	
Dentistry	2	10		7	5	0		0	3	9		0	8	4	
Management experience			0.675				1.000				0.753				0.654
Yes	10	40		24	18	8		1	12	37		2	27	21	
No	3	7		5	3	2		0	3	7		0	7	3	
Educational filed			0.395				0.493				0.593				0.378
Management sciences	0	4		1	2	1		0	0	4		0	1	3	
Non- Management sciences	13	43		28	19	9		1	15	40		2	33	21	

^a L:Low; M:Moderate; H:High

The communication skill level was high in 40% of heads of department; moderate in 56.7%, and low in 3.3%. These findings are consistent with the results of other studies^{6,8,23,24}. Mehrshadian et al²⁰ showed that the

communication skill level was very good in 55.4% of the faculty members of dentistry faculty; moderate in 31.8% and low in 12.8%. In addition, Iranfar et al¹² found out that 64% of faculty members in Kermanshah University

of Medical Sciences had good communication skills and 39.6% had low communication skills.

Regarding the listening skill, the result of the present study pointed out that 48.3% of heads of departments had a low listening skill. Chaharsoghi et al²⁵ showed that there was a significant difference between present and optimum conditions in terms of listening skill status among organizations' employees. Brown et al²⁶ also pointed out that managers spend 80% of their working time for communicating with other members. This point estimate includes 45% for listening, 30% for verbal, and 25% for other communication skills. In fact, top executives and senior management spend about twice as much of their time for listening as other employees. Perhaps for this reason, top and first line managers ranked listening skill first out of several communication behaviors.

It is reasonable that listening skill along with general oral communications skills play an important role in hiring decisions²⁶. These evidences suggest that the leadership and communication skills improving workshop using learning by doing method should be added to the education programs of faculty members as well as heads of departments. In fact, heads of department should be level-headed, reliable and able to use different communication skills².

The results of the present study indicated that verbal skills improve with age which is confirmed by the results of similar studies^{27,28}. In addition, we found that listening and verbal communication skills were higher in males than in females. This finding is dissimilar the results of previous studies^{11,29}. One reason for this diversity may be the cultural difference between societies³⁰. There was a lack of statistical relationship between other demographic characteristics and communication skills.

In accordance with the results of the present study, some educational and training programs and courses (through learning by doing method) should be planned for heads of departments in universities of medical sciences. These programs should aim and improve the following skills: human relations, organi-

zational behavior, managerial human and conceptual skills; appropriate leadership style; employees' motivation; system thinking, developing team work, and participative management.

This study has some limitation. Data on communication skills was collected through self-reporting questionnaire rather than direct observation. It may raise the possibility of information bias. Furthermore, the sample size was small. This might prone the results to random error. This may be a reason that we could not find a significant correlation between the demographic characteristics and communication skills.

Conclusion

We concluded that the communication skills of more than half of the heads of departments are moderate. The results showed that heads of departments had a low listening skill level. Furthermore, communication skills may be affected by age and sex. In order to improve the communication skills of the heads of departments to at least a minimum acceptable level, educational workshops and short course using learning by doing method training is suggested. Future managers of a cross-cultural workplace should be able to use communication skills as a part of their management style and leadership attitude.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest in the undertaking of this research.

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