

DEVELOPING STUDENT LEADER EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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While improving ability to communicate effectively is a given for developing student leadership potential, there are very few systematic frameworks to guide communication skill improvement. Using a model of emotional and social skills derived from research in interpersonal and emotional/nonverbal communication, tools and strategies for both assessing possession of complex and sophisticated social/communication skills and their development are discussed. This well-researched model breaks down complex communication into well-defined skills that underlie the more abstract leadership competencies of emotional and social intelligences. It provides a foundation for enhancing the emotional and social skills of students that lead them to be more effective in positions of leadership, and in social interactions more generally. Specific strategies for communication skill development are suggested, as well as discussion of formal guides and resources to aid in student leadership development.

What is the single most important activity in which leaders are engaged in their day-to-day work? Henry Mintzberg (1973), in his detailed studies of managers/leaders, found that the vast majority of a leader's day is spent communicating – with followers, superiors, peers, customers, and other stakeholders. This highlights an essential area for any leader development program – improving the leader's ability to communicate in ways that are clear, concise, credible, sophisticated, and accessible to others. This is particularly important for students who are still learning how to communicate effectively as nascent leaders. A foundation of basic communication skills is an important starting point for developing more complex leader competencies. This paper presents a model for assessing and developing basic communication/social skills and applies these to the development of student leaders.

While there are many programs available for enhancing specific communication skills, such as effective writing strategies, public speaking guides, active listening tactics, and the like, a more comprehensive strategy is to work to develop the basic, underlying skills for all means of leader communication. Drawing on research from the fields of communication, social psychology, and emotions, Riggio and colleagues (Riggio, 1986, 2014; Riggio & Carney, 2003; Riggio, et al., 2003) developed a model for basic emotional and social communication skills (described below). Using this model provides a framework for focusing on specific elements of leader communication skills that can be targeted for development. These basic communication skills become the building blocks for more sophisticated forms of communication. Research has demonstrated that they are related to both leader emergence (i.e., the attainment of leadership positions) and leader effectiveness. Communication skills are also related to effectiveness as a follower or team member, so developing them can benefit anyone.

THE BASIC SOCIAL SKILLS MODEL

According to the Social Skills Model, there are three basic forms of interpersonal communication – sending (i.e., encoding), receiving (i.e., decoding), and regulating or controlling the expression of messages. These same communication skills operate in two domains: the emotional/nonverbal domain, and the verbal/social domain, creating six basic communication skills. Table 1 outlines these basic skills and suggests how these might apply to leadership.

Table 1. *Basic Social/Communication Skills and Relationships to Leadership*

Skills	Description	Relationship to Leadership
Emotional/Nonverbal Skills		
Emotional Expressiveness	Skill in sending/encoding emotional and nonverbal messages, emotions, attitudes, and cues of dominance.	Related to charismatic leadership; important in motivating/inspiring followers; conveying positive affect, authenticity, and regard.
Emotional Sensitivity	Skill in receiving/decoding others' emotional and nonverbal messages.	Key to understanding followers' feelings, needs, and establishing rapport; being empathic.
Emotional Control	Skill in controlling and regulating emotional and nonverbal displays; masking felt emotions; ability to enact emotions (combined with emotional expressiveness).	Critical for controlling/stifling strong emotions; regulating emotions in self and others; impression formation.
Social/Verbal Skills		
Social Expressiveness	Skill in verbal expression; the ability to engage others in social discourse.	Public speaking/presentations; being persuasive; coaching.
Social Sensitivity	Skill in interpreting verbal/written communication; ability to understand/decode social situations; knowledge of social norms and roles.	Active Listening; regulating/monitoring oneself and others' behaviors.
Social Control	Skill in social role-playing and social self-presentation.	Leader impression management; being tactful; related to sense of leader and social self-efficacy.

Emotional/nonverbal skills involve the ability to send, receive, and regulate emotional and other nonverbal messages. These are the underlying skills discussed in the “ability models” of “emotional intelligence” (e.g., Caruso, et al., 2002; Mayer, et al., 2002). These basic emotional communication skills are related to both charismatic and transformational leadership (as well as other forms of exemplary leadership) because they serve to help the leader to inspire and motivate others by infusing communication with emotions. In fact, it has been suggested that emotional expressiveness is a major element of a leader’s “charisma” (Bass, 1990; Riggio, 1987). Emotional sensitivity is related to the ability to “read” the subtle, emotional messages sent by others, and is crucial in developing leader empathy. Finally, the ability to regulate one’s emotions – emotional control – allows a leader to regulate and control strongly felt emotions, which is very important when a leader is in a stressful or emotionally evocative situation. In addition, possessing good emotional communication skills of all three types leads to the development of better interpersonal interactions, which is particularly important in establishing good leader-follower relationships.

The verbal/social skills of social expressiveness, social sensitivity, and social control are even more important to leadership effectiveness. Whereas emotional skills are related to emotional intelligence, these social skills are the underlying building blocks of social intelligence. These social-communication skills allow leaders to not only communicate accurately in face-to-face, virtual (e.g., Zoom meetings), and in written exchanges, but they are also related to being socially aware and tactful in a leader’s interactions with followers and other stakeholders. Two of these skills – social expressiveness and social control (i.e., sophisticated social role-playing skill) – have been relabeled *savoir-faire*, which translates to “knowing how to be” in relationships and social situations (Riggio, et al., 2020). A much fuller treatment of the relationship between emotional and social skills and leadership is provided in Riggio and Reichard (2008), which outlines the connections between emotional and social skills and emotional intelligence and suggests why these basic communication skills are critical for developing leader emotional intelligence.

These basic communication skill dimensions can also interact with one another. It is not simply a “more is better” approach. Balance among the various communication skills is also important. For example, emotional

expressiveness – the ability to spontaneously express one’s felt emotions – should be tempered with emotional control in order to avoid coming on too strong emotionally. Similarly, strong emotional control without emotional expressiveness leads to the impression that the individual is emotionally distant, or unfeeling. Therefore, in developing these basic communication skills, it is critical to not only work on developing each of the six basic components, but it is also important to consider how they interact with one another to create truly sophisticated, and high-level communication skills.

By studying the basic communication skill model and understanding how the different dimensions interact, a trained staff member can often observe both deficits in a student’s communication skills, and provide feedback, as well as notice when these problematic skill interactions are occurring. Students themselves, trained in the communication skill model, can serve as reciprocal peer mentors to provide feedback to one another about observed strengths and limitations in their classmates’ communication skills.

ASSESSING AND DEVELOPING SOPHISTICATED LEADER COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Using these basic emotional and social skill dimensions to improve leader communication skills operates something like a traditional competency model. By breaking these skills down into their most basic elements and focusing on each skill individually, a framework is created to guide development. For example, emotional communication skills, such as emotional expressiveness and emotional sensitivity, are developed through paying attention to nonverbal cues, particularly facial expressions, tone of voice, and body movements/gestures, and working to develop skill in both expressing and decoding these “body language” cues. In fact, research shows that emotional expressiveness and emotional sensitivity are correlated (Riggio, 1986), suggesting that when it comes to basic emotional communication, good senders of emotion are also good receivers/decoders (i.e., it “takes one to know one”). These can be developed in tandem.

A good starting point is to assess current levels of these basic social-communication skills, either informally, through gaining a deeper understanding of the constructs and reflecting on a student’s possession of the different skill dimensions. This can be done observationally, or more accurately, through the validated and well-researched self-report Social Skills Inventory (SSI; Riggio & Carney, 2003). The SSI is a 90-item instrument, with 15 items assessing each of the six basic communication skill dimensions. An SSI profile can also identify any communication skill imbalances [The SSI is available through Mindgarden <https://www.mindgarden.com/144-social-skills-inventory>]. In any communication skill development program based on this model, it is important to continue assessment, either formally or informally, through staff or peer feedback. There is an other-rated version of the SSI in development that can assist with providing students formal feedback concerning the improvement of particular communication skills.

With this ongoing feedback, student leaders can realize where their communication skill strengths and weaknesses lie, and, as in any competency model, be motivated to capitalize on strengths and work to develop any deficiencies. Let’s look at what an informal, self-paced program of developing these basic communication skills would look like.

Any competency program begins with assessment. An informal assessment would involve guided self-reflection. What are some areas of communication that are difficult for you? Have individuals close to you pointed out any areas where your communication falls short? These might include such things as a loved one or trusted colleague saying that the student seems “emotionally distant” or “unempathetic,” suggesting that emotional skills need work. It might be that the student has difficulties in public speaking or seems “socially awkward” in certain situations, reflecting issues in verbal/social skill communication. This assessment would help identify areas for targeted improvement.

Exercises for improving emotional and nonverbal communication include gaining greater insight into the feeling and expression of emotion, with videorecording of students enacting emotions. This serves as a means for

both identifying deficiencies, as well as for documenting improvement over time. Developing emotional sensitivity could include exercises in identifying facial expressions of others' emotions and simply observing others' behavior with an eye toward decoding what they are feeling. More formally, encouraging students to take acting classes can help develop emotional communication skills, which are beneficial in injecting emotions into interpersonal interactions. Practice giving prepared and spontaneous videotaped presentations, such as a leader giving a motivational speech or giving feedback to another student, are good practices for improving both emotional and verbal expressiveness.

Social expressiveness, which includes verbal communication skills, can be developed through a student taking a course in public speaking or joining a group such as Toastmasters, but it can also be developed in workshops or informally through recording speeches with the student working to eliminate speech disturbances that detract from good oral communication (the "uhs," long pauses, incomplete sentences, etc.). Using opportunities to hone conversational skills, such as talking to people at social gatherings and networking sessions, and initiating discussions with strangers, are also good ways for students to develop this critical communication skill.

Similar to emotional sensitivity, social sensitivity is developed through improving one's observational skills – paying closer attention to the social skills that tell you something about others. Another aspect of social sensitivity involves understanding and adhering to the social norms for particular groups in order to "get along" better with different types of people. For example, a leader needs to understand where followers are coming from in order to connect with them in a meaningful way. Adapting to what is appropriate behavior in a particular group, culture, or situation, is the key to social (and cultural) intelligence (i.e., knowing how to fit in). Additional exercises for students to develop elements of social sensitivity can be created (see Riggio & Merlin, 2011, for ideas).

Social Control, or sophisticated social role-playing skill, is critical for leadership, simply because leadership is a complex social role. Any acting/role-playing exercises will help develop social control. Another strategy is to have students analyze their own behavior in various social situations, and do an "after-action review." Helping students to analyze what they did in a particular situation and reflect on how it was received by others is one discussion-based exercise. Questions such as "What was the outcome?" "What could you have done better?" can lead to students becoming more proactive when going into social (or leadership) situations. Essentially, teaching students to plan ahead and anticipate how their actions will affect others are important components of the sophisticated skill of Social Control. Preparing for different social scenarios and outcomes can help build students' self-confidence, which makes them look more poised and in charge.

EVIDENCE THAT SOPHISTICATED COMMUNICATION SKILLS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR LEADERSHIP

The Social Skills Model was initially created as a research tool and then later used to guide communication skill development for all types of individuals, including students. It was in this initial research that connections to social effectiveness (and, eventually, leadership) were made. For example, in initial studies, persons who possessed more of these basic social/communication skills were found to have larger and more supportive social networks (Riggio & Zimmerman, 1991). These social skills were also connected to higher incidences of social engagement with others, and better psychosocial adjustment (Riggio, et al., 1993). Social skills were also related to making a more positive impression in initial encounters, in job interviews, and to impression formation, more generally (Riggio, 1986; Riggio, et al., 2020; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988).

Although the emotional skills outlined in the model are associated with higher levels of emotional intelligence and are critically important for leaders in developing strong interpersonal relationships with followers and peers, the most consistent skill predictors of effective leadership are the combination of social expressiveness and social control, what Riggio and colleagues (2020) have labeled *savoir-faire*. These two social skills, which are perhaps the best predictors of an individual's level of social intelligence, are related to the student leader's ability to effectively enact the role of leader, and to appear poised and confident. In one study, it was found that these same social skill dimensions mediated the relationship between extraversion and leadership potential, suggesting that

the so-called “extraversion advantage” in leadership emergence and effectiveness cannot happen unless the individual also possesses high levels of critical social communication skills (Guerin, et al., 2011). This argues for the importance of developing students’ communication skills, particularly for students who may not be naturally inclined to take on leadership roles.

Some leadership research has focused on the total score of the SSI, with the assumption that greater possession of *all* of the basic communication skills can increase leadership potential. In experimental studies with students, this total score did indeed predict who would be selected as leaders in student teams (i.e., leader emergence), and SSI-total score predicted more effective leadership, particularly on tasks that required team members to work together (Riggio, et al., 2003). In another study, SSI-total scores were higher for top-level leaders in the fire service than for captains (who would be the equivalent of middle managers). From a more “applied” perspective, for decades, the SSI has been used for identifying persons with exceptional communication skills for both leadership positions, and for other occupations that require high-level social skills (e.g., counselors, negotiators, etc.).

RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPING LEADER EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS

As mentioned, the primary tool for assessing the basic communication skill dimensions is the Social Skills Inventory. The SSI, and a manual (Riggio & Carney, 2003) that presents research evidence supporting the instrument, as well as scoring and interpretation instructions, are available through test publisher Mind Garden (www.mindgarden.com). There are a number of informal strategies for improving emotional and social skills in various publications (Riggio, 1987; Riggio, 2014; Riggio & Reichard, 2008). In addition, there is a guidebook of exercises designed specifically for training professionals (Riggio & Merlin, 2011) that is full of ideas and methods for developing clients’ and students’ communication skills – all based on the Social Skills Model.

A program for developing sophisticated communication skills should begin with an overview of the skills model, followed up by some sort of assessment of students’ existing skills in each area. Exercises should be used to focus on each of the skill dimensions, and to increase students’ awareness of how they are communicating. For example, a simple exercise for helping students understand nonverbal/emotional expressiveness and sensitivity is to have them pair up, face each other, and try to communicate basic emotions (e.g., happiness, anger, sadness, fear) using only nonverbal cues of the face and tone of voice, while holding the verbal content constant (“A, B, C, D, E, F, G”). This gives some initial indication of success/errors in the transmission and receiving of nonverbal cues of emotion. Moving from simple communication exercises to more complex ones is a good strategy. “Homework” assignments to try out on their own time are an important part of any student communication skill program, as is ongoing feedback. In one doctoral dissertation, it was found that students who underwent social skill training based on the SSI model were rated as more “charismatic” following the training sessions (Taylor, 2002).

Some basic rules for developing these sophisticated communication and social skills for student leaders are the same ones for any leadership development program: (1) initial assessment of skill strengths and weaknesses and targeting of skills for development; (2) structured exercises for strengthening the targeted skills; (3) following up on structured training with homework assignments that allow the individual to practice communication skills in everyday life; (4) ongoing assessment of skill improvement and constructive feedback.

CONCLUSION

Communication is a critical skill for developing leaders. All too often, programs to develop students’ leadership skills are done in a piecemeal fashion – focusing on one skill or another (e.g., effective/active listening, public speaking, networking, etc.). There are relatively few integrated frameworks for developing social and communication skills. Based on a well-researched model of emotional and social communication skills, student development staff are encouraged to develop a unified program that promotes student leaders’ ability to communicate more effectively. The Social Skills Model introduced here incorporates the constructs of emotional and social intelligences and focuses on the underlying building blocks of sophisticated leader communication skills.

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