Communication skills in business:
Review of current situation and needs for development

Survey conducted from July to September 2012.

The results presented in the tables and figures are unfiltered. Comments have been added to provide a probable interpretation of the results as well as our experience with our clients. The true value of the information needs to be evaluated by the individuals reviewing the results in order to determine their relevance for their companies.

A total of 109 people participated in the survey. Of that number, 83 answered every question.

SUMMARY

While the participants came from 19 different economic sectors, 53% worked in the medical and pharmaceutical industries, making the results more probing and of greater interpretative value for these two sectors. The vast majority of the respondents worked in companies with more than 150 employees. Since 69.5% of the respondents were human resources managers or worked in teams, the results are likely to be highly representative of the current situation.

When asked how important communication (one-on-one and team/group) was in the current and future effectiveness of their business, 99% of the respondents said that it was at least "important," with 89% indicating it was either "very important" or "extremely important." Of these 89%, one-third said that the effectiveness of one-on-one communication in their company or team was either "poor" or simply "acceptable," with only 11% saying it was "excellent." In terms of team/group communication, 52.5% said that it was either "poor" or "acceptable," with 5.6% ranking it as "excellent." While the results tended to indicate that communication was highly important and would be even more important in the future, fewer than 10% identified the current state of effectiveness as "excellent."

When looking at specific skills that are likely to impact communication effectiveness in the future, three areas were ranked significantly higher than the others:
1. Asking relevant questions
2. Identifying needs
3. Being committed and following up

The results were clearly in line with the most pressing needs identified by our clients during discussions and development work. Other areas of importance identified by the survey and reinforced by our client interactions were:
4. Networking
5. Fostering dialogue

In terms of the most pressing development needs as they intersect with the skills identified as having the most impact on future communication effectiveness, a few key insights from the survey results stand out.

a. Only 29% of the respondents said that individuals in their company or group/team actually engaged in dialogue "often" (26.5%) or "all the time" (2.4%).

b. In terms of dialogue, 71% of the respondents said that individuals either "rarely" or only "sometimes" verify assumptions (by asking questions and clarifying what has been discussed). The results related to engaging in a dialogue identified this skill as the one most in need of development.

c. Over 59% of the respondents said that individuals in their company only "sometimes," "rarely," or "never" continuously seek to understand other peoples' needs. Since need identification is one of the top three skills required for effective communication, this is worrisome, especially given that only 1.2% of the respondents said that understanding needs is a skill used "all the time" while 97.6% of the respondents said that understanding needs is either "important" (45.8%) or "extremely important" (51.8%).

d. In terms of asking insightful questions, 62.7% of the respondents said that it happens "sometimes" or "rarely." On a positive note, 4.8% of the respondents said that insightful questions are asked "all the time," indicating that the potential for understanding needs (c.) and fostering better dialogue (a.) was better than anticipated. Over 96% of the respondents identified the ability to ask insightful questions as "important" (42.2%) or "absolutely important" (54.2%). These results tended to indicate that more sustained efforts need to be devoted to developing this skill.

e. On a positive note, 36% of the respondents said that individuals are able to "often" or continuously ("all the time") provide constructive and valuable feedback to foster improvement within the company. Coupled with the fact that only 17% of the respondents said that feedback is "rare" or "never" occurs, these results point to an increased tendency for trust and transparency.

f. Adding to point e., 62% of the respondents said that an environment of trust and transparency is promoted "often" or "all the time." Combining e. and f. led us to conclude that the level of readiness for improved dialogue, the identification of needs, and the use of effective questions is sufficient for training and development to actually take hold and become part of corporate culture. The fact that 42% of the respondents said that emotional intelligence is either "good" or "excellent" while 41% said that it was "average" also tends to give credence to the previous conclusion on training readiness.

In short, based on the results presented in points a. through f. above and on other comments from the respondents (see pages 11, 12, 25, and 26), communication effectiveness is critical and is likely to be even more important in the future. Fostering productive dialogue through asking effective questions, listening, being open to differences, and developing trust is most likely to lead to success and increased productivity. It seems quite clear that creating a dialogue and asking insightful questions are skills that need immediate and structured attention with continuous follow-up and reinforcement.

The fact that feedback is shared more freely and effectively is highly positive and likely indicates that effective communication has a chance to develop. Technology and the ability to communicate remotely provide new opportunities as well as unique challenges that will also require enhanced communication skills.

Based on the results of the survey, effective dialogue, asking questions, and correctly identifying needs are communication skills that require continuous development efforts. While training programs will significantly help, coaching cannot be overlooked as a key to sustained success.

INTRODUCTION

Aseret Congruence LLC created and launched this survey following numerous discussions with and enquiries from clients concerning the general state of business communication. Aseret uses a number of surveys to assess the current situation and the anticipated evolution of skills such as coaching, selling, convincing, confronting various perspectives, managing conflicts, negotiating, and adapting behavioral styles as well as other aspects of effective communication. Each survey is developed for specific client situations and in the context of training programs that are in the process of being implemented or that are already in place. This survey was designed based on our current awareness of key skills and expressed needs.

The main objective has been to provide a fair picture of the actual situation and evaluate skills that are likely to ensure optimal business success in the near future (1 to 5 years). A secondary objective was to provide some insight into the efforts required to raise the identified skills to a satisfactory level and to guide us and the respondents in developing suitable training programs.

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METHODOLOGY

Aseret Congruence LLC created this survey using Zoomerang based on existing Aseret surveys used to identify communication skill needs for specific client situations (coaching, management, sales), survey templates provided by Zoomerang, as well as numerous client discussions on the development of communication skills. Except for the questions that included a request for comments or additional perspectives, all other questions had to be answered if the respondents were to continue the survey.

The first section (Figures 1 to 4) was designed to provide a business profile of the respondents. The respondents were asked to select their business sector from a drop-down menu. If their business reality was not included in the menu, they could choose "other" and provide a written response.

The second section (Figures 5 to 10, Table 1) was designed to identify current and future needs for one-on-one communication as well as for team/group communication in general. The respondents were limited to choosing among four selected qualifiers in order to simplify the interpretation of the results. The respondents could list additional skills or competencies if desired (Table 1).

Section three (Tables 2 and 3) was designed to allow respondents to rate a specific number of communication skills in terms of current levels and future importance. Answers for the "future

importance" of each skill were not based on the identification of the relative importance of each skill. As such, the same importance value could be given to multiple skills. The results do not provide an order of importance or priority for each skill.

Section four (Figures 11 to 28, Table 4) was designed to identify specific skills. Respondents were asked to rate the current skill level and the future importance of the skill (1-5 years). The objective of this section was to determine which of the skills seemed to require more development. Once again, the number of choices for the levels and the importance were limited to five to simplify interpretation. Respondents could add other skills not listed and could add comments for a better understanding or perspective.

The figures and tables show the unfiltered results and, as such, provide a general snapshot or perspective at the time of this survey. The interpretation of the results is just that, an interpretation and does not constitute an absolute diagnosis.

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RESULTS

Section 1: General consideration of the respondent population and company/group

Figure 1: Type of business

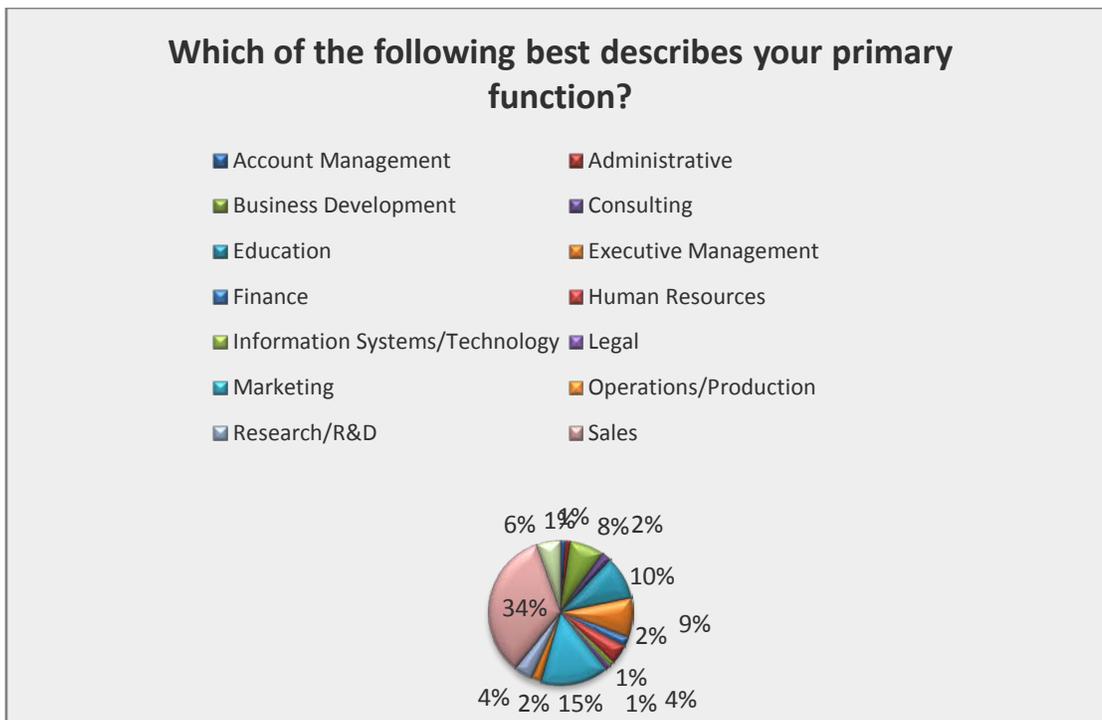Figure 2: Primary function of respondent

Total number of employees in your company (local operations)

■ Under 10   ■ 10 to 19   ■ 20 to 49   ■ 50 to 99   ■ 100 to 149
■ 150 to 499   ■ 500 to 999   ■ 1,000 to 4,999   ■ 5,000 to 9,999   ■ 10,000 to 14,999
■ 15,000 to 25,000   ■ 25,000 or more   ■ Don't work
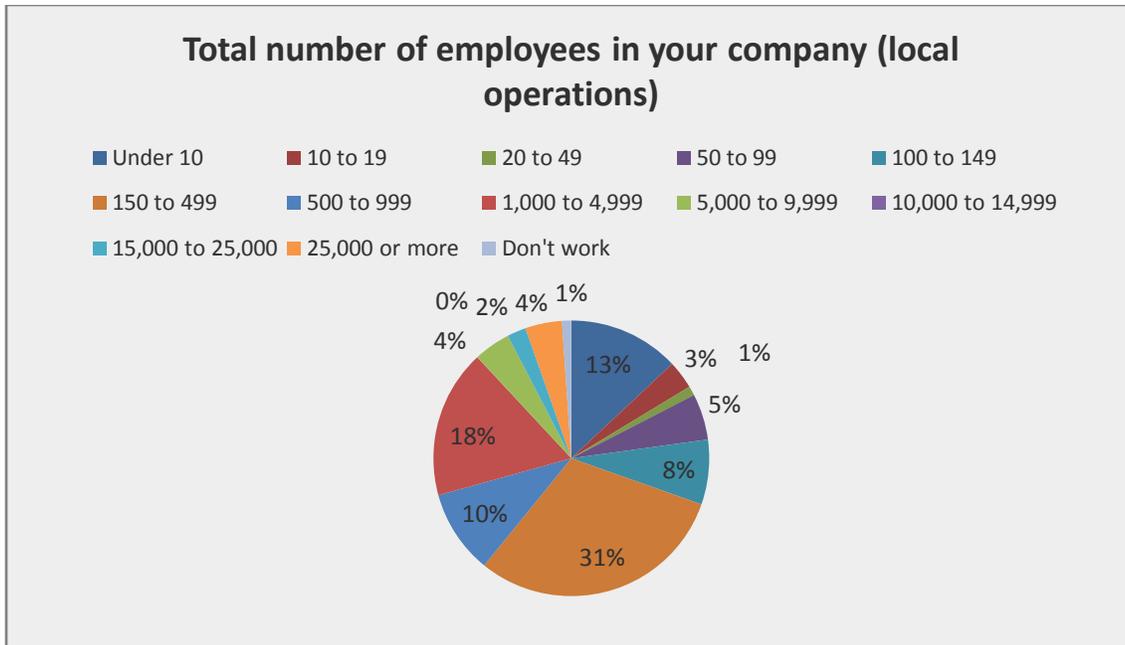
Figure 3: Employees in the respondents' companies

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Which of the following most accurately describes your title in the company?

■ CEO/President   ■ Owner/Partner   ■ Vice-President
■ CFO/Controller   ■ Director/Department Head   ■ Manager
■ Sales Professional   ■ Supervisor   ■ Educator
■ Staff   ■ Other
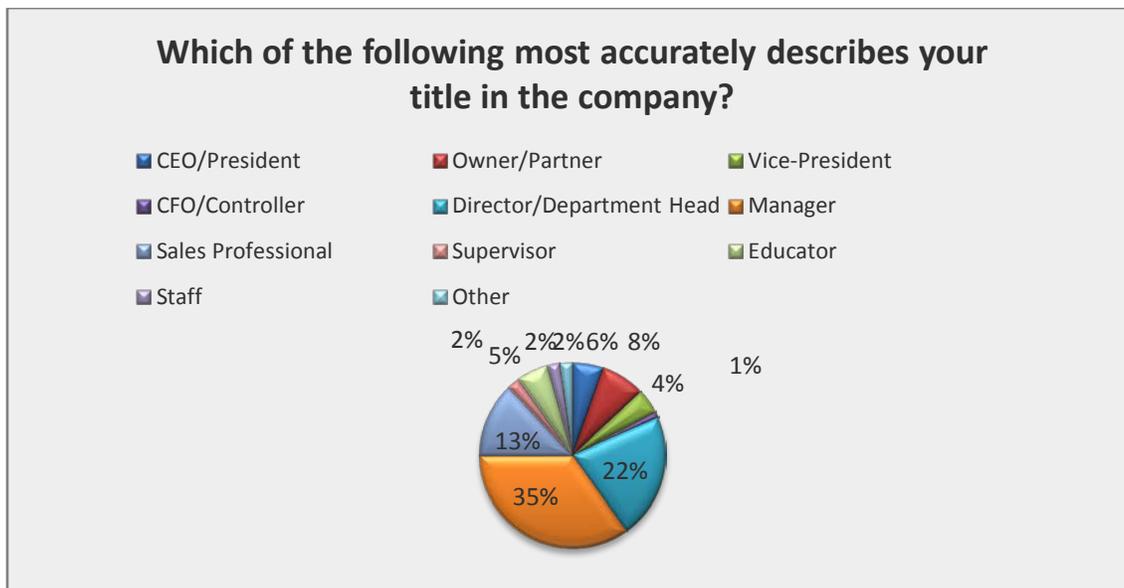
Figure 4: Titles of respondents

Section 2: Situation analysis of the state of communication and future importance
One-on-one communication effectiveness
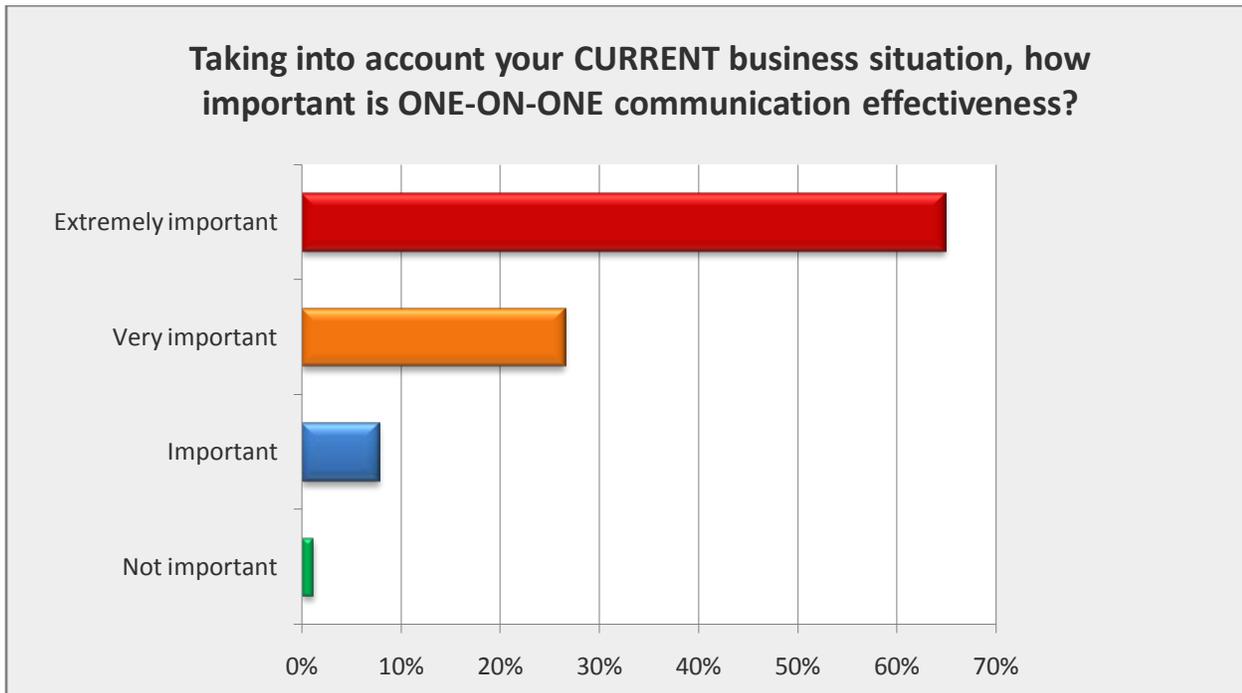

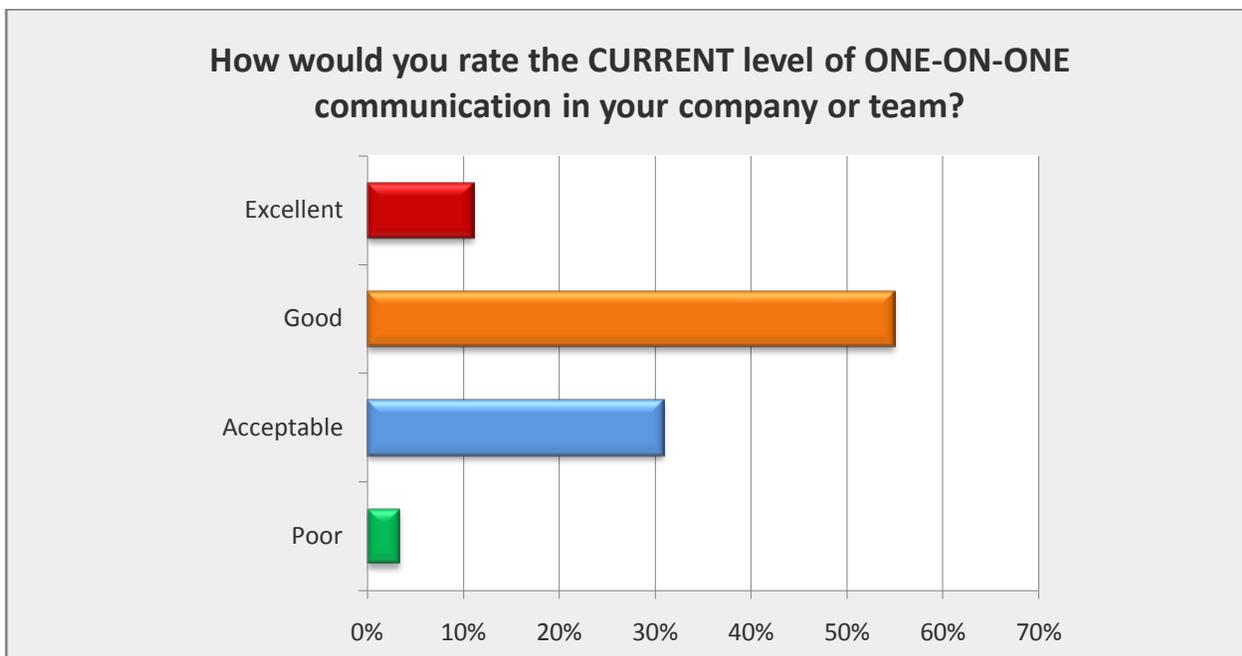Figure 5: Current importance of one-on-one communication effectiveness

Figure 6: Current level of one-on-one communication skills

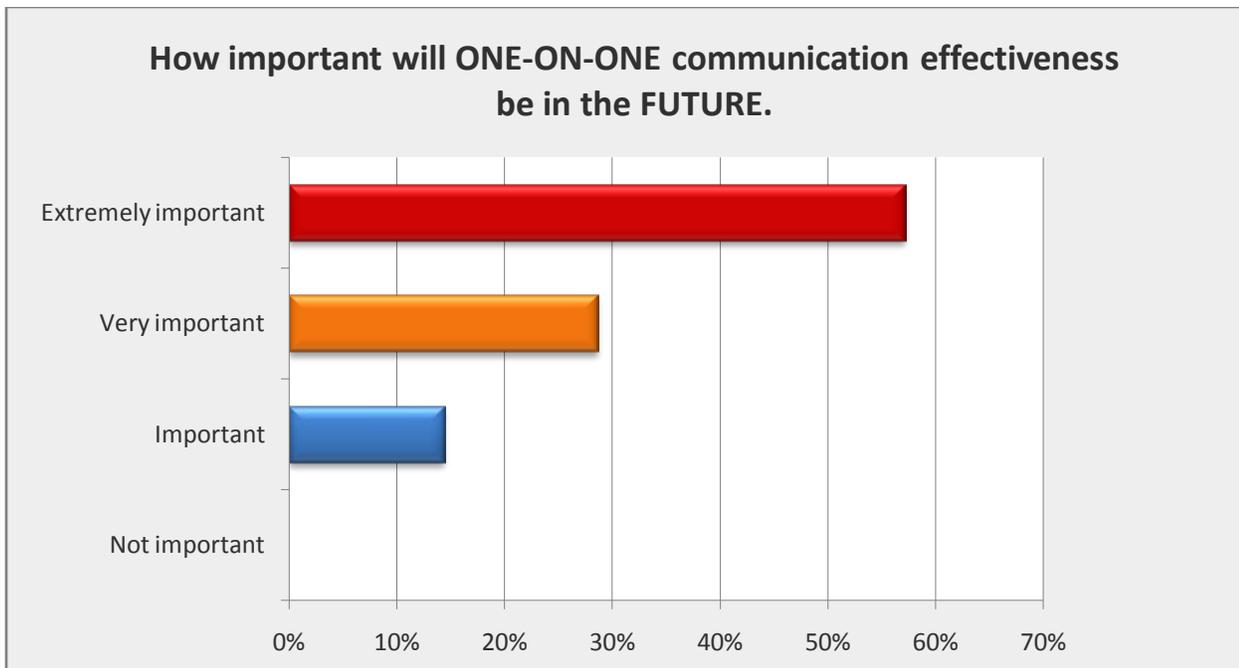**How important will ONE-ON-ONE communication effectiveness be in the FUTURE.**

Figure 7: Importance of one-on-one communication in the future (1-5 years)

The results showed that 91.2% of the respondents consider one-on-one communication effectiveness as at least "very important." Only 1% replied that it was not important. The person who answered "not important" is currently in school. One-on-one communication was rated as "good" by 54.9% of the respondents. This leaves much room for improvement as the future need for effectiveness remains very high.

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Situation analysis of the state of communication and future importance
Team/group communication effectiveness
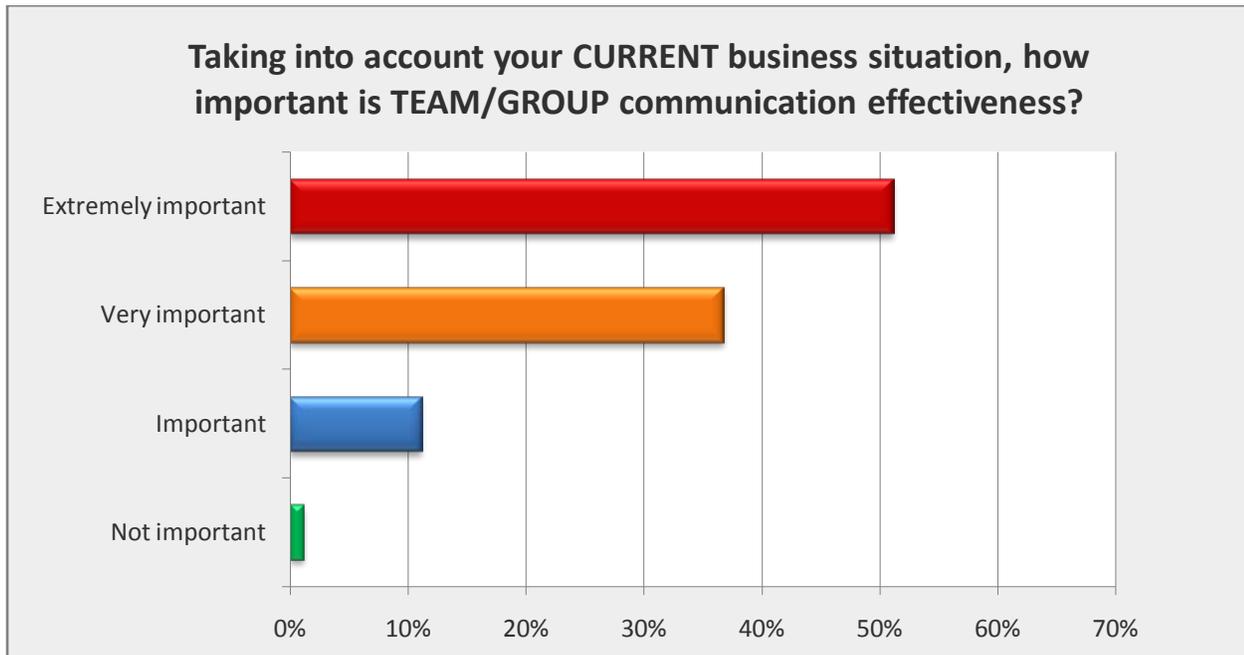

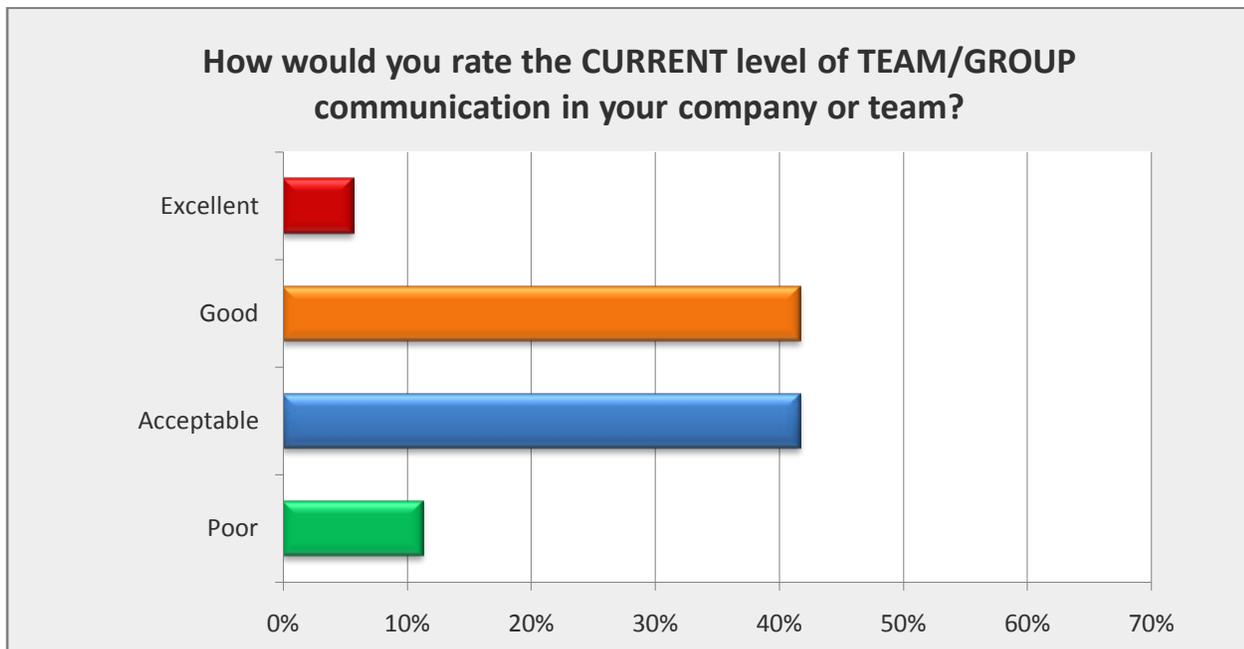Figure 8: Current importance of team/group communication effectiveness

Figure 9: Current level of team/group communication skills

How important will TEAM/GROUP communication effectiveness be in the FUTURE?

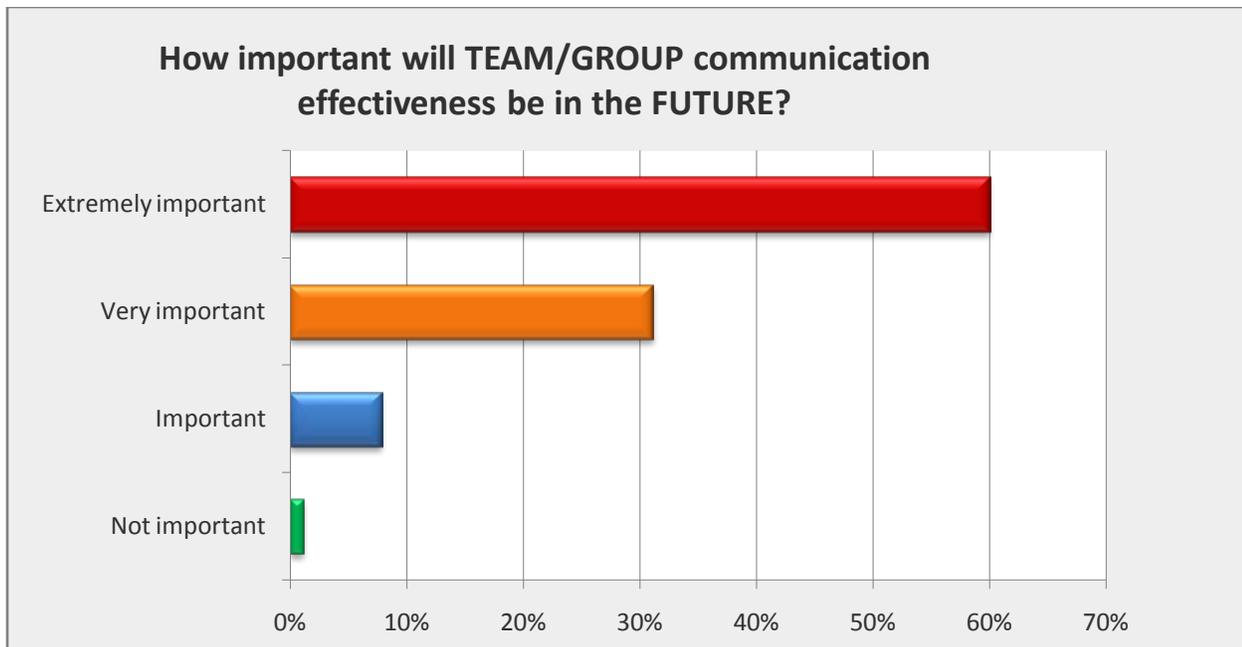

Figure 10: Importance of team/group communication in the future (1-5 years)

The results showed that 87.8% of the respondents consider that team/group communication effectiveness is as at least "very important." Only 1% said that it was "not important." The respondent who answered "not important" is currently in school. In addition, 41.6% of the respondents said that team or group communication is "good" while another 41.6% rated this skill as "acceptable." Given that 91.1% of the respondents thought that team/group communication is "very important" (31.1%) or "extremely important" (60.0%), this skill requires immediate and sustained attention. The results were consistent with previous findings that, in spite of increased remote work and "alone" time on projects, team work and group collaboration are critical for quality and productivity. Working remotely is more productive in most cases, but it has been shown that sharing ideas (often informal) to enhance the final "product" is often lacking or too infrequent. It is also difficult if not impossible to read body language and non-verbal cues from a distance (by phone or even video conferencing).

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Situation analysis of the state of communication and future importance
Other skills and needs for effective communication mentioned by the respondents

The comments are as given in the survey except that typographical errors and spelling have been corrected. Highlights were added to illustrate recurring or similar comments and trends.

Table 1: Individual comments on other skills of importance

1	Increased effectiveness across departments and teams is needed. Improved productivity in meetings and group communications would be of benefit.
2	I am assuming that webcast or wide diffusion such as webcast are not included in one-on-one communication, correct? I think that in our business, we may see more and more of webcasts, which is why I am thinking that one-on-one is important, but not extremely important; I simply wanted to give further details to my answer.
3	I guess human rated (personality factor) will be more important in the future.
4	Our teams are split between two geographic locations and our customers are all over the world. One on one and team communication is extremely important Too much is done through email.
5	1. Clear decision making practices 2. Ability to set proper context 3. Strategic communication and expectation setting
6	This question is confusing. Not sure what "Other" is referencing.
7	Recognition of the importance of context: that is, effectively understanding the communications profile (preferred medium, style of communicating, etc.) of the person (team member, client, other stakeholder) you are communicating with .
8	Communication relevance to our customers
9	Email, company news, use of technology to provide updates
10	1. Listening 2. Understanding 3. Executing
11	Establish trust among clients
12	Continuous communication and feedback.
13	Performance, feedback, cross countries and remote areas business communication
14	Negotiation Skills
15	As social media takes off, more and more people are not communicating face to face or even by phone. Interpersonal communication skills will falter and the younger generation will be impaired by the way they are learning to communicate.
16	Group communication is affected by the fact that if someone from our team has a problem in a communication with another group, there is a tendency to back her/him and therefore feed the group communication with another internal/external group with a defensive/negative approach. However in one to one communication the power to decide to "reset" the previous communication incidents and "start fresh" is less subject to an external influences: it is more a choice made alone.
17	Communication skills are at the center of my team success. My skills are good but I'm looking for new ideas to improve the effectiveness of my skills.
18	Specific communication skills allow the team to have clear expectations. Without them, the team will plateau at a level they feel comfortable.
19	Listening. Most people seem to come to the table with the goal of "Selling" their own agenda.

20	Openness with idea sharing with "family like" approach. This will create the most effective communication network. Flat organizational structure is a must. Importance - very high.
21	Listening, talking to the point, constructive feedback giving
22	Very high as more work is being done virtually
23	I work alone as a freelance translator, so team communication is not applicable, but I find that good communications with my clients is key
24	Listening skills, writing skills, emotional intelligence skills
25	Use of technology to communicate (communicator, facetime, etc)
26	Facilitation and presentation skills
27	Collaboration skills. Although people are afraid of sharing information as it will lessen their job security.
28	Open communications

It is obvious that there are many key elements and skills (necessary or desired) listed in the table above. Among the numerous ideas, needs, and suggestions, three recur. First, remote and electronic communication is a reality and needs to be addressed for improved effectiveness. Remote communication does provide for reduced travel and structural costs. While remote communication is unlikely to ever truly replace "live" interactions, it does allow for economies of resources when appropriate. Remote should not, however, be synonymous with blindness.

The ability to listen and pay attention to others has been a challenge for generations. It appears that we will still have to pay serious attention to this skill. Remote work and communication will require listening to be even more effective than ever (asking questions to clarify, better understand, and get a complete picture are just a few examples).

Adaptability to different people, styles, needs, and methods (and cultures) is also a skill that companies and people have strived to enhance.

A blanket need that is either directly addressed or implied is the fostering of trust. Very little of our communication is truly effective without trust (we also like to talk about a safe environment).

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Section 3: Situation analysis of the state of communication and future importance
Detailed skill levels as currently rated

Table 2: Specific skill levels currently used

Please evaluate the CURRENT overall level of communication skills in your business environment (team).						
Answer Options	Poor	Acceptable	Good	Excellent	Rating Average	Response Count
Expertise in the field of work	0	10	49	25	3.18	84
Ability to understand others	4	27	42	11	2.71	84
Asking relevant questions	9	28	40	7	2.54	84
Initiate and maintain a dialogue	2	30	42	10	2.71	84
Planning and organization	6	31	36	11	2.62	84
Usage of data and facts	5	24	39	16	2.79	84
Adaptability to people and circumstances	8	31	36	9	2.55	84
Structure and consistency of messages	10	32	28	14	2.55	84
Usage of technology	5	26	39	14	2.74	84
Networking	7	37	29	11	2.52	84
Commitment and follow-up	12	27	34	11	2.52	84
Identification of needs	10	30	35	9	2.51	84
Openness (being non-judgmental)	11	24	35	14	2.62	84
					answered question	84
					skipped question	25

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Other skills identified by respondents

1	The emotional load accumulated mostly along written communications makes it complicated to build a solid and professional way to communicate with some stakeholders. All (or a vast majority) of the issues are solved in meetings and they are usually coming from written communication - where we interpret the content behind our screen with our mood of the day. English language is used by all employees and 90% of them are non-native English speakers. Possibilities of misunderstanding are exponential in this context. While writing this I realize that most of the meetings we have tend to pacify relationships or solve/19prevent problems instead of building something efficient targeted towards implementation and performance in an open and comfortable environment...
2	We meet our clients' needs well. Our issue is internal, one on one communication.
3	Incivility is a growing concern

Table 2 and the comments clearly indicated that very few of the listed skills are currently at an "excellent" level. "Identification of needs," "adaptability to people and circumstances," and "asking relevant questions" are most in need of development. It should also to be noted that "commitment and follow-up" as well as "networking" received some of the lowest ratings, indicating a need for improvement.

Situation analysis of the state of communication and future importance
Detailed skill levels rated for the future (1 to 5 years)

Table 3: Specific skill levels required in the future

Please rank the following communication skills as they will impact the FUTURE success of people in your field (1 to 5 years).					
Answer Options	Least important	Important	Most important	Rating Average	Response Count
Expertise in the field of work	0	41	43	2.51	84
Ability to understand others	1	24	59	2.69	84
Asking relevant questions	0	23	61	2.73	84
Initiate and maintain a dialogue	3	32	49	2.55	84
Planning and organization	4	23	57	2.63	84
Usage of data and facts	3	35	46	2.51	84
Adaptablity to people and circumstances	3	26	55	2.62	84
Structure and consistency of messages	3	41	40	2.44	84
Usage of technology	4	32	48	2.52	84
Networking	4	31	49	2.54	84
Commitment and follow-up	1	18	65	2.76	84
Identification of needs	3	14	67	2.76	84
Openness (being non-judgmental)	3	35	46	2.51	84
				answered question	84
				skipped question	25

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Other skills identified by respondents

Is there a number 4 for "commitment and follow-up"? This is the most critical factor according to me that can compensate for a lot of the other factors. If there are flaws in technical capabilities and there is follow-up and commitment, the ground for improvement is open. But being excellent in all fields with no commitment nor follow-up will ruin everything.
Comprehension of non-verbal communication. Appreciating a compassionate workplace.
Global world. Increase of the social media. People work differently (from home, on the road…)

While the results from Table 2 are indicators of the current situation and identified "identification of needs," "adaptability," and "asking relevant questions" as most in need of improvement, Table 3 confirms the importance of these skills in the future and also highlights "commitment to follow-up" and "planning" as other key elements for improving future productivity.

Section 4: Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey

Results interpretation:

Red: Needs serious attention. Discrepancy between current level and future importance is high.

Orange: Needs attention. Discrepancy between current level and future importance is evident but not critical…

Green: Seems to be reasonable or effective. Discrepancy between current level and future importance is limited or nonexistent in some cases.

The color-coded interpretation is based on the overall results. In some cases, the interpretation will change depending on specific or individual situations. A summary of individual responses can be sent to the respondents who ask for it, but only as it pertains to their specific answers.

Please note that all axes are formatted with the same maximum value of 70% in order to provide a better comparative visual between each figure.

Areas that need serious attention:
"Engaging in a dialogue" (Fig. 11 and 12) seems to be the skill that needs most improvement. When 70% of respondents rate their companies (and people) as "sometimes" or "rarely" engaging each other in a dialogue and when 95% rate this skill as "absolutely important" or "important" in the future, the gap is very serious and indicates a clear risk.

In the same vein, some 66% of respondents said that "asking insightful questions" (Figs. 15 and 16) happens only "sometimes" or "rarely" while 96% rated the perceived need in the future as "important" or "extremely important." This pointed to a need for development and for support from the company.

Areas that need (or may need) attention:
The ratings for "Seeking to understand needs" (Fig. 13 and 14), "adapting to others' style differences" (may include culture) (Fig. 17 and 18), and "providing clear examples to illustrate concepts and ideas" (Fig. 19 and 20) indicated a need for development that could be either serious or necessary but not critical depending on individual situations. The linkage of these three skills to the need to develop skills in engaging in dialogue and asking questions seems to be clear given the individual comments by respondents.

In areas where skills seem to be currently effective, companies and individuals need to conduct in-house assessments to determine whether proper structures (training, coaching, competency models, etc.) are in place to ensure the continued use and development of the skills.

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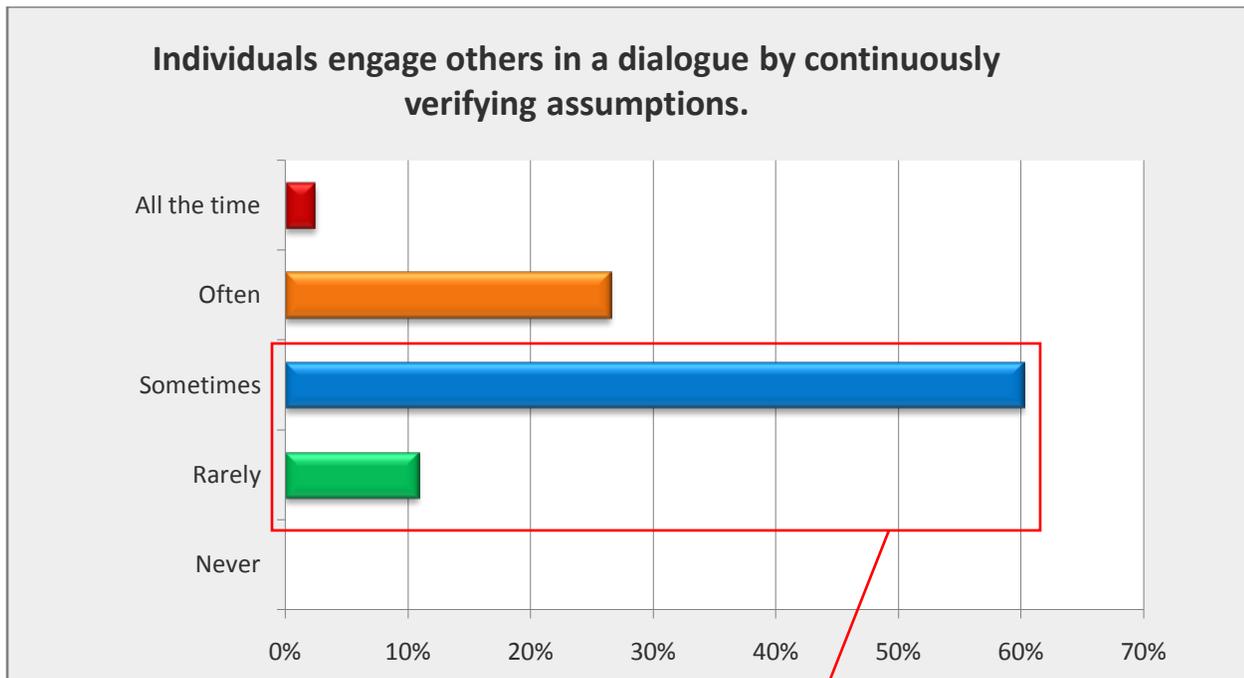Engaging in a dialogue to verify assumptions

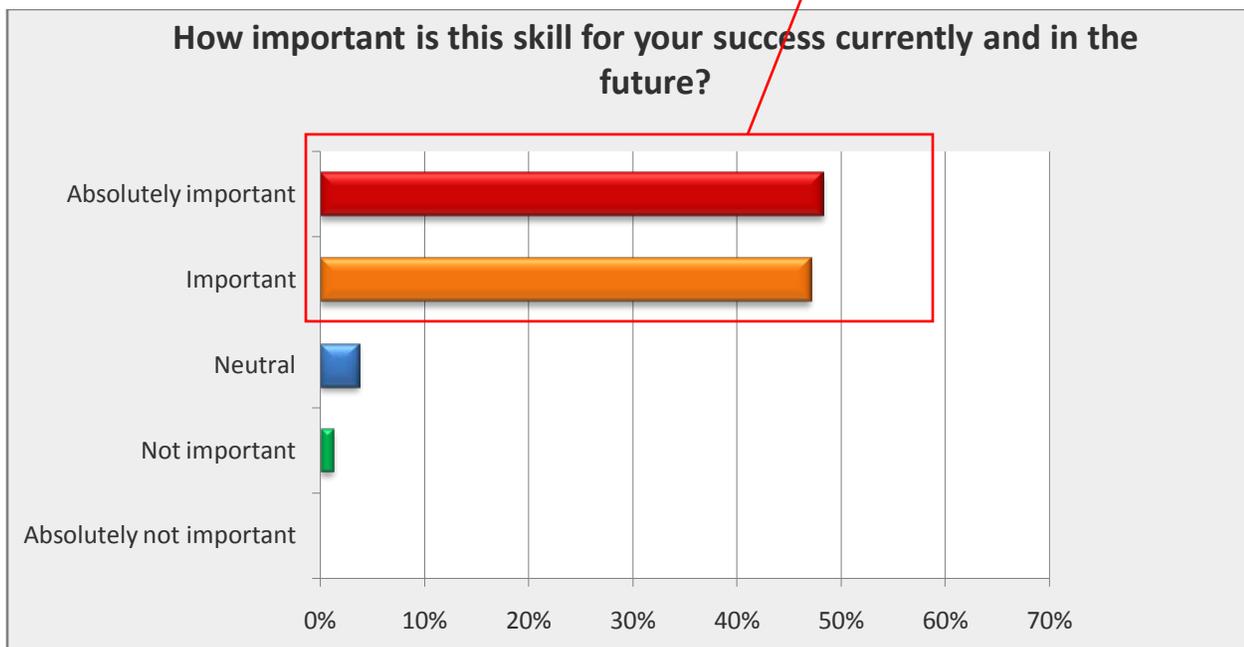Figure 11: Evaluation of current skill levels for engaging in dialogues

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Figure 12: Evaluation of the future importance and value of engaging in a dialogue

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey
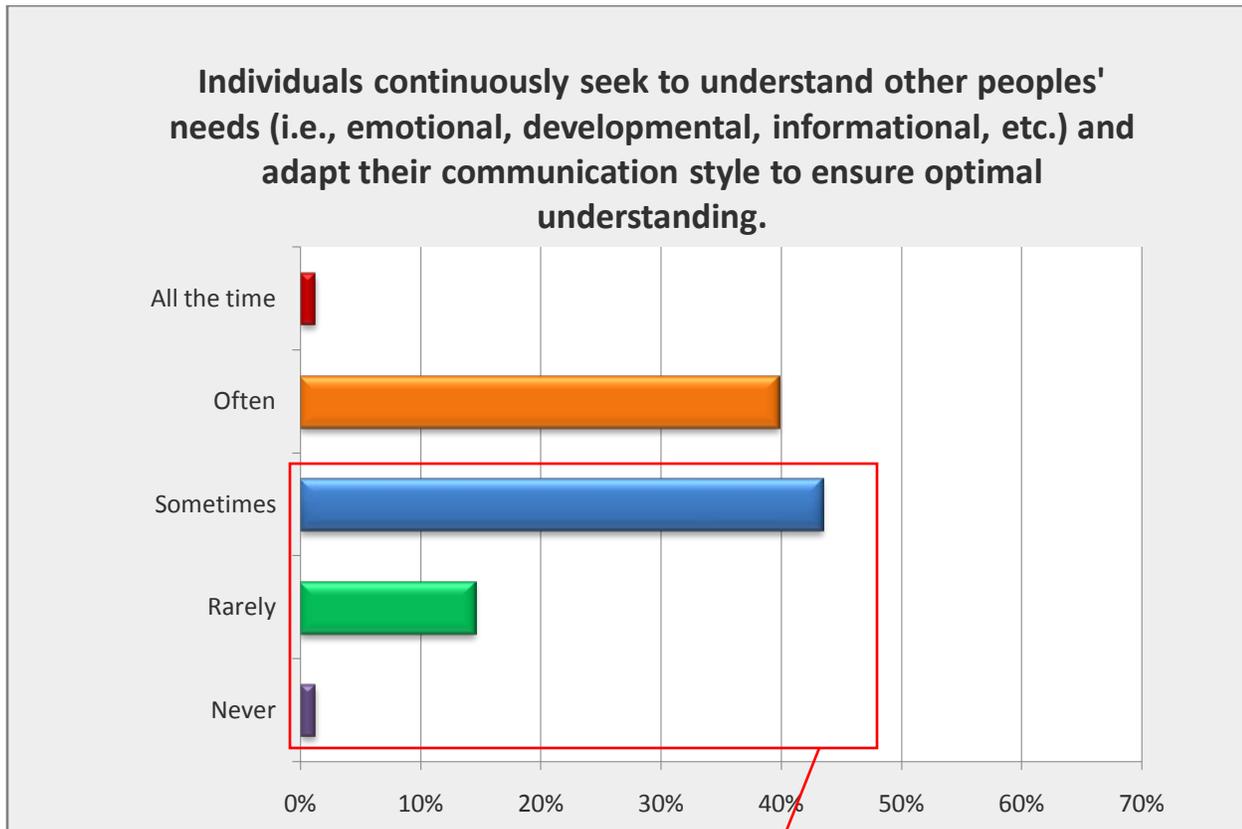Individuals seeking to understand other peoples' needs

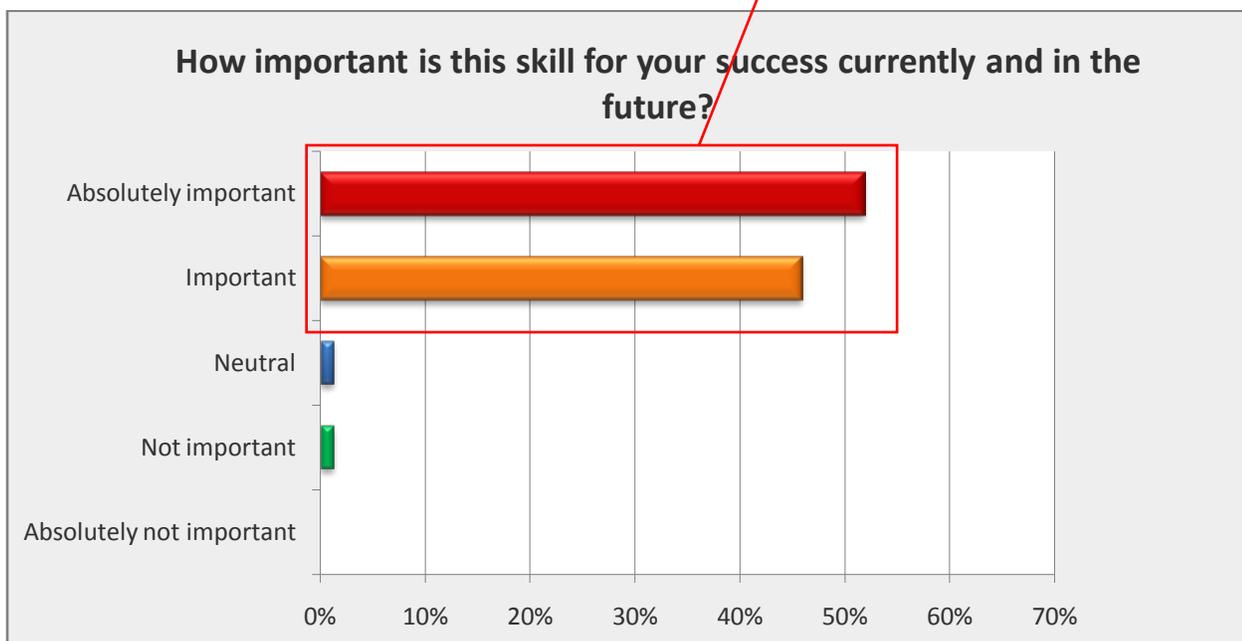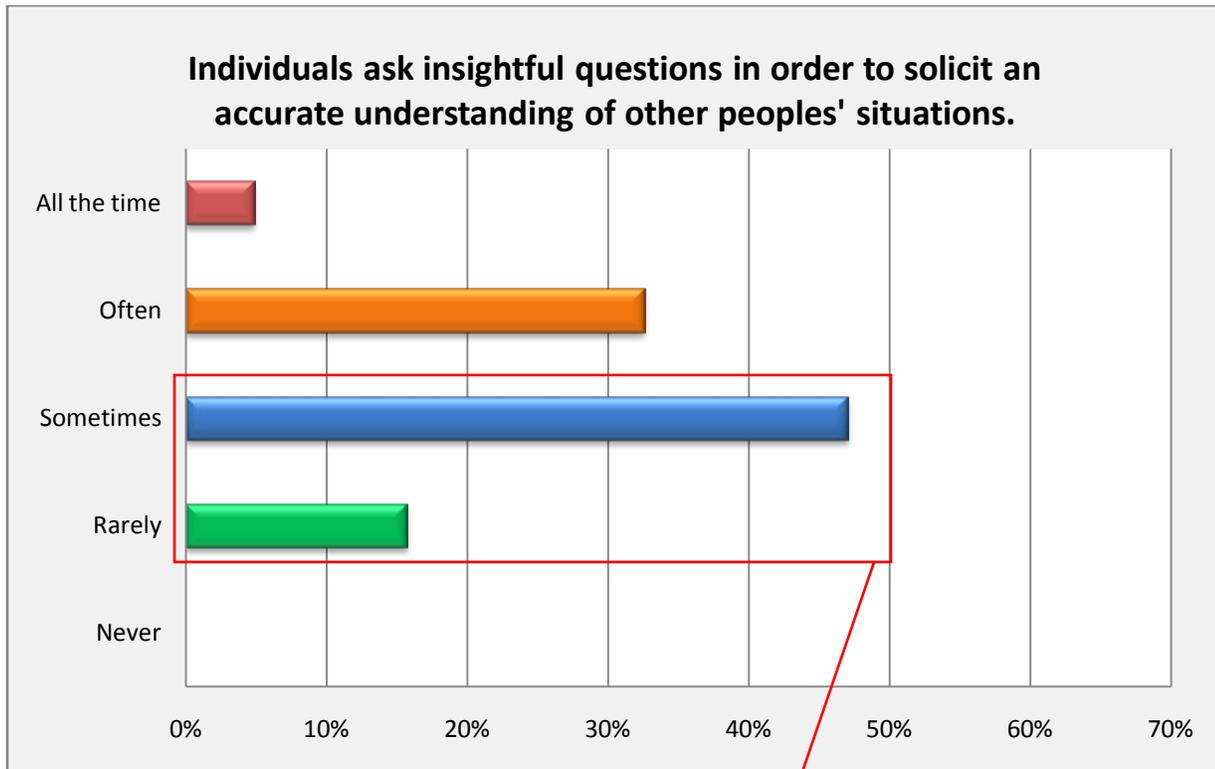Figure 13: Evaluation of current skill levels on seeking to understand needs

Figure 14: Evaluation of the future importance and value of seeking to understand needs

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey
Individuals asking insightful questions

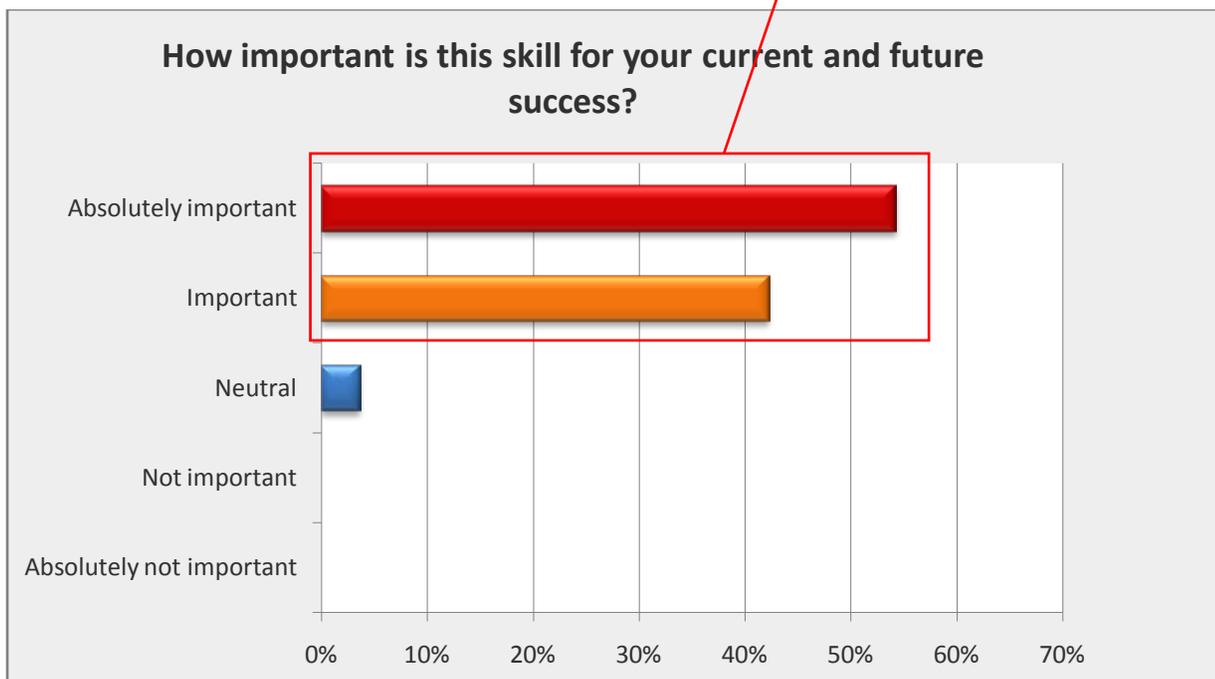Figure 15: Evaluation of current skill levels on asking insightful questions

18

Figure 16: Evaluation of the future importance and value of asking insightful questions

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey
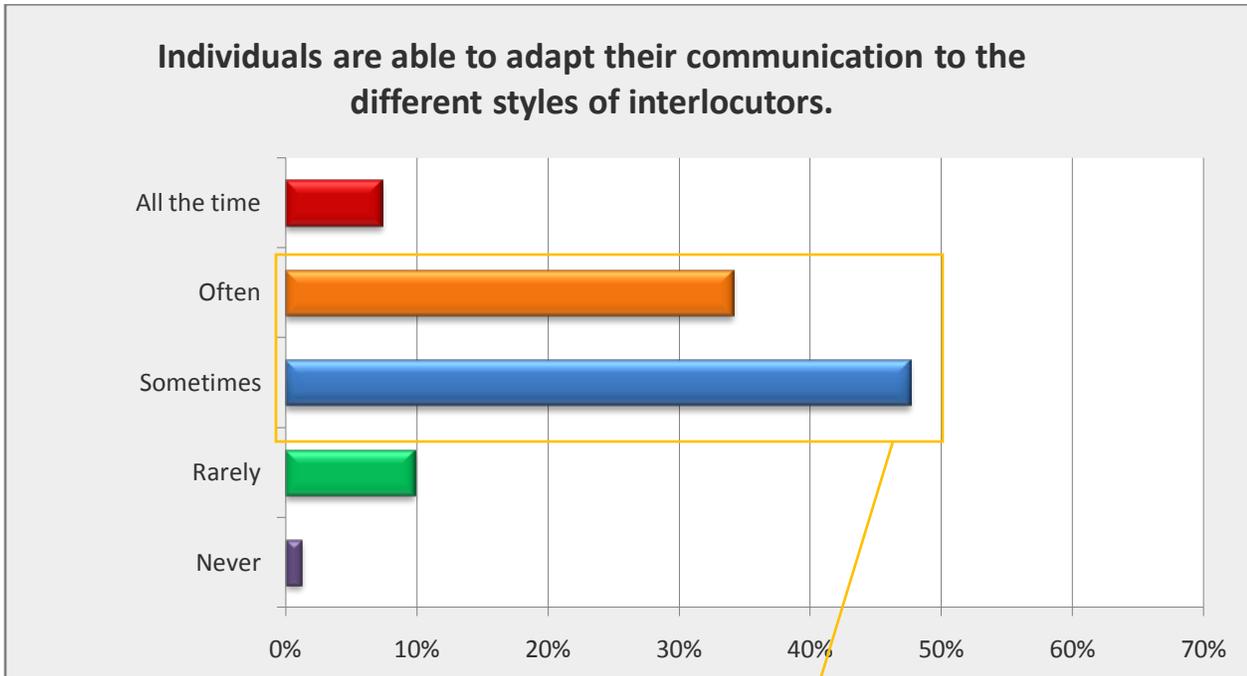Individuals' ability to adapt their communication to different styles

Figure 17: Evaluation of current skill levels on adapting communication to different styles
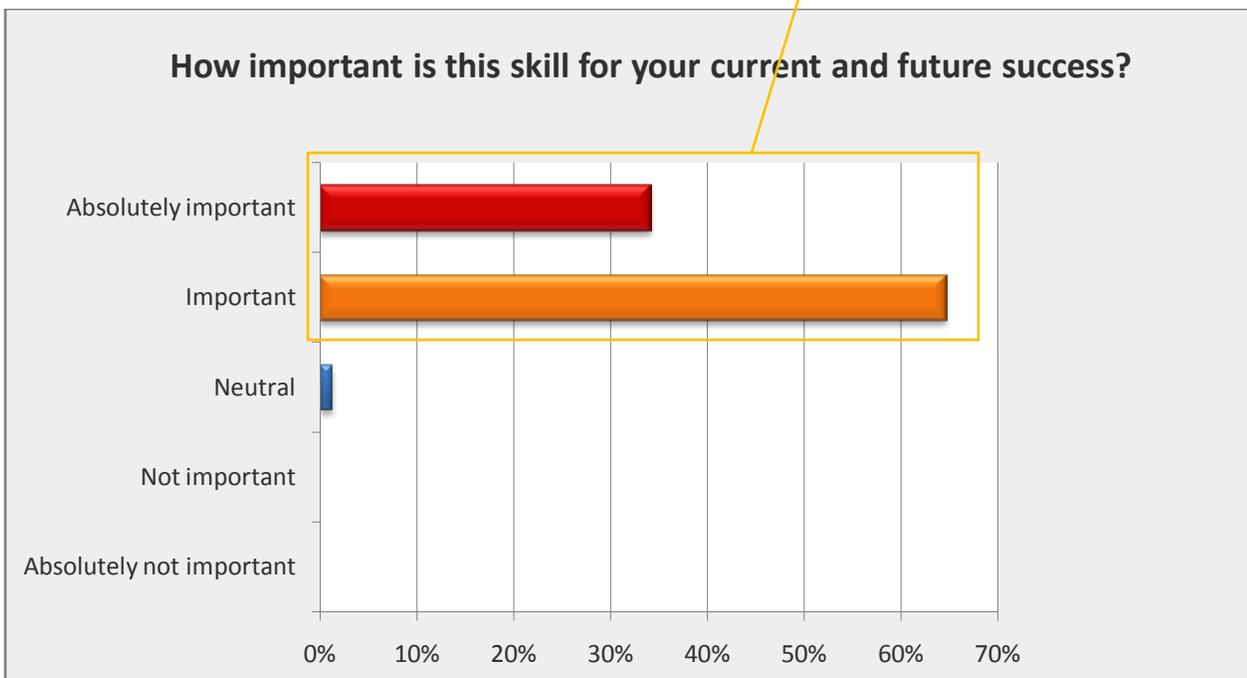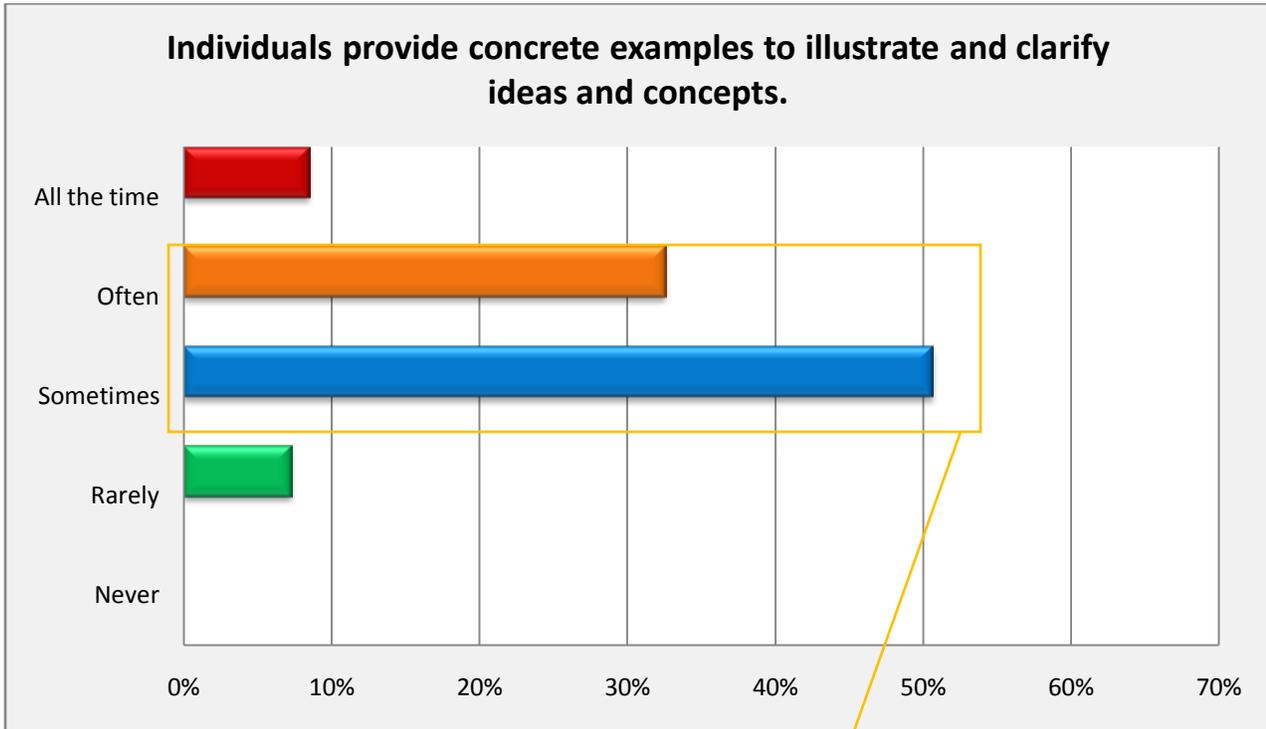
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Figure 18: Evaluation of the future importance and value of adapting communication to styles

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey
Individuals' ability to provide examples to illustrate ideas and concepts

Individuals provide concrete examples to illustrate and clarify ideas and concepts.

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Figure 19: Evaluation of current skill levels for using examples to illustrate concepts
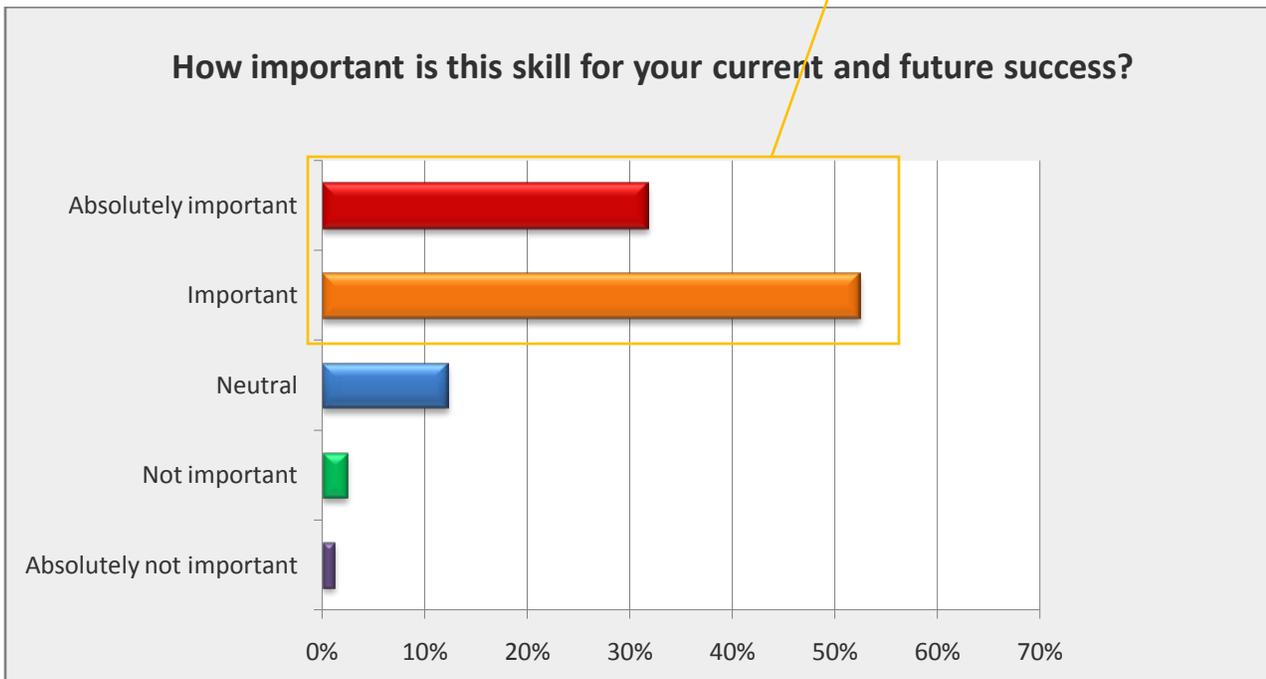
How important is this skill for your current and future success?

Figure 20: Evaluation of the future importance and value of using examples to illustrate concepts

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey
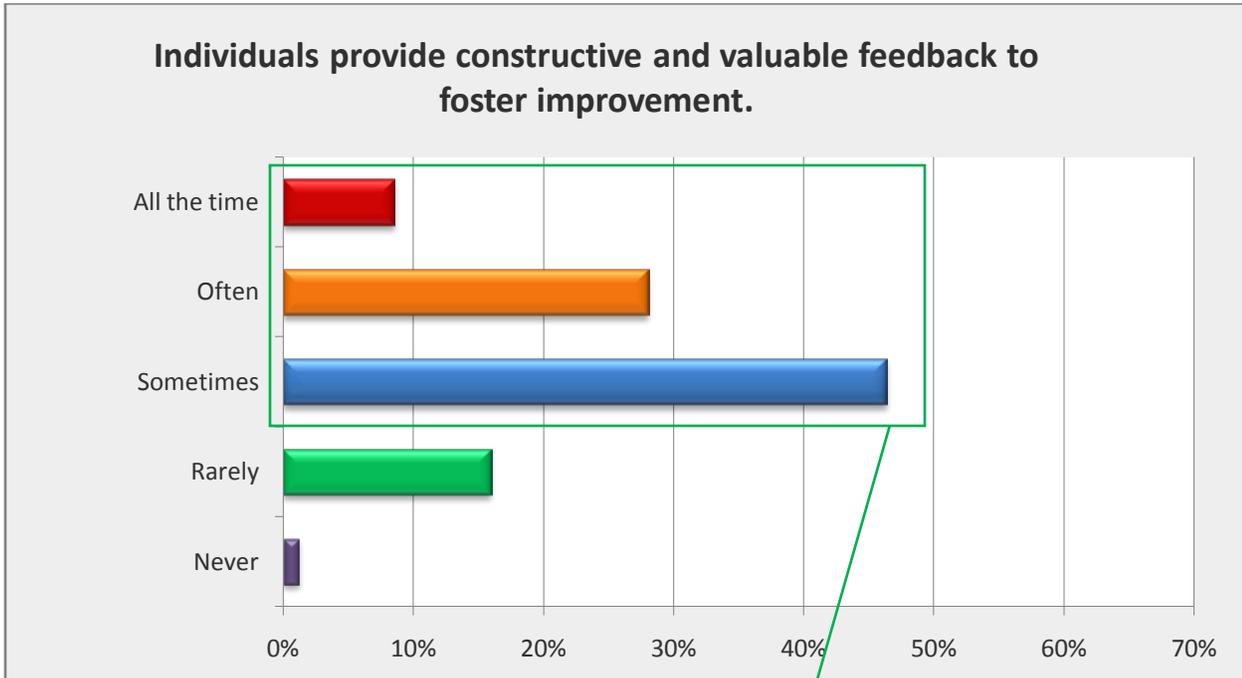Individuals' ability to provide constructive and valuable feedback

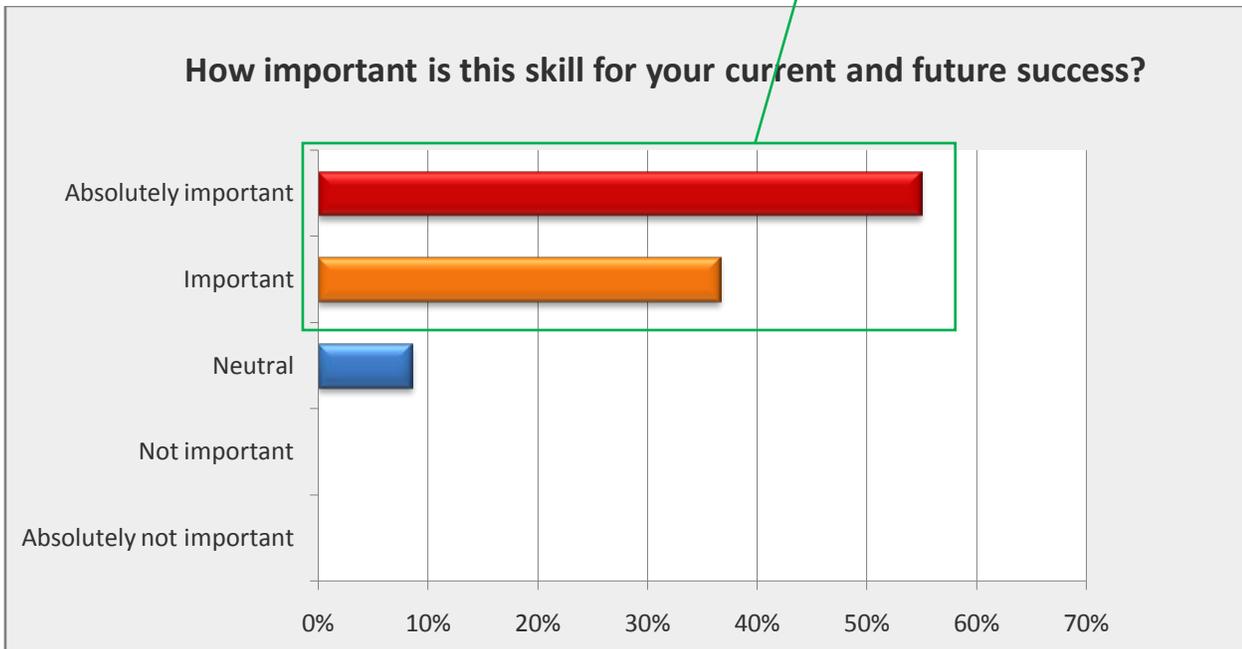Figure 21: Evaluation of current skill levels on providing feedback to foster improvement

Figure 22: Evaluation of the future importance and value of providing feedback

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey
Individuals foster an environment of trust and transparency
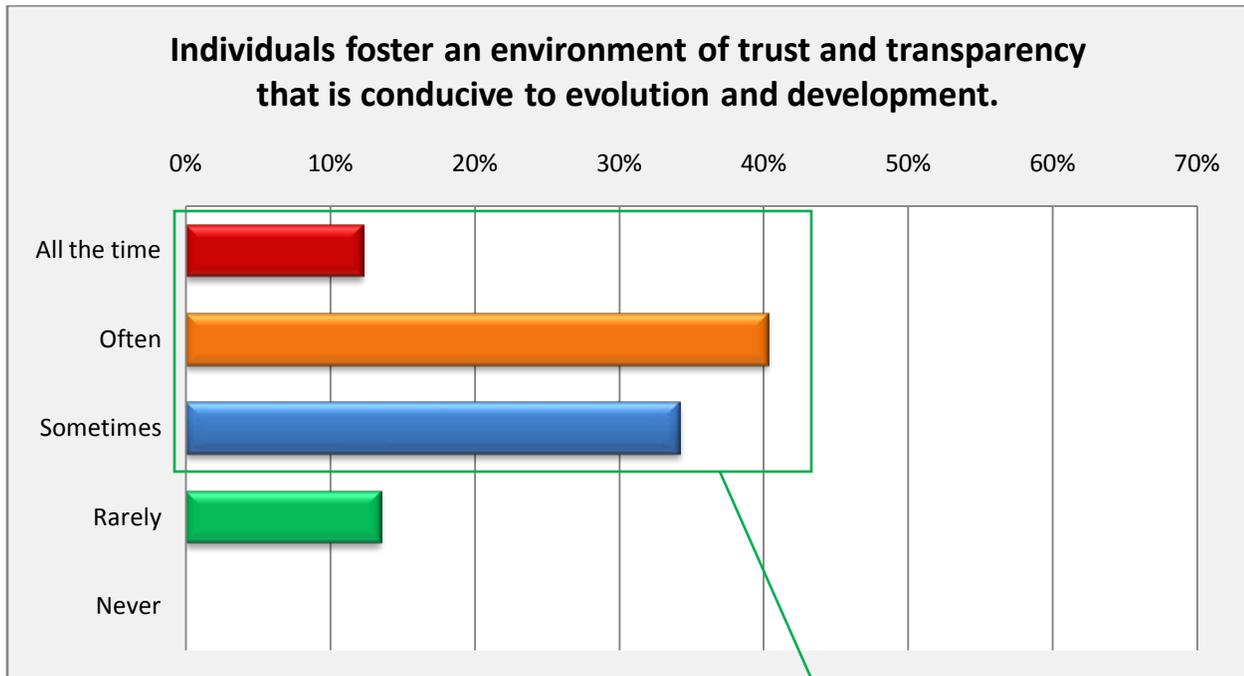
22   Figure 23: Evaluation of current skill levels on fostering trust and transparency
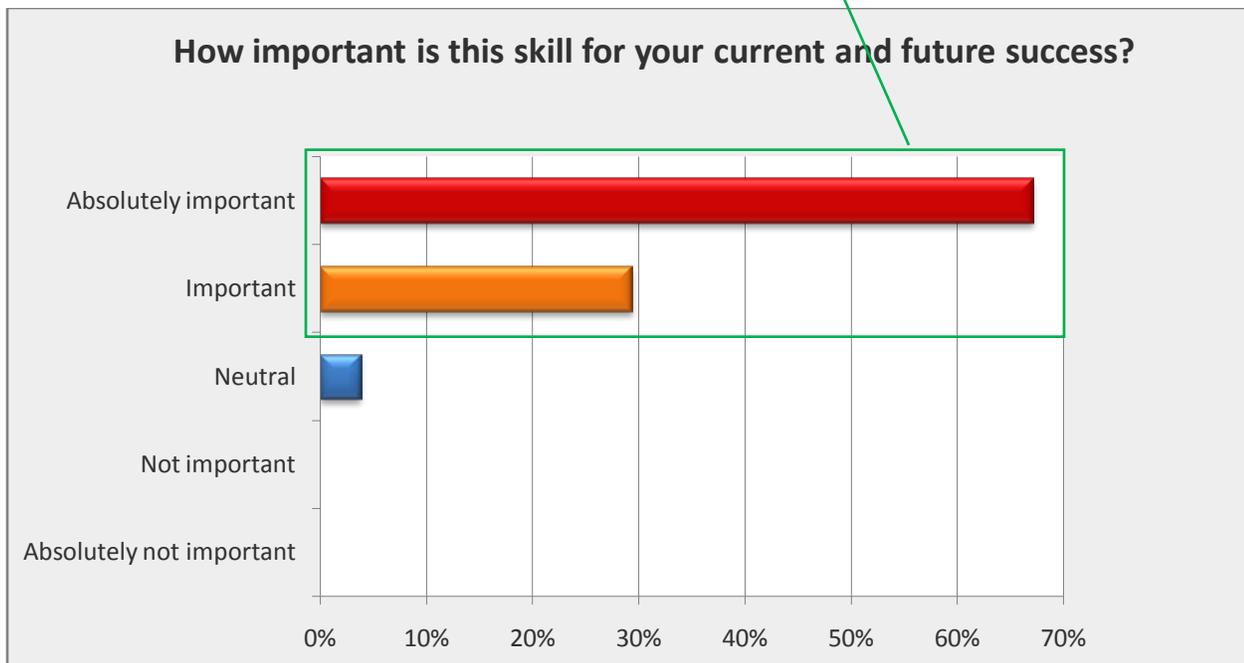
Figure 24: Evaluation of the future importance and value of fostering trust and transparency

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey
Individuals communicate in accordance with the corporate and team vision
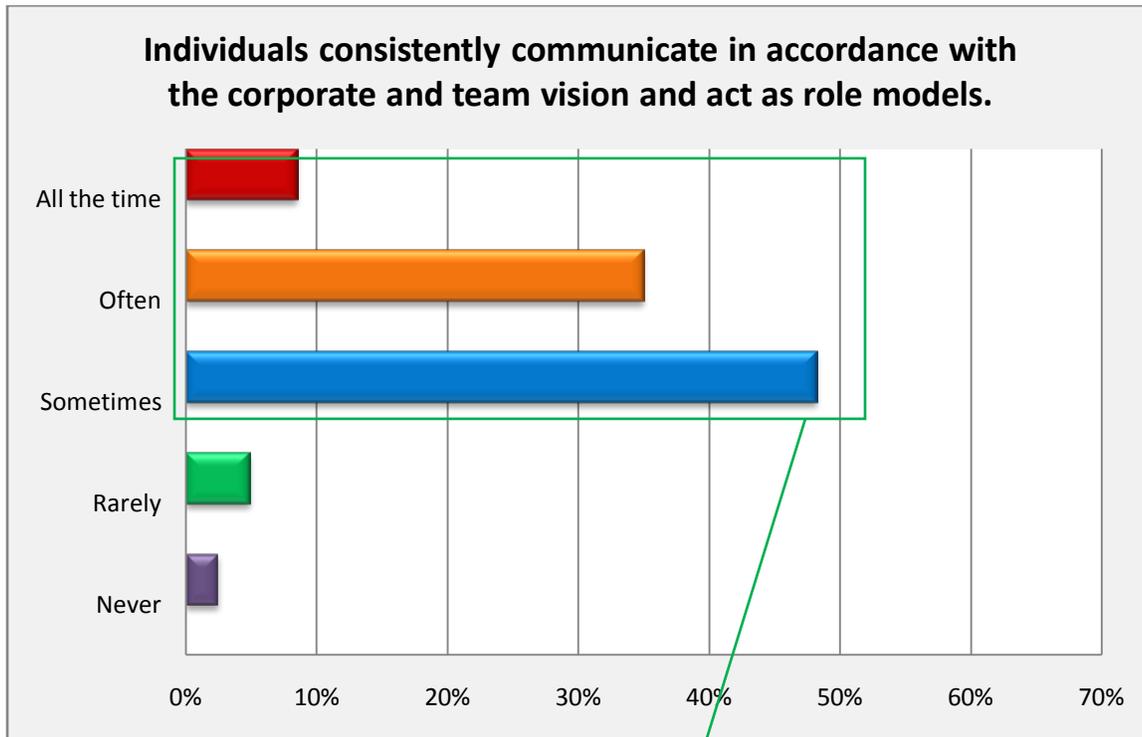
Figure 25: Evaluation of current skill levels on acting as role model for corporate vision
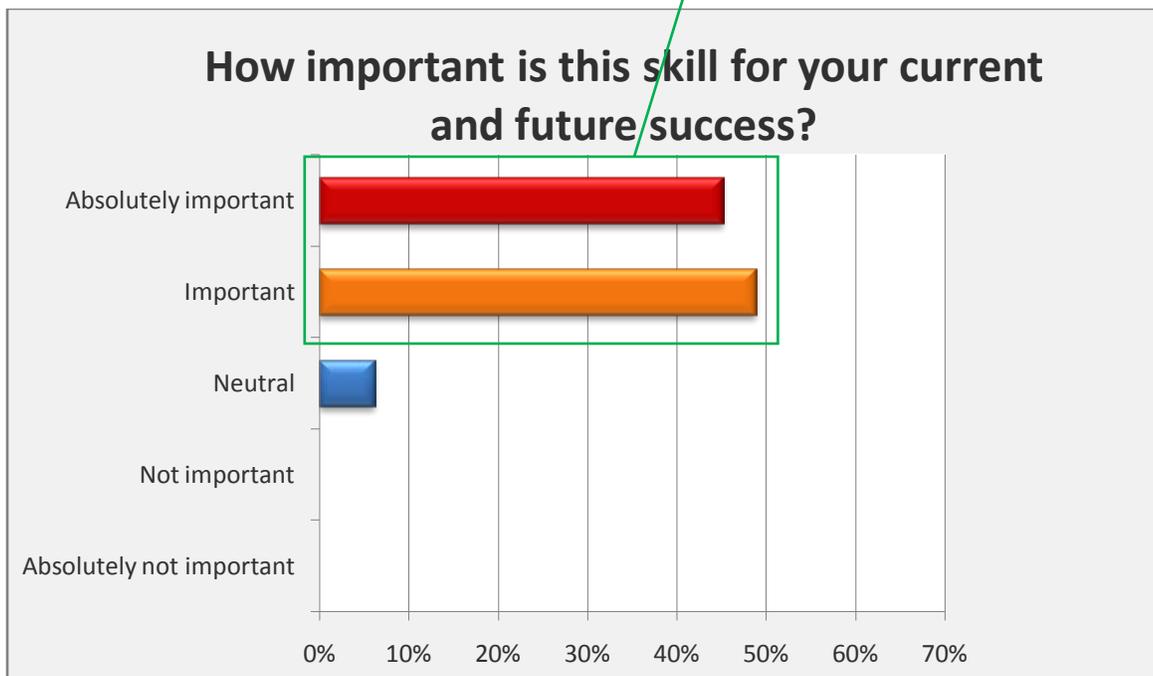
Figure 26: Evaluation of the future importance and value of acting as role model for corporate vision

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey
Evaluation of the emotional intelligence of individuals
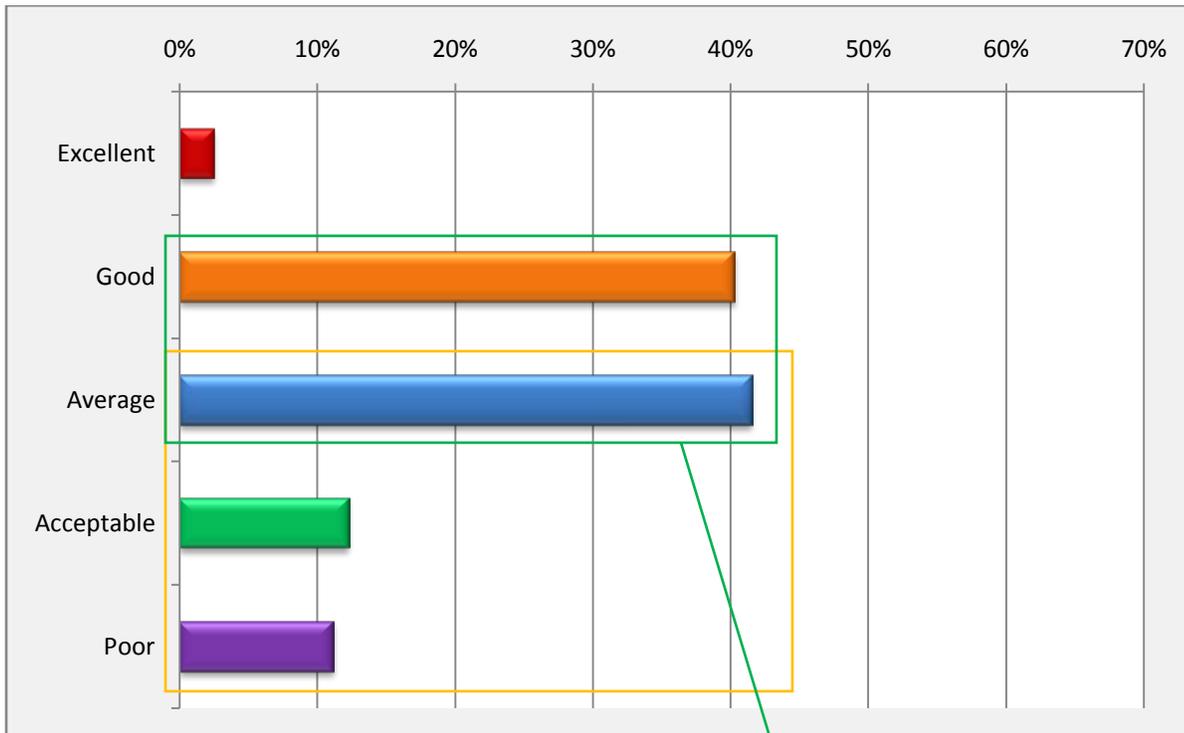
Figure 27: Evaluation of current skill levels with respect to emotional intelligence

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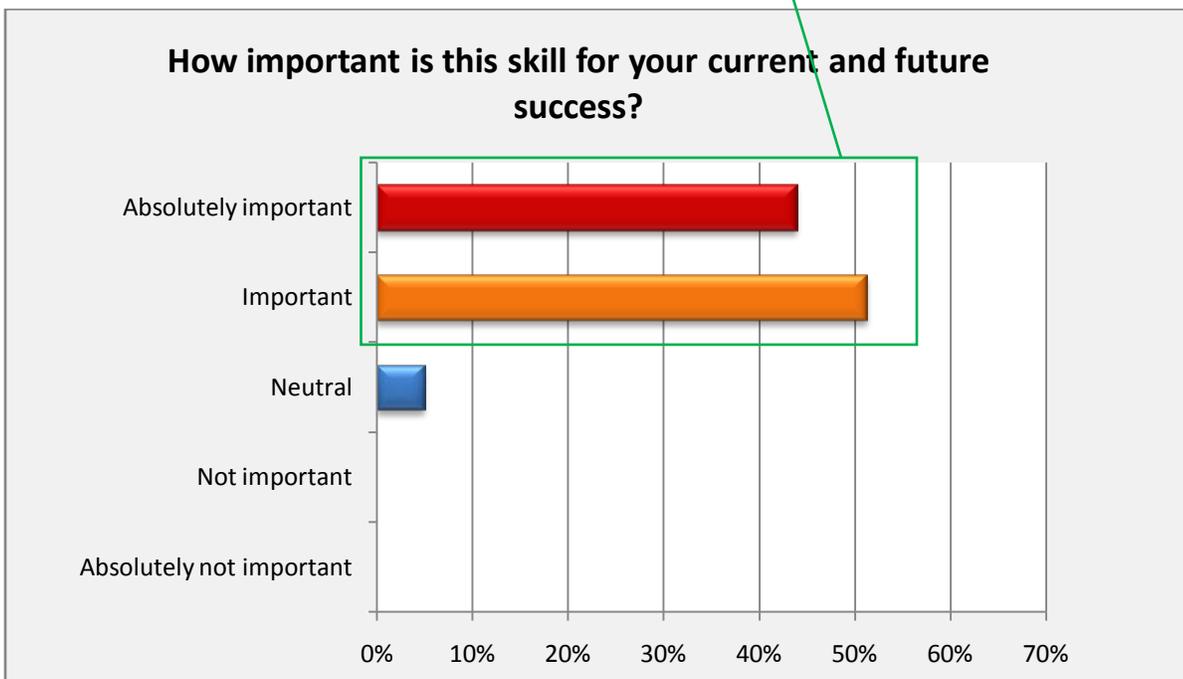
Figure 28: Evaluation of the future importance and value of emotional intelligence

Responses concerning specific skills, attitudes, and attributes individually evaluated in the survey

When the respondents were asked "what else do we need to know and share about the situation and development of effective communication in business," we received the following answers:

The comments were left as is except that typographical errors and spelling mistakes corrected. Highlights were added to illustrate recurring or similar comments and trends.

Table 4: Individual comments on other areas that need development as it pertains to communication in a business environment

| |
|---|
| Written email communication warrants improvement - both to increase understanding, and to improve productivity |
| Confident |
| Some people think that knowledge is power and we know that many people like to have power - how can we help make people realize what is really confidential vs. not? Sometimes, sharing the "nice to know" just make people feel like information is being shared and I believe that this increases the loyalty of certain individuals. Too much information is not better, so how do we coach/provide feedback on that right amount of information to share and the kind of information to share, keeping in mind that sometimes, the "right" setting to share information is never going to happen, but this doesn't prevent us from sharing some information, with some people... In my current team, this is good (Sales). In my previous team (marketing), this was really bad! |
| We are pretty good but need to do more work on understanding a diverse set of working cultures and assumptions across global sites |
| Effective listening |
| Appreciate the constant need for "mutuality" in all interactions - with team members, clients, and other stakeholders |
| Some individuals do not communicate professionally, via emails. They communicate as if everyone is a chum and too familiar |
| Vision Sharing |
| Trust |
| Consistency |
| See from the eyes of the client and not themselves |
| Alignment between corporate goals and real world implementation of these two, sometimes disparate environments needs to be addressed in order for ideas and programs to be embraced. Open, effective communication would greatly assist. |
| I also include social media as a (one to group/one and vice versa) channel for communication in the future |
| Cultural context, channels used, gender differences |
| Peaceful and respectful communication: I have the privilege to work in a Team where internal communication is outstanding. Problems come however when external individuals or groups come into the loop. The biggest gap is that we have erased aggressiveness from our way to communicate and we got used to it. It seems that this aggressiveness is very present everywhere else and dealing with it on frequent basis can be a challenge for us. |
| Understanding culture of specific organizations and how that impacts behavior and thought |
| Strategic perspective |
| Most issues internally in a company come from lack of clear communication and expectations |
| Create a relationship of mutual trust |
| Proper use of method of communication e.g. Technology, face to face, etc. |

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Appreciation of workplace bullying
Communication amongst different levels and departments
Effectiveness in working remotely - teleconferencing and online meetings
Team members need to be able to recognize the variety and breadth of perceptions team members may have when receiving the same information or stimulus.
Self-confidence
Meetings need to be focused - and shorter with fewer key players
Use of technology, at a basic level, can be challenging
Aligned Messages
Frequency
Selling the expert not the product.
Communicate powerfully and prolifically
Impact of social networks relative to perceptions and assumptions
Positive attitude
Organization and time spent is a challenge to learn new things and ensure that all communication is accurate and necessary
Organized and planned communication
Establish stretch goals

As in Table 1, many key elements and skills (necessary or desired) appear in Table 4, five of which appear to recur. First, "remote and electronic communication is a reality and needs to be addressed for improved effectiveness." This is very much in line with the comments associated with Table 1. Second, the "ability to listen" is also a recurring theme.

"Adaptability to different people, styles, cultures, and contexts (different departments, teams, or responsibilities)" needs continuous and sustained improvement. "Trust and respect" also recurs numerous times. Lastly, "the need to transmit information in a manner that takes into account volume and need" is identified and, in some cases, discussed with a certain amount of intensity. Technology, in many of its forms, has a tendency to increase the volume of information transmitted/shared, without always make allowance for its relevancy.

DISCUSSION

Since 53% of the respondents came from the Healthcare1Medical and Pharmaceutical/Chemical sectors, the results and their interpretation are more applicable to these two sectors. The vast majority of the respondents work in companies with more than 150 employees. In addition, given that 69.5% of the respondents are human resources managers or work in teams, the results are likely highly representative of the current situation since each answer takes into account the communication behavior of roughly eight people per respondent. In the Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices sector, front line managers have an average of nine direct relationships while second level managers and directors have an average of six direct relationships. It is also estimated that each employee interacts directly with a dozen people within their company or team, which influences their perspective on the communication skills of peers and managers.

When asked how important communication (one-on-one and team/group) was for the current and future effectiveness of their business, 99% of the respondents said that it was at least "important," with an average of 89% saying that it is either "very important" or "extremely important." Of the 89%, one-third said that the effectiveness of one-on-one communication in their company or team is either "poor" or simply "acceptable," with only 11% saying it was "excellent." Given that nearly 90% of the respondents said that one-on-one communication is "important" or "extremely important" (over 55%), the results tend to indicate that we are ill prepared for the future.

In terms of team team/group communication, the situation seems to be even more problematic, with 52.5% of the respondents ranking this skill as "poor" or "acceptable" and only 5.6% saying it is "excellent." The respondents clearly indicated that team/group communication will be even more important than one-on-one communication in the future. This is supported by the fact that 9 of the 28 comments accompanying Table 1 clearly address team/group communication. Except for remarks 7 and 23 associated with Table 1, which seem to be specifically aimed at one-on-one communication, all others apply to both one-on-one and team/group communication skills.

Table 1 also shows how important remote (technology) communication is becoming. Telephone conversations, teleconferences, and remote sessions (video or web-based) arguably require more effective communication skills. Our experience over more than a decade has shown that remote communication methods can be abysmally ineffective. However, they can also be tremendously productive when done properly. As we increasingly communicate remotely, it is critical that we adopt better methodologies and remain conscious of the need to apply key communication principles such as:

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- Asking insightful questions
- Verifying assumptions and understanding
- Leaving space and creating a safe venue for people to share their ideas, thoughts, concepts, and solutions
- Ensuring that all parties involved have a voice
- Having a solid structure
- Working on specific objectives and a limited number of topics
- Adapting to peoples' styles and needs
- Listening
- Fostering trust

The last two bullets, listening and fostering trust, also showed up a few times in the respondents' comments (Table 1). But, even more so, as we look back at the training sessions we facilitated over the past year (in addition to roughly the same number each year for the past 10 years), creating a trusting environment via effective listening, adapted

communication, and respect of differences is a combination that never fails to surface in any situation that requires communication.

To add emphasis to the bullet list of communication principles on the previous page as well as the comments that follow, Table 3 gives us a perspective on the key skills that will likely impact communication effectiveness in the future. Three areas were ranked significantly higher than the others:

1. Asking relevant questions
2. Identification of needs
3. Commitment and follow-up

Other areas of importance identified by the survey and reinforced by our client interactions are:

4. Networking
5. Dialogue

The value of surveys such as this one is often confirmed when consistent responses are obtained. Of the top three skills identified above, the first two showed up in Figures 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 as the skills with the highest need for improvement. Table 5 below also illustrates the importance of these skills for ensuring business communication success in the future. The survey design did not include a re-evaluation of "commitment and follow-up." It is thus a little more difficult to evaluate the need for development of this aspect. However, based on the results listed in Tables 2 and 3, this skill obviously needs to be improved.

Table 5 ranks the nine core skills identified in Section 4 of the survey according to how many respondents thought that the skill was either "important" or "absolutely important" in the future.

Table 5: Ranking of core skills according to ranking for importance in the future (Figs.12-28).

Skill	Future importance			Current
	Important %	Absolutely Important %	Combined Total %	Never, Rarely, Sometimes Combined %
Adapting communication to different styles	64.6	34.1	98.7	58.6
Seeking to understand needs	45.8	51.8	97.6	59.1
Fostering trust and transparency	29.3	67.1	96.4	47.0
Asking insightful questions	42.2	54.2	96.4	62.7
Engaging in dialogue	47	48.2	95.2	70.8
Emotional Intelligence	51.2	43.9	95.1	64.0*
Acting as role model for vision	48.8	45.1	93.9	55.4
Providing feedback to foster improvement	36.6	54.9	91.5	63.4
Using examples to illustrate concepts	52.4	31.7	84.1	57.8

*EI was described as poor, acceptable, and average rather than never, rarely, or sometimes.

It is important to note that "fostering trust and transparency," "asking insightful questions," "seeking to understand needs," and "providing feedback to foster improvement" were scored by at least 50% of the respondents as "absolutely important" in the future.

Skills that require serious attention

The discrepancy between current and future importance was high, as indicated by the ranking summary in Table 5.

Only 29% (Figure 11) of the respondents said that people in their company or group actually engage in dialogue "often" (26.5%) or "all the time" (2.4%), while 95.2% of the respondents (Figure 12) rated the ability to engage in a dialogue as either "important" (47%) or "absolutely important" (48.2%) in the future. Based on the results of this survey, it appears that engaging in a dialogue is currently the least-used skill but ranks very high in the need for it in the future.

As can be seen in Figure 15, 71% of the respondents thought that people either "rarely" or only "sometimes" verify assumptions (by asking questions and clarifying what has been discussed), which exposed a significant discrepancy between the current situation and the evaluated need for this skill in the future (96.4% of the respondents ranked it as "important" and "absolutely important"). In terms of "asking insightful questions," 62.7% of the respondents thought that this only happens "sometimes" or "rarely." On a positive note, 4.8% of the respondents thought that insightful questions are asked "all the time," indicating a better than evaluated potential to understand needs and foster better dialogue. Over 96% of the respondents identified the ability to ask insightful questions as "important" (42.2%) or "absolutely important" (54.2%).

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Over 59% of the respondents thought that people in their company either "sometimes," "rarely," or "never" continuously seek to understand other peoples' needs. Given that need identification is one of the top three skills required for effective communication, this is worrisome, especially given that only 1.2% of the respondents thought that understanding needs is a skill expressed "all the time" and 97.6% of the respondents thought that understanding needs is either "important" (45.8%) or "extremely important" (51.8%).

Engaging in a dialogue implies that one is able to ask effective questions and is then able to better understand the interlocutor's perspective (needs). Given the results described above and those in Table 5, it seems clear that the three skills in question have not been developed in a manner that will ensure future effectiveness. It is thus our opinion that serious and urgent efforts be devoted to developing these skill.

Development strategies may include training programs for improving communication, conflict management, convincing, negotiating, and selling skills. It may be pertinent to select specific modules from these programs such as those that focus on sequencing effective questions, developing questions in accordance with communication styles, better identifying needs, enhancing the impact of dialogue, and other such approaches. Effective coaching will also have a major impact on the development of skills.

Skills that require attention
The discrepancy between current and future importance is evident but not generally critical.

Resources must also be allocated to a second group of skills. While seemingly less urgent, specific resources need to be allocated for the development of style-adapted communication and the use of examples to illustrate and clarify ideas. While using examples received a lower combined total for future importance (Table 5), the fact that a high number of respondents thought that people "never", "rarely" or only "sometimes" use examples coupled with the fact that examples are key elements in adapting our communication to different styles suggests that more training and development efforts need to be devoted to this "duo" of skills. This conclusion is also influenced by the number of additional comments associated with Table 4 that either directly identify or allude to adaptability.

Emotional intelligence was rated as "good" or "excellent" by 42% of the respondents and as "average" by 41%, indicating a healthy level of EI in many companies. It is, however, important to note that 23% of the respondents thought that EI is "poor" or only "acceptable." It is therefore prudent to conclude that EI still deserves continued development, especially given that healthy EI has a direct effect on the ability of individuals to engage in a productive dialogue and seek to understand others (social awareness and relationship management according to Daniel Goleman in his book published in 1995).

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Development strategies may include some of the previously mentioned training programs as well as presentation skills and specific EI programs. Once again, effective coaching is likely to have a major impact on EI improvement.

Skills that seem to be reasonable or effective
The discrepancy between current and future importance is limited or nonexistent in some cases.

Some 36% of the respondents thought that co-workers are able to "often" or continuously ("all the time") provide constructive and valuable feedback that promotes improvements in the company. Coupled with the fact that only 17% of the respondents thought that co-workers feedback either rarely or never provide feedback points to a trend toward increased trust and transparency.

In addition, 62% of the respondents thought that an environment of trust and transparency is promoted "often" or "all the time," indicating that the level of readiness for improved dialogue, identification of needs, and use of effective questions is sufficient for training and development to actually take hold and become part of corporate culture.

It should also be noted that Table 4 clearly illustrates the importance of trust, transparency, and a positive attitude. It is thus always very important to continue fostering such an environment.

The results of the survey tend to demonstrate that communication effectiveness is critical and is likely to be even more important in the coming years. Creating productive dialogue by using

effective questions, listening, being open to differences, and fostering trust is most likely to promote success and increase productivity.

Technology and the ability to communicate remotely provide new opportunities as well as unique challenges that will also require enhanced communication skills.

The best results in fostering the sustainable development of communication skills have been obtained when continued coaching and development become a corporate/team priority. When skills sets are clearly defined in a competency model that is supported by quarterly reviews, an adapted training curriculum, continuous discussion and reinforcement, and dedicated coaching, they tend to significantly improve and, most importantly, become part of the corporate culture and values. Core communication skills need to be core values in order to make them a normal and productive way of doing business.