THE HANDBOOK OF COMMUNICATION TRAINING

A Best Practices Framework for Assessing and Developing Competence

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Chapter 2

Communication training's higher calling

Using a civic frame to promote transparency and elevate the value of services

Don Waisanen

Abstract

Communication trainers can make a greater case for their work by positioning all of their training, at its highest level, within a civic frame. A civic frame raises the stakes for training components such as listening or diversity and puts the benefits of corporate social responsibility and similar efforts into practice in training contexts. This chapter details why and how trainers can use this frame to create transparency and elevate the value of their services.

As both a communication trainer and professor, I have worked with just about every type of group and organization. I've found training extraordinarily valuable for helping people in my local community and around the world do their work more effectively, testing new ideas about communication, and bridging theory with practice. The greatest surprise in carrying out this work over the years, however, has been my discovery of the robust connections between communication training and societal improvement. This chapter makes a case for implementing this connection in an intentional and visible way within all communication training to create transparency with clients and elevate the value of our services.

For decades, communication "training, a specific type of consulting intervention," has been "aimed at developing organizational members’ skills in target areas that can enhance organizational outcomes" (Houser, 2016, p. 217). Given the pressures for immediate skill building or organizational advisement built into most contracts, communication trainers should continue to make these goals a priority. Yet a next step is to underscore how communication training further connects with societal improvement. Focusing on societal improvement isn't simply a "nice add on" for existing training programs, but rather a pragmatic, robust way to signal trainers' accountability to higher standards, broader audiences, and—even in the most bottom-line focused environments—make a greater case for the types of outcomes clients seek. Based on a review of extant literatures, Stephan et al. (2016) argue that market-based organizations in particular should "proactively initiate" positive social change (PSC) through "a multilevel, ‘bottom-up’ process where changes in patterns of thoughts, behaviors and social relationships among individuals underlie changes in organizations, industries, communities, regions, or even nations" (pp. 1252–1253, italics in original). They argue, for example, that sustainable production practices throughout supplier networks only come into being "from aggregated changes in the behaviors of individual decision makers".
working in these organizations” (p. 1253). A civic frame for training builds upon this research, providing a bottom-up way to put such ideas into practice.

Some reading this chapter may be looking for a larger conceptual framework for communication training or simply a primer on implementing some elements of this perspective. Others could benefit from a frame that raises the stakes for specific communication training components such as listening or diversity, while providing a concrete way for training to connect with increasing organizational emphases on corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability, and more. For trainers seeking to make more compelling pitches for funding training (e.g. to an organization, the HR department, etc.), a civic frame translates the benefits of CSR and similar ideas into practice in training contexts. Many investors now believe that addressing economic returns and social developments is critical to their success (Mair & Hegenberger, 2014).

All communication trainers should be “working from a solid theoretical framework and thoughtfully allowing empirical knowledge to guide our decisions during consulting,” which “makes consultants credible, effective, and valuable to the organizations which seek their help” (Waldeck & Seibold, 2016, p. xi). There is “no theory-free consulting; we are all driven by explicit and/or implicit human and organizational theories” (Pettegrew, 2016, p. 308), and using frames strategically impacts leadership, management, and self-assessments (Sasnett & Ross, 2007). Trainers hence need to be more conscious about the frames that guide their training, conducting strategic “design work” to address organizational challenges (Jackson & Aakhus, 2014, p. 125). In fact, the communication training literature hints at the need for civic design in this work. Seibold (2016) notes that organizational communication consulting mutually enhances theory and practice “for the growth of knowledge... for the benefit of our discipline,” and “for the well-being of society and its institutions” (p. 13, emphasis added). Some institutional trends have also been moving in this direction, such as “citizenship” becoming a commonly used term in many organizations (e.g. Organ, 2017), and a belief that organizations need to engage in activities that signal legitimacy to the broader public (Jacobs, van Witteloostuijn, & Christe-Zeyse, 2013, p. 777; see also see Stephan et al., 2016).

With these opportunities in mind, I define a civic frame as the structuring of communication training intentionally and visibly as a way to improve society through an accountability to the larger public. Some guiding questions driving this frame include: What would training objectives and outcomes look like starting from a societal viewpoint? What benefits does a training offer participants both inside and outside an organization? And, for any individual skills covered in a training, what if more participants acted in this way? For example, for a corporate diversity workshop focused on how to work well across differences, a human resources or full-time trainer might write a proposal speaking to the individual benefits of being able to work with vastly different communication styles, the organizational rewards of employee retention, and the societal return for easing relations, anticipating risks, and averting crises between people in a world where more cultures are coming into contact than ever before (see Lull, 2007).

What’s critical to recognize is how the last point heightens the value of the individual and organizational objectives. With the civic frame, a larger case can be made for embedding and scaling trainings that focus on a staff’s ability to work across differences. A civic frame works with all the individual and organizational outcomes trainers hope to effect (e.g. greater productivity, better teamwork, etc.), but elevates the value of these services by highlighting their connections with the public good. Debriefs, for instance, can raise the stakes for communication training by toggling between “I hope this new skill helps
you with your lives and work” to “The world would be a much better place if more people used this skill in their interactions with others.” In turn, communication training becomes more transparent by making interventions guided by a higher, global level of accountability. With the civic frame in mind, trainers can articulate that their content and processes have interlocking value for individuals, organizations, and societies.

A civic frame promoting transparency and other ethical standards is already implicit within communication training. For instance, at a corporate staff development workshop that teaches how to communicate well up, down, and across organizational silos, we’re envisioning ways to be better citizens outside of an organization too. Or, in helping a nonprofit consider audiences it doesn’t typically work with, we’re attempting to build civic and communal bonds where there were none, helping people imagine and make actionable ways of working across divides. Such projects “facilitate collaborations among previously unconnected actors to build weak-tie (or bridging) social capital” (Stephan et al., 2016, p. 1263). A civic frame forwards “the strength of weak ties” and the access to critical information and development of new ideas that it affords (Granovetter, 1983, p. 201). In conducting teambuilding sessions or training in how to facilitate better meetings, we’re also underscoring essential ways to build trust, manage conflicts, and bring diverse voices to the table writ large. These aren’t just useful activities to help people in organizations do their work better, they’re what our world needs.

In Table 2.1 I address integration and adoption issues for the three different audiences likely to read this chapter: those who have already adopted a civic frame and are searching for criteria and evidence to affirm this perspective (adoptive audience); those who are receptive to these ideas or who are already down this road but looking for ways to implement and further justify their work (receptive audience); and those who for whom these ideas may initially seem uninteresting or unimportant (skeptical audience). Following the issues identified in this table, the rest of this chapter will build a case for why and how a civic frame can benefit each of these audiences.

At a minimum, adopting a civic frame means explicitly drawing attention to and marketing the individual, organizational, and societal outcomes for training. In the teambuilding session mentioned above, a trainer might present tools for building trust among employees and highlight the global dimensions for using such a tool in a cross-cultural business meeting. A session on professional writing may seem like it’s only relevant to improving staff members’ abilities to communicate well via email, or to unclog an organization’s voluminous pipeline of unnecessary online communication each work day. But a written component can also adopt a civic frame and a higher level of transparency about why trainers are doing what they’re doing by being tied to, for example, the “curse of knowledge” (the idea that we all struggle to move outside of our own frames of reference in writing) that has led to more misunderstanding between all people than perhaps any other communication issue (Pinker, 2015). Before detailing how communication trainers of all kinds can further benefit from and employ a civic frame, the next section will provide a deeper background, context, and rationale for training guided by an accountability to the larger public.

Why use a civic frame for training?

In many ways, the challenges that individuals and groups face in organizations directly parallel the problems that we face as a society. The social and political problems of polarization, tribalism, and conflict run rampant throughout public life. In the U.S., Pew polls show that people are increasingly distrustful and isolated from one another
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<td>Provides a frame in which diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity all fit; raises the stakes for these matters beyond minimalist employee compliance to a maximalist, motivating purpose for why the world and organization needs more training</td>
<td>Underscores the importance of both unique contributions and common causes in the work culture; provides a frame in which diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity all fit; raises the stakes for these matters beyond minimalist employee compliance to a maximalist, motivating purpose for why the world and organization needs more training</td>
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(Pew Research, 2014). In the last two decades, especially, "our politics seems more unaccountable and dysfunctional than ever, and outright hostility toward anything public seems increasingly common" (Snyder-Hall, 2015, p. 1).

When the communication training and civic engagement literatures are positioned together, the possibility for training to address many of the most vexing societal problems becomes clear. Scully and Diebel (2015) note that "in too many communities, the inherent democratic capacities of citizens, organizations, and networks to address complex public programs remain unrecognized and underutilized" (p. 1; see also Nabatchi & Gastil, 2012). Jarvis, Nold, and Barroquillo (2016) further find that civic education (at least in the United States) historically became "scientized, sanitized, and nationalized" in a way that emphasized knowing rather than doing or feeling a "civic pulse" (p. 15). A lot of ink has been spilled about what democratic communication should look like (e.g. Habermas, 2006), but communication training actually provides one route for putting these ideas into practice. By working with individuals and targeting social improvements from the ground up, communication training constitutes an ethical, civic intervention for clients and trainees.

If community development "implies that the quality of interaction among the people living in a locality improves over time" (Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer, 2015, p. 364), then it's chiefly in improving the one-to-one interactions between people that trainers can most make their mark in promoting positive communities. According to theories such as the coordinated management of meaning, "organizations and their concerns are made through the ongoing and combined interactions of their people. Therefore, if you want to change anything about the organization, you begin with the relevant interactions of its people" (Soskwin, 2016, p. 154). The same goes for societal engagement, which can only start with the quality of discourse between people. With a civic frame, this kind of skill development also links to the variable of "employee helping behavior," or "interpersonal organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) that is affiliative, co-operative, and directed at other individuals" (Mosholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011, p. 33).

Since communication consulting and training involves "the application of organizational communication principles and theories to real-world problems" (Dewine, 2016, p. xv), communication trainers need to take seriously how their work can influence both institutions and society. As research shows, training can effectively address many societal problems, such as the poor relationships between police officers and different publics (Ross & Waldeck, 2016). In this study, a civic focus offered a societal benefit and linked to bottom-line outcomes, with "clients report[ing] cost savings associated with the negative outcomes averted by practicing the principles and engaging in the behaviors recommended by our programs" (p. 320; see also Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009, p. 468).

Although this may require a shift in mindset for some readers, a civic frame can be applied intentionally and visibly in any and all organizational trainings. As Pearce (2010) highlights, if civic engagement gets characterized as only about traditional city council meetings and public hearings, we miss opportunities to make it matter through more creative and unusual processes (p. 8). Mathews (2014) too expands the definition of civic engagement by suggesting that "practicing democratic practices creates its own space. There is no street address; the space appears whenever people take advantage of opportunities to go about familiar routines in a more democratic way" (p. 120).

As research repeatedly shows, "when time and energy are applied to building the communication skills of learners — and the communication-skills of leaders, this has an immediate impact [on] improving productivity, quality, morale, turnover among..."
Civic frame and transparency

...more unexplored dimensions of civic life. They are positioned at the intersection of societal problems, education, and national priorities. A “civic pulse” should look like one route for assessing social impact, ethical, civic engagement among the people (p. 364), then it’s trainers can most likely make use of, if you want to connect with them, this kind of community or “inner circle.”

The civic frame in action. DeWine, 2016, can influence many aspects of different cultural benefit and associated with group behavior (p. 468). Civic frame canings. As Pearce suggests, the definition creates its own advantage of its own. In building the leaders, this has run over among low-performers and retention among high-performers” (The skills, 2017). Yet, as two millennia of communication research highlights, communication training shouldn’t be behind the minute trainees walk out of their organizations: it’s meant to foster transparent and ethical improvements in individuals, organizations, and public life as a whole.

In my experience, this larger civic framing stands out as distinctive and credible for communication training proposals to foundations and other funding entities, especially in persuading funders that communication training should be carried out through a long-term, sustained, and ecological commitment to improvements that can be tracked and assessed (i.e., the other best practices in this volume). A civic frame further highlights emerging themes from meta-analyses of training research that look to the “different levels of analysis” we might use to frame our work (see Bell et al., 2017, p. 305). Overall, by using a civic frame and terms that attempt to improve individuals, organizations and, as its highest purpose, society, we build a higher calling into our work.

How to use a civic frame for training

Trainers can apply a civic frame in countless ways. My goal here is less to provide an exhaustive list of examples than to introduce some of the means by which trainers can use this frame. One example is David Kantor’s ideas about “Dialogic Leadership,” which invites individuals to expand their repertoire of communication skills by thinking through how much they practice using their voices, how well they listen to others, how much they engage in respectful opposition, and how much they are neutral rather than reactionary in different situations (Isaacs, n.d.). Listening alone is one of the top predictors for effective leadership (Rohrmoser, 2001), but it’s also the starting point for working across differences in a complex society. Without good listening skills, the communication in organizations and societies devolves into monologues. Communication frameworks like dialogic leadership ask trainees to become more open, transparent communicators committed to getting unstuck from common, unproductive patterns in their personal lives and as citizens in society.

We can even use a civic perspective to raise the stakes for these skills more broadly by constructing training as a counterfactual with national or international leadership. As much as two participants in a training may perform better from a role-play practice, they often act as thought-leadership, they also stand to benefit from thinking about how two world leaders might have gone differently had this technique been employed. To use a civic frame for training, trainers should continually link concepts and skills to this level of referential and outcomes.

Trainers should tell participants that they apply these learnings in their everyday lives, focusing their investment in improving conversations and the quality of public discourse. Patton (2016) argues that self-identity is one of the top communication training variables. If trainers see themselves as transparent, ethical, and civically-engaged professionals, then they will tend to act this way, and many participants will follow suit. One way that I try to model a spirit of transparency and openness in my small leadership communication trainings is by having everyone sit in a circle for most of our time together. In doing so, I take on the role of “facilitative leader,” demonstrating to trainees what democratic communication can look like. I use established moderating techniques from dialogue initiatives such as the National Issues Forums (www.nifi.org) to highlight process practices that stand to improve communication both within and outside organizations.

To best adapt to different audiences, trainers need to be boundary spanners (see Waisanen, 2014). Communication training is about helping people connect with others,
skillfully crossing boundaries and borders toward that end. From a civic perspective, "fixers’ don’t work alone; they are enmeshed in any number of overlapping networks of people" (Mathews, 2014, p. xv). To conduct consulting well, Plax, Waldeck, and Kearney (2016) too relate how that they had to become "literate in a range of sectors and concerns that our advanced degrees in communication never would have prepared us for” (p. 100). Drawing from a range of research, Beebe (2016) identifies seven behaviors that communication trainers should exhibit, which can equally be seen as ways to span boundaries and model a civic frame: assume equality, be perceived as comfortable, keep conversational rules, practice dynamism, invite disclosure from others, encourage enjoyment, and establish rapport nonverbally (pp. 134–135). Additionally, however, using a civic perspective means reframing training from what clients and trainees too often perceive as only about individual “soft skills” to the “hard skills” that it takes to make societies work well.

Three themes tend to run through communication training best practices: relationships and transparency; a tailored rather than off-the-shelf, generic approach to training; and evaluation or assessment/measurement (Fahs & Brock, 2016). Each of these themes can be developed under a civic framing. Whether communicated on our websites, in contracts, or orally at the beginning of a training, to develop relationships and transparency trainers can tell participants that they’re accountable to and willing to learn from everyone. Using a tailored approach highlights that trainers are responsive to the needs of trainees and committed to working with a diverse citizenry. Engaging in evaluation and assessment/measurements further shows that trainers see themselves as accountable to broader social data and evidence beyond their own intuitions or traditions. In each of these ways, there’s more than meets the eye in communication training—we’re aiming to be transparent, accountable, responsive, sensitive to diversity, and willing to go where the evidence leads in meeting others’ needs.

For those who are primarily communication practitioners, using this framing can add greater depth, stakes, and accountability to a variety of services. For those who are primarily academics, using this framing can better communicate how this outside work connects with every university’s public service mission. Those who cross these worlds can speak about civic purposes with both vocabularies. In this spirit, let me detail a few ideas for practitioners, academics, and both for putting a civic frame into practice.

For practitioners

If you run or are part of a business or a nonprofit, it’s worth recognizing the alignment between a civic frame and hybrid public–private developments like social entrepreneurship, the ethos of corporate social responsibility, or sustainability programs that look beyond profit to concerns for people and the environment. Corporations, in particular, need to find new ways “to look at the relationship between business and society that does not treat corporate growth and social welfare as a zero-sum game,” since “perceiving social responsibility as an opportunity rather than as damage control or a PR campaign requires dramatically different thinking—a mind-set... that will become increasingly important to competitive success” (Porter & Kramer, 2006, para. 4).

There’s a reason so many companies have invested heavily in corporate social responsibility: it broadcasts a transparency to the larger public beyond shareholder needs, looking more realistically to the range of stakeholders and the broader environment at play. Additionally, the organizational change literature is clear that “what works well in one organization, culture, or country, may well produce failure in another organization, culture, or country” (Jacobs, van Witteloostuijn, & Christe-Zeyse,
2013, p. 775). A civic frame signals that communication strategies should vary across contexts, accounting for the diversity that now exists within just about every organization. At the same time, all kinds of individual and organizational benefits follow from recasting company goals along these lines, from employee satisfaction to brand enhancement. I’m arguing for exactly the same move to take place in communication training – social responsibility isn’t simply a nice accessory to what we do, it’s an opportunity to elevate the meaning and value of training itself. Ultimately, transporting this frame to the communication training space makes sense given the impacts of organizational social responsibility (e.g. Deng, Kang, & Low, 2013).

In working with for profits, I’m unabashed about the idea that a primary training goal is to improve communication skills and spread this work as far as possible. After all, the tools that make for better conversations at work are also effective outside of it. Almost every communication training and development exercise can be infused in this way. Trainers don’t have to be preachy here, they can get the civic calling into their work subtly through questions such as, “What do you think would happen if every corporate and nonprofit leader engaged in this listening practice?”

There may be no better role that a civic frame can play in business and other forms of training than in its links with the “purpose economy” (Hurst, 2014). Different than prior eras, Hurst finds that people are moving into an age in which meaning, relationships, personal growth, and “service to something greater than themselves” have become the most important motivators for careers (p. 4). We know from research that “motivated project teams are more likely to be engaged and willing to build project capabilities and opportunities” (Stephan et al., 2016, p. 1264). The establishment of private–public organizations like B-corporations and the growth of industries such as life coaching further testify to these desires (Hurst, 2014, pp. 72, 107). As much as people may need communication training for their individual and organizational goals, then, a civic frame opens up an opportunity for trainers to connect with the ways that corporate and nonprofit practitioners are increasingly thinking about their work.

For academics

Countering outdated views that communication training is somehow at odds with what academics do, it’s now more clear than ever that communication consulting can enrich and share a reciprocal relationship with teaching and research (Waldeck & Seibold, 2016, p. ix). But a civic frame can make an additional, higher level case that academics (especially in the communication field) should be conducting communication training along the lines set forth in this chapter. Boyte (2004) notes that “academic culture at many of today’s colleges and universities has produced a widespread sense of powerlessness in their faculties, disappointment in their students, and dismisseasiveness from the public at large” (p. 1). If you’re at a university, applying a civic frame addresses what many perceive to be the lost civic missions of colleges across the nation. This isn’t only an ethical commitment to public service, it’s a way of improving full-time university work. In my experience, students love hearing about any time I help local nonprofit staff present their cause more effectively. It quickly rids the classroom environment of objections such as “this is just theory,” “ivory tower,” and other remarks that you’re disconnected from what’s happening “out there.”

A civic frame would have us be more transparent and available to broader publics in training, testing our developing ideas about communication in the process. Since adding training to my work, even when conducting research I find myself thinking
through trainees’ feedback about how a tool for group communication may not be useful in every type of meeting. I’ve observed different models of leadership and management communication in organizations and rethought my theories of how good decisions can be made or what it might take to develop more positive work cultures. Communication training with a civic focus forces you get to become more interdisciplinary, applied, and engaged.

When academics frame their training, at its highest level, in terms of improving publicness, they participate in a form of civic engagement that some evidence suggests also results in more fulfilling careers. Interviewing 39 academics from all over the country, Snyder-Hall (2015) found that “all those interviewed felt positive and energized by their civic engagement, found that it helped them do their academic jobs better, and experienced increased levels of connection with others and meaningfulness in their work” (p. 3).

By communicating the societal value of training to clients and trainees, as well as fellow scholars and administrators, a civic frame provides a transparent, sense-making model for this work. As a civic act, trainers move beyond their silos and establish presence with diverse people. Writing to an audience of rhetoricians, Pezzullo implicitly makes a case for this frame in highlighting how:

Some might consider it ironic that academics dedicated to studying public address and public culture need to reflect on why some of us conduct research in public spaces and/or with publics. Given that ancient rhetorical scholars commonly moved between their roles as teachers, advocates, consultants, poets, and more, it should be uncontroversial to affirm rhetorical analysis that draws on critical ethnographic practicalities and sensibilities.

(Pezzullo, 2016, p. 178)

In shifting between the types of roles Pezzullo highlights, communication trainers who are academics bring value to both the public and their university settings. Keyton (2016) notes how her national expertise in gender communication, especially sexual harassment, was discovered mostly through presentations to non-academic organizations (p. 34). Plax (1991) further finds that “there are clear conceptual and operational parallels between what high quality university communication researchers do in simulated setting and what high quality communication consultants do in the field” (p. 56). Adding a civic frame to communication training only amplifies these connections and makes us public actors who care for how communication gets practiced at every level of society.

**Four key terms for civic training**

I’d like to propose four key terms as benchmarks for civic-focused, globally-minded communication training. My hope is that trainers can use these ideas to build additional concepts and connections with societal engagement into their work. The first best practice in this handbook focuses on being transparent, and it’s at the center of what this chapter means by using a civic frame. If we’re concerned about communicating in open and honest ways, frequent communication with clients is a must. From putting together to actually implementing a training, we have to ask ourselves every step of the way how much we’re opening or closing space for others (see Asen, 2009, p. 263). To be transparent, we have to approach clients and trainees as “open books,” being ready to justify our
choices (i.e. training content decisions, how we arrived at our fees, etc.), while always trying to be open to the possibility that we could be misguided or wrong. How we listen to others also matters. Trainers should use verbal listening skills such as paraphrasing and asking questions (Bodie et al., 2015). As civic, public beings, we should conditionally accept others (Rogers, 2012) and their rights to know about what we do and why we do it at every stage of the communication training process.

Civically informed communication training becomes more transparent when we highlight that communication should be distributed. Everyone’s voice matters. “Adaptive leadership” remains attentive to how voices and power get distributed throughout organizations and societies (Heifitz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Many concepts in the communication field have similar underpinnings. As communication trainers, we should take every opportunity to let others know how much we care about their voices being heard and advance putting organizational processes in place that can sustain open, democratic, and diverse dialogues. Those in managerial positions should especially “maintain non-verbal immediacy and frame prosocial-type messages to preserve their credibility in the workplace” (Teven, 2007, p. 155).

Trainers should also be reflexive, or practice continuous self-examination about what they’re doing. Individual, organizational, and societal communication problems all beg the same three questions: “how was this made,” “what are we making together,” and “how can we make better social worlds,” with answers always highlighting that “we have power – a limited power, to be sure, but power nonetheless – to make the worlds in which we want to live” (Pearce, 2010, pp. 30–31). The worlds made in organizations affect the worlds made outside of them, and vice versa. A civic frame would have us be reflexive about the worlds we and our participants are constantly in the process of creating, using a dynamic rather than static understanding of how communication works to both create and solve most human problems. Among many ways of reflexively thinking about the social worlds that we’re creating in training spaces, using different lenses from the communication field – such as systems, interpretive, symbolic, and even critical communication theories – can help both trainers and trainees see their worlds anew (Keyton, 2016).

Finally, a civic framing geared toward acting in transparent, distributed, and reflexive ways implicates a humanitarian perspective. The sine qua non of communication training is clients’ needs; indeed, “training that does not address a need or specific job function of a trainee is not effective training” (Beebe, Mottet, & Roach, 2013, p. xii). The greatest need for communication training may be bridging differences between people so that they can act in more human and humane ways with one another. In PSC projects, such “shared visions can be particularly powerful by instilling a sense of positive collective identity and purpose. The very nature of this work emphasizes making a positive difference to others, appealing to individuals’ universal basic need for relatedness” (Stephan et al., 2016, p. 1264; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A civic frame for communication training can align individual, organizational, and societal needs along these lines. Compared with other approaches, a negotiation training that gets trainees to create rather than claim value with one another (Malhotra & Bazerman, 2008), for example, tends to create better individual results, establish a more positive organizational climate, and sets in motion a way of acting that’s helpful for all citizens. This kind of humanitarian thought has a long history. The “categorical imperative” asks us to think about individuals’ actions and consequences in terms of the question: What if everyone acted in this way (Kant, 2013/1785, p. 490)? Similarly, communication training can be a means by which trainees learn to think about and act in more humanitarian, global ways with one another.
In applying a civic frame to communication training, trainers should be careful to protect clients’ confidential and proprietary information, committing to nonmalfeasance and beneficence, while applying reasonable standards of care (Keyton, 2016, pp. 41–43). Discussing training in civic terms can still be accomplished by hewing closely to clients or trainees’ needs for private, safe spaces to practice their skills individually or collectively. Overall, a civic frame for communication training that is transparent, distributed, reflexive, and humanitarian promotes sensitivity to people and contexts.

**Recovering and evolving higher training purposes**

In many ways, establishing a civic frame for transparent and accountable communication training is a recovery project. Whether you’re a full-time management consultant or working from a university platform, it’s worth recognizing how many of the communication field’s earliest figures moved seamlessly between the worlds of practice and reflection for civic purposes. A father of organizational communication research, Charles Redding, trained military officers in communication skills, and saw wearing many hats as integral to his work and community development (Waldeck, 2016, p. 4). Many of our forebears sought to improve society through their “disciplinary attachment not only to ideas but to the ground, to the messiness of practice, to the hesitations of the real world, and to the inconsistencies and brutalities of social, economic, political, cultural, and public life” (Zelizer, 2011, p. 15). Even ancient communication experts like Cicero and Quintilian put civic inflections over all their work. On different days, they’d teach communication skills to students, advise government leaders, and write reflections for public audiences informed by all these efforts.

By using a civic frame, trainers can contribute to the development of people everywhere, pulling society upward. Communication consultant and scholar Pearce (2007) says that “the pull upward consists of new ideas, institutions and practices that elevate and enhance human beings and society,” as contrasted to the “downward pull of the old, familiar ways of being” (p. 9). When communication training focuses on individual skill building or organizational development alone, it misses an opportunity to make a greater case for the value of the work that communication trainers do. Without this larger civic context, one risks engaging in great person narratives that talk about extraordinary people and results (Mathews, 2014, p. xvi), rather than the tools and perspectives that can make a difference in the lives of everyone. A civic frame also forwards current trends in leadership research emphasizing distributed and connective models that put the exercise of leadership within more people’s reach (see Gagnon, Vough, & Nickerson, 2012; Stephan et al., 2016).

As a practical matter, putting a civic frame over communication training can also help trainers see new opportunities for work. A civic frame focuses systemic ways to apply training. For instance, trainers could seek foundation funding to embed and scale communication training across organizations to make more of a societal impact. One public program that I have worked with, The New York Community Trust Leadership Fellowship, is a perfect example. To make training matter, the program has funded, sustained, tracked, and assessed impacts for cohorts of nonprofit participants who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to receive cutting-edge professional development (The New York Community Trust Leadership Fellows, 2017).

In this chapter I have sought to “get the ball rolling” by framing communication training more firmly as a matter of social responsibility, especially as a means to greater
transparency with clients and trainees. While I’ve provided reasoning for doing so, what’s now needed is more evidence, data, and examples that explore the connections between communication training and civic capacities. Macromanagement research itself has been largely dominated by theories that conceive of organizations as ‘closed’ and guarded, top-down controlled places of rational transactions and competition that are focused on shareholders but disconnected from local communities and most stakeholders …. Conversely, the organizational practices associated with deep-level PSC strategies characterize organizations that are ‘open’ to stakeholder influences, ‘embedded’ in communities, ‘relational’ in that they create social connections, [and] ‘purposeful’ as they are infused with meaning.

(Stephan et al., 2016, p. 1268)

Along with work in PSC, and just as CSR research started with a few ideas that have burgeoned into its own subfield in recent decades, we need further empirical work to test the benchmarks in this chapter and explore the social responsibilities of communication training in different contexts.

There’s one final benefit of applying a civic frame in training: It stands to improve the communication field as a whole. Whether you’re a practitioner or academic, engaging with broader publics through communication training provides one avenue for making known all that our discipline has to offer. In my own experience, using the benchmarks in this chapter (e.g. the need for distributed communication) often has participants realizing how much they need to make communication skills and perspectives a priority in their lives. When joined with civic and societal purpose, we amplify those needs as a matter for global development. Toward that end, it’s time to settle for nothing less than transparent communication training that can affect individuals, organizations, and societies.

References


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