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MORE THAN JUST WORDS TRAINING: IMPROVING STUDENT ORGANIZATION EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract
Miscommunication and a lack of transparency within the university student organization hindered coordination and fuelled internal conflicts. This project aimed to strengthen coordination and reduce conflict by enhancing the interpersonal communication competence of the organization members. After conducting a training needs analysis through questionnaires and interviews, psychology students partnered with HIMAHI to deliver a single session “More Than Just Words” workshop. Twelve student leaders attended four hours of interactive activities—including lecture-style presentations, Q&A, ice breakers, and focus group discussions—embedded in the Industrial and Organizational Psychology practicum. Participants completed pre- and post-intervention assessments using the Interpersonal Communication Competence Questionnaire, and rated trainer performance via a structured satisfaction survey. Average declarative knowledge scores increased from 75.0% to 81.5%, reflecting an 8.7% gain. In the reaction survey, 75% of participants rated lecture clarity as “very good,” while 67% rated trainer mastery, engagement, and interactivity as “very good.” These outcomes demonstrate measurable improvements in communication knowledge and high participant satisfaction.

Keywords: interpersonal communication; student organizations; soft-skill training; experiential learning

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BACKGROUND

Effective interpersonal communication is a critical determinant of organizational success, functioning as the essential medium through which all core managerial functions are executed (Wahyuni, 2024). Whether planning, organizing, leading, or monitoring, leaders and members communicate with and through other people, implying that an individual's communication skills directly affect both personal and organizational effectiveness (Ghofar et al., 2019). Consequently, a deficiency in effective communication is frequently cited as one of the most significant impediments to achieving organizational goals (Mukhtar et al., 2020). This underscores that interpersonal communication is not merely a "soft skill" but a mission-critical competency. Organizations are, at their core, social systems designed to achieve collective objectives (Pfaff, 2022). This requires coordinated action, which in turn depends on a shared reality built through the constant exchange of information and meaning. Any breakdown in this communicative process inevitably leads to a failure in coordination, hindering the organization's ability to realize its strategic vision (Tholia et al., 2022).

Higher education institutions, and particularly the student-led organizations within them, serve as vital crucibles for forging the professional competencies demanded by the modern workplace (Tondang et al., 2025). There is a growing consensus among employers that a significant "skills gap" exists, wherein recent graduates often lack crucial soft skills such

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as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership (Rahmah et al., 2024). Student organizations provide a unique, experiential learning environment that directly addresses this gap. They function as informal laboratories where students can practice and refine these skills in a high-stakes, practical context (Rahmah & Muhliansyah, 2020).

Participation in extracurricular activities is vital for a student's holistic development, offering opportunities to enhance conflict resolution skills, build social interaction abilities, and cultivate interpersonal trust—the very cornerstone of effective social and professional networks (Adriansyah et al., 2023). Literature robustly supports the idea that the development of such soft skills is a powerful predictor of graduate employability and long-term career success (Safitri et al., 2025). These organizations are not just social outlets; they are dynamic training grounds where members must collaborate on projects, manage internal disputes, and lead their peers. Success in these endeavors requires the direct application of interpersonal communication, teamwork, and leadership, mirroring the challenges of the professional world (Römgens et al., 2020). Therefore, active involvement in a well-functioning student organization can be seen as a form of self-directed professional development that bridges the divide between academic theory and practical application.

Despite their value, student organizations are frequently beset by challenges stemming from communication failures. The original case study that forms the basis of this analysis identified recurring issues of miscommunication and a lack of transparency within the International Relations Student Association (HIMAHI) at Mulawarman University, a problem confirmed through interviews with the organization's leadership. This specific example reflects a broader phenomenon: conflict is an inevitable and natural component of any intense interpersonal relationship or group dynamic (Borg et al., 2011). Such conflicts often arise from failures in communication, where differing individual perceptions and misunderstandings are allowed to fester.

The critical variable determining an organization's health is not the presence of conflict, but rather its capacity to manage that conflict constructively. This capacity is almost entirely dependent on the collective interpersonal communication competence of its members (Golubeva, 2023). Research on conflict management emphasizes that effective strategies—such as attacking the behavior rather than the person, using "I" messages to express concerns, and engaging in active, empathetic listening—are all core components of skilled interpersonal communication (Puscas et al., 2021). Promoting effective communication enables team members to express their needs and concerns respectfully, ensuring all parties feel heard and understood (Akhavan Tabassi et al., 2025). Conversely, a lack of clear communication policies and procedures can significantly exacerbate disputes (Haya, 2024). Therefore, training in interpersonal communication is not a generic "improvement" initiative; it is a targeted intervention designed to enhance an organization's conflict management capacity, thereby bolstering its overall effectiveness and the well-being of its members (Hamlin et al., 2024).

This study re-examines a study that sought to address these issues through direct intervention. The primary objective of the original research was to enhance the interpersonal communication skills of members within the HIMAHI student organization at Mulawarman University, with the explicit goals of strengthening coordination and reducing internal conflict. The intervention consisted of a single-session, face-to-face workshop delivered to 12 members of the organization. The workshop's methodology included a lecture-style

presentation, a question-and-answer session, and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). To assess the workshop's effectiveness, the researchers employed a quantitative, pre-test/post-test design to measure changes in participants' declarative knowledge of interpersonal communication concepts. This leads to the central research question guiding this analysis: Does a short, workshop-based training intervention primarily utilizing a lecture format significantly increase student organization members' knowledge of interpersonal communication? Based on the intervention's design, it was hypothesized that participants would show an improvement in their knowledge scores from the pre-test to the post-test.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

1. Lecturer Activities

The lecturer plays a central role in this project, taking on the responsibilities of both supervisor and director. Their involvement ensures that the project is well-guided and aligned with academic expectations. This initiative is integrated as part of the practicum component for the industrial and organizational psychology course, offering students a hands-on experience to apply theoretical concepts in real-world settings. Through this activity, students are encouraged to collaborate, analyze workplace dynamics, and gain practical insights into psychological principles within organizational contexts.

2. Students Activities

Students take an active role as the primary implementers in this activity, gaining firsthand experience through direct involvement. As part of the ‘More Than Just Words’ training, they are guided and supported by a team of senior students who have already completed the industrial and organizational psychology course. This collaborative setup not only fosters peer mentoring but also enhances the learning atmosphere by encouraging knowledge-sharing. The activity serves as a practical platform for applying psychological principles in real-world training contexts, while also strengthening interpersonal and leadership skills among students.

3. Brief Description of Partner

This community service initiative was conducted in partnership with the Himpunan Mahasiswa Hubungan Internasional (HIMAHI) at Universitas Mulawarman, which served as the formal collaborating organization. Members of HIMAHI participated actively in the training sessions, demonstrating enthusiasm and engagement throughout the program. A total of twelve students took part in the activities, allowing for a more focused and interactive learning environment. Their involvement not only facilitated the practical application of psychological concepts but also underscored the relevance of collaborative learning in advancing organizational and personal development objectives.

4. Implementation Step

4.1 Pre-activity

Problem identification

Problem identification is crucial in a project that aims to improve the effectiveness of an organization (Adriansyah et al., 2020). Problem identification aims to understand the problems that occur in the organization (Nawaz et al., 2022). This process is carried out by doing a Training Needs Analysis (TNA) using questionnaires and interviews (Hartoyo

& Efendy, 2017). Questionnaires distributed to all administrators and members of HIMAHI, interviews conducted to the department heads. Based on the problem identification, it was found that the organization has problems in it's members interpersonal communication skill.

The preparation of training modules

After identifying the organization's problems, the next step is to design a training module that serves as a reference to ensure all training activities meet established standards. The module should include a concise summary of the training content, along with the schedule and sequence of events planned for the program.

4.2 More Than Just Word: Bring Your A-Game in Communication Training

In accordance with the plan of this training activity is to improve interpersonal communication in the International Relations Student Association (HIMAHI). So the activities that will be carried out are expected to have an impact on improving interpersonal communication to increase openness between members, commitment of organizational members and reduce the occurrence of conflicts between members. The implementation of activities is carried out by psychology students at Mulawarman University. Before the training we collect pre-test data. Data collection of all members was carried out with a questionnaire prepared using a Likert scale. The statements in the questionnaire are based on indicators of organizational effectiveness according to (Steers, 1977), namely productivity, readiness, efficiency, motivation, and conflict cohesion. And for Interviews conducted with the Chairperson and one of the Heads of Department of the International Relations Student Association (HIMAHI).

This training was held in the Multipurpose room of Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik Universitas Mulawarman on December 2, 2024. The number of participants who attended this training was 12 people who were members of the International Relations Student Association of Mulawarman University. The delivery of material by trainers who are graduates of the Mulawarman University psychology degree who are experienced as department heads in the psychology student association (HIMAPSI) using a presentation/ lecture system. Below is the main activities of the program:

a. Delivery of training material

   The speaker actively presented the training material on interpersonal communication to improve communication in the organization using the lecture method. Picture 1 shows documentation of training activities conducted to improve understanding of interpersonal communication. The content of the training material carried out is the definition of communication, the elements of communication, communication barriers, the definition of interpersonal communication, the characteristics of interpersonal communication, and the application of interpersonal communication.



Picture 1. Training Material Delivery

b. Material Comprehension
Participants can understand more about things that are not conveyed directly by the speaker during the presentation/lecture session, participants can ask questions to the speaker. Picture 2 shows documentation of the question and answer session between participants and presenters about interpersonal communication material related to their experience during the organization.



Picture 2. Q&A Session

c. Focus Group Discussion
Focus group discussion is a technique in which researchers bring together a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic. The aim is to explore participants' complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes through moderated interaction. This group discussion activity was divided into 2 groups, each group consisting of 7 participants and accompanied by 1 facilitator. Then after completing the discussion, the results of the discussion were presented by the participants.

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Picture 3. Focus Group Discussion

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

Two evaluation levels were applied: cognitive and reaction. Cognitive evaluation data were obtained via pre-test and post-test using the Interpersonal Communication Competence Questionnaire (Rubin & Martin, 1994) and analysed with a t-test to assess knowledge differences before and after training. Reaction evaluation employed a satisfaction questionnaire addressing session timeliness, material quality, delivery effectiveness, trainer competence, training atmosphere, process, and perceived benefits.

A. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Quantitative Assessment of the Intervention's Impact

The effectiveness of the training workshop was evaluated by comparing participants' knowledge scores before and after the intervention. An initial analysis of the data distribution using the Shapiro-Wilk test revealed that the pre-test scores were normally distributed (p=0.575), but the post-test scores were not (p=0.010). This violation of the normality assumption for the post-test data necessitated the use of a non-parametric statistical test (ORCAN, 2020).

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was selected as the appropriate method to compare the paired pre-test and post-test scores for the 12 participants (Kim & Park, 2019). The analysis yielded a Z-value of -1.935 and a corresponding p-value of 0.053. According to the conventional alpha level of α=0.05 used in social science research, this result is not statistically significant. Therefore, the analysis leads to a failure to reject the null hypothesis. The data indicates that there was no statistically significant difference in participants' measured knowledge of interpersonal communication following the training intervention. Key results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Knowledge Scores and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results

N (Participants)	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Z-value	*p*-value	Statistical Significance (α=0.05)
12	75.0	81.5	-1.935	0.053	Not Significant

2. Interpreting Non-Significant Finding

A p-value of 0.053 demands a nuanced interpretation that goes beyond a simple declaration of non-significance. While a strict adherence to the α=0.05 threshold means the result is not statistically significant, it is crucial to resist the methodologically unsound practice of describing such a result with ambiguous phrases like "approached significance" or "quasi-significant" (Benjamin & Berger, 2019). The integrity of the scientific method requires a clear and honest interpretation of the data as it stands.

However, the context of the study's design is paramount. The most critical limitation of the original research is its very small sample size of N=12. Statistical tests, including non-parametric ones like the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, require adequate statistical power to reliably detect a true effect if one exists (Anaene Oyeka & Ebuh, 2012). Small samples dramatically reduce this power, substantially increasing the risk of a Type II error, that is, failing to detect a real difference when one is actually present (Akobeng, 2016). In fact, for extremely small samples (e.g., five or fewer participants), the Wilcoxon test is mathematically incapable of producing a p-value below 0.05, regardless of the magnitude of the effect (Klotz, 1963).

Although the sample in this study is larger than five, the underlying principle holds. A p-value of 0.053, obtained from an underpowered study, is more suggestive of an inconclusive finding than it is of a definitive "no effect." It is plausible that the training did have a modest positive effect on knowledge, but the study was simply too small to confirm this effect with statistical confidence. Therefore, the most responsible interpretation is not that the training unequivocally failed, but that the study's methodology was insufficient to properly evaluate its effectiveness. The result should be viewed as a cautionary tale about the importance of sample size and statistical power in research design.

3. The Lecture-Practice Gap in Soft Skills Training

The inconclusive statistical result is likely not just an artifact of low statistical power but also a predictable consequence of the intervention's design. The training was delivered primarily through a "presentation/lecture format, a method that is fundamentally mismatched for the objective of developing a complex behavioral skill like interpersonal communication (Yoshida et al., 2002). While lectures can be an efficient means of transmitting information in a short period, they are an inherently passive, teacher-centered method of instruction (Johnson & Coulter-Kern, 2025).

A vast body of educational research demonstrates that for developing complex skills, active learning methodologies are significantly superior to passive ones (Deslauriers et al., 2019; Detlor et al., 2012; Harris & Bacon, 2019; Willett, 2017). A landmark meta-analysis of 225 studies found that students in active learning environments had 6% higher exam scores and were 1.5 times less likely to fail compared to those in traditional lecture courses (Freeman et al., 2014). This principle is especially true for soft skills, where the primary challenge is not a lack of knowledge but a failure to translate that knowledge into applied behavior—a phenomenon known as the "transfer problem" (Hindiarto et al., 2020).

Effective soft skills training must be experiential, providing participants with opportunities to practice, receive feedback, and refine their abilities in a controlled setting (Hatfield et al., 2020). Methodologies such as role-playing and simulation are cornerstones of

rigorously tested communication training programs because they bridge the gap between knowing and doing (Jackson & Back, 2011). Role-play allows learners to step into realistic scenarios, experiment with different communication strategies, build confidence, and receive targeted, actionable feedback without the risk of real-world consequences. It moves learning from the abstract to the behavioral, which is essential for a performance-based skill like communication (Krolikowska et al., 2007). The intervention in this study, by relying on a lecture, attempted to teach performance skills using a knowledge-transmission method. This pedagogical mismatch made it highly unlikely that the workshop would produce a meaningful and measurable change in participants' communication competence, let alone their declarative knowledge.

4. Participant Perceptions of Training Quality

In stark contrast to the non-significant quantitative results, participants' subjective evaluations of the training were overwhelmingly positive. As detailed in the original study, feedback on the trainer's performance was exceptionally high. Participants rated the trainer as “very good” across several key dimensions, including clarity of explanation, mastery of the topic, and ability to create an engaging and interactive atmosphere. This qualitative feedback suggests a high level of participant satisfaction with the training experience. Table 2 quantifies this positive reception based on the data collected.

Table 2. Participant Evaluation of Training Delivery (N=12)

Evaluation Aspect	Rating: Very Good	Rating: Good
Trainer explains material clearly	9 (75%)	3 (25%)
Trainer masters the topic	8 (67%)	4 (33%)
Trainer answers questions well	8 (67%)	4 (33%)
Trainer delivers material in a pleasant way	8 (67%)	4 (33%)
Trainer interacts well with participants	8 (67%)	4 (33%)

5. The Paradox of Perceived versus Actual Learning

The juxtaposition of a non-significant learning outcome (Table 1) with high participant satisfaction (Table 2) presents a compelling paradox. This phenomenon, however, is well-documented in educational psychology research. Studies have shown that students often feel they learn more from a polished, fluent, and engaging lecture, even when active learning methods produce objectively superior results on subsequent assessments. Students may perceive active learning sessions as "loose" or "unstructured," while the linear flow of a well-delivered lecture feels more organized and "easy to follow," creating a powerful illusion of comprehension (Yannier et al., 2021).

The positive feedback in this study is likely not a valid indicator of the training's pedagogical effectiveness but rather a testament to the trainer's presentation skills and the cognitive ease of the lecture format. The passive nature of the lecture required less "effortful cognition" from the participants, which can feel more comfortable and pleasant than the mentally demanding nature of active learning, where students must grapple with problems and construct their own understanding (Harris & Bacon, 2019).

Therefore, the high satisfaction scores and the non-significant learning gain are not contradictory findings; they are two sides of the same coin. The very factors that made the training enjoyable and well-received by participants, its passive nature and the fluency of the delivery—are the same factors that rendered it pedagogically ineffective for the deep learning and behavioral change required for skill development. The study inadvertently captured a classic educational paradox: what feels most effective is not always what is most effective.

CONCLUSION

This critical re-examination of a communication training workshop reveals that the intervention, while well-received by participants, failed to produce a statistically significant increase in their knowledge of interpersonal communication. This outcome is best explained by a confluence of two primary factors: first, significant methodological limitations, most notably a small sample size that rendered the study statistically underpowered and its findings inconclusive; and second, a fundamental pedagogical mismatch, wherein a passive lecture format was inappropriately used in an attempt to teach a complex, performance-based behavioral skill.

Ultimately, the study serves as a valuable cautionary case study for educators and organizational leaders. It powerfully illustrates the critical importance of aligning training methodology with learning objectives, particularly in the domain of soft skills development. The primary takeaway is that for communication training to be effective, it must transcend the simple transmission of knowledge. It must embrace active, experiential, and practice-based learning paradigms that allow individuals to actively engage with the material, apply concepts in realistic scenarios, and receive constructive feedback. By incorporating methods such as role-playing, simulation, and case study analysis, interventions can foster genuine competence, not just declarative knowledge. This shift in pedagogical approach is essential if higher education institutions are to succeed in their vital mission of equipping students with the tangible, real-world competencies required for effective leadership within their campus organizations and for success in their future professional careers.

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