

Developing Communication Skills and Forestry Leaders in Georgia

By Brooks C. Mendell, PhD, Forisk Consulting

In August 2005, Gary Brett, a forest business owner in north Florida, told a group of forest resource students from the University of Georgia, "I encourage you, do anything you can do to develop your communication skills, your people skills. It's about who can get things done, and that's about working with people."

Gary's message resonates with those of us who have dedicated careers and resources to working with forests. In the past, we thought that strong technical forestry skills would carry us through our careers. Unfortunately, strong technical skills may not even get us a job. If they do, technical skills divorced from the ability to communicate what we're doing with them, may limit our abilities to influence decisions that directly affect our firms, our professions, and our forests.

This issue is not unique to forestry. On September 20th of this year, *The Wall Street Journal* published the results of a survey of 4,125 job recruiters in order to rank 85 M.B.A. programs. The results indicated that recruiters were more concerned with students' communication skills (89%), teamwork (86.9%), personal ethics and integrity (86%) than with the academic rigor of the programs or the technical skills of the graduates.

As a forest business owner and communication skills educator, this is an area of personal and professional interest

to me. Will the next forester I hire have the professional skills required to work with clients, in teams, and in the community? Forests and the forest industry contribute over \$20 billion annually to Georgia's economy. Are we developing the skills in foresters and recent forestry graduates to lead this industry in the future?

Recently, a forestry manager participating in one of my communication skills workshops shared a story from a local professional meeting for foresters. A student, from a program outside of Georgia, stood to make a point during the meeting. He was unshaven, wearing a baseball cap, and chewing tobacco. Before sitting down and spitting in the cup in his hand, he said, "And I'm looking for a job."

The forestry manager concluded his story by saying, "that guy had no clue on the message he was sending to the group." His firm did not offer that student an opportunity to interview for an existing job opening.

Why are communication skills resources and training opportunities important for working forestry professionals? First, traditional forestry programs spend less time developing communication skills than professional programs in business or law. Surveys of firms hiring into forestry confirm the need for college graduates and professionals who can work in teams, listen to and address questions in public, commu-

nicate orally and in writing, and manage people (Brown and Lassoie 1998; Sample et al. 1999; Thompson et al. 2003; Mendell 2005). Also, state resource agencies seek these skills in new employees who must increasingly interact with citizens and the media. Second, forestry professionals communicate with a broad range of groups and individuals. We work with students, researchers, clients, private consultants, industry members, non-profits, local and federal governments, community groups, and our neighbors. Often, folks just want to know what we are up to, and we owe it to them to be able to explain what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how it will help or affect them. Our communication skills are applied in a wider array of settings than those of a lawyer, doctor, or teacher.

In Georgia, efforts have been made to improve the communication and professional skills of recent graduates and working foresters. In spring 2003, the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources at the University of Georgia began offering a seminar course focused on the communication skills needed by natural resource professionals. The course was designed in response to feedback from alumni and job recruiters regarding the desired skill sets for forestry and wildlife graduates. The course targets undergraduate and graduate students preparing to interview for jobs, internships, and

assistantships. It focuses on developing practical skills in the areas of public speaking, job interviews, and salary negotiations.

Since 2004, the Georgia Center for Continuing Education has offered communication skills short courses for forest resource professionals that qualify for CFE credits. One of these was offered in Macon in November, and several will be offered around the state in 2007. The courses emphasize public speaking, negotiating skills, and giving feedback at work.

In 2005, Stuckey Timberlands of Eastman established the Stuckey Timberland Communication and Professionalism Endowment at the University of Georgia. The Endowment will support seminars on communication and professionalism at the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources.

This year, Aventine Press published my book, **Loving Trees is Not Enough: Communication Skills for Natural Resource Professionals**. It is a handbook for forest resource students and professionals, and the basis for workshops and courses in communication skills. As an advocate for forestry, I wrote this book to "put my money where my mouth is" and provide practical answers to foresters who ask, "How can I improve my public speaking and interview skills? What should I consider when giving feedback to employees or running a meeting?"

Oral communication



skills currently are and will continue to be in demand by firms hiring to fill forest resource positions. We value professionals who work hard, communicate openly with colleagues and members of the community, and seek collaborative solutions to forest resource management dilemmas. These natural resource professionals inspire others, create cooperation, advocate ideas, and educate us. When we know individuals who can be described this way, we call them leaders.

Brooks Mendell speaks professionally and serves as Principal of Forisk Consulting, a forest industry and timber market research and education firm based in Augusta, GA. In spring 2007, Dr. Mendell will teach "Communication Skills for Natural Resource Professionals" at UGA for the fifth consecutive year. Contact information:

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