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Signaling Professionalism: The Influence of Communication Instruction on Adolescents' Perceptions of Competence in Adult-Dominated Environments

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Abstract

Teenagers often communicate in settings mostly made up of adults, but less is known about whether a short lesson can change how they think about professionalism. This study looked at whether a brief professional-communication workshop was linked to changes in adolescents' views and confidence. Participants completed surveys before and after instruction on word choice, eye contact, vocal delivery, body language, and pausing. The analysis included 65 eligible pre-workshop responses, 58 eligible post-workshop responses, and 50 matched participants. Among the matched participants, the share choosing communication skills as the most important factor rose from 36% to 80% (exact McNemar $p < .001$). Mean confidence in getting an unfamiliar adult to take their ideas seriously rose from 6.84 to 7.90 (Wilcoxon signed-rank, $p < .001$). On a separate post-workshop question that allowed more than one answer, none of the 58 eligible participants selected age or grades/GPA. Overall, the results suggest that a focused workshop may shift how adolescents think about professionalism and how confident they feel. Still, the study cannot show that the workshop caused the changes or that they lasted.

Keywords: Adolescents, Professional presence, Communication skills, Self-confidence, Age-based bias, Youth leadership, Workshop evaluation.

1. Introduction

As teenagers begin working, leading, and spending more time in adult-centered settings, they face new expectations about maturity and competence. Work experiences can shape how adolescents develop and how they think about education and careers (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). At the same time, young people may run into assumptions that they are less capable simply because of their age. In one recent study, adolescents said adults sometimes viewed young people as incompetent and dismissed their contributions because of their age (Wray-Lake et al., 2026). Research across cultures has also found that adults and adolescents are stereotyped differently, with adolescents consistently seen as more impulsive, rebellious, and undisciplined (Chan et al., 2012). These findings raise a simple question: What signals do adolescents think adults use to judge whether someone seems competent and professional?

Communication may be one of those signals. Research on teenagers speaking with adults in authority shows that the two groups may understand communication problems differently. Adults may see adolescents as lacking communication skills, while adolescents may see the real problem as unequal power and a lack of respect (Drury, 2003). Other research shows that people can form judgments about competence from limited visual and background information, including details in virtual meetings (Cook et al., 2023). A meta-analysis also found that judgments based on very short samples of facial expression, body movement, and tone of voice predicted real interpersonal outcomes better than chance (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). Age and experience may matter, but the way a young person speaks and carries themselves may matter too.

Vol. 2026 (11) 893 – 902
ISSN 2688-3651 [online]

Researchers have studied how adolescents communicate with adults in authority (Drury, 2003), but it is less clear whether direct instruction can change how young people think about professionalism. Communication lessons can improve behavior at different ages. For example, a randomized study of a twelve-part speech program for third and fourth graders improved their public-speaking skills, although it did not lower their anxiety about speaking (Herbein et al., 2018). Among older students, a program that combined examples, practice, and feedback improved both presentation skills and confidence in presenting (De Grez et al., 2009). Another communication program for young people also improved their measured skills (Torres et al., 2023). However, most of these studies focused on performance. They did not ask what adolescents themselves believe makes a young person look competent or professional. This study adds a different view by examining teenagers' beliefs about professionalism and their confidence before and after instruction. It asks a simple question: Can a brief workshop change which behaviors teenagers connect with being taken seriously?

This study examined whether focused instruction in professional communication changed how adolescents thought about competence and professionalism in adult-centered settings. These judgments matter in real life. Teenagers speak with adults who have decision-making power when they lead a club, run for student office, interview for a first job or internship, present to teachers or competition judges, and advocate for themselves with counselors, coaches, or clinicians. In many of these situations, an adult forms an impression quickly and has little other information. What a teenager believes signals competence may affect both how they prepare and how they present themselves. Participants completed surveys right before and right after a workshop on word choice, eye contact, physical stillness, deliberate pauses, and confident delivery. The study looked for two changes: whether participants placed more importance on communication and whether they felt more confident that an unfamiliar adult would take their ideas seriously. It was expected that, after the workshop, participants would place more value on communication-related behaviors and report greater confidence.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants came from Seat at the Table: The Art of Professional Presence, a workshop held at the 2026 Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) National Leadership Conference on June 29 and June 30, 2026. The workshop appeared in the conference program, and any registered attendee could choose to attend. No students were individually selected, recruited, or invited. Everyone at each session was invited to take the surveys, but participation was optional. Because of this, the participants were a voluntary response sample of conference attendees, not a random or representative sample of adolescents. Most had experience with activities such as FBLA, sports, volunteer work, student government, jobs, internships, entrepreneurship, or public speaking. A few adults also completed the surveys, but the main analysis focused on adolescents because that was the group the study was designed to examine. The study received 69 pre-workshop submissions and 60 post-workshop submissions. These numbers count survey responses, not everyone who attended, since the surveys were optional.

Participants were in grades 6 through 12. In the eligible pre-workshop group ($n = 65$), the grade distribution was grade 6, $n = 2$; grade 7, $n = 14$; grade 8, $n = 20$; grade 9, $n = 4$; grade 10, $n = 11$; grade 11, $n = 10$; and grade 12, $n = 3$. One respondent did not report a grade. Middle school students in grades 6-8 made up 36 of the 64 respondents who provided a grade. Reported ages ranged from 11 to 18 years ($M = 14.48$, $SD = 1.63$, $Mdn = 14.00$). Age was missing for three respondents: two left the question blank, and one entered something that was not a valid age. Among the 50 matched participants, 28 were in grades 6-8 and 22 were in grades 9-12.

The survey's fixed answer choices only included grades 6-8 and ages 11-14. Older students had to use the Other box, and they entered their information in several forms, such as 11, 11th, 11th Grade, and Senior. Before the analysis, these answers were changed to one consistent numeric grade format, and written grade levels were converted to numbers. A number entered by itself in the grade field was treated as a grade level rather than an age. In every one of those cases, the student's reported age, which ranged from 15 to 17, supported that interpretation.

Written permission to administer the surveys at the conference was obtained in advance from FBLA's Education

Vol. 2026 (11) 893 – 902
ISSN 2688-3651 [online]

Programs Manager, on the condition that the purpose of the research was disclosed clearly and that participation was voluntary. The surveys were anonymous and collected no names, email addresses, or other direct identifiers; each participant generated a private four-character linkage code known only to that participant. Before beginning each survey, respondents indicated that they agreed to participate and agreed that their anonymous responses could be used in a student-written research paper. Participants could skip any question or stop at any time.

The responses were screened before analysis. Four of the 69 pre-workshop submissions were excluded, leaving 65 eligible individual responses. One excluded submission had been completed together by three participants, so it could not be counted as one independent response. Another respondent did not agree to the use of their data, and two responses came from adults, one parent and one teacher. Two of the 60 post-workshop submissions were also excluded: one from a respondent who did not agree and one from an adult teacher. This left 58 eligible post-workshop responses. One pre-workshop response included clearly non-serious grade and age entries but thoughtful answers to the other questions. There was no separate evidence that this person was ineligible, so the response was kept in the full-sample descriptive results. The invalid demographic entries were treated as missing, and the response was not used in paired or subgroup analyses. In the end, 50 participants were matched across the two surveys using private linkage codes they created themselves.

2.2 Procedures

Data came from two workshop sessions, each lasting about 45 minutes, on June 29 and June 30, 2026. At the start of each session, attendees were invited to complete an anonymous survey about professionalism, competence, and age-related barriers in professional settings. Each participant made a private four-character code so the pre- and post-workshop surveys could be matched without collecting names or email addresses.

After the first survey, participants completed Seat at the Table: The Art of Professional Presence. The workshop focused on verbal and nonverbal behaviors that may affect whether someone seems competent. It used examples, demonstrations, group discussion, and guided practice to compare different communication styles. Participants learned how to replace hesitant or apologetic wording with more direct language. They also considered how delivery can shape impressions of confidence, maturity, and competence.

The student researcher who wrote this paper also created and taught the workshop. No one else taught any part of either session. Because the researcher was also the instructor, participants may have figured out the study's focus and given answers they thought the instructor wanted after the workshop. Several parts of the process reduced this risk but could not remove it completely. The surveys collected no direct identifiers, participation was voluntary, questions could be skipped, and the instructor did not review the responses until after the conference. Even with those steps, demand characteristics and the desire to give socially acceptable answers could partly explain the changes. This issue is discussed again later.

The workshop taught four main techniques: pausing briefly before answering, staying physically still, making intentional eye contact, and ending statements with a confident tone instead of a questioning one. Participants practiced these skills with partners. They delivered the same statement, gave each other feedback, and compared how clearly and confidently the statement came across. The session ended with a review and a prompt asking participants to think again about which factors matter most for professional presence.

Right after the workshop, attendees were invited to complete an anonymous post-workshop survey. It asked about their views of professionalism and competence, changes they planned to make, and their confidence when speaking with unfamiliar adults. Participants entered the same four-character code they had used earlier so their two surveys could be matched. Both surveys were voluntary.

2.3 Measures

The study used pre- and post-workshop surveys created by the researcher. The questions asked about professionalism, competence, barriers to professional communication, and confidence when speaking with unfamiliar adults. The surveys included multiple-choice, select-all-that-apply, open-ended, and 1-10 rating questions.

Vol. 2026 (11) 893 – 902
ISSN 2688-3651 [online]

The researcher wrote the survey questions for this study. They were based on the workshop's learning goals and ideas from earlier research on communication between adolescents and adults (Drury, 2003) and on quick impressions formed from short samples of behavior (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). The answer choices mixed behaviors taught in the workshop, including word choice, eye contact, posture, and physical stillness, with other qualities often discussed in that research, such as experience, appearance, and leadership. An outside survey expert did not review the questions, and students did not pilot test them before the conference. For that reason, there is no evidence about the survey's reliability or validity. The findings should be understood as responses to questions written for this project, not as scores from an established measure.

The pre-workshop survey asked about grade level, age, and past experience interacting professionally with adults. It was first designed for middle school students, so the fixed choices only listed grades 6-8 and ages 11-14. Everyone else had to use the Other box, which meant older students entered this information as free text. Participants also wrote their own definition of professionalism, chose qualities they connected with it, and selected the one factor they believed mattered most when adults judged a young person's professionalism. Other questions asked whether adults judged adolescents differently, how age might affect those judgments, and what made it hard to appear confident or professional.

Confidence was measured with a 10-point question: How confident were participants that they could get an unfamiliar adult to take their ideas seriously? A rating of 1 meant Not at all, and 10 meant Definitely. The post-workshop survey repeated the question but added the word now. That small change may have reminded participants that their answers were expected to change and encouraged them to compare their new feelings with how they felt before the workshop. Because of this wording difference, the two questions were not completely identical.

Only this one question was used to measure communication confidence. A single rating can show how confident someone feels in one specific situation, but it cannot measure every part of communication confidence. That broader idea could include speaking to different audiences, communicating in different settings, listening, and responding under pressure. A one-question measure also cannot be checked for internal consistency. The results should therefore be read as confidence in the situation described by the question, not as a complete measure of adolescents' communication confidence.

The post-workshop survey again asked participants to choose the single most important factor in professionalism. It also asked them to select up to three factors that most influenced whether adults saw a young person as competent. Participants reported whether the workshop had changed how they thought about professionalism. Open-ended questions asked what they planned to change about their communication and what had surprised them most.

The repeated professionalism question and the confidence rating were used for the matched pre-post analyses. Only participants whose two surveys could be linked with their private codes were included in those comparisons. The other survey questions were summarized separately to describe what the full groups thought before and after the workshop.

2.4 Data Analysis

The survey responses were examined in several ways. Counts and percentages were used for questions with set answer choices, and means and medians were calculated for the 1-10 confidence ratings. For the open-ended questions, the researcher used inductive coding. This means there was no preset list of themes. First, all answers to a question were read to find repeated ideas. Similar answers were then grouped, and each group was given a label. Every response was placed in one main category, so the percentages for each open-ended question add to about 100%. When an answer included more than one idea, it was placed in the category that best matched its overall point. For example, an answer that mentioned both appearance and confidence was placed under whichever idea it emphasized more. Blank, off-topic, or too-vague responses went into an unclear or other category and stayed in the denominator. The student researcher completed all of the coding. Since no second coder reviewed the answers independently, there is no interrater-agreement statistic. Some answers with several ideas could reasonably have been placed in a different category, so the percentages for the open-ended questions should be read with that limitation in mind. Counts and percentages were then used to show patterns in how participants defined professionalism, described age-related

Vol. 2026 (11) 893 – 902
ISSN 2688-3651 [online]

barriers, planned to change their behavior, and reflected on the workshop.

First, the full eligible pre- and post-workshop groups were described separately. To examine changes within the same people, responses were then matched using the participants' self-generated four-character codes. Fifty participants had eligible surveys at both time points and were included in the paired pre-post analyses.

Two outcomes were tested: confidence in getting an unfamiliar adult to take their ideas seriously and the choice of communication skills as the most important factor in professionalism. Because the same people rated their confidence twice, the pre-post differences were checked with a Shapiro-Wilk test. This test showed that the difference scores were not normally distributed ($W = 0.889$, $p < .001$), so a paired-samples t test was not a good fit. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used instead to test whether confidence ratings differed before and after the workshop.

A matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation was calculated along with the Wilcoxon test. This number shows how consistently the changes moved in one direction among participants whose ratings changed. It does not show how large the changes were, so the mean and median changes are reported too. Two additional analyses explored whether results differed across groups. A Mann-Whitney U test compared confidence changes for middle school students in grades 6-8 and high school students in grades 9-12. Spearman rank-order correlations examined whether the changes were related to age or starting confidence. These were exploratory analyses, and no correction was made for testing several comparisons. The professionalism-factor question needed a different test because the answers were categories rather than numbers. For each matched participant, the answer at each time point was classified as either communication skills or something else. Since the same participants answered the question twice, an exact McNemar test was used to compare the proportions before and after the workshop. The exact version was chosen because the test depends on the matched pairs who changed their answer, and there were relatively few of those pairs.

3. Results

The analysis included 65 eligible pre-workshop responses and 58 eligible post-workshop responses. Fifty participants were matched across both surveys with self-generated private linkage codes and were included in the paired pre-post analyses.

3.1 Pre-Workshop Perceptions of Professionalism

Participants did not all define professionalism in the same way before the workshop. In the primary-category coding of the open-ended definitions, 35.4% mainly described maturity and appropriate behavior. Appearance and attire came next at 21.5%, followed by business or professional settings at 16.9%. Communication was the main theme in only 3.1% of these unprompted definitions.

The categories were defined in the following way. Maturity and appropriate behavior included answers about acting responsibly, showing respect, or behaving in a way that fit the situation, such as "Acting responsible and respectful." Appearance and attire included clothing, grooming, or overall presentation, such as "people dressed in suits." Business or professional setting described answers that defined professionalism by where it happens, such as "A professional setting in which people get business done." Confidence and composure included poise, calmness, or self-assurance, such as "Being calm and confident." Leadership and competence included leading others or having expertise, such as "Confidence and Expertise." Communication included speaking, word choice, tone, or listening, such as "Being able to put your ideas into words." Answers that were too vague to classify were placed in the other or unclear group, such as "You have to be real."

The pattern looked different when participants were given a list of choices. Communication skills were selected most often as the single most important factor in professionalism (23 of 65; coincidentally also 35.4%). Confidence came next (19 of 65; 29.2%), followed by appearance (9 of 65; 13.8%). Every other option was selected by fewer than 10% of respondents.

Most participants (50 of 65; 76.9%) said age affects how adults see adolescents in professional settings. Another 15.4% were unsure, and 7.7% said it does not. Among the 50 participants who answered yes, the most common primary explanations were perceived immaturity (24.0%), lack of experience (22.0%), and lower competence or ability (22.0%). Perceived immaturity included answers saying that adults assume younger people are immature or

Vol. 2026 (11) 893 – 902
ISSN 2688-3651 [online]

not fully developed, such as "It makes us seem less mature." Lack of experience included answers saying that adults assume adolescents have done less simply because they are younger, such as "Adults view adolescents as inexperienced." Lower competence or ability included answers saying that adults see adolescents as less capable or knowledgeable, such as "Younger people are viewed as less competent and less respected." Two other categories, reduced credibility and age-based preconceptions, each made up 14.0% of these responses.

Participants could choose up to three things that made it harder to appear confident or professional. The most common barriers were nervousness (43 of 65; 66.2%), fear of being judged (41 of 65; 63.1%), and not knowing what to say (35 of 65; 53.8%). Every other option was selected by fewer than one-third of participants.

Before the workshop, the average confidence rating was 6.78 out of 10. The median was 7, and responses covered the full range from 1 to 10.

3.2 Post-Workshop Perceptions and Reported Behavioral Intentions

After the workshop, answers were much more focused on communication. When participants had to choose the single most important factor in professionalism, 81.0% selected communication skills. Confidence was second at 13.8%. No other category was selected by more than 1.7% of participants.

A separate question allowed participants to choose up to three factors that influenced whether adults saw a young person as competent. Confidence was selected most often (74.1%). Word choice and eye contact tied for second at 44.8% each, followed by public speaking ability at 31.0%. None of the 58 eligible post-workshop respondents selected age or grades/GPA.

After the workshop, the average confidence rating was 7.95 out of 10, and the median was 8. Most participants (79.3%) said the workshop changed how they thought about professionalism. Another 12.1% were unsure, and 8.6% said their thinking had not changed.

When asked what they planned to do differently, 27.6% said they would work on their word choice or speaking habits. Other common plans included showing more confidence and assertiveness (20.7%), improving physical presence and body language (17.2%), and pausing on purpose while speaking (13.8%).

The categories were grouped in the following way. Word choice and verbal habits included plans to change specific words or speaking patterns, such as using fewer filler words, improving vocabulary, avoiding unnecessary apologies, or phrasing statements differently (for example, “Stop saying um”). Confidence and assertiveness included plans to speak more directly, be more assertive, or feel more sure of themselves without naming a specific action (“Be more confident”). Physical presence and body language included changes in stillness, fidgeting, eye contact, or posture (“No more fidgeting”). Pausing and speaking deliberately included plans to slow down, pause, or think before speaking (“Using the 3-second pause”). A few smaller categories covered voice and delivery, practicing communication more often, and responses that mentioned several workshop strategies instead of just one.

In the open-ended reflections, 22.4% said they were most surprised by how important communication was to professionalism. Another 13.8% specifically noticed that small changes in communication could affect how other people saw them.

Table 1. summary of the main descriptive results for the full eligible pre- and post-workshop groups.

Measure	Pre-workshop	Post-workshop
Eligible sample	n = 65	n = 58
Communication skills identified as most important factor	35.4%	81.0%
Confidence identified as most important factor	29.2%	13.8%
Appearance identified as most important factor	13.8%	0%
Mean confidence rating (1–10)	6.78	7.95
Median confidence rating	7	8
Note. Pre- and post-workshop descriptive statistics are based on the full eligible samples at each time point (n = 65 and n = 58, respectively) and therefore should not be interpreted as paired comparisons. Paired analyses were conducted separately using the 50 matched participants.		

Vol. 2026 (11) 893 – 902
ISSN 2688-3651 [online]

3.3 Pre–Post Changes in Professionalism Perceptions and Confidence

Among the 50 matched participants, the share choosing communication skills as the most important factor rose from 36% before the workshop to 80% afterward. The exact McNemar test showed that this paired change was statistically significant ($p < .001$). At the same time, confidence fell from 30% to 16% as the single top choice, and appearance fell from 16% to 0%.

Table 2. Summary of the matched pre-post results and statistical tests.

Outcome	Pre-workshop	Post-workshop	Statistical test	Result
Communication skills identified as most important factor	36%	80%	Exact McNemar	$p < .001$
Confidence identified as most important factor	30%	16%	—	—
Appearance identified as most important factor	16%	0%	—	—
Confidence rating (1–10)	6.84	7.90	Wilcoxon signed-rank	$W = 8.00$, $p < .001$
Median confidence rating	7	8	—	—

Note. Analyses were based on 50 participants matched across pre- and post-workshop surveys using self-generated private linkage codes. Mean confidence increased by 1.06 points. The matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation for confidence was $r_{rb} = .970$, indicating that change was almost uniformly positive among the 32 participants whose ratings changed; this statistic reflects consistency of direction and does not index the magnitude of change.

For the matched group, average confidence in getting an unfamiliar adult to take their ideas seriously rose from 6.84 before the workshop to 7.90 afterward, an increase of 1.06 points. Ratings increased for 62% of participants, stayed the same for 36%, and decreased for 2%. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that the paired difference was statistically significant ($W = 8.00$, $p < .001$). Of the 32 participants whose ratings changed, 31 improved. The matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation ($r_{rb} = .970$) shows that nearly every nonzero change went in the positive direction. It should not be read as the size of the gain. The mean increase of 1.06 points and median increase of 1.00 point better show the amount of change on the 10-point scale.

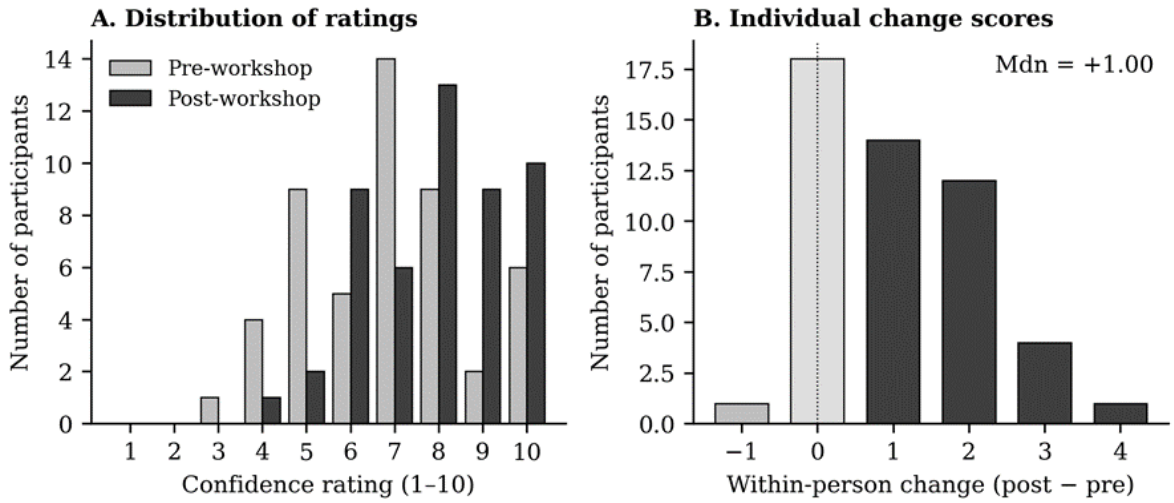


Figure 1. The confidence ratings at each time point and the individual change scores.
Note. Panel A shows the distribution of responses to the item asking how confident participants were that they could get an unfamiliar adult to take their ideas seriously (1 = Not at all, 10 = Definitely), before (light bars) and after (dark bars) the workshop. Panel B shows within-person change scores (post minus pre) for the same participants; 31 participants increased, 18 were unchanged, and 1 decreased. Mean change = 1.06 points; median change = 1.00 point.

3.4 Exploratory Moderator Analyses

The exploratory analyses asked whether confidence changed differently across groups. The gains were similar for middle school participants (grades 6-8; n = 28; M = 6.79 to 7.93, a 1.14-point increase) and high school participants

Vol. 2026 (11) 893 – 902
ISSN 2688-3651 [online]

(grades 9-12; n = 22; M = 6.91 to 7.86, a 0.95-point increase). A Mann-Whitney U test found no significant difference between the groups (U = 338.0, p = .55). Change was also not related to age (Spearman rho = -.16, p = .29). The shift toward communication skills was significant within both groups when they were examined separately (middle school: 39% to 82%, exact McNemar p = .002; high school: 32% to 77%, exact McNemar p = .006). In this sample, the changes were not limited to one age group.

Starting confidence had a stronger relationship with change (Spearman rho = -.51, p < .001). Participants with the lowest pre-workshop ratings (1-5; n = 14) increased by an average of 1.64 points, and 12 of 14 improved. Those in the middle range (6-7; n = 19) increased by 1.26 points, with 15 of 19 improving. Participants who already had high confidence (8-10; n = 17) increased by only 0.35 points, and 4 of 17 improved. This may mean that students who started with less confidence changed the most. Still, that conclusion needs caution. Students who began near 10 had less room to improve, and regression to the mean could create a similar pattern even if the workshop had no effect.

4. Discussion

The clearest post-workshop finding was that none of the 58 eligible respondents selected age or grades/GPA when they could choose up to three factors that affect whether adults see a young person as competent. Instead, they chose confidence, word choice, eye contact, and public speaking. These are all connected to how someone communicates and presents an idea. This question was only asked after the workshop, so it does not prove that the workshop caused participants to stop focusing on age or grades. Even so, it shows that adolescents can think about competence in terms of behaviors they can control instead of fixed facts about themselves. The matched results point in the same direction: communication skills rose from 36% to 80% as the single most important factor, and confidence ratings also increased.

The shift toward communication was one of the biggest changes in how participants viewed professionalism. Before the workshop, their answers were spread across several choices. Communication came first, but confidence and appearance were close behind. In the matched group, communication became the clear majority choice, while confidence and appearance both fell as the single top choice. This doesn't conflict with the separate post-workshop question where confidence was selected most often. The questions worked differently: one required a single top choice, while the other allowed up to three choices. An answer can become less common as the number one choice and still be popular when people can select several options. Taken together, the results suggest that participants may have started to see confidence as something shown through word choice, eye contact, and public speaking rather than as a separate quality. That idea fits earlier research on communication between adolescents and adults in authority (Drury, 2003) and on improvement after communication training (De Grez et al., 2009; Torres et al., 2023).

The difference between unprompted and prompted answers is also useful. Before the workshop, communication was the main coded theme in only 3.1% of participants' own definitions of professionalism. However, 35.4% chose communication skills when they saw a list of possible answers. After the workshop, 81.0% chose communication as the single most important factor. This pattern suggests that many participants already recognized communication when they were reminded of it, but it was rarely the first idea that came to mind. The percentages should not be treated as points on one scale because the questions were asked in different ways. Instead, they show that communication became a more noticeable part of how participants thought about professionalism.

Before the workshop, participants also described how age and personal barriers affected professional interactions with adults. Most (76.9%) believed that adults viewed adolescents differently because of age. Their written answers often mentioned assumptions about immaturity, limited experience, or lower competence. The most common personal barriers were nervousness, fear of being judged, and not knowing what to say. These concerns match research on anti-youth ageism, in which adolescents have described being treated as less capable and having their ideas dismissed because of their age (Wray-Lake et al., 2026). They also fit research showing that adolescents and adults may understand communication problems differently, especially when the adult has more authority (Drury, 2003). In other words, young people may be dealing with both internal barriers, such as nervousness, and outside judgments about their age and experience.

The rise in confidence came with specific plans for changing communication. In their reflections, participants most often planned to change their word choice and speaking habits. They also mentioned showing more confidence,

Vol. 2026 (11) 893 – 902
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improving body language, and using deliberate pauses. The workshop may have helped them connect confidence with practical behaviors they could practice. However, the survey only measured what participants planned to do right after the session. It cannot tell us whether they actually used these strategies later with adults.

The exploratory results suggest that the changes were not limited to one subgroup. Confidence gains were similar for middle and high school students and were not related to age. Communication also became the top choice within both school levels. This may mean the workshop does not need to be aimed at only one narrow age group, but the study was not designed with enough participants to make strong subgroup conclusions. Students who started with the lowest confidence improved the most. They may have had the most to gain, but they also had more room on the 10-point scale to move upward. Regression to the mean could produce the same pattern. A future study with a comparison group would be needed before calling this an effect of the workshop.

Participants' reflections also suggest that their thinking may have shifted. About four out of five said the workshop changed how they thought about professionalism. The most common written responses focused on the importance of communication and on how small communication changes can affect the way other people see them. These comments match the broader pattern of participants paying more attention to communication after the workshop. Still, self-reports alone cannot prove that the workshop caused the change. They are more useful when considered together with the matched survey results. Overall, the numbers and written answers suggest that communication became a more important part of professional presence for many participants.

There are several reasons to be careful with these results. Most importantly, the study measured participants' opinions and self-rated confidence only a few minutes after the workshop. It did not measure whether their actual communication changed, and no adults rated the participants' competence or professionalism. The findings about being taken seriously therefore show what participants expected from adults, not how adults actually judged them. The data don't support a claim that communication skill improved or that adults saw the participants as more competent. The study also followed only one group and had no control group, so we can't know how much of the change came from the workshop itself. Since the researcher also taught the workshop, participants may have guessed that communication was the focus and answered the second survey in the way they thought was expected. The post-workshop survey happened immediately, so we also don't know whether the changes lasted. Only 50 participants could be matched, and the outcomes were self-reported thoughts, confidence, and plans rather than real conversations with adults. The survey had other limits as well. It was written for this study without expert review or pilot testing, and confidence was measured with one question. The survey was first designed for middle school students, with fixed choices only for grades 6-8 and ages 11-14, even though older students also attended. Those students entered grade and age information in different ways, which made some demographic data less exact. One researcher coded all of the open-ended answers, with no second coder or interrater-agreement check. Finally, students who attend a national FBLA conference may already have more leadership and public-speaking experience than adolescents in general, so the findings may not apply to every group.

These data can't tell us whether an average increase of 1.06 points on a 10-point scale matters in everyday life. The confidence question was written for this study, so there is no established minimum important difference, no comparison with typical scores, and no outside measure, such as observed behavior or an adult's rating, to help explain the gain. In simple terms, the typical participant moved from a 7 to an 8, and almost everyone whose rating changed moved upward. But consistency is not the same as size. A self-rating given minutes after a workshop may reflect short-term excitement as much as a lasting change. The increase is best understood as a small and consistently positive short-term change whose practical importance is still unknown. To find out whether it truly matters, a future study would need a tested confidence measure, a comparison group, and a later follow-up connected to real outcomes such as interviews or presentations.

Even with these limits, a brief communication workshop may help adolescents prepare for adult-centered settings by giving them specific behaviors to practice. Future studies should use larger and more varied groups, tested survey measures, a comparison group, and a later follow-up. They should also examine real communication behavior and ask adults how they judge it.

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5. Conclusion

After a brief professional-communication workshop, adolescents were much more likely to name communication skills as the single most important factor in professionalism. They also reported greater confidence that an unfamiliar adult would take their ideas seriously. Both paired changes were statistically significant. After the workshop, no participant chose age or grades as a factor affecting whether adults see a young person as competent. The practical value of these findings is that ideas about professional presence may be teachable. One 45-minute session built around a few specific behaviors was followed by a shift in where adolescents placed competence: less on fixed traits such as age and more on behaviors they can practice. For educators and program leaders, this suggests that short lessons focused on clear behaviors may be a useful way to spend limited program time. These conclusions still have important limits. The study followed one group with no comparison group, measured the outcomes immediately after the workshop, and used a survey that was written for this project without expert review or pilot testing. The participants chose to attend a national conference and may not represent adolescents in general. One researcher coded the open-ended answers. Most importantly, the study measured beliefs, confidence, and plans, not actual communication behavior or the judgments adults made. Future studies should include a comparison group, follow participants for several weeks or months, and use tested measures of communication confidence. They should also use a second coder and report how often the coders agree. Finally, adults should rate the communication skills that the workshop is meant to improve. For now, this study provides early evidence that adolescents' ideas about professionalism are not fixed and may change after focused instruction.

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