

Personal Reputation: Effects of Upward Communication on Impressions About New Employees

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Abstract

One of the pitfalls of past research in upward influence communication is that messages are often categorized using more than one characteristic. This categorization has made it difficult to understand how different message characteristics affect supervisors' perceptions about employees. Given the importance of supervisor perceptions for the future of employees in the organization, this study uses principles of language expectancy theory (LET) to explore how message content (benefit organization vs. no benefit) and delivery style (aggressive vs. nonaggressive) in upward communication situations affect perceptions of personal reputation and work competence. Participants, acting in the role of supervisors, read one of four scenarios and evaluated a new employee. Results suggest that delivery style and message content independently influence the supervisor's willingness to grant a request as well as influence perceptions of personal reputation, whereas perceptions of work competence are primarily affected by message content. Implications of results for theory and practice are discussed.

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Shifts in the structure of organizations from multiple layer to flatter hierarchies has motivated scholars to understand different factors that contribute to an employee's ability to influence others in an organization. Upward communication has emerged as one of the important factors that are considered in this process (Waldron, 1999). The study of upward communication includes the exploration of behaviors such as upward influence (Waldron, 1999), upward dissent (Kassing, 2001; Kassing & Armstrong, 2002), voice behaviors (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009), and employee–supervisor communication (Krone, 1992), to mention a few. Previous research suggests that employee communication with higher-ups in the organization is important because it affects how powerful others perceive the employee (Porter, Allen, & Angle, 1981; Wayne, Liden, Graf, & Ferris, 1997). In turn, supervisor perceptions are important because they affect the credibility, mobility, and the success of an individual in the organization (Ferris, Blass, Douglas, Kolodinsky, & Treadway, 2003). Although there has been much research on upward communication (Ferris et al., 2002; Waldron, 1999), one area that has not received much attention is how message content (i.e., what employees communicate) and delivery style (i.e., how employees communicate a message) affect supervisors' perceptions about employees. This project addresses this gap.

Work competence and personal reputation are two important perceptions when supervisors make decisions about personnel management in organizations (Sandberg, 2000; Zinko, 2007). Work competence encompasses perceptions that supervisors have about how well employees can complete their jobs (Grantham & Vieira, 2008), whereas personal reputation reflects a set of impressions or behavioral expectations that individuals create based on social interactions (DeCremer & Sedikides, 2008). This study primarily focuses on how what employees say and how they say it affect supervisor perceptions about work competence and personal reputation, with emphasis on employees who are new to the organization. Drawing on language expectancy theory (LET; Burgoon, Denning, & Roberts, 2002; Burgoon & Miller, 1971), we argue that what a new employee communicates and how he or she communicates it will affect the initial perceptions that supervisors create. In particular, we suggest that in situations in which supervisors have very little information to judge an employee (e.g., when a new employee joins the organization), they will rely on their interpretation of communication behaviors to create their judgments about the employee.

Literature Review

Organizational entry is an important time for the development of relationships between employees and supervisors (Jablin, 2001). During this stage, employees and supervisors collect information about each other that will help them determine the type of relationship they will have, how they can help each other, and their role-making process (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, what happens in this initial stage is critical because it will affect the future of employees in the organization. In this study, we explore how initial communication interactions between a new employee and a supervisor affect the supervisor's perception about personal reputation and work competence.

Personal Reputation & Work Competence

Scholars often discuss the term reputation at the organizational level (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006; Ferris et al., 2007). However, recently, a group of researchers has been exploring personal reputation (Ferris et al., 2003; Zinko, Ferris, Blass, & Laird, 2007). Personal reputation represents an individual's collection of perceptions about others (DeCremer & Sedikides, 2008; Ferris et al., 2003) and results from the combination of salient personal characteristics, behaviors, and images that are observed directly over time or are reported by others (Zinko et al., 2007). Individuals with a positive reputation are perceived as more competent (Gioia & Sims, 1983), as having higher status (Hochwarter, Ferris, Zinko, Arnell, & James, 2007), and as trustworthy (Ostrom, 2003), all of which lead to positive outcomes for employees (Ferris et al., 2003; Zinko et al., 2007). Thus, developing a positive reputation is important, especially for employees who are new to the organization.

Although multiple studies have focused on the consequences of personal reputation (DeCremer & Sedikides, 2008; Hochwarter et al., 2007), very little is known about how an employee's reputation is developed (Laird, 2008). Thus, similar to others who borrow the logic presented when explaining the formation of organizational reputation (Bromley, 1993; Ferris et al., 2003), in this article, we argue that initial impressions are the building blocks of reputation. Impressions are collections of information about an individual (i.e., their general traits and abilities) that are formed through direct observation and/or second-hand accounts about the individual (Bromley, 1993; Goffman, 1959; Ostrom, Lingle, Pryor, & Geva, 1980). Impressions are formed quickly, automatically, and often unconsciously (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992), with initial encounters playing an important role in subsequent perceptions about an employee (Harris & Garris, 2008). Thus, although personal reputation develops over time, initial perceptions are often lasting and influential for

future encounters (Dougherty, Turban, & Callender, 1994; Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999).

Supervisors' perceptions about work competence also play an important role in the evaluation of employees (Wayne et al., 1997). *Work competence* refers to the perceived ability to perform a task successfully as part of one's job (Grantham & Vieira, 2008). Although work competence has been interpreted in different ways (Erondu & Sharland, 2002; Robotham & Jubb, 1996), these interpretations all describe a competent employee as one who performs his or her job well and tend to view work competence as affecting an individual's job performance (Robotham & Jubb, 1996).

During the organizational entry stage, supervisors have very little information to judge employee competence; therefore, they infer these characteristics from the actions they observe while interacting with an employee (Jablin, 2001). Supervisors use these observations to create initial perceptions about how well an individual can perform his or her job. Some support for this can be found in the research exploring leader-member exchange (LMX). Research on LMX indicates that perceptions of competence affect employee-supervisor relationships (Graen, 1976; Graen & Cashman, 1975). In particular, those who are initially perceived as competent in their work have a greater chance of developing high LMX relationships and in turn can reap the positive consequences of those relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, as with understanding constructions of personal reputation, it is important for a new employee to understand how perceptions about initial work competence develop in the organization.

During initial interactions between employees and supervisors, one factor that plays an important role in the formation of personal reputation and work competence is communication. Based on the principles of LET, we argue that through communication exchanges, we develop perceptions about others and judge their behaviors (Burgoon et al., 2002; Burgoon & Miller, 1971). LET posits that receivers (i.e., supervisors) have expectations about the behavior (verbal and nonverbal) that a communicator (i.e., subordinate) should exhibit in an interaction. During interactions, receivers compare their expectations and actual behaviors to determine whether expectations have been violated. These violations can be positive (i.e., better than expected) or negative (i.e., lower than expected). The extent to which an employee's communication behavior matches the supervisor's expectations will affect perceptions about that employee. In cases where positive violations occur, there will be favorable impressions created about the employee, whereas negative violations will result in negative impressions. Given this, we argue that communication behaviors during initial interactions between employees and supervisors affect the impressions that supervisors form about employees.

Upward Communication

Upward communication refers to the process by which employees communicate with others who are higher in the organizational hierarchy (Waldron, 1999). Research on upward communication explores issues about organizational dissent (Kassing, 2001, 2007), voice behavior (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009), employee-supervisor relationships (Krone, 1992), and upward influence (Waldron, 1999). For this study, the focus is the influence component of upward communication. *Upward influence* refers to the process by which a subordinate attempts to influence an individual higher in the organizational hierarchy. A primary area of research in upward influence focuses on understanding the messages employees use to influence their supervisors (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980). In general, research suggests that messages that use logic and reasoning as the primary base for persuasion are preferred by individuals in upward influence situations (Waldron, 1999) and are seen as the most effective with supervisors (Wayne et al., 1997). In addition, the use of specific messages has been related to work outcomes such as performance assessments and extrinsic success (Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003).

There have been many pitfalls associated with the study of influence messages (Wilson, 2002). One of the shortcomings of this research is the use of nominal-level typologies that differ in multiple ways (Olufowte, Miller, & Wilson, 2005; Wilson, 2002). For example, Kellermann and Cole (1994) showed that the most common typology of upward influence messages (the one from Kipnis et al., 1980) includes message that are defined based on form (e.g., sanctions), content (e.g., rationality), presentation (e.g., ingratiating and assertiveness), context (e.g., upward appeal and coalition), delivery style (e.g., assertiveness), and interactive use (e.g., exchange). Thus, it is very difficult to understand what characteristics of the message affect how important others judge employees. In this study, we are interested in two components of the communicated messages (i.e., the content of the message and the delivery style).

Impact of Message Content on Perceptions of New Employees

As used in this study, *message content* refers to the words used when making the request. What employees say when communicating with supervisors affects the impressions supervisors create about them (Ostrom et al., 1980). In particular, past research has found that the way in which employees frame their upward communication affects the reactions of important others (Kassing, 1997, 2001, 2007). Support for the importance of content in upward

influence messages comes from our understanding of the use of rationality tactics. *Rationality* refers to the use of logic, facts, and data to influence others (Ferris et al., 2002). Having a convincing explanation contributes to the target's perception that the request is based on accurate information and is made without bias (Ambrose & Harland, 1995). When attempting to influence others at work, scholars agree that rationality is the most effective tactic to use (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Yukl, Kim, & Falbe, 1996). The positive evaluation from the use of rationality may come from the fact that these messages are less likely to violate the expectations of supervisors. Thus, following principles from LET, the use of rationality in upward influence messages is more likely to match or exceed the expectations that supervisors have and result in positive evaluations for the employee.

Another line of research that supports the importance of content in upward communication comes from research on the goal of the influence attempt. Two goals are important in upward influence. *Organizational goals* describe situations in which the employee's purpose is to request a change that would benefit the organization or the group as a whole (Yukl, Guinan, & Sottolano, 1995). *Personal goals*, however, describe situations in which the purpose of the employee is securing individual benefits (Ansari & Kapoor, 1987). Situations in which employees try to gain compliance from supervisors for actions that would benefit the organization are perceived as less risky than situations in which they are trying to get a personal benefit (Yukl & Tracey, 1992). Thus, it can be argued that during initial interactions with supervisors, messages that show benefit to the organization are less likely to violate supervisor expectations and result in negative consequences for the employee.

Given the negative consequences associated with message content that violates receiver's expectations as suggested by LET (Burgoon, 1995), we expect that messages that highlight benefit to the organization will be seen as a sign that the employee cares about the organization and is willing to engage in positive organizational citizenship behaviors. Thus, similar to the research on LMX development (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), we believe that in situations in which supervisors have little information about employees (e.g., when the employee is new), message content that highlights benefit to the organization will not result in supervisors having negative perceptions about the employee. In particular, supervisors will perceive that an employee is not violating their expectations. In turn, this communication effort will not translate into negative perceptions about the employee. However, it may be possible that not offering a benefit for the organization may result in a violation of expectations to the supervisor. With this in mind, we believe that, in contrast to employees who do not offer a benefit to the organization, an employee

who makes a request that offers a benefit to the supervisor may be seen as having better personal characteristics and as showing positive behaviors toward their job and the organization that will translate into favorable evaluations about personal reputation and work competence. Given this rationale, the following hypotheses are advanced:

Hypothesis 1: Employees who make requests that offer benefits to the organization will be perceived as having (a) a better personal reputation and (b) greater work competence than employees who make requests that do not offer benefits to the organization.

Impact of Message Delivery Style on Perceptions of New Employees

A second factor that influences supervisor's perceptions of new employees is message delivery style. Although some research uses delivery style to describe the channel used to communicate the message (e.g., face-to-face vs. email; Stephenson, Brown, & Griffin, 2006), this study uses the term delivery style to explain how a message is communicated. The focus is on the way in which employees communicate their message and not the channel that they use. Although delivery style has not been directly explored in upward influence research, some indirect evidence of its importance comes from research on assertive influence tactics. Assertive influence tactics are messages that express anger verbally or are demanding on the target (Kipnis et al., 1980). The use of assertive tactics has been linked to perception of manipulation, aggressiveness, and coercion and has been interpreted as demonstrating lack of respect for the message recipient's feelings (Ambrose & Harland, 1995). Because of its nature, assertive tactics are commonly associated with negative outcomes such as low influence effectiveness, lower promotion, and lower assessments by supervisors (Laird, 2008; Thacker & Wayne, 1995). We believe that previous research seems to equate assertiveness with aggressive delivery style and not all assertive messages are delivered in an aggressive way. Because of this, we decided to focus on the delivery style of the message.

For this study, two delivery styles are considered. The aggressive delivery style involves communication exchanges in which the employee expresses anger verbally, is demanding, and uses pressure to obtain a desired outcome. The nonaggressive style describes requests that are made in an assertive but not forceful way. Given that the use of aggressive messages has been associated with lower performance scores and overall appraisals, it is expected that

when employees use an aggressive delivery style, he or she will be viewed less positively because his or her actions violate the expectations that we often have when we communicate with others. According to LET, messages that negatively violate societal expectations about appropriate behavior are perceived more negatively and are less persuasive (Burgoon et al., 2002). Thus, during initial interactions between a new employee and a supervisor, the use of aggressive delivery style will reflect negatively on supervisor perceptions of the employee's personal characteristics, which will reflect negatively on the new employee and will be interpreted as a violation of expectations about employee behavior. This violation of expectations will in turn affect the initial perception about the reputation and the competence of the employee. Following this rationale, we advance our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Employees who use nonaggressive delivery styles when making a request will be perceived as having (a) a better reputation and (b) greater work competence than employees who use aggressive styles.

Method

Participants

Two hundred forty-five individuals participated in this study. Thirty percent of the participants were male, 88% were White, and the average age was 25.71 years ($SD = 9.91$). Most of the participants (72%) had 4 or more years of work experience and 40% had been supervisors. Forty-nine percent of the sample had some college education, 27% had bachelor's degree, and 10% had a master's degree. The three main industries represented in our sample were service (25.22%), education and health (19.03%), and retail (10.18%).

Design and Procedure

A 2 (delivery style: aggressive vs. nonaggressive) by 2 (message content: benefit organization vs. no benefit organization) independent groups design was used in this study. Participants were contacted via email and asked to participate in this study. After giving consent, participants read one of the four scenarios and answered questions regarding their perceptions about personal reputation and work competence of the employee making the request, their perceptions about the situation, and demographic information. Participants took approximately 15 min to complete the survey.

Materials

Participants were asked to play the role of a manager, and they were presented with a situation in which a new employee makes a request for a computer program. This situation was chosen to represent a frequently experienced upward communication situation as described by Yukl and Falbe (1990). The scenarios are presented in the appendix.

Measures

Six items from Hochwarter and colleagues (2007) were used to assess perceptions of personal reputation (for the list of items, see Table 1–Factor 4; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Work competence was measured with five items created for this study (Table 1–Factor 3). We used three items to measure perceptions of delivery style (Table 1–Factor 1) and three additional items for perceptions of message content (Table 1–Factor 2). Both scales were created for this study. We assessed scenario realism with three items (Table 1–Factor 5; Fedor, Davis, Maslyn, & Mathieson, 2001). Finally, we used one question to assess whether participants would grant the request: “If you had the money, would you grant this request to the employee?” Table 2 reports descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations for the variables included in this study.

Analyses

We assessed the factor structure of our measures with confirmatory factor analysis (see Table 1 for items and factor loadings). Results (Eigenvalues > 1.0, varimax rotation) produced five clean factors (primary loadings = .50-.94; highest cross-loading = .37; variance explained = 64%). We tested hypotheses using a hierarchical regression. We controlled for age, sex, education, supervisory experience, and realism in Step 1. Following the suggestions of O’Keefe (2003) and Tao and Bucy (2007), we entered the manipulation checks for delivery style and message content in Step 2 and the interaction between these factors in Step 3. We evaluated the significance of each step with change in F (ΔF) and interpreted betas with t values.

Results

To assess the manipulation of message content and delivery style, t tests were conducted. For delivery style, those in the aggressive message condition

Table 1. Factor Loadings for Scales

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Jordan was pushy when requesting the program	.81				
Jordan was confrontational when making the request	.70				
Jordan was persistent in making the request	.65				
The request was well reasoned		.76			
Jordan made rational arguments for why the program was necessary		.74			
It would benefit the company to have XPS program		.71			
It is in the organization's best interest to buy the program		.59			
I do not think Jordan would do a good job at work (r)			.54		
Jordan is the kind of person that likes doing well at work			.62		
I do not see Jordan as being a very competent person (r)			.54		
Jordan would not be able to perform the job well (r)			.62		
I think Jordan would be a talented worker within the organization			.66		
I picture Jordan as someone who would be highly regarded by others				.77	
I think Jordan would have a good reputation among coworkers				.78	
Jordan would be the type of person who would be respected by other workers in the organization				.85	
Jordan is a person who would be trusted by other colleagues				.81	
Other colleagues would see Jordan as a person of high integrity				.70	
Jordan would have a reputation of engaging in the highest quality of performance				.58	
I can imagine this situation happening to me in my current job					.65
It was difficult to make myself feel that this situation was real (r)					.50
This situation could happen in my job					.94

Note: r = reverse coded.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Granting request ^a	0.51	0.50													
2. Personal reputation	3.15	0.79	.51**	(.94)											
3. Work competence	3.51	0.65	.50**	.57**	(.81)										
4. Message content ^b	0.49	0.50	.32**	.24**	.43**										
5. MC content	3.20	0.93	.68**	.61**	.56**	.55**	(.88)								
6. Delivery style ^c	0.50	0.50	-.31**	-.37**	-.15*	-.01	-.29**								
7. MC delivery style	2.86	1.10	-.42**	-.53**	-.32**	-.15*	-.39**	.65**	(.82)						
8. MC content × MC delivery style	8.75	3.35	.09	-.08	.05	.28**	.35**	.38**	.68**						
9. Realism	3.24	0.84	.41**	.40**	.47**	.49**	.65**	-.10	.23**	.25**	(.73)				
10. Age	25.71	9.91	-.27**	-.18**	-.25**	-.02	-.23**	.10	.11	-.06	-.11				
11. Sex ^d	1.70	0.46	.03	.04	.08	-.01	-.02	-.01	-.02	-.04	-.06	-.02			
12. Education ^e	0.38	0.49	-.07	-.27**	-.25**	-.03	-.26**	.18**	.22**	.02	-.14*	.50**	-.04		
13. Supervisor ^f	3.04	1.26	-.22**	-.10	-.03	.07	-.07	.15*	.08	-.02	.07	.39**	-.04	.19**	
14. Tenure ^g	2.91	1.11	-.15**	-.08	-.08	.04	-.07	.12	.06	-.01	.03	.68**	.09	.18**	.40**

Note: MC = manipulation check. N = 232-245 pairwise. Alpha coefficients are in parenthesis.

a. Coding: 0 = no, 1 = yes

b. Coding: 0 = nonaggressive, 1 = aggressive

c. Coding: 0 = benefit self, 1 = benefit organization

d. Coding: 1 = male, 2 = female

e. Coding: 1 = high school, 2 = some college, 3 = associate/certificate, 4 = BA/BS, 5 = master's, 6 = PhD

f. Coding: 0 = no supervisor experience, 1 = previous supervisory experience

g. Coding: 1 = less than 1 year, 2 = 1-3 years, 3 = 4-10 years, 4 = 11-20 years, 5 = 21-29 years, 6 = 30+ years

*p < .05. **p < .01, two-tailed.

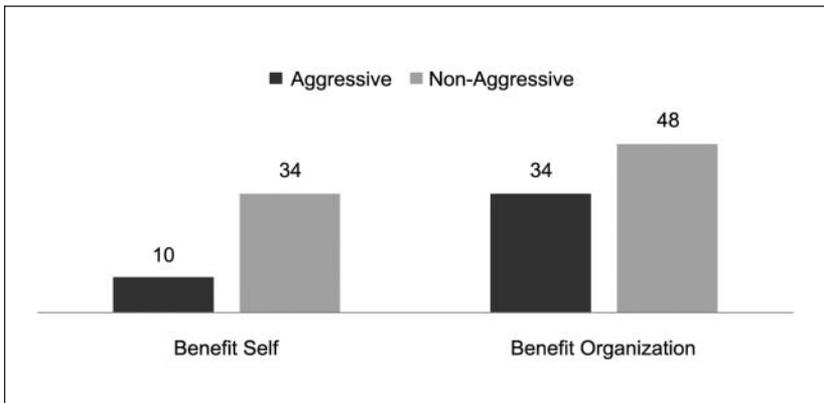


Figure 1. Requests granted per condition

found the message to be more aggressive ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.99$) than those in the nonaggressive condition ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.63$), $t(242) = 13.34$, $p < .001$. For message content, those in the benefit organization condition perceived the request as more beneficial for the organization ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.56$) compared with the no-benefit organization condition ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(242) = 10.23$, $p < .001$. These results support the successful manipulation of message delivery and content.

Before hypotheses were tested, we explored the number of requests that were granted in each condition. As seen in Figure 1, participants in the organizational benefit–nonaggressive condition were the ones who granted the most requests. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) results indicate there were main effects for delivery style, $F(1, 241) = 29.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, message content, $F(1, 241) = 30.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, and no interaction effects, $F(1, 241) = 2.43$, $p = ns$.

A hierarchical regression was conducted to examine the effects of message content and delivery style on personal reputation. After accounting for the controls, the addition of the main effects in Step 2 significantly increased explained variance in personal reputation ($\Delta F = 61.32$, $p < .001$). The addition of the interaction in Step 3, however, did not produce a significant increase in explained variance of personal reputation ($\Delta F = .39$, ns). As reported in Table 3, supporting Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 2a, there was a positive relationship between message content and personal reputation ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$) and a negative relationship between delivery style and personal reputation ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$). In Step 2, the predictors explained 49% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .47$).

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Personal Reputation

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	-.01	.01	.01
Sex ^a	.04	.04	.04
Education ^b	-.19**	-.07	-.07
Supervisor experience ^c	-.07	-.07	-.06
Realism	.36**	.01	.12*
MC delivery style		-.31**	-.57**
MC message content		.47**	.28*
MC delivery style × MC message content			.11
<i>F</i>	11.70**	30.36**	26.54**
ΔF		61.32**	0.39
R^2	.21	.49	.49
ΔR^2		.28	.00
Adjusted R^2	.19	.47	.47

Note: MC = manipulation check.

a. Coding: 1 = male, 2 = female

b. Coding: 1 = high school, 2 = some college, 3 = associate's/certificate, 4 = bachelor's degree, 5 = master's, 6 = PhD

c. Coding: 0 = no supervisor experience, 1 = previous supervisory experience

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

For work competence, the results from the hierarchical regression indicate that, after accounting for the controls, the addition of Step 2 ($\Delta F = 16.41$, $p < .001$) and Step 3 ($\Delta F = 5.44$, $p < .05$) significantly increased the explained variance in work competence. As reported in Table 4, regression results support Hypothesis 1b, showing a positive relationship between message content and work competence ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$). However, Hypothesis 2b was not supported ($\beta = .28$, $p = ns$). Results also suggest that there was an interaction between message delivery style and message content ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .05$). Figure 2 illustrates the form of this interaction. When delivery style was non-aggressive, offering a benefit made more of a difference in perceptions of work competence than when delivery style was aggressive. Overall variance explained was 40% (adjusted $R^2 = .38$).

Discussion

Results from this study show the importance of considering the content of a message and the delivery style independently when understanding a supervisor's

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Work Competence

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	-.16*	-.14*	-.13*
Sex ^a	.08	.08	.08
Education ^b	-.01	-.04	-.04
Supervisor experience ^c	.03	.06	.03
Realism	.46**	.23**	.23**
MC delivery style		-.12*	.28
MC message content		.33**	.63**
MC delivery style × MC message content			-.41**
<i>F</i>	18.97**	20.09**	18.61**
ΔF		16.41**	5.44*
R^2	.29	.38	.40
ΔR^2		.09	.02
Adjusted R^2	.28	.37	.38

a. Coding: 1 = male, 2 = female

b. Coding: 1 = high school, 2 = some college, 3 = associate's/certificate, 4 = bachelor's degree, 5 = master's, 6 = PhD

c. Coding: 0 = no supervisor experience, 1 = previous supervisory experience

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

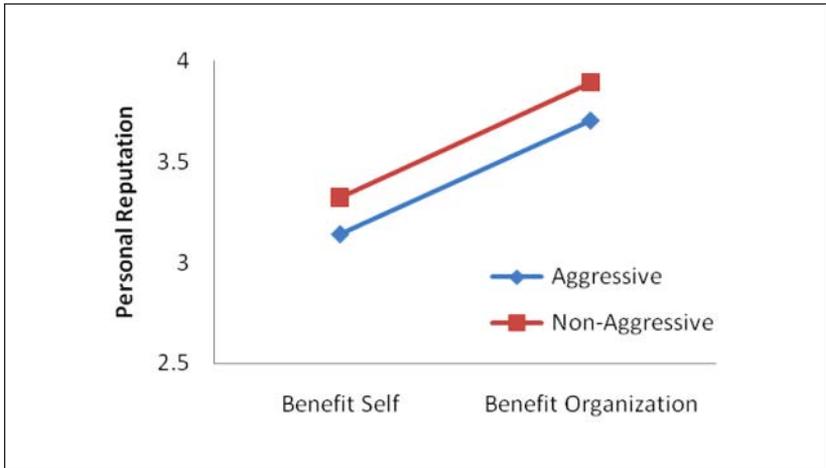


Figure 2. Effects of delivery style and message content on work competence

initial perceptions about a new employee. In support of our predictions, message content and delivery style both had independent effects on the initial perceptions about the personal reputation of the new employee described in the scenario. However, message content was the only factor that affected supervisor perceptions about the work competence of the new employee described in the scenario. Although it was not predicted, there was an interaction between message content and delivery style when predicting perceptions of work competence.

Theoretical Implications

The findings from this study show the unique effects of message content and delivery style on supervisor impressions about an employee's personal reputation and work competence. Thus, one contribution of this study comes from the separating of message content and delivery style when exploring upward communication. In the past, studies have examined influence attempts based on the work on influence tactics that started with Kipnis and colleagues (1980). As highlighted by Kellermann and Cole (1994), a problem when relying on this typology is that tactics differ in multiple ways, and this makes it difficult to interpret the meaning of the findings of previous studies regarding how individuals are communicating with supervisors. Therefore, this study complements prior research on upward communication by clearly identifying the components of the message that are examined. By separating these two components, researchers are better able to understand different communication factors that will influence the impressions others create about an individual at work. Understanding how communication affects impressions of employees is important, given the effects that these perceptions can have on the future of an employee in the organization.

These results also shed light on the importance of delivery style and message content when interacting with a supervisor. In particular, our results complement findings from Kassing (2001, 2002) and Garko (1992) suggesting that, during initial communication interactions with supervisors, delivery style and message content are important for the impressions a supervisor creates about an employee. In addition, results have more general implications for understanding the effects of upward communication for an employee. Past research indicates that upward communication is a risky endeavor for subordinates because relationships with supervisors are long-lasting, and more powerful others often control the resources and rules of engagement that employees must follow (Porter et al., 1981). Results from our study are

consistent with this idea and suggest that communication with supervisors can be risky, especially when employees are trying to fulfill a personal goal and are perceived as aggressive.

Our results also have general implications for understanding LET. Prior work using principles of LET has primarily been conducted in health contexts. In health, LET has been used to explore communication between physicians and patients as a tool for compliance (Klinge, 1996), to explore adolescent reactions to public service announcements (Siegel & Burgoon, 2002), and to assess the effectiveness of health communication campaigns (Campo, Cameron, Brossard, & Frazer, 2004). Our results suggest that LET can also be applied in interpersonal context and in organizational contexts under the condition that a supervisor has specific expectations about the employee making the request. Thus, another theoretical implication is the extension of LET to interpersonal influence situations. In these situations, we assume that supervisors have expectations about several components of the communication process (i.e., delivery style and message content) with employees. Therefore, in employee-supervisor interactions there are multiple ways in which expectations can be violated. In instances in which supervisor expectations are violated negatively, employees will incur negative perceptions about their actions that will have negative repercussions for the future of the employee with that supervisor.

A final implication for future theory development comes from understanding the initial perceptions about personal reputation. Several studies have argued the importance of having a strong personal reputation in the organization (DeCremer & Sedikides, 2008) and have indicated that individuals with positive reputations are perceived as having more expertise and legitimacy (Gioia & Sims, 1983), having a higher status (Hochwarter et al., 2007), and being more effective at meeting expectations (Tsui, 1984). Therefore, these results provide new insights on the importance of upward communication in the way others perceive individuals at work.

Practical Implications

On a practical level, these results can help new employees understand how they need to communicate to avoid negative perceptions in the eyes of the supervisor. Supporting the predictions from LET, our results indicate that individuals have expectations regarding how others in the organization should communicate with them. In particular, individuals have expectations about behaviors that are seen as unprofessional, and employees need to be

aware that violation of these expectations will have detrimental effects on their future with the supervisor. This is important because the perceptions that supervisors have strongly effected the future of employees (Ferris et al., 2003; Zinko et al., 2007). Thus, given our results, when employees are communicating with supervisors, they should make sure that their communication and actions do not come across as being aggressive or promoting self-interests. Based on the results of this study, when individuals engage in communication behaviors that recipients perceive as aggressive and self-promoting, they will obtain the least positive results from their requests and will initially be perceived as having the lowest personal reputation and work competence in the eyes of the supervisor.

A final practical implication of this study centers on the different effects that message content and delivery style have on supervisor perceptions about a new employee's personal reputation and work competence. Message content and delivery style are both important for the perceptions of personal reputation, whereas message content is more influential when evaluating perceptions of work competence. It seems that, at least in our study, the effects of message content and delivery style on personal reputation work similar to a "halo effect" (Balzer & Sulsky, 1992). That is, when supervisors evaluated new employees, positive communication behaviors (i.e., offering benefit for the organization and being nonaggressive) resulted in positive evaluations about personal characteristics that, in turn, translated into a positive personal reputation. However, work competence was primarily evaluated based on the perceptions of whether the new employee offered a benefit for the organization. It may be that engaging in actions that are seen as self-promotive early after joining an organization is not perceived as an intelligent action and, thus, is seen as affecting an individual's competence at work. Given our results, employees who are interested in having a positive reputation should pay equal attention to the content of their messages and their delivery style, whereas those focused on being perceived competent at work should primarily focus on the content of their messages to supervisors.

Strength, Limitations, and Future Research

To our knowledge, this is one of the few studies in upward communication that separates message content and delivery style as two distinct factors in the communication exchange. Thus, a key strength of our research is our focus on message content and delivery style as different components of the communicated message. We believe that this separation is important because

it enables a better understanding of the effects of communication factors in interactions between employees and supervisors. At the same time, we note limitations that come from the sample, the use of scenarios, and the simplicity of the design. The fact that only 40% of the participants had supervisory experience may affect the responses to the situations. In our sample, we did not find differences in the perceptions of personal reputation (PR) and work competence (WC) based on previous supervisor experience ($M_{pr} = 3.05$, $M_{wc} = 3.48$) and no supervisor experience ($M_{pr} = 3.21$, $M_{wc} = 3.53$). We do suggest that future research try to replicate our findings with samples of supervisors only to test whether having supervisor experience does matter when evaluating employees. Another limitation linked to our sample emerges from the convenient nature of the sample used and the demographic characteristics of this sample. Given that females and Whites were overrepresented, we suggest that future research try to replicate our results in a more diverse sample.

A second limitation of our study may come from the use of scenarios. It is possible that the perceptions of the realism of the scenario used in the current study could have affected how participants responded to our questions. To address this concern, the study questionnaire included a scale designed to measure perceptions of scenario realism (Fedor et al., 2001). Even though perceptions of realism differed, we controlled for realism in Step 1 of the hierarchical regression; thus, we accounted for the variance due to realism in our analyses. Although perceptions of realism were accounted for in our analyses, we believe that future research should consider alternative ways to assess the effects of message content and delivery style when exploring upward communication. If the researchers wish to use scenarios in their research, one way to address the concerns of realism may be by using two samples. The first sample can assess the realism of the scenario and rate their perceptions regarding the manipulations of the communication components. The second sample can be the experimental sample. This division can enable testing realism and main effects at different points in time.

In addition, due to the use of set scenarios created to measure whether expectations were violated, participants could have been primed into forming expectations about the employee. This article assumes that supervisors have specific expectations about their employees; however, it could be possible that a supervisor has no expectation at all. A major theoretical assumption of LET is the presence of expectations about the behavior of others. This is a key presupposition that was not measured in this study. Future research

would benefit from first determining if expectations are present before presuming to measure the effects of the expectancy violation.

Another limitation related to the scenario use is the evaluation of personal reputation based on a scenario. As defined by Ferris and colleagues (2003), personal reputation develops over time, and that would require providing a history element as part of the scenario. Given that we were interested in the initial perceptions of reputation, the only information that we provided was that the new employee came from a reputable university and had a good degree. Past research indicates that in initial encounters, individuals use information about education and degree as an anchor for expectations (Jablin, 2001). That being said, this study provided information on a single encounter and assumed minimal history between the employee and the supervisor. Therefore, future studies should incorporate the variable of time into their design as a way to explore the development.

A final limitation comes from the simplicity of our design. Given that our primary focus was to explore the combined effects of message content and delivery style, we chose a simple design that would enable us to test these effects. In real life, upward communication is more complex and employees may be more sophisticated when communicating with their supervisors. For example, requests can be beneficial for multiple stakeholders, and they may use multiple delivery styles in the same request. Given this, we suggest that future research could benefit from more complex experimental designs or collection of data in other ways.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to explore how message content and delivery style affect perceptions supervisors developed about employees. Results from our study suggest that these communication factors played an important role in the intent that supervisors had to grant a request. When evaluating personal reputation, delivery style and message content were both important for the perceptions supervisors created about employees. However, when assessing work competence, supervisors primarily focused on the content of the message. Our findings support the principles from LET and extend the use of LET into interpersonal contexts in the organization. Future research should explore other communication factors that affect initial perceptions that supervisors create about employees and how these perceptions affect future supervisor decisions.

Appendix

Scenarios

You are a manager at a local company. Your company has just hired several new employees, one of which will be reporting to you directly. Jordan is just starting out in the working world but has a good degree from a reputable university. You have not spoken much with Jordan except in passing. In the first few weeks of employment in the organization, you find Jordan in the hallway and the following interaction occurs.

Jordan: Excuse me, do you have a second to talk?

You: Sure, what's up?

Jordan: I noticed that we don't have the XPS computer program. This program would allow us to make database searches faster and more effective—and it would be a big benefit to the company overall. Plus it doesn't cost much at all. So, I was wondering if you would consider buying the program. (Nonaggressive-Benefit Organization)

I noticed that we don't have the XPS computer program. This program is similar to the program that we are currently using but I like it much more than the program we currently have. I'm not really sure how much it costs, so it could be expensive. (Nonaggressive-Benefit Self)

I noticed that we don't have the XPS computer program. This program would allow us to make database searches faster and more effective—and it would be a big benefit to the company overall. Plus it doesn't cost very much at all—so you should buy it. In fact, there is no reason why you can't get this program. (Aggressive-Benefit Organization)

I have noticed that we don't have the XPS computer program. This program is similar to the program that we are currently using but I like it much more than the program we currently have. I'm not really sure how much it costs, so it could be expensive. But I like XPS more than what we have now and therefore you should buy it. In fact, there is no reason why you can't get this program. (Aggressive-Benefit Self)

You: Well, I'll need to think about it.

Jordan: Ok, if you would like more information or have any questions just let me know—I'll be happy to answer them for you. (Nonaggressive)

Why would you need to think about it?! I think you should buy it as soon as possible. (Aggressive)

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