DO GOOD COMMUNICATORS GET PROMOTED? MAYBE NOT!

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Abstract

The paper reports data from a national (U.S.) sample of senior business executives employed by organizations with more than 1000 employees and, therefore, likely to have comprehensive policies governing employee promotions. The executives were asked to recall a recent decision to promote someone and then asked a series of questions about the decision. One set of questions concerned the factors that influenced the decision, and included items about interpersonal, oral, and written communication. Analysis of the responses to the communication-related items indicates that written communication skill was not—in comparison to interpersonal and oral communication—an important decision factor. The discussion of results argues that written communication is best understood as a threshold competency, and suggests that business communication instructors should re-evaluate the content of their courses.

Introduction

Promotion decisions are important. They are important to those who receive promotions, those who are passed over, and the organizations where both the promoted and the passed-over may (or may not) continue to work. This paper reports data from a survey of senior business executives, exploring the factors that affected the executives' most recent decisions to promote someone.

Among the factors included as potential promotion criteria were several broad categories of communication. But, while the descriptions of communication are broad rather than specific, this data provides a national, representative sample of senior business executives at large organizations, apparently the first such sample to be reported in the business communication literature since 1982 (Hildebrandt, Bond, Miller, & Swinyard, 1982).

Literature Review and Research Questions

Business organizations (and students of business organizations) in the United States have been concerned about promotion processes since at least the 1960s (e.g., Bowman, 1964; Harrell, 1961). Understandably, much of the discussion and research has concerned fair treatment for persons other than white males (e.g., Filmer, King, & van de Walle, 2005; Kaplan & Ferris, 2001; Powell & Butterfield, 2002; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999).

While recognizing that prejudice and/or policies may still be a problem at some organizations for some individuals, the current study focused on a different set of issues. This study was designed to assess the relative weight given to a range of factors—some more- and some less-related to job performance—in upper level promotion decisions in large organizations.

In one important previous study Ruderman and Ohlott sought to unveil the "realities" of management promotion in three Fortune 500 companies. The authors gathered data about each of 64 promotions, interviewing the person who had been promoted, the boss who had made the promotion decision, the boss's boss, and (in most cases) a company HRM professional familiar with the relevant processes (Ruderman & Ohlott, 1994, p. 3).

Analysis of the interview results identified 36 reasons for (i.e., explanations of) promotions, which the authors grouped into five categories: preparation (e.g., "track record of success"), attitudes (e.g., "work ethic"), people skills (e.g., "interpersonal skills"), personal attributes (e.g., "potential for growth"), and context (e.g., "groomed for the job") (Ruderman & Ohlott, 1994, pp. 5, 44-45, Table 1). These results provide an important perspective on the issue of "how actual promotion decisions are made, especially at the top management level" (Ruderman & Ohlott, 1994, p. 1).

Ruderman and Ohlott found that the most frequently cited reason for a promotion (61% of cases) was a "track record of success" (1994, p. 5; p. 44, Table 1). They also noted that communication abilities were important. "Basic interpersonal and communication skills" were mentioned in 45 percent of the cases (Ruderman & Ohlott, 1994, p. 6; p. 44, Table 1). "Intelligence" was also mentioned in 45 percent of the cases and "intelligence was defined by decision-makers as the exercise of good judgment combined with good verbal skills" (Ruderman & Ohlott, 1994, p. 6).

The current study consists of a secondary analysis of data collected by a professional polling organization, Penn Schoen Berland (PSB). The polling organization's questionnaire was designed to assess the extent to which favoritism plays a role in contemporary promotion decisions at the senior level in large organizations. Potential decision factors were included as consistent with the purpose of the poll. The list included a small number of items related to the communication abilities of the promoted individuals—this report focuses on those items.

Communication Abilities and Career Success

The literature concerning communication abilities and success in the workplace is voluminous (see, for example, Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000; Morreale & Pearson, 2008). The current review will be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

In the mid 1960s, Bowman (1964) reported that senior U.S. business executives rated "ability to communicate" as a positive factor for getting promoted; indeed, ability to communicate was among the most consistently valued attributes in the survey. The survey did not, however, differentiate among various types of communication.

A survey of a subsequent generation of U.S. executives, the Hildebrandt study (Hildebrandt et al., 1982), generated considerable excitement among business communication instructors; it reported that a sample of newly promoted, senior executives had rated business communication as the single most valuable course in preparing business students for careers in general management. The questionnaire used in the Hildebrandt study listed 13 business school courses (e.g., Finance, Accounting, Marketing)

and asked respondents to assess each on a scale, anchored at the positive end by "very important." "Business Communication (oral and written)" was designated as "very important" by 71.4% of the respondents, followed by Finance (64.7%), and Accounting (57.9%). When the two highest rating categories ("very important" and "somewhat important") were combined, Finance became the highest rated course (95.6%), followed by Business Communication (94.1%) and Accounting (90.4%) (Hildebrandt et al., 1982, p. 7, Table 1). These results, like those of the Bowman (1964) study, conflated oral and written communication.

Waner's (1995) survey of 35 U.S. business persons and 30 U.S. faculty members found considerable agreement between practitioners and academics. Her survey instrument identified four categories of communication skills (business writing, oral/interpersonal, basic English, and other). The practitioners rated as very important (i.e., a mean of 6.00 or higher on a 1-to-7 scale) one or more items in each category including "writes well—clearly, concisely, correctly, completely" (business writing); "listens effectively" (oral/interpersonal); "produces correctly spelled documents" (basic English); and "applies ethics, morals, and values in business situations to determine socially responsible actions" (other).

In an effort to understand the importance of communication abilities from the perspective of employees, Reinsch and Shelby (1996, 1997) collected data from young professionals who had recently left the workplace to begin an MBA program. Reinsch and Shelby asked each respondent to describe a specific communication episode that had been challenging and to identify communication abilities that would have helped the respondent to be more effective in meeting the challenge. The qualitative results allowed for the identification of some frequently occurring challenges such as disagreement or conflict within a dyad (Reinsch & Shelby, 1997, p. 17). The authors concluded that management communication courses should be re-focused to define "oral communication" more broadly so as to prepare graduates for some of the more common types of challenging episodes (Reinsch & Shelby, 1997, p. 23).

Maes, Weldy, and Icenogle added additional sophistication to the conceptualization of communication abilities, distinguishing between a *competency* ("ability to engage in nonroutine cognitive and intellectual activities") and a *skill* ("capacity to engage in specific behaviors") (1997, p. 68). In their first study, 354 lower-, middle-, and upper-level managers in the Greater Gulf Coast region of the United States assessed 16 competencies; the managers ranked "oral communication" as the most important competency for a new hire (1997, p. 73, Table 1). Other highly ranked competencies included "problem solving" (ranked second), "self-motivation" (ranked third), and "decision-making" (ranked fourth); the "written communication" competency was ranked tenth (Maes et al., 1997, p. 73, Table 1). In an effort to better understand the significance of their results, the authors collected follow-up data concerning oral communication skills from 58 of the respondents. Oral communication skills that were rated as both important and as frequently used included: "following instructions," "listening skills," "conversational skills," and "giving feedback" (Maes et al., 1997, p. 75, Table 2).

Crosling and Ward (2002) surveyed graduates about their use of oral communication in the workplace (importance and frequency). The results indicated that oral communication was "important and frequent" (Crosling & Ward, 2002, p. 53). The authors also concluded that "students require experience and instruction in a range of oral communication settings," and argued that "undergraduate experience in formal presentation only is inadequate preparation for oral communication in the workplace" (Crosling & Ward, 2002, pp. 56; 41).

Stevens (2005) gathered survey data from 104 Silicon Valley employers, asking specifically about their

perceptions of the communication skills of recent hires. Stevens concluded that the employers were "not fully satisfied" with either the general communication abilities or the writing abilities of their new employees (2005, pp. 5-6). She noted that "several employers stated that they had had to terminate newly hired employees who could not write well" (Stevens, 2005, p. 6). However, responses to an open-ended question ("identify additional business communication skills ... new employees needed to be taught") yielded results described as "surprising" (Stevens, 2005, pp. 4, 7):

> Employers sought improved oral presentation skills more frequently than they did written skills. Their comments expressed a need for stronger skills in public speaking, enhanced interpersonal skills, increased confidence, and improved interviewing skills. Several wrote that students needed more presentation skills, highlighting the ability to use software tools like PowerPoint. This was surprising because the popular press talks more about a lack of writing skills among college graduates than about insufficient oral skills." (Stevens, 2005, p. 7)

The evidence strongly suggests, therefore, that "being able to communicate will help individuals to succeed in a wide array of different careers and types of businesses" (Morreale & Pearson, 2008, p. 232).

Business Communication Course Content

As implied in the preceding paragraphs, the discussion of the importance of communication abilities has been interwoven with a concomitant discussion about the optimal content of business communication courses (e.g., Keyser, 1972). Many business communication educators received their graduate training in disciplines that focus on written communication (Beard & Williams, 1993, p. 278, Table 3; Cyphert, 2009, p. 266, Table 1). A smaller number of business communication educators received their graduate training in disciplines that focus oral communication (Beard & Williams, 1993, p. 278, Table 3; Cyphert, 2009, p. 266, Table 1). But, perhaps because individuals with both sorts of academic training have been significantly present within the ABC membership, there has been periodic discussion of the appropriate balance between oral and written communication. For example, in the 1970s Phil Lewis argued for movement away from "traditional writing courses" toward more theoretically-rich courses in "organizational communication" with increased attention to oral communication media (1975, pp. 25, 27).

The oral versus written communication issue has occasionally re-emerged in the discussion of the importance of communication to career success. As previously noted, both Reinsch and Shelby (1996, 1997) and Maes, Weldy, and Icenogle (1997) concluded not only that communication skills were important, but that oral communication skills were particularly important, and perhaps neglected in the business communication curriculum.

Students are not always good judges of the relative importance of the concepts to which they are exposed—Ulinski and Callaghan found, for example, that student evaluations of the relative importance of oral communication skills did not converge with employer perceptions until the students had accumulated greater amounts of work experience (2002, p. 196). Still, it seems noteworthy that students seem to place greater value on interpersonal communication skills than on writing skills (Goby, 2007; see also Reinsch & Shelby, 1996, 1997).

A recent and revealing perspective on this issue is found in the work of Laster and Russ (2010). The strongest finding in that study was cross-disciplinary differences in the emphasis placed on writing

instruction. Grouping their respondents into "the business discipline" and "the communication discipline," the authors reported that "communication instructors emphasize oral over written communication" (Laster & Russ, 2010, pp. 257, 259). Expressing "concern" about "the lack of attention that communication instructors give to the technical development of students' writing skills," Laster and Russ argued that "instructors from the communication discipline would better serve their students by placing a more equitable emphasis on written and oral communication in the introductory course" (2010, p. 260). The explanation for this disciplinary difference is almost certainly the one implied by Laster and Russ at the top of page 260—the history of "the communication discipline" as "speech" after it separated from "English," with a consequent focus on oral rather than written communication.

In short, the issue of the role of communication abilities in marking a person as worthy (or not) of promotion (or hiring, or retention) has implications for business communication pedagogy. While pedagogical decisions may be driven frequently by the instructor's graduate training, they might better be based on an understanding of the role of communication abilities in business careers.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective that frames this study has been called the "lens" model of decision making. The lens model makes two general assumptions. The first assumption is that "individuals base their decisions on one or more pieces of information or cues"; the second assumption is that "individuals combine these cues . . . to reach their decisions" (Powell & Butterfield, 2002, p. 399; see also Brunswick, 1955, 1956; Ilgen, Major, Hollenbeck, & Sego, 1995).

From the perspective of the lens model, understanding of decision making can be improved by exploring two sorts of questions. First, what are some of the "cues" or "pieces of information" that decision makers use. Second, how do those cues get combined to contribute to a decision—one important initial question concerning the process of combining cues is to sort out the more- from the less-important cues.

Research Questions

The preceding literature review and the proposed theoretical perspective suggest the following research questions:

    Q1. Are a candidate's communication skills an important factor in whether a candidate receives a promotion?
    Q2. Which communication skills are more (or less) important?

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Methods

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PSB, one of the leading political polling organizations in the United States, gathered survey data in March, 2011. Selected portions of the data have been made available for use in this research project.

The PSB survey focused on senior executives at large business organizations. "Senior executive" was defined as holding an organizational title as CEO, COO, CFO, CIO, CTO, President, Chairman of the Board, Senior VP, Executive VP, Managing Director, or Vice President. Respondents completed the survey online on a PSB-hosted website, facilitating data collection and analysis.

Random sampling continued until 303 completed responses had been collected, a sample size which (according to PSB calculations) should yield population value estimates accurate to within 5 percentage points for the entire sample; obviously sub-samples (for example, male respondents) have larger margins of error.

Each of the respondents was asked about his or her authority to make promotion decisions, and only final decision makers or those with a significant amount of influence were allowed to complete the survey. The executive was then asked to recall a specific, recent promotion decision, and to answer a series of questions about that decision. In particular, he or she was asked to consider a short list of factors (e.g., "excelled in current position," "oral communication skills," etc.) and to identify the most important and least important factors.

The decision to ask each respondent to describe the most recent promotion decision was intended to reduce the errors that might occur if respondents were asked, for example, to describe the factors that they typically consider.

The complete list of factors included 23 items, and responses were collected with the "maximum difference scaling" (MaxDiff) technique. In the MaxDiff technique, a respondent is presented with a short list (e.g., five) of attributes and asked to specify the one factor that was most important in the decision and the one factor that was least important. This process is repeated several times, with the selection and the sequence of the attributes systematically varied by computer. Each respondent sees each specific item (e.g., "written communication skills") a roughly equal number of times—both orthogonality (the items with which a specific item is matched) and positional balance (the order of the items in the list) are controlled. The process is organized so that after a number of responses to short lists it is possible to infer a respondent's ranking of all the items.

The MaxDiff technique has great utility when it is important to assess the relative importance of a variety of "important" issues. Political pollsters, for example, use the technique to help sort out which of several relevant issues is, in fact, most important to voters.

PSB analyzes MaxDiff data by creating a hierarchical Bayes analysis utility score, sometimes called a "preference index score." So, if an executive is selecting the "most important" item from a list of 5 items, a probability of 20% can be assigned to the possibility that a specific item will be selected during the presentation. If, in competition with various sets of other items, an item is repeatedly selected as "most important" then it becomes clear that the item played a very large role in the decision, and its preference index score will be increased to reflect its importance. In general, since PSB sets the preference index score to a base of 100, an item that is ranked most important the "normal" number of times (based on the number of items in the population) will receive a score of 100. An item that is ranked most important twice as often as might be expected will receive a score of 200. An item that is ranked most important half as often as might be expected will receive a score of 50.

Results

The 303 individuals who completed the survey included 218 males and 85 females. Most reported their race as "White/Caucasian" (84%). Most described themselves as married (84%). All respondents reported that they had completed "some college" and the majority (67%) had done post-graduate work. All were employed by an organization with more than 1000 employees; 53% were employed in

organizations with more than 10,000 employees. The organizations competed in a wide variety of industrial sectors.

The youngest respondents (3%) marked the "25-34" age range; the oldest (2%) marked "65 or older." A median split on age identified 48% (n = 146) as under 50 and 52% (n = 157) as 50 or older.

With regard to authority for promotion decisions concerning their directly reporting employees, 44% checked "I am the final decision maker." The other 56% checked "I have a significant amount of influence." As one might expect, given the typical correlation between age and hierarchical rank, the older executives were more likely to describe themselves as the final decision maker (47% versus 40% of the younger executives).

Most Important Factors

The preference index scores for all 23 items are included in Table 1. As indicated by spacing within the table, the 23 factors have been sorted into three broad categories.

The category of most highly rated items (numbered 1-6) all received preference index scores in excess of 200, indicating that they were potent decision factors. The single most potent item was "has excelled in current position" with a preference index score of 321. Included in this first category of most highly rated items is one item that is related to interpersonal communication—"strong interpersonal skills" with a preference index score of 248 and a fourth place overall ranking. The preference index scores for "strong interpersonal skills" among men and women were quite similar (247 and 250) and did not differ at a statistically significant level. The scores for younger (<50) and older (50+) executives did, however, differ significantly with older executives assigning higher value to interpersonal skills (263) than did younger executives (232).

The second category included items (numbered 7-10) that received scores between 87 and 120, in short, scores relatively close to the base score of 100. This category included another communication-related item, "oral communication skills" with a preference index score of 109 and an eighth place overall ranking. Men and women did not differ in the values assigned to this item; younger and older executives did not differ at a statistically significant level.

Items in the third group (numbered 11-23) all received scores below 60, indicating that these factors while potentially important were not, in fact, potent in comparison to the other items. The group includes a third communication-related item, "written communication skills" with a preference index score of 56 and a twelfth place ranking. Men and women did not differ significantly in the values assigned to this item; the difference between younger and older executives approached but did not achieve statistical significance (with older executives tending toward assigning greater value to written communication skills than did younger executives).

The first research question asked whether a candidate's communication skills are important in promotion decisions. The answer is clearly "yes" (with some qualifications to be discussed in terms of the second research question). The strongest evidence is the ranking of "strong interpersonal skills" as number 4 overall, ahead of items such as "history of strong performance reviews" (#5), "someone I trust" (#6), and "recommendations from other senior leaders in the company" (#7). Another communication-related item, "oral communication skills" also scored (albeit modestly) above 100,

ahead of items such as "fits into our corporate culture" (#9) and "comfort level working with the employee" (#10).

The second research question asked which communication skills were more (and less) important. One part of the answer to this question is the relative importance of "strong interpersonal skills" (#4, 248 preference index points), "oral communication skills" (#8, 109 preference index points), and "written communication skills" (#12, 56 preference index points). The respondents clearly regarded "interpersonal skills" as the most important of the three, and "written communication skills" as the least important of the three.

Table 1
Factors that Influenced My Most Recent Decision to Promote Someone: Preference Index Scores (Max Difference Analysis)

Factors to be evaluated	Total n=303	Male n=218	Female n=85	<50 n=146	50+ n=157
01. Has excelled in current position	321	320	325	314	329
02. Leadership potential	276	273	282	277	274
03. Job-related skills	274	272	279	267	280
04. Strong interpersonal skills	**248**	**247**	**250**	**232[a]**	**263[a]**
05. History of strong performance reviews	233	238	222	225	241
06. Is someone I trust	215	218	205	222	208
07. Recommendations from other senior leaders in the company	120	119	123	123	118
08. Oral communication skills	**109**	**109**	**109**	**106**	**111**
09. Fits into our corporate culture	104	105	100	113	96
10. Comfort level working with the employee	87	90	81	88	86
11. My gut instinct about the person	57	57	56	59	55
12. Written communication skills	**56**	**55**	**57**	**52**	**59**
13. Strong educational background	42	41	47	41	44
14. Is easy to manage	32	33	30	36	28
15. I have personally mentored the person	31	31	32	34	28
16. Is a likeable person	17	17	17	19	15
17. Participated in company career-development training	17	17	18	18	16
18. Thinks like me	15	14	16	19	10
19. Fear that the employee will leave the company	13	11	18	14	12
20. Views are similar to mine	12	13	11	15	11
21. Tenure at the company	12	11	15	15	10
22. Background is similar to mine	5	5	5	6	3
23. Friendship outside the office	3	3	4	4	2

Note. Items most relevant to communication are shown in boldface. Communication-related scores marked with a common superscript differ at the .05 level.

It should also be noted, however, that the answer to this second research question depends, in part, on the characteristics of the decision maker. For example, while the rank order of the three communication-related items (interpersonal, oral, written) does not change within any of the sub-samples, there is a significant difference and a near-significant difference between executives of different ages.

While both younger and older executives ranked "strong interpersonal skills" as the fourth most important factor overall, the older executives awarded it 263 points (in contrast to 232). Furthermore, while the difference between younger and older executives with regard to "written communication skills" was not statistically significant, it was nearly so. Indeed, if one looks only at the data from the older executives, "written communication skills" would rank eleventh instead of twelfth, surpassing "my gut instincts about the person" (#11).

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Discussion

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This study has some provocative implications for business communication education. In the following paragraphs several of them are discussed.

Written Communication Is a Threshold Competency

First, the results clearly indicate that written communication skills are regarded as less influential in many business contexts than are oral and interpersonal skills (Cf. Fried & Hansson, 2010, pp. 222-223). Surely this does not mean that organizations seek to hire or retain persons who are illiterate. Indeed, Stevens (2005)—who was surprised to find employers requesting additional training in oral communication—noted several reports that individuals had been terminated for lack of writing ability. It is almost certainly the case then that writing should be thought of as a "threshold competency" (Boyatzis, 1982, p. 23).

A competency, according to Boyatzis, is "a person's generic knowledge, motive, trait, self-image, social role, or skill ... that differentiate[s] superior performance from average and poor performance" (1982, p. 23). A threshold competency, in contrast, is "a person's generic knowledge, motive, trait, self-image, social role, or skill which is essential to job performance, but is not causally related to superior job performance" (Boyatzis, 1982, p. 23). This implies (as illustrated in Figure 1) that some competencies, as they become more pronounced, may help one to improve job performance from poor to average, without continuing to yield the same benefit with improvement beyond a certain threshold.

Boyatzis' study, which began with a "job competence assessment" analysis of working managers (1982, p. 41), identified "use of oral presentations" as a competency within the "leadership" cluster (1982, chapter 5) without uncovering any comparable competency that directly referenced writing abilities. Yet, the ability to use and to produce written documents is clearly assumed in Boyatzis' descriptions of business behavior. This suggests that the ability to engage in written communication was so much assumed by Boyatzis' informants as to have become invisible. It also suggests that increments in the ability to communicate by means of writing did not, for the sample of practicing managers, yield effects sufficiently large to attract attention. Thus, while Boyatzis (1982) nowhere mentions writing as an example of a "threshold competency" (1982, p. 230, Table 12-1), the label seems to apply.

It should also be acknowledged that Boyatzis did not uncover a competency that is labeled as "interpersonal communication." However, several of the competencies (e.g., communicating "positive regard" and "managing group process")—particularly competencies in the "Human Resources Management" cluster (Boyatzis, 1982, chapter 6)—obviously assume interpersonal communication.

The view that written communication skills are a threshold competency (while oral presentation ability is a "competency"—Boyatzis, 1982, pp. 106, 108) also fits nicely with previous research results. For example, such a view would predict exactly what Stevens (2005) reported—employers dismissing some new employees for writing deficiencies and, at the same time, suggesting that their new hires would have benefitted from additional training in oral presentation skills.

Figure 1. **Relationships of a competency and a threshold competency to job performance.**
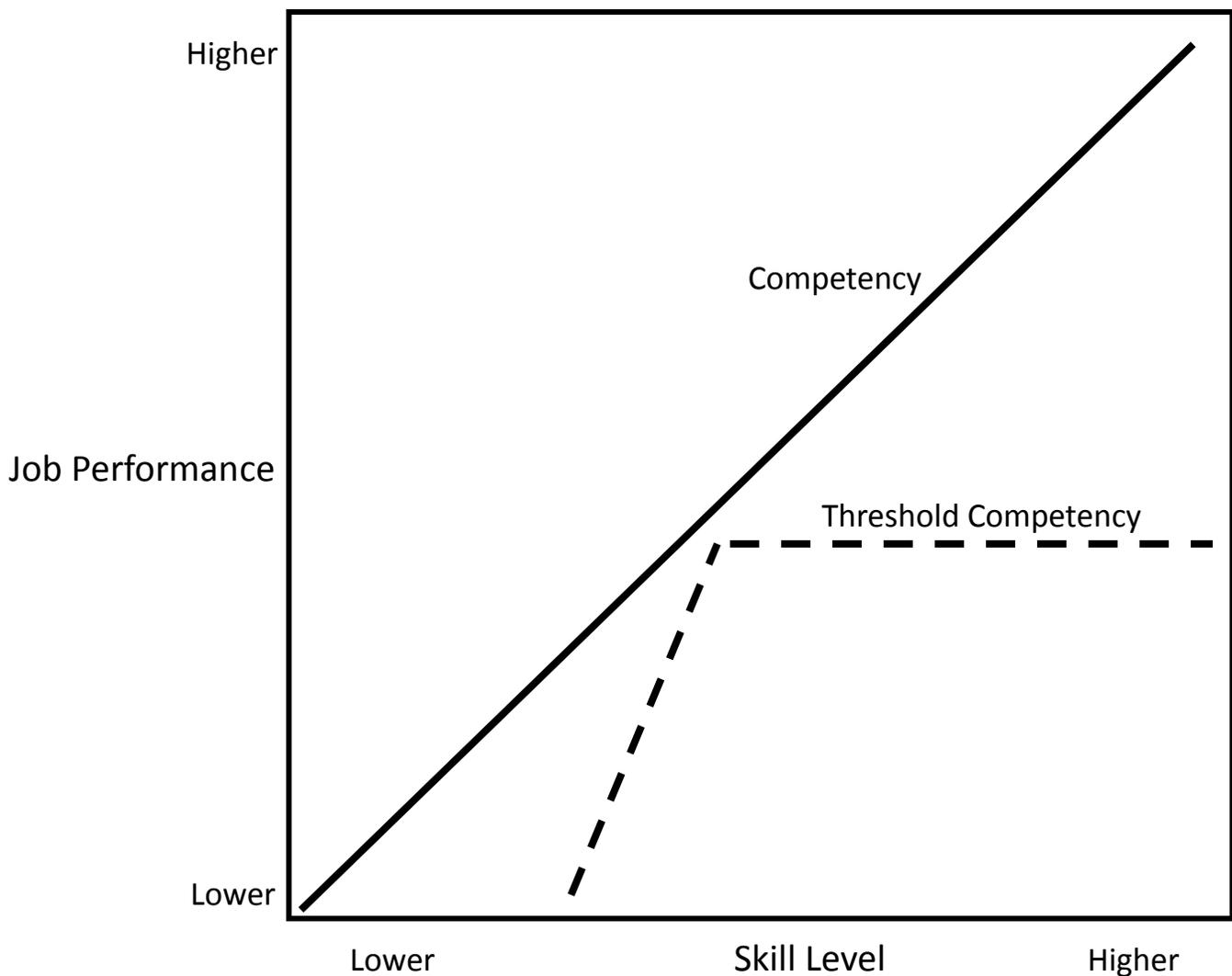
These views appear to be in contrast to some of the conclusions of Laster and Russ (2010). As previously noted, Laster and Russ called attention to the fact that "communication discipline" faculty give much

less attention to writing than do other persons teaching the introductory course in business communication. They proposed that "communication discipline" faculty ought to adjust their courses to look more like those taught by "business" faculty. The results of the current study suggest that it would be worthwhile to consider an alternative. Perhaps the "communication discipline" faculty who are emphasizing oral communication more than written communication have it right. Maybe "business discipline" faculty ought to imitate the "communication discipline" faculty.

Interpersonal Communication Deserves More Attention

Second, the results call attention to "interpersonal communication" as the most important form of communication. This finding sounds very much like the conclusions expressed by Reinsch and Shelby (1996, 1997) when they suggested that management communication courses ought to define oral communication more broadly "to include [a larger portion of] the full range of oral events" encountered by business practitioners.

Here again, the findings from the current study resonate with earlier research. The most highly rated "oral/interpersonal competencies" identified by Waner were not concerned with formal presentations but, instead, with listening, telephone conversations, maintaining eye contact [presumably during interviews and conversations], and asking appropriate questions (1995, p. 55, Table 3). And the detailed analysis of "oral communication skills" by Maes and her co-authors focused on skills such as "following instructions," "listening skills," "conversational skills," "giving feedback," and "communicating with the public" (1997, p. 75, Table 2).

Of course, the concept of "interpersonal communication" is broad and somewhat ambiguous. Practitioners have sometimes spoken of "listening" when they were more accurately concerned with a complete set of effective conversational skills (Lewis & Reinsch, 1988). Similarly, academics (e.g., Maes et al., 1997; Reinsch & Shelby, 1996, 1997; Waner, 1995) appear to lack a comprehensive and agreed-upon set of categories for describing "interpersonal communication." (Is it not likely, in fact, that when business practitioners speak of "interpersonal skills" or "interpersonal communication" they are sometimes including skillful use of written communication media such as notes, letters, and adroitly worded e-mail texts?)

Age Effects: Maturational or Generational?

Third, there is at least some evidence that the importance attached to communication abilities is associated with the age of the respondent. Specifically the results showed that older executives (50 years of age and older), in comparison to younger executives, placed higher value on "strong interpersonal skills" and might (had the power of the testing procedure been greater) have been found to place higher value on "written communication skills."

These results could indicate a maturational effect. That is, older executives—with greater accumulated experience—may place more emphasis on the communication abilities of potential promotees. If this view is correct, it suggests that the view of younger executives will change as they continue to gain experience.

Another possibility is that the difference between younger and older executives reflects a generational effect. That is, older executives who became adults at a different time (than did younger executives)

may give greater attention to interpersonal relations and to formal written documents. Younger executives may be comfortable with more impersonal interactions and may not expect as much attention to formal written documents. If this view is correct, it suggests that "interpersonal skills" and "written communication skills" are likely to become somewhat less important in the future as the older executives retire and are replaced by the rising generations. (The data do not allow identification of one of these views—maturational or generational—as more likely correct than the other one.)

Is It Smart to Keep Speaking and Writing Separate?

The final conclusion is derived indirectly from the results of the current study. The importance assigned to "strong interpersonal skills" in the results, and the possibility that such interpersonal skills were likely observed by some observers in some instances in the form of written messages, raises a question about the wisdom of teaching written communication in one course and oral communication in another. It is interesting, for example, that in the model of job performance developed by John Campbell and his colleagues "written and oral task proficiency" was a single category (Campbell, Gasser, & Oswalt, 1996). And, after reading hundreds of descriptions of critical incidents, Reinsch and Shelby wrote that "practitioners appear to shift frequently and almost unconsciously between written and oral communication [within the described episodes]" (1997, p. 21).

The field of business communication has a long and continuing history of self examination (e.g., Cyphert, 2009, 2010; Du-Babcock, 2006; Grinols, 2010) focused, in part, on distinguishing business communication from other fields. Perhaps one dimension of *pedagogical distinctiveness* is that unlike the fields of English (which teaches written composition) and Communication (which teaches oral communication), business communication teaches both.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The data were collected only in the U.S., and they focused on the upper levels of management in large companies. It is by no means certain that these results match what we might find in other parts of the world or in other strata of the U.S. business community.

The survey items dealing with communication were few and broad. It is at least conceivable that additional items or differently worded items might have resulted in different results.

Human memory is imperfect (Manzoni, Vermunt, Luijkx, & Muffels, 2010) and the current investigation relied on memories of a previous event. Future studies might incorporate a standardized landmark procedure (van der Vaart & Glasner, 2011) as one way to heighten the accuracy of recall.

And, finally, the aspirations of this paper are limited. It makes no effort to explain how the identified "cues" might be combined in the mind of a decision maker. It claims only that communication behaviors are among the cues that senior managers consider when making promotion decisions, and that in relative importance, interpersonal and oral are more potent than written.

Conclusion

Do persons who have strong communication skills get promoted? The data suggest that the answer depends on what one means by "communication skills" and, to a lesser degree, what abilities the decision maker values. The results of a national survey of senior business executives suggests that

individuals recognized as having "strong interpersonal skills" are likely to be considered favorably for additional promotions. On the other hand, an individual who hopes that more skillful writing will lead to the executive suite is, according to the current results, probably engaged in wishful thinking.

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