Article

Followers' Perceptions of Positive Communication Practices in Leadership: What Matters and Surprisingly What Does Not

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Abstract
Using the model of positive communication as a guiding framework, this study explored which specific prosocial behaviors best explained a relationship- or task-oriented leadership style. Examining data gathered from 359 participants working in various industries, regression analyses revealed that listening behaviors and inspirational actions were meaningful for both relationship- and task-oriented leaders; however, complimenting emerged as particularly salient for relationship-oriented leadership styles whereas asking was significant for task-oriented leadership styles. Interestingly, followers' age, race-ethnicity, and gender did not impact their perceptions of leader's positive communication practices. The implications of these findings for leadership training, particularly in an increasingly diverse workforce, are discussed.

Introduction

Although leadership and relational communication may seem an unusual pair at first glance, they go hand-in-hand. The most effective leaders show concern for both people and production in their communication (Blake & McCanse, 1991). One seminal project connecting leadership styles to relational messages is Mikkelson et al. (2017)

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work. Their study laid important groundwork for this line of inquiry by exploring the relational messages of intimacy and dominance broadly (e.g., "be more open" [intimacy] or "be memorable" [dominance]). The present project intends to extend this approach by emphasizing underlying communication behaviors foundational to relational messaging. Understanding specific communication behaviors enacted by leaders of varying styles sheds light on actions they take to perform relational communication. Moreover, these actions can be trained or taught to enhance leadership skills. A conceptual framework that offers guidelines for how one can enact prosocial relational messages is Mirivel's (2014) model of positive communication.

   Mirivel's (2014) model consists of positive verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that function in a constructive manner to facilitate prosocial interaction. Although the model was designed initially in the context of interpersonal relationships, its applicability extends beyond that venue, especially given that leadership has an inherently relational nature (Rost, 1993). The question remains: Which positive communication behaviors most closely align with one's leadership style?

Model of Positive Communication

Positive communication messaging is intended to be prosocial, ethical, supportive of values, and driven by strong character, promoting emotional well-being and positive self-actualization (Socha & Pitts, 2012). To encapsulate the varied positive communication verbal and nonverbal strategies one can employ, Mirivel (2014) created a heuristic conceptual structure called the model of positive communication. The model is comprised of seven positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, and inspiring) that can function independently or in conjunction with one another to create connection between interactants. A smile, a nod, a "hello" are some ways in which people offer *greetings*. *Asking* questions shows interest in the other person's thoughts, opinions, and ideas. *Complimenting* is a way to recognize and verbalize a positive attribute, behavior, or accomplishment of that person. *Disclosing* involves sharing information about oneself. *Encouraging* occurs when affirmative language is used to emphasize people's innate potential or their ability to succeed. *Listening* encompasses paying attention to others both verbally and nonverbally. *Inspiring* occurs when people act as a role model in their communication, enacting exemplary positive communication practices.

   This model provides a scaffolding, or organizational framework, for identifying actionable communication behaviors that leaders can employ to strengthen their relationships with their followers; while the model in its entirety has not been thoroughly vetted, research on leadership exploring individual components of this framework reveals the positive impact that leaders can have when these behaviors are displayed. For example, when comparing two businesses, the firm that utilized *greetings* in communication had a more healthy, positive environment with open communication and discourse; whereas, the firm that did not employ greetings demonstrated lower morale and more distrust of management (Waldvogel, 2007). Leaders who seek input from their followers via question *asking* not only create more encouraging working relationships

(Wodak et al., 2011), those leaders also are viewed as more effective overall (Goldsmith & Morgan, 2004); additionally, leaders who engage in respectful inquiry, which combines both open-ended question asking with attentive listening, promote follower self-determination, as well as retention via job satisfaction and job performance (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Stronger teams and better working relationships also are formed when leaders *compliment* followers using positive off-record appraisals or casual complimenting (Holmes & Marra, 2004).

A wealth of scholarship (e.g., Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Mayfield et al., 1998; Sharbrough et al., 2006) focusing on motivating (or *encouraging*) language by leaders shows an array of positive outcomes, including but not limited to job satisfaction and job performance. Another key leader behavior that boosts employee motivation and commitment to achieving role requirements is leader *disclosure* (DeConinck, 2010). Moreover, employees who believe their organizational leaders effectively *listened* to them had greater satisfaction with their supervisor, stronger perceptions of fair treatment, and higher job satisfaction (Lloyd et al., 2017). Finally, leaders who *inspire* their employees increase employee emotional attachment to the firm, their confidence in the ability to complete assigned and proactive tasks, and the likelihood that they will voluntarily address or seek to prevent workplace problems (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). In sum, positive communication behaviors performed by leaders enhance both followers' perceptions of their work environment, and their productivity.

Although these positive communication practices consistently yield desirable outcomes, positive communication is not a panacea. Indeed, both rewards (such as those derived from a leader's positive communication practices) and punishments (which can include reprimands, critiques, or disciplinary actions) from leaders can increase the level of cooperation from employees (Balliet et al., 2011). Admittedly, there are times when employees may need "a kick in the pants" more than they need "a pat on the back" (Korukonda & Hunt, 1989). That said, as Yukl and Van Fleet (1992) argue, someone who relies on punishments in lieu of rewards may not really be a "leader." Additionally, negative leader practices are related to low job satisfaction and poor job performance (Schilling, 2009), whereas positive leader practices are not likely to have such adverse effects. In other words, these findings suggest that, while positive communication practices are not the only way for leaders to accomplish their goals, they present a safer bet in terms of behavioral options. The specific positive communication behaviors leaders ultimately choose to enact are likely tied to their leadership style.

Leadership Style

Being a leader is a complex, multi-faceted role; it is not just who someone is in title but rather what that person does in action. Leaders guide their followers toward a goal or purpose, and the way they approach that is through their leadership style. A leadership style can be described as the constituent behaviors employed by a leader, either innately or through training, that seek to steer followers to successful achievement of organizational goals. Two prominent leadership styles are: relationship-oriented or task-oriented (Hackman & Johnson, 2013).

The relationship-oriented leader works toward supporting and developing the subordinate as part of a team, encouraging and motivating their employees. Relationship-oriented leaders communicate messages of trust, commitment, and cooperation (Manyak & Mujtaba, 2013). They focus on creating respect, cooperation, and camaraderie not only between the leader and follower, but also among the group (Stogdill, 1974; Yukl et al., 2002). Employees are encouraged to take initiative, and are asked for their input in the decision-making process (Bowers & Seashore, 1966). The relationship-oriented leader is concerned with employee satisfaction and a healthy communication environment.

The task-oriented leader is focused on the achievement of a task or goal. They communicate in a top-down manner, explaining when, where, and how to complete job functions, monitor performance and scheduling, and place an emphasis on high reliability of service (Huang & Mujtaba, 2010; Stogdill, 1974; Yukl, et al., 2002). The focus is on short-term accomplishment, delineation of role expectation, and efficiency. Task-oriented leaders have also been described as transactional (Burns, 1978) or concerned with production (Blake & McCanse, 1991).

Both relationship- and task-oriented leadership styles bring value to organizations; they are linked to employee job satisfaction, motivation, and organizational commitment (Mikkelson et al., 2015). It is not surprising that their influence has been widely explored in scholarship (Henkel et al., 2019; Madlock, 2008, 2012; Montano et al., 2017).

Rationale

In looking at the connection between relationship- and task-oriented leadership styles and relational communication of intimacy and dominance, Mikkelson et al. (2017) highlight the importance of teaching specific communication behaviors "to both new and experienced leaders to help them improve their relationships with employees and improve work output" (p. 15). Prior scholarship examining specific communication behaviors linked to leadership has largely relied on inductive reasoning, focusing on a variety of communication variables, such as: leader transparency (Vogelgesang et al., 2013); verbal aggressiveness, expressiveness, preciseness, assuredness, supportiveness, and argumentativeness (De Vries et al., 2010); intellectual stimulation, individual interest, conditional rewards (Cansoy, 2019). While each of these independently sheds light on the role of communication in leadership, utilizing a comprehensive conceptual framework offers scholars greater ability to provide nuanced explanations of communication processes (e.g., Craig, 1999; Roloff, 2015). Thus, guided by Mirivel's (2014) model of positive communication, the present project takes a robust approach in examining the association between followers' perceptions of specific communication behaviors exhibited by relationship- and task-oriented leaders.

Understanding followers' perceptions of their leader is important because it offers a direct evaluation of performance (Zacher et al., 2011) and is often how leadership success is determined (Sosik & Megerian, 1999). Indeed, effective leadership is inextricably tied to follower perceptions of their leader (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). However,

one's perceptions can be influenced by their identities, including: age, race-ethnicity, and gender. And these identities rarely operate in isolation. For example, younger subordinates may rate older leaders differently depending on their level of generativity (Zacher et al., 2011). Some research has found that individuals rate those of their same race-ethnicity (a term coined by Yanow, 2003) more favorably (Kraiger & Ford, 1985); whereas other scholarship indicates that there is a bias privileging white leaders, with both whites and non-whites viewing non-white leaders more negatively (Sackett & DuBois, 1991). While there remains limited research focusing on how gender identity impacts follower perceptions of their leaders (Manning, 2002; Stelter, 2002), men and women do seem to differ in their evaluations of leader behavior (Muchiri et al., 2011). Therefore, scholars need to be mindful of the impact these identity factors play in followers' assessments of their leader's communicative practices.

Employee-focused communication practices embody relationship-oriented leadership. These leaders seek to achieve team goals through empowerment, motivation, support, and encouragement (DeCaro et al., 2010; Van Wart, 2014). It seems reasonable to surmise, then, that positive communication behaviors will be strongly linked to a relationship-oriented leadership style. As a result, the following hypothesis was proposed:

> **Hypothesis 1:** When controlling for followers' age, race-ethnicity, and gender, positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking questions, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, inspiring) will be directly related to a relationship-oriented leadership style.

In contrast, task-oriented leadership emphasizes results and requires efficiently communicating specific role requirements and objectives (Huang & Mujtaba, 2010). Task-oriented leaders may be production oriented, rather than employee focused, participating more on the technical components of an employee's job function than on relational aspects (Bowers & Seashore, 1966). That said, behaviors such as encouraging and inspiring, for example, are positive communication behaviors that may be linked with a task-oriented leadership style (De Vries et al., 2002), because these behaviors seek to create internal motivation within the subordinate such that the leader is able to extract the highest level of output from an employee. Yet, the role these and other positive communication behaviors play in task-oriented leadership warrants further exploration; thus, the following research question was put-forth:

> **Research Question 1:** When controlling for followers' age, race-ethnicity, and gender, what is the relationship between positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking questions, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, inspiring) and a task-oriented leadership style?

The display of positive communication behaviors will differ depending on the required relationship- or task-oriented leadership style needs of the organization. Encouraging, for instance, may be more necessary to the task-oriented leader, while

disclosing is likely more critical to the relationship-oriented leader (Manyak & Mujtaba, 2013). To explore how specific positive communication behaviors may help inform each leadership style, the following research question was proposed:

Research Question 2: When controlling for followers' age, race-ethnicity, and gender, which positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking questions, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, inspiring) best explain one's (a) relationship-oriented and a (b) task-oriented leadership style?

Methods

Participants. Participants for the research study ($n = 359$) were recruited on a volunteer basis from the United States using Amazon's Mechanical Turk website. One hundred ninety-one respondents identified themselves as female (53.2%), 166 indicated that they were male (46.2%), one respondent identified as non-binary (0.3%), and one participant preferred not to identify gender (0.3%). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 80 years old ($M = 37.23$, $SD = 11.64$). The majority identified themselves as White/Caucasian ($n = 247$, 68.8%), followed by Black/African American ($n = 41$, 11.4%), Asian or Pacific Islander ($n = 34$, 9.5%), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 22$, 6.1%), Native American, ($n = 10$, 2.8%), and other/decline to state ($n = 5$, 1.4%). In order to be eligible to participate in the study, individuals needed to have worked with their current organization for no less than one year. The length of employment at their current organization ranged from 1 to 50 years ($M = 7.30$, $SD = 7.63$). Individuals were employed in a variety of industries, including: 27.9% service ($n = 100$), 18.4% education ($n = 66$), 12.3% manufacturing ($n = 44$), 10.6% high-tech ($n = 38$), 6.1% government ($n = 22$), 3.1% staffing ($n = 11$), and 21.5% other/decline to report ($n = 77$).

Procedure. Participants completed an online, anonymous questionnaire designed to assess followers' perceptions of their supervisor/manager's leadership and communication. All measures on the questionnaire were assessed using 7-point Likert-type scales, with higher scores indicating a greater frequency or intensity of the variable. The study was compliant with the university's institutional review board and respondents received a small monetary award for their participation.

Measures

Leadership style. Task- and relationship-oriented leadership style were assessed using the Leadership Style Questionnaire (Northouse, 2019). The 20-item measure examines specific task- and relationship-leadership behaviors, using a 7-point Likert scale. Task-oriented items include "Tells group members what they are supposed to do" and "Defines role responsibilities for each group member" while relationship-oriented leader items include "Treats others fairly" and "Responds favorably to suggestions made by others." The Leadership Style Questionnaire yields reliable results (Madlock, 2008). For the present project, both task-oriented leadership ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.14$) and the relationship-oriented leadership ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.14$) achieved strong alpha reliabilities ($\alpha = .925$ and $\alpha = .919$, respectively).

Table 1. Positive Communication Behavior Scale Items.

Behavior	Survey question
GR1	My current boss greets me every day.
GR2	My current boss regularly says "hello" or "good morning/afternoon" to me.
GR3*	My current boss does NOT acknowledge me with a greeting during the day.
ASK1	My current boss asks questions that make me consider other ways to approach an issue.
ASK2	The questions my current boss asks demonstrate that they seek to fully understand what I think.
ASK3*	My current boss does NOT ask questions relevant to my thoughts or concerns.
COMP1	My current boss gives me praise when I have achieved a goal.
COMP2	My current boss recognizes my performance through the use of positive feedback.
COMP3*	My current boss does NOT utilize compliments as a form of recognition.
DISC1	My current boss self-discloses information related to their past experiences.
DISC2	My current boss self-discloses information about themselves that is similar to the issues on which I am working.
DISC3*	My current boss does NOT self-disclose relevant personal information to me.
ENC1	My current boss reminds me of my strengths when I am discouraged about a task.
ENC2	My current boss expresses confidence in my ability to overcome difficulties.
ENC3*	My current boss fails to recognize my accomplishments and does NOT motivate me to pursue professional goals.
LIST1	My current boss demonstrates that they are listening by using verbal acknowledgments.
LIST2	My current boss summarizes points of agreement or disagreement when appropriate.
LIST3*	My current boss does NOT demonstrate receptiveness to my ideas.
INSP1	The language my current boss uses motivates me to do more than my role requires.
INSP2	The way my current boss talks about team goals inspires me to do my best.
INSP3*	The way my current boss communicates with me does NOT motivate me to do more than the minimum.

Note. GR = greeting; ASK = question asking; COMP = complimenting; DISC = disclosure;
ENC = encouraging; LIST = listening; INSP = inspiring.
*Reverse coded.

Positive communication behaviors. To assess the components in the model of positive communication, a measure was developed for each behavior. Where possible, existing scales of individual positive communication behaviors were utilized (e.g., Ladany & Lehrman-Waterman's (1999) supervisor self-disclosure index) or adapted (e.g., Wong et al.'s (2019) academic encouragement scale and Bodie's (2011) active-empathic listening scale). Each behavior was represented by three items with one item reverse-coded to avoid acquiescent response bias. Table 1 provides the list of items used.

The measures successfully captured each component: greeting ($M=5.01$, $SD=1.40$, $\alpha=.93$, question-asking ($M=4.72$, $SD=1.27$, $\alpha=.92$), complimenting ($M=4.92$, $SD=1.36$, $\alpha=.92$), disclosing ($M=4.38$, $SD=1.31$, $\alpha=.94$), encouraging ($M=4.70$, $SD=1.36$, $\alpha=.91$), listening ($M=4.91$, $SD=1.16$, $\alpha=.92$), and inspiring ($M=4.62$, $SD=1.40$, $\alpha=.91$).

Results

Hypothesis 1 stated that, when controlling for age, race-ethnicity, and gender of followers, positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking questions, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, inspiring) would be directly related to a relationship-oriented leadership style. Partial correlations revealed that greeting ($r(352)=.457$, $p=.001$), question asking ($r(353)=.618$, $p=.001$), complimenting ($r(352)=.672$, $p=.001$), disclosing ($r(352)=.390$, $p=.001$), encouraging ($r(352)=.666$, $p=.001$), listening ($r(352)=.691$, $p=.001$), and inspiring ($r(352)=.673$, $p=.001$) were all significantly related to a relationship-oriented leadership style; indeed, most positive communication behaviors were strongly correlated with relationship-oriented leadership, with the exception of disclosing (which was weakly correlated) and greeting (which was moderately correlated).

Research Question 1 sought to assess the relationship between positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking questions, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening inspiring) and a task-oriented leadership style, when controlling for age, race-ethnicity, and gender of followers. Partial correlations demonstrated that greeting ($r(352)=.377$, $p=.001$), question asking ($r(352)=.566$, $p=.001$), complimenting ($r(352)=.547$, $p=.001$), disclosing ($r(352)=.303$, $p=.001$), encouraging ($r(352)=.549$, $p=.001$), listening ($r(352)=.593$, $p=.001$), and inspiring ($r(352)=.618$, $p=.001$) were all significantly related to a task-oriented leadership style; specifically, inspiring was strongly correlated; question asking, complimenting, encouraging, and listening were moderately correlated; and greeting and disclosing were weakly correlated with task-oriented leadership.

Research Question 2 explored which positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking questions, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, inspiring) best explain one's (a) relationship-oriented and a (b) task-oriented leadership style, taking into account followers' age, race-ethnicity, and gender. A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted for relationship-oriented leadership (RQ2a) and the positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking questions, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, inspiring). In the first step, followers' age, race-ethnicity, and gender were introduced. In the second step, the length of employment at the current organization and length of time working with their current supervisor were entered. In the final step, the seven positive communication behaviors were entered. Because a high collinearity among variables makes it difficult to separate the distinct effect of each predictor, Kleinbaum et al. (1988) and Ryan (1997) argue that variable inflation factors (VIF) over 5.0, and collinearity tolerance statistics under .10 are problematic; we examined the VIF values and collinearity tolerance statistics; all were within the

Table 2. Summary of Hierarchical Regression for Relationship-Oriented Leadership.

Indicators	β	SE	p-value	Coll.	VIF
Step 1					
Gender	−.017	.118	.751	.961	1.040
Age	.001	.005	.988	.945	1.058
Race-ethnicity	−.103	.042	.063	.921	1.086
Step 2					
Gender	−.003	.119	.952	.942	1.062
Age	.020	.006	.735	.816	1.225
Race-ethnicity	−.099	.042	.075	.917	1.090
Length of time at job	−.098	.009	.102	.781	1.280
Length of time with boss	.069	.017	.232	.846	1.181
Step 3					
Gender	.017	.081	.654	.932	1.073
Age	.026	.004	.515	.791	1.265
Race-ethnicity	−.066	.029	.077	.912	1.096
Length of time at job	−.067	.006	.102	.760	1.315
Length of time with boss	.060	.012	.128	.831	1.204
Greeting	.027	.038	.564	.595	1.680
Asking	.052	.057	.415	.313	3.196
Complimenting	.153	.061	.036	.243	4.116
Disclosing	.047	.037	.273	.709	1.410
Encouraging	.090	.066	.250	.207	4.827
Listening	.272	.065	.000	.293	3.411
Inspiring	.204	.056	.003	.270	3.701
Durbin Watson	1.877				
Variance explained	$R^2 = .565$				

recommended guidelines (see Table 2). In the first and second step, none of the variables (age, race-ethnicity, gender; length of time at the current job, length of time with the current supervisor) exerted a significant effect on relationship-oriented leadership. In the final step, the significant predictors from the model included complimenting ($\beta = .153$, $t = 2.106$, $p = .036$), listening ($\beta = .272$, $t = 4.117$, $p = .001$), and inspiring ($\beta = .204$, $t = 2.974$, $p = .003$). The regression model, $F(12, 353) = 36.919$, $p = .001$, accounted for 57% of the variance.

To explore the criterion variable of task-oriented leadership (RQ2b), another three-step hierarchical regression analysis was conducted following the same process. Again, to safeguard against multicollinearity and serial correlation, we examined the VIF values and collinearity tolerance statistics; all values fell within the recommended parameters (Kleinbaum et al., 1988; Ryan, 1997; see Table 3). In the first step, race-ethnicity exerted a significant influence on task-oriented leadership ($\beta = −.117$, $t = −2.120$, $p = .035$). That influence was diminished when length of time at current job and length of time with current leader was added in the second step. In step three, the

Table 3. Summary of Hierarchical Regression for Task-Oriented Leadership.

Indicators	β	SE	p-value	Coll.	VIF
Step 1					
Gender	−.019	.118	.730	.961	1.040
Age	−.025	.005	.643	.945	1.058
Race-ethnicity	−.117	.042	.035	.921	1.086
Step 2					
Gender	−.003	.119	.953	.942	1.062
Age	−.013	.006	.819	.816	1.225
Race-ethnicity	−.111	.042	.045	.917	1.090
Length of time at job	−.096	.009	.111	.781	1.280
Length of time with boss	.095	.017	.099	.846	1.181
Step 3					
Gender	.013	.091	.751	.932	1.073
Age	−.022	.004	.629	.791	1.265
Race-ethnicity	−.080	.032	.060	.912	1.096
Length of time at job	−.061	.007	.191	.760	1.315
Length of time with boss	.089	.013	.045	.831	1.204
Greeting	.004	.043	.944	.595	1.680
Asking	.161	.065	.026	.313	3.196
Complimenting	.020	.069	.805	.243	4.116
Disclosing	−.015	.042	.756	.709	1.410
Encouraging	−.055	.075	.538	.207	4.827
Listening	.262	.074	.000	.293	3.411
Inspiring	.324	.063	.000	.270	3.701
Durbin Watson	1.240				
Variance explained	$R^2 = .446$				

significant predictors from the model included, asking (β=.161, t=2.230, p=.026), listening (β=.226, t=3.524, p=.001), and inspiring (β=.324, t=4.178, p=.001). The regression model, F (12, 353)=22.831, p=.001, accounted for 45% of the variance.

Discussion

Communication is the primary tool leaders use to bring people together and to accomplish goals (Bakker-Pieper & De Vries, 2013). In other words, communication is at the core of relationship- and task-oriented leadership. Understanding which communication behaviors are foundational to each leadership style can help leaders become more effective (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016). The present project examined the link between prosocial communication behaviors, specifically applying Mirivel's (2014) model of positive communication framework, and relationship- and task-oriented leadership styles.

Because relationship-oriented leaders focus on supporting, developing, and motivating their subordinates as an integral part of a healthy and productive team (Blake &

Mouton, 1964; Katz et al., 1950; Wofford, 1971), it is not surprising that all seven positive communication behaviors (greeting, asking questions, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, inspiring) were strongly linked to this leadership style. Prosocial communication behaviors may prove to be a meaningful way to build interpersonal bonds in the workplace. Indeed, facilitating relational connections is a key component of positive organizations (i.e., those that elevate organizational processes and outcomes to enable workers to thrive; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Relationship-oriented leaders, then, may employ these positive communication behaviors to create that interpersonal connection, which helps their teams to flourish.

Task-oriented leaders are charged with achieving specific goals, with emphasis on short-term outcomes and a high reliability of service (Bass, 1967; Bowers & Seashore, 1966; Katz et al., 1950), which makes the link to positive communication murkier. Yet, all seven positive communication behaviors were connected to a task-oriented leadership style, with inspiring emerging as the most meaningful. Why is inspiring so important for the task-oriented leader? Perhaps inspiring, more than any other positive communication behavior, has the potential to be transformative in follower achievement and organizational commitment—outcomes that are foundational to task-oriented leadership. For a leader to be genuinely inspiring, they must, through verbal and non-verbal communication, be "perceived by followers to be knowledgeable, enlightened, and sensitive to the problems at hand. From this, follower confidence is built" (Bass, 1988, p. 21). Employing inspiring communication behaviors, then, may promote confidence, which in turn can foster trust in the leader from their followers. For the task-oriented leader, gaining trust from their followers is an important step in accomplishing organizational goals, as the inspired follower is motivated to achieve *for* the leader. Other behaviors, such as listening, question asking, and complimenting also may potentiate the achievement of organizational goals. For instance, both respectful inquiry and attentive listening increase followers' sense of self-determination (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018) and complimenting creates a positive mindset among employees (Cheon, 2016). These behaviors may foster a positive organizational atmosphere and boost employee performance. Positive speech acts by leaders yield deliverables from employees, such as increased profits, higher customer satisfaction, and stronger employee performance evaluations (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

Since both relationship- and task-oriented leadership rely on prosocial behaviors, the question then is which specific positive communication actions, if any, differentiate the two leadership styles? Listening behaviors and inspirational actions surfaced as contributing to both relationship- and task-oriented leadership. Johnson and Bechler (1998) demonstrated that the follower perception of sincere listening by leaders indicates engagement with and interest in others, a behavior that effective leaders employ in order to keep followers content and to make them feel valued. As previously noted, leaders who exhibit inspiring behaviors create an environment where leaders are trusted (Bass, 1988). When employees trust their leader, they are more emotionally attached to the firm and are more confident in their capacity to complete assigned tasks and prevent problems (Bass, 1988).

The distinction in positive communication behaviors between relationship- and task-oriented leadership was found in complimenting and asking respectively. Compliments provide the prosocial benefit of recognition, an acknowledgment of seeing and appreciation. As a social construct, complimenting behaviors function to build solidarity among individuals and groups (Wolfson & Manes, 1980). For this reason, complimenting fulfills a critical function for the relationship-oriented leader in facilitating healthy group cohesion.

For task-oriented leaders, accomplishing the goal is the ultimate quest, and that leader is deemed most effective when they have accomplished a task in the most efficient manner. Being a task-oriented leader does not preclude collaboration. Question-asking, especially of those directly responsible for the ultimate accomplishment of a specific task, is perhaps the most effective way to identify the best means of completing the task (Avery, 1999). Those who are responsible for completing a task are in the best position to provide input on how to improve processes and procedures, and a leader who is genuinely interested in productivity and completing a task will desire all relevant information by asking thought-provoking questions of everyone in the group. By asking questions, the task-oriented leader potentially creates within followers a sense of ownership of task achievement and attachment to the group and organization.

It should be noted that, surprisingly, self-disclosure emerged as only weakly related to both relationship-oriented and task-oriented leadership styles. This finding was unexpected, especially with regard to the relationship-oriented leadership style where self-disclosure might be seen as an effective method for fostering a fuller, more intimate relationship between leader and subordinate. A deeper examination uncovers the burdens that might develop through disclosure. There exists a dialectic tension between openness and discretion (Hoppe-Nagao & Ting-Toomey, 2002). An individual must determine what aspects of themselves they choose to disclose or keep secret. Individuals own their private information and manage the boundaries of internally acceptable disclosure (Petronio, 1991). Boundaries are protective; disclosing out of bounds not only requires courage, but more importantly creates vulnerabilities. Ultimately, a leader must lead from a position of competence and authority and they may feel that any potential vulnerability borne of disclosure undermines their status.

This study uncovered another unexpected and particularly noteworthy finding: neither followers' age, race-ethnicity, nor gender impacted their perceptions of leader's positive communication practices. Scholarship and popular media highlight differences between groups based on demographic variables and there is a general premise that individuals with similar identities align with each other and may be less trustful or cooperative with out-group members (Jackson, 1992). Certainly, different people have unique experiences navigating the organizational landscape; their identities, as well as the intersection of those identities, with regard to age (e.g., Zacher et al., 2011), race-ethnicity (e.g., Sackett & DuBois, 1991), and gender (e.g., Muchiri et al., 2011) shape how they assess their leaders. So, why did these salient factors not play a role in how followers viewed their leader's positive communication behaviors? It may be that positive communication taps into the fundamental interpersonal attributes that everyone desires regardless of background. At its root, positive communication embodies confirming

messages (Cissna & Sieburg, 1981), which essentially convey "I acknowledge you," "I value you," and "I support you." By enhancing solidarity among group members (Wolfson & Manes, 1980), building attachment to the team (Avery, 1999), and fostering trust between leaders and followers (Bass, 1988), positive communication serves as a foundational mechanism to create connection. Importantly, because these particular communicative behaviors are evaluated consistently across followers' backgrounds, leaders who employ them can yield predicable results. As organizations become increasingly diverse (Langdon et al., 2002), this meaningful discovery has significant implications for leadership practices.

Implications

This project reveals that the model of positive communication provides basic behavioral building blocks which can both inform theory and point to specific interventions for practice. It also highlights that both relationship- and task-oriented leaders display a combination of positive communication behaviors. Because both relationship-oriented and task-oriented leadership styles have value for an organization and for the professional development of employees, the most productive leaders are those who exhibit a blend of both approaches (Blake & McCanse, 1991).

For the training of actionable communication behaviors to be valuable and effective, trained leaders need to be able to recognize and respond to situations where implementation of learned competencies are appropriate; the causal relationship between actions and results is definitive, whereby learned behaviors lead directly to intended results (Argyris, 2000). This study demonstrates that positive communication behaviors hold noteworthy potential for the inclusion in leader communication training programs. ". . . for training purposes, research into the communication styles of leaders is more likely to offer trainers and trainees clear guidelines to understand behaviors that are likely to lead to positive results" (De Vries et al., 2010, pp. 377–378). From a practical angle, Mirivel's (2014) model of positive communication behavior provides a comprehensive structure to organize training—and as the results of this project demonstrate, it has wide-reaching applicability in a diverse workforce; specifically, it may benefit leadership training curricula through development of actionable training methods designed to guide the ways in which leaders engage with employees, foster and strengthen relationships, and create cohesion in diverse work groups.

Moreover, positive communication behaviors align with several theories of leadership. Path-goal theory defines a leader's responsibility to communicate to followers the path to achieving a task, and the reward associated with reaching a goal; four communication styles are identified as motivational in influencing followers: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership (House & Mitchell, 1974). Mirivel's (2014) positive communication behaviors are clearly associated with the last three. Greeting and complimenting are aligned with supportive leadership; disclosing, asking, and listening can be seen as participative; and inspiring and encouraging can be viewed as achievement-oriented. Leader-member exchange theory explains how leaders and followers develop relationships, and how actions are coordinated to accomplish

goals. In leader-member exchange, in-group and out-group followers are identified, and it is expected that in-group followers will be more committed and productive (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Ginsburgh, 1977). Positive communication behaviors might therefore be used to move out-group followers to the in-group in order to build a more connected and efficient organization.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study identified specific positive communication behaviors associated with relational messaging of task-oriented and relationship-oriented leaders across industries and demographics, the study had some limitations with regard to sample and methodology; it also illuminated opportunities for further exploration.

First, the sample was geographically limited to United States workers. The composition of the sample may be problematic as our data are specific to American cultural norms and practices. Studies have demonstrated similarities, but more importantly differences, in leadership across cultures (Pillai et al., 1999; Walumbwa et al., 2007). Future research may want to cast a wider net in recruiting participants to offer a more international perspective on leaders' positive communication behaviors, especially given that business is becoming increasingly global (Resick et al, 2006).

Secondly, data were gathered using Amazon Mechanical Turk; some have called into question the use of mTurk workers (Pittman & Sheehan, 2016). Nonetheless, studies have addressed mTurk data quality (Lovett et al., 2018) and have demonstrated their reliability compared to other survey methods (Mortensen & Hughes, 2018).

Admittedly, we failed to take into account the demographics of the leaders themselves. Different leaders are held to different standards of conduct. For instance, leaders who are older, identify as women, or represent people of color are treated differently (Salas et al., 2011) and often expected to uphold normative assumptions of feminine communication strengths (Yoder, 2001), such as those reflected in relationship-oriented leadership; and when they do not, their leadership legitimacy declines (Eagly, 2005). How one's enactment of positive communication behaviors will be perceived by followers is linked to leaders' identities. To further refine the findings unveiled in this project, future research may benefit from the inclusion of identity characteristics of both followers and leaders.

Finally, the role of negative communication behaviors as they relate to relationship- and task-oriented leadership were not investigated. Schilling (2009) identified a litany of negative behaviors leaders can and do enact in the workplace to make ends meet. Understanding how both positive and negative communication may function in relationship- and task-oriented leadership offers a more thorough foundation for guiding leaders. As Spitzberg and Cupach (2012) eloquently argued, perhaps there are no "sides" but rather a comprehensive, integrative whole. Future scholars may wish to examine the dialectical tensions of these two forms of communication to clarify when and how leaders can most effectively use each of these communicative practices based on their leadership style.

Indeed, leadership style and relational messaging are critical to organizational success. Whether an employee will choose to stay with a firm, or leave, is greatly impacted by their direct supervisor (Loehr & Emerson, 2008). Employee satisfaction is highly dependent on supervisor communication, and both task- and relationship-oriented leadership styles are linked to employee satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Mikkelson et al., 2015). The present project extends Mikkelson et al.'s (2017) scholarship connecting task- and relationship-oriented leadership styles to the relational messages of intimacy and dominance by drawing upon a comprehensive model of positive communication behaviors (Mirivel, 2014). While all seven of the model's prosocial communication behaviors (greetings, asking, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening, and inspiring) manifested in each leadership style, some played a more prominent role than others. Leaders must be strategic in their communication, with listening and inspiring among the most meaningful actions, because the relational messages leaders convey shape the future of their organizations. Strategies to develop positive communication can be incorporated into new leader training programs or reinforced with existing leaders through professional development opportunities and supervisor/peer evaluations. Employees increasingly value "leaders who are trusting, support their needs, and express care for them as humans, not just employees" (Wingard, 2020). Positive communication accomplishes those goals and the leader of the future will need to be well-versed in them. As workplaces continue to grow increasingly diverse, this project underscores that, regardless of followers' age, race-ethnicity, or gender, leaders' positive communication may be what unites us.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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