Perception of Gender Communication Competence of Leaders in a Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Leadership communication competence is known to be a key element in organizational success. The present study examines leadership communication competence in an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The study delved into subordinates' perception of their leaders' encoding and decoding skills and found that these leaders have a relatively high encoding and decoding skills. When comparing between males and females, it was found that the males scored higher in both skills. This result seems similar to the western literature on gender communication but purportedly with different reasons for why men scored higher than women. This study, thus, contributes to the literature on the influence of culture in relation to the perception of gender communication competence.

Keywords: Communication competence, gender, encoding, decoding, leaders, Malaysian Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

In the past, leadership research focused on studies of traits, behaviours, and situational factors. Communication was assumed to be a part of doing leadership but not as one of the required skills of leadership. Only about six decades ago when organizational communication became illuminant in organizational studies that researchers began to study leadership communication as a key element in workplace effectiveness. The present study intends to further contribute to this body of research by examining leadership communication competence, particularly the encoding and decoding communication skills of the male and female leaders in an institution of higher learning in Malaysia.

Leadership and Communication Competence

According to Hackman and Johnson (2004), leadership is a "form of human (symbolic)

communication" (p. 31). Job satisfaction and work performance seem to be influenced by employees' perception of leadership communication. With effective strategic plans and appropriate application of relevant communication principles and knowledge, organizations are able to excel. Holmes *et al.* (2002) assert that:

> *Doing leadership' entails competent communicative performance which, by influencing others, results in acceptable outcomes for the organization (transactional/task-oriented goal), and which maintains harmony within the team or community of practice (relational/people-oriented goal).*

Various studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between leadership communication and employee work-related variables (e.g., Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). Leaders who show concern and demonstrate friendliness towards employees tend to be rated high for desirable leadership behaviour as compared to those who are less friendly and caring. Meanwhile, others perceive immediacy as a positive attribute of leadership (Bosman, 2011). Even though communication competence lacks emphasis in the development of leadership theories, the important role of communication is significantly obvious in theories, especially where leader-member relationship matters such as servant leadership, transformational leadership, charismatic and authentic leadership. For example, Burns (1978) presented an employee-centred perspective of leadership that is transformational leadership, where within this paradigm, communication is an important leadership quality through the demonstration of individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence (Bass, 1990). These transformational leaders have strong communicative capability that enables them to articulate a clear and vivid vision and to display desirable and strong relational behaviours in order to stay connected with their followers. Additionally, Barge (1994) asserts that:

> *The key to more complex leadership behavior and more adaptability to new situation is good communication skills*

In the organizational setting, a company benchmarked for its organizational leadership communication is General Electric Company (GE). Cushman and King (1995) regard GE "a World-Class Leadership Communication System" and Jack Welch, the former CEO of GE, a highly effective communicator based on the company's repeated success and Welch's recognitions by notable business magazines such as *Fortune 500, Financial Times* and *Chief Executive Magazine.* According to Cushman and King, Welch's successful performance of transformational leadership was founded on a "*backbone leadership communication* process*", where Welch incorporates a clear articulation of the company threats and a vision in dealing with

the threats (p. 6). On top of these excellent functional communication skills, Welch also acknowledges the need to address the human side of communication, stating that "the leader must become an even more engaged coach, an even more engaging person. You're going to have to create an environment where excitement reigns, where the challenges are everywhere, and where the rewards are both in the wallet, yes, but also in the soul" (cited in Walmsley, 2003).

For the most parts, leadership is about effective communication. In order to gain employee compliance, persuade them, balance power relations, and effect positive interactions, a leader ought to be communicatively competent. Leadership communication competence can be observed through demonstration of effective communication skills. Two sets of communication skills essential to leadership effectiveness are functional and emotional skills (Hackman & Johnson, 2004). According to Hackman and Johnson, functional communication skills are those initiatives which involve: (1) connecting internal and external organizational members; (2) thinking and reasoning to solve problems and develop plans and visions; and (3) regulating through influential processes such as negotiation and compliance gaining. Emotional communication skills, on the other hand, entail: (1) perception, appraisal, and expression of emotion; (2) attending to the emotions of others; (3) emotional facilitation of thinking; (4) understanding and analyzing emotional information and

employing emotional knowledge; and (5) regulation of emotion.

In an organizational context, communication is both a process and a product of organizational functioning (Sypher, 1984), without which, organizations may not accomplish their set goals if a large number of members in the organization lack effective communication skills. Spitzberg and Cupach (2002) state that the "skill in interpersonal communication is essential to an individual's ability to manage relationships" (p. 567), which applies to any kind of interaction, be it in friendships, marriages, or the workplace. Implied in the importance of effective communication is the ability to communicate competently.

In the Malaysian context, culture plays a big role in communication. As a country which is comprised of three main ethnic groups; the Malays (60.3%), Chinese (22.9%) and Indians (7.1%) (statistics from the 2010 Census, Wikipedia, 2012), the perceptions of communication competence can be varied. On this note, Asma (1996) asserts that, "while we differ in many symbolic expressions, our common denominator lies in our deep-seated Asian values" (p. xiii). In a similar study of the Malaysian three ethnic groups on workplace communication competence, Choon (2004) found three dimensions of communication competence emerged: self-confidence, respect-relational and, self-image. Looking at the communication style of one of these ethnic groups, Lailawati (2006) contends that for the Malaysian Malays, their communication is partly shaped

by the religion they embrace. Similarly, Asma (1996) recommended that Malay leaders and managers who wish to win the hearts and minds of their subordinates are expected to role model their behaviours based on the cultural and religious values of their subordinates. Asma continues to provide suggestions on Malaysian effective leadership behaviours (and hence, communication), which include building relationships, demonstrating expertise in both technical and human management, expressing concern for subordinates' welfare, as well as development through *IMAN* (faith in God) and sharing stories through talks and chats.

Communication can be studied from several perspectives (Krone *et al.,* 1987). The mechanistic perspective views human communication as a transmission process with channel as the locus of communication. The psychological perspective centres on the effects of individuals' characteristics on communication via informational stimuli, while the interpretive-symbolic perspective maintains individuals' ability to create and shape social reality through their communication process. Finally, the systems-interaction perspective focuses on the overall communication system which produces the patterned sequential behaviour within the system.

For the present research, the study of organizational leadership communication employs the psychological perspective in that the locus of communication process is "conceptual filters" that consist of attitudes, cognitions, and perceptions. Subsequently, these conceptual filters are, not only, those internal states of the mind which conveys the intended information but also the way how information is processed (Krone, Jablin, & Putnam 1987, p. 25) by encoding and decoding information from the environment. Subordinates were asked to perceive their leaders communication competence (encoding and decoding skills) using the Communication Competence Questionnaire.

METHOD

Organization

The chosen organization for the study was an institution of higher learning located in Peninsular Malaysia, known as SSM. This institution has 16 faculties ranging from Social Sciences to Medicine. Apart from the faculties, there are institutes to cater for students who opt to do research in specific fields of study and seven administrative units, with 28 other support units. SSM was staffed by 4,494 employees in the various academic, as well as administrative units, with 284 (6.32%) in upper and middle-level managerial positions. Some units have lower level managers but this level was not included in the study to increase the manager-subordinate ratio, particularly for the smaller units, which have less than 5 staff members. The study involved 184 managerial level participants and 1114 subordinates.

Measurement

The Communication Competence Questionnaire (CCQ) was used to measure leaders' communication competence. The scale was developed by Monge, Backman, Dillars, and Eisenberg (1982). These researchers derived organizational communication skills factors from the works by Norton (1978), Berlo (1960), and Farace, Taylor, and Stewart (1978), where encoding and decoding skills appear to be pertinent in the organizational contexts.

The scale can be used to evaluate superiors' or subordinates' communication competence and generally takes about five minutes to complete. For the purpose of this study, items in the CCQ measured leaders' organizational communication competence. The instrument has 12 items with two subscales; one on encoding skills and the other, decoding skills. The encoding skills subscale consists of seven items for example, "gets right to the point' and the decoding skills subscale has five items for example, "easy to talk to." After testing for face validity, the responses which were based on a seven-point scale varying from a strong Yes (*YES!*) to a strong No (*NO!*) were changed to numerical figures of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

According the Monge *et al*. (1982), the CCQ has an internal reliability with an average of .85 for both superior and subordinates. Papa and Tracy (1988) reported that the encoding and decoding sub-scale correlated highly (.95), and collapsed both factors into a single competence factor. They also found a reliability of .98.

For the current study, the CCQ has an overall reliability of .86. In order to determine internal consistency of the items, this scale was evaluated further by the split-half reliability procedure (see for e.g., Aron & Aron, 1997; Garson, 2006), where the scale was split between the encoding and decoding items. Guttman split-half coefficient shows a moderately high reliability of .811.

The scale intercorrelations ranged from .76 to .92. All the inter-item intercorrelations were highly significant ($p < .001$), except for the intercorrelation of items 1 and 7, which was at $p = .05$. The high positive intercorrelations also suggested that all the items in this scale had done what they were intended to do, i.e. to measure organizational communication competence consistently.

Participants

Participants were subordinates of SSM. The unit of analysis were the managers, who will be referred to as leaders throughout this study. At the time the study was conducted, SSM had 284 leaders in the various organizational positions. Some of these leaders were stationed at facilities away from the main campus, while others were unavailable or unwilling to participate, and thus, leaving 184 leaders available for the study. There were 4,494 non-managerial employees, whereby 1,114 participated in the study.

Out of 4,494 employees, 1114 were selected considering the dispersed location of the units and time frame for the data collection (follow-up on the data collection

took up a considerable amount of time). Hence, to reduce error limit so that the researcher can be confident that the sample respondents were representatives of the population (Wunsch, 1986), a ratio of 1:5 for leader to subordinates was sampled. Thus, if a unit has less than five employees, all the subordinates were asked to participate. Nonetheless, where there were more than five subordinates in a unit, a systematic random sampling was done. The questionnaires, together with a list of selected participants, were left with the leader's secretary to distribute. When returned, the completed questionnaires were not exactly the participants chosen earlier due to the lack of response or the participants were away from their office at the time when the questionnaires were distributed. A total of 452 questionnaires were returned but 130 of the responses were not usable either because the leaders whom the subordinates had evaluated were not those selected for the study or that the subordinates' responses were incomplete. The survey yielded a response rate of 40.5%, which can be considered good since the common response rate for a workplace survey in Malaysia is between 10-20%. However, usable data were 29.8%.

Other than the non-managerial subordinates who evaluated their leaders' communication competence, some leaders were also asked to evaluate their superiors since these leaders were themselves subordinates to their superiors (except for the top most official). One hundred and eighty-four sets of instruments were distributed to the leaders, where 123 responded. Only 118 were usable. Since these leaders also evaluated their superior's communication competence, their responses were combined with the responses from the non-managerial subordinates. In total, the survey yielded 575 responses, which is a 44.3% response rate and 34.7% usable data. Table 1 shows a summary of the number of participants and the responses for the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Unit of analysis was leaders whom the participants evaluated. From 118 responses, 114 leaders matched the leader-subordinate criteria. The demographic profile of these leaders is given in Table 2. There were 84 males (74%) and 30 females (26%) between the ages of 31 and 59 years, with $M = 49.42$ and $SD = 5.21$. Seventeen participants did not report their ages. About 90% of the leaders have postgraduate education while the remaining 10% have either a bachelor degree or a college diploma degree. All the leaders were Malays.

Mean for leadership communication competence was 5.59, with a standard deviation of 0.65. This result shows a fairly high level of communication competence. To tease out more meaningful information from the data, demographic variables such as gender, age, and education were examined to see if these variables have relationship with the leaders' organizational communication competence. Table 3 shows that only gender has a significant correlation with communication competence ($r = .28$, p < .01). This result provides a

TABLE 1
Summary of the Returned and Usable Questionnaires

Instrument	Participants	Number of returned questionnaires	Number of usable questionnaires
CCQ	non-managers	452 (40.5%)	332 (29.8%)
	managers	123 (66.8%)	118 (64.1%)
	Total subordinates	575 (44.3%)	450 (34.7%)

TABLE 2
Demographic Profile of the Leaders

		Male	Female
Education			
Postgraduate		76	26
Bachelor or college diploma		8	4
	Total	84	30
Age			
31 – 39 years old		2	4
40 – 49 years old		35	15
50 – 59 years old		33	18
	Total	70	27

warrant to further examine whether there is a significant difference between male and female communication competence, particularly between the subscales of organizational communication competence, namely, encoding and decoding skills.

T-test was run to determine any significant difference between male and female communication competence. The results (Table 4) show that the mean for gender is significantly different at t (111) = 3.07, p = .003. Both male and female scores were relatively high, but the male leaders (M = 5.69, SD = .59) seem to demonstrate a higher level of organizational communication competence as compared to the female leaders (M = 5.28, SD = .72).

To make sense of the underlying scores, the subscales of CCQ were examined. Both male and female leaders demonstrated a higher level of decoding skills as compared to their encoding skills. This shows that leaders in SSM are sensitive when speaking with their subordinates. The subordinates feel that their leaders pay attention to what they have to say and respond favourable (e.g., *My superior pays attention to what other people say to him or her* and *My superior usually responds to messages(memos, phone calls, reports, etc.) quickly*). This is important in building relationships between leaders and subordinates. In fact, one of the most important skills in communication is listening skills and it seems that SSM subordinates acknowledge that their leaders have good listening skills. Also, even though encoding skill was indicated as lower than decoding skills, the mean for

TABLE 3
Correlations between Leaders' Demographic Variables and Communication Competence

	Gender	Age	Education	Communication Competence
Gender	1.0	.25*	.05	.28**
Age		1.0	-.06	.01
Education			1.0	.01
Communication competence				1.0

** Correlation is significant at p < .01 level (2-tailed).
 * Correlation is significant at p < .05 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 4
Mean of Communication Competence Questionnaire (CCQ) Subscales

	N	Mean	SD	Encoding	Decoding
Gender					
Male	84	5.69	.59	5.64	5.76
Female	30	5.28	.72	5.26	5.40
Total	114	5.59	.65	-	-

encoding skills is still relatively high. The subordinates do believe that their leaders have the technical skills, as well as the ability to convey information clearly and effectively. Revisiting Asma's (1996) recommendation about winning the hearts and minds of subordinates, the results of this study demonstrate that SSM leaders do build relationships, demonstrate care and concern for employees' well-being, and share stories. As someone in a leadership position, SSM leaders seem to have the skills to get work done through their subordinates. With a high ability to compose ideas and to say what they would in a manner acceptable to subordinates, these leaders are more likely to be adored and respected by their subordinates.

Another interesting finding is that males are perceived to have higher communication competence than the females in both encoding and decoding skills, and this makes it appear as though female leaders are perceived as less competent than their male counterpart. This may not be entirely true since both the males and females received relatively high scores. It is just a matter of perception that men tend to score higher than females. In relation to this observation, Barrett and Davidson (2006) shared their views in *Gender and Communication at Work*, which exemplifies that women are denounced on their communication skills, and hence leadership skills, as they are often seen as more emotional than men when speaking. When these women (who are in higher positions) tend to communicate in a more masculine manner, they are less favourably accepted by their subordinates. That said, it could well be that the higher communication competence perception of male leaders is influenced by cultural background or stereotyping female social role.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that leaders in an institution of higher education in Malaysia, SSM, demonstrate a relatively high score in competence with regards to workplace communication. Subordinates perceive male leaders to have higher encoding and decoding skills than female leaders. What makes this finding interesting is that women, who believe in relationships and their action speaks "in a language of connection and intimacy" (Gleason, 1994), receive lower scores compared to men who speak their mind and display masculine communication style. The question is, "why do women receive lower scores in communication competence, when in fact, naturally, they demonstrate more care and concern in their communication?"

Some of the answers to the question above may lie in the studies below:

1. A study on affect display found that subordinates send negative affect signals (e.g., frowns) to women who are in authority positions (Koch, 2005).

2. In the western context, volubility is a form of power display. Men tend to exhibit volubility compared to women who prefer less aggressive communication style (e.g. participative or democratic). The lack of aggressiveness is perceived as lack of power, hence, communication (Schullery, 1998).

3. Women are expected to behave in a manner congruent to their gender role, so when they violate this expectation (due to their leadership position), they

are seen as lack communication skills (Mohr & Wolfram, 2008).

von Hippel *et al.* (2011) found women in leadership position as victims of *stereotype threat*. Attempting to remove the negative connotation that women leaders are less effective, they adopted a more masculine communication style. Much to their surprise, they were rated as less warm and likeable because they were acting like "men" - a phenomenon mentioned earlier as contradicting their "female" social role.

Conversely, when men show verbal consideration (which is considered a feminine style of communication), followers level of irritation is lower (Mohr & Wolfram, 2008). Followers perceive that men behave this way because they care.

Based on the studies above, it seems that western women in leadership position are more likely to receive lower evaluation of their communication competence compared to men, simply because they are "female". Even though westerners consider assertiveness and decisiveness as strong communication skills (Gallios *et al.*, 2006), these may not be so when women are in leadership positions.

Unlike the western culture where assertiveness and decisiveness are strongly encouraged, the Asian culture views this behaviour as less polite. The Asian culture places harmony and relationship high in their value system and behaviours, which threaten what they value as unwarranted. The same goes with communication in that when communication speeches and behaviours seem to disrupt harmony and relationship,

they opt to loosen up the tightness. One way is to be silent like how Kwintessential (2012) noted about Malaysian culture. Kwintessential observed that Malaysians rely on non-verbal communication and prefer subtle and indirect communications. In the traditional Malay culture, women are expected to be less verbal less than men. They should be seen less and stay home to care for their family. This is because women are considered "fragile" and susceptible to harm and injury. Hence, by reducing their presence in the public, the Malay women are believed to be safe. This cultural behaviour is brought to the workplace. Women tend to be more cautious when expressing their views and to maintain harmony. Thus, when dealing with their subordinates, they may tend to say less to appear non-dominating and hope that the subordinates will feel comfortable working with them.

As all of the leaders in this study were Malays, one characteristic of the Malay culture that may contribute to the lower subordinate perception of communication competence of women in contrast to men is respect to those higher in the hierarchy. In her work, Lailawati (2007) discussed the role of religion in shaping the Malay culture. One of the teachings in Islam is to respect the elders and those high in the hierarchy, for example, the *Imam* (religious head) and teachers. It could have been this sense of respect that makes Malay women to refrain from exhibiting their full potential and make way for the men to take the lead - resulting in these perceived lack of communication competence in women.

In short, leadership communication competence in SSM is considered as relatively high. Both the males and females demonstrate caring and sharing behaviours to make this institution a conducive working place for everyone. SSM has no doubt but to continue supporting those in leadership positions, males and females, to greater heights and potentials.

Finally, the present study has contributed to a perspective on gender difference in leadership communication competence from the east, which seems to bear similar subordinate perception of their leaders' communication competence with the west but with different reasons.

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