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Impact of communication style compatibility on leadership outcomes in multinational organizations

Doctoral dissertation
<u>SUMMARY</u>

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Table of Contents

1 Introduction

Communication plays a critical role in any organization, as it facilitates the flow of information and understanding between individuals and departments that occurs through different media and uses various channels and networks. Organizational communication is the lifeblood of the organization, the glue that ties the organization, or oil that smoothens the organization's function[1]. It has been shown that employees generally spend between 50% and 80%[2] of their work time communicating. Furthermore, numerous empirical studies show that managers spend up to 82%[3] of their time communicating with subordinates by:

- transmitting goals, providing information, clarifying standards; and
- instructing, coordinating, or giving feedback.

These research findings suggest that unhealthy communication equals an unhealthy organization. As a result, organizations cannot exist separately from their members and are created and reproduced by communication between participants. Therefore, organizations are defined through groups of individuals harmoniously working together to achieve common production-related goals. Consequently, communication becomes a tool by which members design, distribute, and pursue organizational goals[4].

People differ in the way they communicate. Individuals use different *communication styles (CS)* contingent on the social situation they find themselves in, people they are with, or emotional states they are experiencing. For instance, while speaking with subordinates, Manager X typically assumes a dominant communication style - makes sure that everyone listens to her, tries to be structured, poised, and in control over the situation. On the other hand, Manager Y prefers a nondominant style - always listens to team members' ideas, and usually waits patiently until everybody had chance to speak up. Therefore, CS can be defined as:

"the characteristic way a person sends verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal signals in social interactions denoting

> *(a) who he or she is or wants to (appear to) be,*
> *(b) how he or she tends to relate to people with whom he or she interacts, and*

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[1] Giri & Pavan Kumar, 2010
[2] Giri & Pavan Kumar, 2010
[3] Jablin, 1979; Sarros et al., 2014; Riggio et al., 2003; Madlock, 2008
[4] Giri & Pavan Kumar, 2010

(c) *in what way his or her messages should usually be interpreted."*

So, "somebody who exhibits conversational dominance, may not only convey that somebody should take the message seriously (i.e., [c]), but may also convey status information (i.e., [a]) and how she or he wants the conversational partner to react (i.e., submissive – [b])[5]."

People's communication styles are subject to intraindividual variability. They are dependent on the situational context or a particular life domain – e.g., the Manager X could adopt a different, more submissive, communication style when talking to her superiors and an even different one at home. However, in this work, the focus lies on exploring a particular type of communication, which is communication between *managers and supervisors (leaders)* and *team members (employees)*. Multiple research have shown that supervisor communication impacts numerous leadership outcomes, like employees' wellbeing at work, job satisfaction, trust, and more, which respectively influences the success of achieving goals set by the team, department, or organization[6]. Scholars have been paying attention to how sender's (supervisors', health care providers', customer service providers') communication styles impact receivers in different research fields including but not limited to management, hospitality, and health care sectors.

For example, research in customer services sector[7] has shown that:

- *Contentious CS (i.e., a tendency to communicate in an aggressive fashion)* negatively influences the communicator's persuasive power, which can impact the effectiveness of employees; while
- *Relaxed (absence of tension or anxiety), open (self-disclosing), and attentive (making sure that others listen carefully) CSs* have a significantly positive impact on customers.

As the result, the CS of a sender directly impacts the receivers' outcomes, like their emotions, trust towards the sender[8]. Additionally, receivers' preferences (such as willingness to cooperate, share knowledge, or receive services) differ depending on what CS the sender adopts[9]. However, how much may these outcomes and preferences differ if we also consider the CSs of the receivers?

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[5] De Vries et al., 2013 (p. 507)
[6] Jablin, 1979; Buller & Buller, 1987; Baker & Ganster, 1985; Kang & Hyun, 2012; Webster & Sundaram, 2009
[7] Pettegrew et al., 1981
[8] Brown et al., 2019
[9] Bednar, 1982; Kang & Hyun, 2012

2 Research Objective and Justification of the Research Problem

Previous research in the area of communication styles focused on exploring the direct effects of various communication styles on receivers. However, more and more research in the area of person-organization, person-supervisor, and person-group fit seems to indicate that a compatibility of certain characteristics (e.g., values or control preferences) between two or more organizational members can be even more informative of important outcomes such as organizational trust, well-being, or turnover intentions[10]. For this reason, I consider it crucial to investigate how a leader's CS combined with an employees' CS impact leadership outcomes.

Therefore**, the research objective of this work is to explore how congruence in communication styles between supervisor and employees impacts leadership outcomes**, particularly organizational trust and well-being that employees experience at work **within a multinational environment** (which might be particularly sensitive to communication issues). The topic of compatibility of communication styles between leaders and followers has – to my knowledge - been the focus of very limited academic theorizing and empirical exploration up to this date[11]. **I aimed to realize this objective by performing two Research Tasks described in the following section.**

Dyadic communication is the essence of relational dynamics both within and outside of the organizational context[12]. It was shown to predict various elements of co-worker relationship quality, e.g., self-disclosure, relational closeness and richness, relational expectation, and degree of intimacy[13]. Unfortunately, extant communication styles research in the management field focused on evaluating immediate supervisor's or customer-oriented employees' communication style and how it impacts employees' or customers' outcomes. With a few notable exceptions[14], the receiver's communication style was not taken into consideration. Thus, previous research largely focused on leader's characteristics that are independent of the environment.

According to the **LMX model and Person-Environment Fit** (specifically, Person-Supervisor Fit) **theories**, the compatibility between leaders and followers might be even more important in

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[10] Andela & van der Doef, 2019; Kuzminska et al., 2018
[11] Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Fan & Han, 2018; Infante & Gorden, 1982
[12] Bakar & McCann, 2016
[13] Barry & Crant, 2000; Berscheid et al., 1989; Kelley & Burgoon, 1991; Prager, 1989; Tesch & Whitbourne, 1982
[14] Bakar & McCann, 2016; Fan & Han, 2018; Infante & Gorden, 1982

predicting leadership outcomes than independent characteristics of individuals. As put forward by Fan & Han[15]: "An agreement or fit in this communication style can guide the group regulation process and promote interaction quality, which, in turn, nurtures a sense of belonging among the work-group members (p. 1084)." Such positive effects of compatibility between leaders and followers were previously shown for values, goals, and personality[16]. For instance, the similarity in personality between leaders and followers predicted an increase in positive leader-member exchange and, as a result, a higher commitment, trust, job satisfaction, and even performance[17]. The LMX model considers a leader-subordinate dyad as a vertical communication relationship, where the high-quality relationships are achieved through aligning and accommodating behaviors[18]. Communicative strategies are the most effective if properly adjusted as the interaction progresses[19]. Such alignment increases understanding and improve predictability of another person's behaviour[20], as well as increase interpersonal attraction and satisfaction with the relationship[21]. When necessitated by the situation, leaders may also willingly adopt subordinate-oriented communication to increase mutual understanding and obtain their commitment[22]. Therefore, the dyadic agreement in communication styles seems to plays a crucial role in explaining work outcomes in line with the LMX model. This prediction is further strengthened by Person-supervisor fit theory, according to which a good relationship with the leader is fostered by employees' feeling that their personal characteristics match those of the leader[23].

A support for the positive impact of leader-follower communication style compatibility is also offered by some of the **leadership theories** discussed in the theoretical section of this dissertation. According to some approaches, leadership should be considered as a process rather than a state and is assigned in the process of interaction between the involved parties[24]. Since in such interactions the meaning is created largely through communication, a leader who can adjust the communication style to the needs of the followers is more likely to exert desired influence. What is more, according to contingency theories, leadership outcomes depend on the

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[15] Fan & Han, 2018
[16] Schaubroeck & Lam, 2002; van Vianen, 2000; Witt, 1998; Zhang et al., 2012
[17] Schaubroeck & Lam, 2002; Zhang et al., 2012
[18] Infante & Gorden, 1982
[19] Fairhurst, 1993, as cited in Martin et al., 2004
[20] Berger & Calabrese, 1975
[21] Simons et al., 1970, as cited in Infante & Gorden, 1982
[22] Luo et al., 2016
[23] van Vianen et al., 2011
[24] Northouse, 2019

leaders' ability to tune their behavior to the maturity and needs of the employees[25]. Communication style is one of the most prominent and visible of leader's everyday behaviors, hence its compatibility with the needs of the employees seems to be of paramount importance. Such an adjustment of leadership communication style seems to be especially beneficial in case of high interpersonal stress, as predicted by cognitive resources theory[26].

Final justification of my research comes from the area of communication itself. Communication is a tool by which members design, distribute, and pursue organizational goals[27]. It helps to form the social domain, as well as to create and reproduce the shared understanding of goals, objectives, and organizational roles and responsibilities[28]. Individuals interpret the social environment, create meaningful perceptions, and act according to their interpretations. Hence, a leader-follower communication that is not aligned may foster misunderstanding and/or unnecessary conflict that undermines the achievement of desired outcomes. Such misunderstandings might be especially pronounced in multinational organizations, in which the meaning creation could be undermined by differences in cultural values and practices[29]. That is why leaders' attempts at adjusting their communication styles to employee needs and characteristics can be especially beneficial in multicultural contexts.

3 Empirical Research

3.1 Research Task 1

The first study performed was experimental and focused on one of the most impactful communication styles of a leader explored in the previous research – a dominant CS. Even though preferences towards dominant leaders or service providers may depend on such circumstances as criticality of situation[30] or economic uncertainty[31], research generally suggests that such leaders are perceived negatively[32]. Dominant communication behaviors, such as paying little attention to employee views or opinions, interrupting employees, or failing to consult with them, have been even included in the measures of incivility in the workplace[33].

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[25] Yukl, 2011
[26] Fiedler & Garcia, 1987
[27] Giri & Pavan Kumar, 2010
[28] Donsbach, 2008
[29] E.g. Smith, 2011
[30] Webster & Sundaram, 2009
[31] Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017
[32] Baker & Ganster, 1985
[33] Cortina et al., 2001, 2013; Martin & Hine, 2005

However, no previous research checked what are the organizational consequences of leader-follower fit or misfit in CS dominance. To do so, I have conducted the experiment on a sample of 252 U.S. employees via the Amazon Mechanical Turk. The initial experiment was aimed at a preliminary exploration of the consequences of leaders' and employees' compatibility in CSs. In particular, I investigated how manager's CS dominance impacts employee attitudes toward that manager, depending on the employee's own level of CS dominance.

I found that all participants declared preference to cooperate with a less dominant leader regardless of their level of dominance. However, participants with a more dominant communication style were seemingly more compatible with dominant leaders than participants with a less dominant communication style. The results did not fully confirm that the attitude towards the leader would be more positive if they were similar in the level of CS dominance, but they showed that participants' CS dominance indeed moderated the impact of manager's CS dominance in the predicted direction. Those who are low in dominance might find it very difficult to share their opinions and expertise when the leader dominates the discussion, because they are not ready to interrupt or push for being heard. For this reason, people who are low in dominance might feel disregarded or unheard. On the other hand, employees with a dominant CS might find it easier to work with dominant leaders, as they can feel more confident to interrupt them during the conversation or find another way to add into the conversation.

3.2 Research Task 2

The second study was nested in one organization and explored a wider selection of CSs to confirm and expand the preliminary results obtained in Study 1. The aim of the study was to explore impact of the compatibility of team leaders' and employees' CSs on such leadership outcomes as job-related well-being and organizational trust. The study was conducted at the shared services office of a global legal firm located in Warsaw, Poland. For the purpose of the study, I collected data separately from each team. In this way I was able to explore the consequences of the actual (dis)similarity in communication styles between 29 team leaders and their 122 followers (151 participants in total).

The results of this study confirmed that communication styles compatibility between leaders and followers is more important than independently measured leader's communication styles in predicting employee job satisfaction, trust, and emotions they experience at work. Particularly:

- **a compatibility between supervisor and employee in friendliness matters for employee job well-being** – the lowest job well-being can be seen when both exhibit unfriendly CS and EJ well-being increases as their joint friendliness increases;
- **confident communication style matters for employee trust**. The level of employee trust was the highest when both the leader and the employee used confident CS that was average – not very high and not very low;
- **congruence in dominant communication style matters for employee job well-being**. The highest level of employee job well-being was observed for those participants for whom the level of dominance in communicating was congruent with that of the supervisor, with a steep decline in declared EJ well-being as the level of similarity decreased. **Congruence in dominant communication style mattered for trust in the team** – trust was the highest if the supervisor and the employee are similar in dominance (either both high or both low). Trust was the weakest when the employee is highly dominant, but the supervisor was very low in dominance;
- **congruence in precise communication style matters for employee trust**. Trust was highest when both the employees and their supervisors reported an average level (not too very high and not very low) of preciseness. The lowest trust was observed when both the employees and their supervisors were very low in preciseness. The level of trust was diminishing when both supervisors and employees' level of preciseness was very high.

4 Contribution of the dissertation

This doctoral dissertation has the following three contributions to the scientific literature.

4.2 Theoretical (cognitive)

Research presented within this dissertation showed that leaders' CSs do not entirely predict leadership outcomes unless the employees' CS is also taken into consideration. Such a finding expands the theory of Person-environment fit, which so far focused mostly on leader-follower compatibility in terms of values,[34] and confirms that no characteristics or behaviors should be analyzed without the knowledge of their context. Previous studies on intraorganizational dyadic communication, although extremely scarce, found it to be related to various aspects of coworker

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[34] van Vianen, 2000; Witt, 1998; Zhang et al., 2012

relationship like self-disclosure, relational closeness, and interactional richness[35]. However, these initial attempts at investigating CS compatibility focused only on a small sample of communication styles – current research fills this gap. This is the first research that studied such a wide variety of CSs with respect to person-supervisor fit.

Even though experimental Study 1 confirmed results present in the literature that high CS dominance of a leader negatively impacts employees' perceptions (moderated by employees' own level of CS dominance), Study 2 showed that the analysis of compatibility provides a much more nuanced picture. While the lowest level of trust and employee well-being were observed for leader-employee dyads that were characterized by a large discrepancy in their dominance (especially when a leader was much less dominant than an employee), the most positive outcomes were visible for the higher levels of similarity. The role of fit was also shown for preciseness, friendliness, and confidence, providing further insight into the role of communication styles within multinational organizations.

What is more, Study 2 was conducted within a multinational organization, which might be especially susceptible to problems arising from CS incompatibility (as discussed in the Theoretical Background section of my dissertation). The data was collected from employees with diverse level of experience and who were representatives of different nationalities[36]:

- Eastern European Group[37]: 124 representatives;
- Western Europe and Other Groups[38]: 24 representatives;
- Asia and the Pacific Groups[39]: 2 representatives;
- African Group[40]: 2 representatives.

Finally, as the two research tasks I performed employed different methodological approaches, I was able to expand the validity of the obtained results. Experimental design of Study 1 allowed me to confirm the internal validity of the previous results showing that the dominance of the leader might differentially affect employees depending on their own level of dominance. In other words, I could show that the obtained results are really a factor of leader's dominance and are not due to a spurious correlation. On the other hand, in Study 2, I expanded the external

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[35] Fan & Han, 2018
[36] Country division according to United Nations Regional Groups
[37] Azerbaijan, Belarus, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, Russia
[38] United Kingdom, France, Austria, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Portugal, Belgium
[39] Uzbekistan, South Korea
[40] South Africa

validity by collecting data on communication styles from actual team leaders and team members. Thanks to this approach, I obtained a unique set of data for leader-follower dyads and did not have to rely on followers' perception of leader's communication styles, which can be confounded by other variables (e.g., liking).

4.2 Methodological contribution

Study 2 used a polynomial regression with response surface analysis. This is a technique which, by graphing the results of a polynomial regression analysis in a three-dimensional space, provides a detailed outlook on the complex relationships between a variety combinations of two predictor variables and an outcome variable. This method offers more explanatory potential than difference scores or traditional moderated regression analyses and are applicable to a vast range of research questions[41].

Additionally, for the second study, a new communication styles questionnaire was developed, which combined questions from already existing questionnaires. The chosen questions were slightly changed to reflect the method of the study. For the first study, two target descriptions of dominant and non-dominant manager were developed.

4.2 Application

The main purpose of this dissertation was to investigate how congruence in communication styles between supervisor and employee impacts leadership outcomes, particularly organizational trust and job-related well-being. Even though I do not argue that supervisors and employees should be matched based on the compatibility of CSs, I believe that managers and employees should be aware of their CSs and how their (mis)fit can affect their well-being. Since people are flexible and can adjust to a variety of contexts and situations, it is reasonable to expect that managers and supervisors would be willing to adjust their communication styles to the needs and preferences of different employees. Such contingent approach to communication could potentially improve its effectiveness and positively affect leadership outcomes. This assumption is in line with Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory [42], according to which relationship quality between leader and followers depends on whether the resources are

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[41] Shanock et al., 2010
[42] Harrison, 2018

distributed according to followers' needs. Thus, the knowledge of employees' CSs may help to properly evaluate the relationship with an employee and suitably distribute the resources.

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