Running head: COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE OF MANAGEMENT PERSONNEL

The Communication Competence of Management Personnel – Suggestion of an Integrative Framework Model

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Abstract

This paper highlights the interface of leadership and communication psychology, presents the current state of research, outlines the integration of communication competence of management personnel in a framework model, and discusses implications for organizational success (performance, commitment, etc.).

Keywords*: leadership communication, communication competence, framework model*

Communication is of essential importance in organizations in many respects. This is most obvious in the coordination function that communication fulfills for organizations, for example, when a manager delegates tasks to employees, conducts goal-setting meetings, etc. The assumption is that communication competence on the part of the manager plays a key role in the success of the organization. Surprisingly, research on this interface of leadership theories and communication psychology nevertheless shows significant deficits (Cohen, 2004). Thus far, communication competence has neither been defined as a component of leadership, nor has the construct of *communication competence of management personnel* been comprehensively defined by managers themselves. Instead, communication competence is often implicit in leadership theories. In recent years, measurement tools have occasionally emerged as byproducts of leadership research, e.g., to assess the communication quality of the manager (Mohr, 2002). However, a theoretical foundation is lacking here, as is a comprehensive operationalization of the construct of communication competence.

A theoretical framework to clarify how the constructs are interrelated has likewise been lacking. We therefore suggest an integrative framework model of communication competence of management personnel that maps antecedents and consequences of interpersonal communication in the organizational context and considers a number of moderator variables (e.g., organizational culture).

In the following, we first briefly discuss relevant leadership theories and outline the construct of communication competence. We then describe the model and discuss the importance of leadership communication with regard to organizational success.

**Leadership Theories**

In leadership research, the area of personal leadership is a primary interest for a link with the construct of communication competence, which Wegge and Rosenstiel (2004) define as “all direct, reciprocal, and tendentially asymmetrical interaction processes in the service of company leadership that occur between one or more leaders and one or more led [...]” (p. 476). With a focus on communication psychology, the interest in these interaction areas can be narrowed even further to influence processes that Wegge and Rosenstiel (ibid.) refer to as personalized

leadership. This form of influence is predominantly communication-based, which is evident, for example, in feedback conversations or in the development of collective action plans. It can also be discerned from job descriptions that a large proportion of managers' activities consist of interactive, dyadic communication (Jablin, 1979). Schirmer (1992) reports in a compilation of 16 studies that verbal communication accounts for between 40 and 77 percent of all managers’ activities. And within this, more than half of the communication occurs with subordinate employees (e.g., Schreyögg & Hübl, 1992).

Personal leadership theories can be categorized as personality-oriented or behavior-oriented approaches. Since leadership research traditionally focuses strongly on the manager (Wegge & Rosenstiel, 2004), studies thus far have predominantly been conducted on behavior-oriented approaches that examine both the real and ideal behavior of managers.

In terms of psychological research, the approaches of the University of Michigan (e.g., Likert, 1961) and Ohio State University (e.g., Fleishman, 1953) are foundational. This research resulted in the two behavioral dimensions of employee orientation (consideration) and performance orientation (initiating structure), and the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) (e.g., Stogdill, 1963), which is most commonly used to measure the leadership behavior of superiors (Schuler, 2004). The predominantly communication-based formulation of LBDQ items (e.g., “Argues persuasively from his/her point of view”) already indicates that communication competence has the potential to strongly influence leadership processes.

Leadership theory according to Bass (1998) recognizes two different types of behavior. Transactional leadership functions on the basis of a rational exchange principle. Here, the focus is on goals and tasks, and the manager seeks to win over their employees to achieve the goals by means of incentives. In contrast, transformational or charismatic leadership, focuses on the manager's vision. Employees put their own interests aside in favor of the goal or task because they trust and admire the manager and are therefore committed to the manager's vision.

Graen and Uhl-Bien (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) pursue an entirely different approach with their Leader–Member Exchange theory (LMX). Their basic assumption is that there is no uniform leadership behavior that can be generalized across all employees, but that qualitatively specific two-way relationships (dyads) are established in each case. These assumptions have been empirically confirmed in many cases (e.g., meta-analysis by Gerstner & Day, 1997). Liden and Maslyn (1998) postulate four dimensions of this exchange relationship: affect, loyalty, professional respect, and perceived contribution. What is special about this approach is that leadership is understood as an interaction process between a manager and employees. In contrast to the bulk of other leadership approaches, the focus is not on the manager, but rather on the mutual evaluation within the dyad that explicitly includes the employees’ perception. The LMX theory thus perfectly lends itself toward integration within the communication competence idea.

**Communication Competence**

The literature on the communication competence concept is characterized by an unmanageable number of definitions, each originating from different research contexts. Despite all the differences, however, some characteristics and criteria of communication competence appear again and again (for an overview, e.g., Wilson & Sabee, 2003). For example, there is a consensus that communication competence consists of an entire range of different skills, to which knowledge resources belong as an essential prerequisite. Consequently, communication competence manifests itself on various levels, such as behavior and cognition, as well as motivation. However, the most widely used definition criterion is the situational and social appropriateness of the communication style (Six & Gimmler, 2007).

Based on the postulated criteria, the concepts can be categorized as process, result, or resource-oriented. While process and result-oriented concepts focus on the behavior of the actors in communication situations, the resource-related concepts primarily address the prerequisites for competent behavior.

The relational communication competence model by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) is a resource-oriented model. It focuses on direct interpersonal communication and considers various aspects that are meaningful toward an understanding of communication competence in an organizational context. Accordingly, it lends itself as a basis for the definition of communication competence of management personnel.

The model postulates that the assessment of a person as a competent communicator not only depends on the individual, but also on the assessment context.

The context is determined, e.g., by norms and rules, as well as by the environment in which the communication takes place (e.g., organization). A competent communicator can be described in three dimensions:

1) Knowledge, among other things, regarding the manner of verbal expression as well as the specific social rituals that are part of a corporate culture.

2) Skills and capabilities needed to translate knowledge into appropriate behaviors.

3) Motivation to actually apply existing knowledge and skills. Different concepts within motivation psychology such as willingness to communicate, shyness, and fear of communication come into play here. The interaction of these factors as well as the model conception are discussed below.

**Leadership and Communication Competence**

To date, there are only a few studies that have examined communication competence in the leadership context of organizations. Nevertheless, these studies demonstrate the link between communication competence and leadership, as well as other determinants of organizational success.

Kramer (1995) used a longitudinal design to examine how communication between managers and new employees changes during the first year after the workplace change. He found that a manager’s communication behavior has a significant influence on the dyadic relationship quality from the new employee’s perspective, as well as on their adjustment to the new job and role. In their studies, Flauto (1999) and Madlock (2008) establish a link between the communication competence of a manager and leadership behavior. Like Spitzberg and Cupach (1984), they base their findings on a multidimensional construct of competence and draw on various leadership theories. A key finding by Flauto shows that employees in high-quality leadership dyads also rate their manager as highly competent. The quality of the leadership dyad was able to explain most of the variances found in the perceived communication competence of managers. Madlock also found strong interrelationships between leadership style and communication competence.

Waldherr (2008) examined numerous variables relevant to organizational success. She was able to demonstrate interrelationships between the communication style of a manager and the communication satisfaction of the employees, as well as between the leadership relationship quality and affective commitment.

On the one hand, the research presented demonstrates the close connection between communication (competence) and leadership; on the other hand, it highlights that the operationalization of a competence construct is deficient and that a comprehensive framework model of communication competence of management personnel is still lacking. At the same time, the breadth of the relevant characteristics examined emphatically underscores the need for a complex theoretical model to adequately serve the topic of *communication competence of management personnel.*

**An Integrative Framework Model**

Our suggestion for an integrative framework model of communication competence of management personnel is based on the general communication process model of Jablin, Cude, House, Lee, and Roth (1994). It maps antecedents and consequences of interpersonal communication in an organizational context and considers a series of moderator variables. What is absent from this model is the motivational aspect that Jablin and Sias 2001 added to their ecological model of organizational communication competence. Furthermore, the link to the leadership construct must also be established.

The suggested model (cf. Figure 1) is presented below using an example from the area of change/innovation communication.

New software is introduced within a company that is to be used as standard in nearly all areas of the company in the future. The goal of the manager is to inform an employee about the software introduction, indicate the advantages and disadvantages of the new program (e.g., greater user-friendliness, training effort), and encourage the employee to become more familiar with the topic (e.g., pointing out special information on the intranet). It is assumed (Jablin et al., 1994, p. 120) that both sides possess the minimum level of communication competence that is also necessary to perform the respective job. Communication competence includes cognitive and conative competence resources (1). For example, the manager has the ability to express themselves clearly and precisely. They have information regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the software and appropriate arguments with which to respond to the employee’s questions. They also have strategic knowledge regarding the manner in which these arguments and information are presented without appearing threatening to the employee. The actual communication that takes place between manager and employee is co-determined by motivational factors (2) such as social uncertainty and the manager's current willingness to communicate. For example, if there is currently a conflict between the manager and this particular employee, the manager may feel uncertain and prefer to avoid the conversation. This uncertainty can affect the conversation, e.g., by making the manager more preoccupied with observing their own conversational behavior than with engaging with their employee’s point of view and questions. The experiences that both sides have in this dyadic interaction (3) have an effect on their motivation for future conversations as well as on the improvement of their own competencies in the sense of a feedback loop (4). In addition, knowledge and skills are acquired during the conversation and are then available as resources for future conversations. As an ideal result of the interaction, a common understanding of the situation discussed arises, the manager has achieved their goals, and both sides are satisfied with how the conversation went. In the case of the employee, the positive course of the conversation fosters respect for the knowledge and professional competence of their superior. At the same time, it leads to communication competence being attributed to the conversation partner (5). Overall, the course of the conversation contributes to a high-quality leadership relationship (6). One's own conversational behavior is also assessed and leads to attributions regarding their own competence or incompetence (7). These feedback loops enable learning and adaptation processes. For example, the manager can surmise how the employee feels about the software change from their reactions and then adapt their current and/or future communication behavior accordingly. Perceived deficiencies in communication behavior can promote the intention to develop continued education activities. The communication process is moderated by various context variables (8). For example, the work demands and relational history of the conversation partner influences whether an automated or deliberate selection of behaviors occurs. If it is a routine situation for the manager or if the interpersonal relationship with the employee is stable and unencumbered, the manager is more likely to resort to automated patterns of behavior than in the case of conflictual issues or during the getting acquainted phase with a new employee.

The influence is reciprocal and here, the manager and employee also actively shape the context, e.g., by continuously changing their work relationship through the interaction or by contributing their part to the organizational culture. The context variables have a decisive influence on which communication behavior is considered appropriate in an interaction situation.

Finally, the quality of the dyadic interaction between manager and employee also affects variables such as leadership success and leadership effectiveness, i.e., organizational success (9). Psychological variables such as the job satisfaction, commitment, and extra-role behavior of employees (organizational citizenship behavior) are relevant in this context (Rosenstiel, Molt, Rüttinger, & Salisch, 2005). If the superior in our example succeeds in encouraging their employee to engage with the new software and thereby convincing them of its advantages for their work, this can positively influence the employee's job satisfaction and performance behavior because they can understand the meaningfulness of the introduction. The superior has thus demonstrated successful leadership.

---Insert Figure 1 here ---

**Discussion and Outlook**

The benefit of the model is that it enables a differentiated analysis of communication situations. If the superior in the example above does not succeed in achieving their goal, hypotheses can be made as to where in the communication process the causes for this are to be found. It is possible that the cause in the example case lies in the fact that the conflict as a context variable has a negative impact on the communication behavior of the two parties. Only such insights into the causes of communication breakdowns, as well as of successful conversation processes, make it possible to derive concrete measures for change.

A number of studies and review articles are available that address the importance of leadership behavior for organizational success. Hogan and Kaiser (2005) state quite generally that “good leadership is the key to organizational effectiveness” (p.178). Also, the results of several studies and meta-analyses show interrelationships between leadership behavior and success indicators (including Geyer & Steyrer, 1998). For example, Steyrer, Schiffinger, and Lang (2008) show that appropriate leadership behavior has a positive correlation with employee commitment, which in turn contributes to organizational success. An overview of the empirical confirmation of the central importance of communication for corporate success is provided by Tourish and Hargie (2009).

The few existing studies on leadership communication in an organizational context provide evidence of the link between communication competence, leadership, and relevant result variables such as commitment and job satisfaction (e.g., Luthans, Hodgetts, & Rosenkrantz, 1988; Waldherr, 2008). They support Tourish and Hargie's (2009) assertion that, to a large extent, an organization's success is guided by the competent communication behavior of its managers.

In view of the above, we argue for more systematic, theoretically grounded research on the implications of leadership communication for the success of an organization. Currently, initial empirical studies (e.g., Hertzsch, 2011; Schneider, Maier, & Retzbach, 2010) show that the integrative framework model suggested in this article can serve as a productive basis for this.

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**Figure 1: Integrative Framework Model of Communication Competence of Management Personnel in Organizations**



|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **GERMAN** | **ENGLISH** |
| Attributionen über eigene Performanz7 | Attributions about own performance7 |
| **Kontext-Variablen8** | **Context Variables8** |
| Arbeitsanforderung | Work demands |
| Aufgabenunsicherheit | Task uncertainty |
| Kommunikationsnormen und -regeln | Communication norms and rules |
| Organisationskultur | Organizational culture |
| Beziehungsgeschichte der Interagierenden | Relational history of those interacting |
| **Führungskraft** | **Leadership** |
| u.a. Persönlichkeitseigenschaften | Personality characteristics, i.a. |
| Ressourcen1 | Resources1 |
| (kognitive + konativ) | (cognitive + conative) |
| überlegte | Deliberate |
| oder/und automatisierte | and/or automated |
| Motivational Faktoren2 | Motivational factors2 |
| **Auswahl von Verhaltensweisen8** | **Selection of behaviors8** |
| tatsächlich gezeigte Kommunikation | Communication actually shown |
| Dyadische interaction3 | Dyadic interaction3 |
| Feedback4 | Feedback4 |
| **Mitarbeiter** | **Employee** |
| u.a. Persönlichkeitseigenschaften | Personality characteristics, i.a. |
| Ressourcen1 | Resources1 |
| (kognitive + konativ) | (cognitive + conative) |
| überlegte | Deliberate |
| oder/und automatisierte | and/or automated |
| Motivational Faktoren2 | Motivational factors2 |
| **Auswahl von Verhaltensweisen8** | **Selection of behaviors8** |
| tatsächlich gezeigte Kommunikation | Communication actually shown |
| Dyadische interaction3 | Dyadic interaction3 |
| Feedback4 | Feedback4 |
| Attributionen über eigene Performanz7 | Attributions about own performance7 |
| **Führungsbeziehungsqualität6** | **Leadership relationship quality6** |
| Zuneigung, Loyalität, Respekt, Engagement (gegenseitg)5 | Affection, loyalty, respect, commitment (mutual)5 |
| Gemeinsames Verständis5 | Mutual understanding5 |
| **Attributionen über KommKomp des Interaktionspartners5** | **Attributions about CommComp of interaction partners5** |
| Minimierung von Unsicherhiet | Minimization of uncertainty |
| Kommunikationszufriedenheit5 | Communication satisfaction5 |
| Wahrgenommene Zielerreichung5 | Perceived goal achievement5 |
| **Organisationale Ergebnis-Variablen9** | **Organizational result variables9** |
| Führungserfolg | Leadership success |
| Wahrgenommene Effektivität der Führung | Perceived leadership effectiveness |
| Arbeitszufriedenheit, Commitment, Extrarollenverhalten | Job satisfaction, commitment, extra-role behavior |
| Organisationserfolg | Organizational success |
|  |  |
| **Respectively Numbered German Text in Body p. 9–11 PDF** | **Respectively Numbered English Text in Body p. 7–9** |
| kognitive und konative Kompetenzressourcen (1) | Cognitive and conative competence resources (1) |
| Motivationale Faktoren (2) | Motivational factors (2) |
| dyadischen Interaktion (3) | Dyadic interaction (3) |
| Feedbackschleife (4) | Feedback loop (4) |
| Gesprächspartner Kommunikationskompetenz zugeschrieben wird (5) | Communication competence being attributed to the conversation partner (5) |
| qualitativ hochwertigen Führungsbeziehung (6) | High-quality leadership relationship (6) |
| Attributionen über Kompetenz bzw.Inkompetenz (7). | Attributions regarding their own competence or incompetence (7) |
| Kontextvariablenmoderiert (8) | Moderated by various context variables (8) |
| Organisationserfolg (9) | Organizational success (9) |
|  |  |