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THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION ON INDIVIDUALS IN ORGANIZATIONS

JAMES C. McCROSKEY and VIRGINIA P. RICHMOND

The impact of communication apprehension of employees on organizational behavior is discussed and research in this area summarized. Suggestions for managers to consider for dealing with this problem are provided.

That effective communication is central to the efficient operation of an organization, whether public or corporate, and to effective participation of individuals within organizations has been recognized for several decades, at least since the decline of the "scientific" school of management. Many organizations spend thousands of dollars each year to employ either consultants or regular staff to implement training programs or structural changes intended to enhance the quality of communication within their systems. Unfortunately, relatively few such efforts produce long-term positive change. Many produce some positive change that continues for only a short period, some others produce no noticeable effect at all, and a few actually result in negative changes.

Given the clear awareness of the importance of effective communication to organizations, it is somewhat surprising that relatively few organizations have directed any of their efforts towards helping their employees overcome what appears to be a significant barrier to effective communication in an organization—communication apprehension. A probable reason for this oversight is that information about the role of communication apprehension is widely scattered through a variety of research journals not commonly assessed by managers. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to provide a succinct summary of this information and

provide some suggestions which communication consultants may consider recommending for implementation.

THE NATURE OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

Communication apprehension (CA) is defined as *an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons.*¹ A person with "high" CA is one whose anxiety about or fear of communicating with others outweighs the person's projections of gain from such an activity.² The construct of CA is similar to that of "shyness."³ Both refer to an internal state of the individual which inhibits that person across a wide variety of communication contexts, from a job interview, through group conferences, to the public platform. While most people will experience significant anxiety in some communication situations, such as when forced to give a public speech,⁴ the person we will refer to below as a "high CA" person will experience such difficulties in most, if not all, contexts which require oral communication with another person or persons.

1. James C. McCroskey, "Oral Communication Apprehension: A Summary of Recent Theory and Research," *Human Communication Research*, 4 (1977), 78-96.

2. James C. McCroskey, "Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety," *Speech Monographs*, 37 (1970), 269-277.

3. Philip G. Zimbardo, *Shyness: What It Is and What To Do About It* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Co., 1977).

4. Zimbardo, p. 14.

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While people with high CA generally go unnoticed in the general society, the number of such people is surprisingly high. Research involving the general U.S. population and varying from grade-school children through college students to senior citizens indicates that the proportion of such people in all age groups in the United States is approximately 20 percent.⁵ Some estimates range as high as 40 percent.⁶ Research in other cultures suggests very similar proportions within most groups, with some varying substantially below this level (such as Israelis and Jewish Americans) and some varying substantially above this level (such as Germans, Indians, Japanese, and Mexicans).⁷ Although the available research suggests that a somewhat smaller proportion of employees in some public organizations are high CAs, in all of the available studies of ongoing organizations, substantial numbers of such individuals have been observed.⁸

Our concern with the role of CA in organizations stems from the projected impact on the individual and the organization of CA's primary behavioral consequence: the avoidance of and withdrawal from oral communication. Previous research has demonstrated clearly and consistently that high CAs regularly engage in strategies, some conscious and some nonconscious, to avoid situations in which they perceive that they will be forced to communicate orally. When such efforts are not successful, high CAs will seek to withdraw from the communication situation as soon as possible and/or participate as little as possible while in that situation.⁹ For example, within a small group context, the high CA will first attempt to avoid joining the group. If that is not possible, the person will tend to sit quietly and not participate unless forced to by other group members and will

seek an excuse to leave the group at the earliest opportunity. In short, the high CA fears verbal behavior and engages in such behavior significantly less than other people. To understand the importance of these tendencies on the part of high CAs, we need to consider the role and impact of verbal behavior within interpersonal relationships.

VERBAL BEHAVIOR IN RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The importance of verbal behavior in the development of interpersonal relationships may seem so obvious that it needs no exposition. However, the role of verbal behavior is less obvious than it may appear at first glance, and some of our "folk wisdom" in this area leads many to false conclusions and assumptions.

In the developmental theory of interpersonal relationships advanced by Berger and Calabrese, it is stressed that in initial contacts between people there is a great deal of uncertainty present.¹⁰ Neither person typically knows much of anything about the other, and both need and seek information about the other in order to form interpersonal impressions. Although some information may be gleaned from observations of the other person's behaviors and careful decoding of their nonverbal communication, the primary source of information is the content of the other person's verbal behavior. Essentially, then, talking permits a relationship to develop. Although talking is a necessary condition for full relational development, it is not a sufficient condition. That is, if people do not talk to one another, the development of a relationship between them is highly unlikely. However, if they do talk, what and how much is said will be heavily influential in determining whether the relationship develops and/or continues and whether the relationship is affectively positive or negative.

Given this theoretical context, then, we should project that high CAs would have greater difficulty establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships than would other people. The available research supports this presumption.¹¹ However, this difficulty

5. McCroskey, "Oral Communication Apprehension."

6. Zimbardo, p. 14.

7. Zimbardo, p. 233.

8. See, for example, Michael D. Scott, James C. McCroskey, and Michael E. Sheahan, "Measuring Communication Apprehension," *Journal of Communication*, 28 (1978), pp. 104-111; and Raymond L. Falcione, James C. McCroskey, and John A. Daly, "Job Satisfaction as a Function of Employees' Communication Apprehension, Self-Esteem, and Perceptions of Their Immediate Supervisor," *Communication Yearbook I*, B.D. Ruben, ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1977), pp. 263-276.

9. McCroskey, "Oral Communication Apprehension."

10. Charles R. Berger and Richard J. Calabrese, "Some Explorations in Initial Interaction and Beyond: Toward a Developmental Theory of Interpersonal Communication," *Human Communication Research*, 1 (1975), 99-112.

11. James C. McCroskey and Michael E. Sheahan,

in relational development experienced by high CAs may not be so much a function of their not giving and obtaining information through oral interaction with other people as it is a function of the information inferred by other people on the basis of their verbal behavior.

Although "folk wisdom" teaches us that there are a lot of people in the world who talk too much and cause people to dislike them as a result, overwhelming research evidence points to the fact that this is very seldom true.¹² In fact, for decades it has been known that interpersonal perceptions of the quality of a person's communication are significantly correlated with perceptions of the person's quantity of communication.¹³ This is a direct, linear relationship, with increased quantity resulting in perceptions of increased quality, up to a very high (and very atypical) level of quantity. People who talk more are perceived to be more competent, attractive, and sociable as well as exerting more leadership over others. These results have even been observed under experimental conditions where quality of communication was carefully controlled and manipulated, as well as in naturalistic settings. Although research in this area has been conducted primarily in the United States, replications in England, Mexico, and Chile suggest that the findings are not simply a cultural artifact but may generalize to many other cultural groups not yet studied.¹⁴

What is apparently operating in the generation of such interpersonal perceptions as those described above is a socially learned stereotype. In the absence of strongly contradictory evidence, people assume that those who participate more make more worthwhile contributions and that those who participate

less make less worthwhile contributions.¹⁵ Interpersonal evaluations are then predicated on a combination of these assumptions and the observation of another person's verbal behavior.

Given this research base, then, we should project that high CAs, since they talk less, should be perceived less positively than other people. The research investigating this presumption has been strongly supportive. High CAs consistently have been found to be perceived to have lower competence, lower leadership, lower attractiveness, and lower sociability than other people and to be less likely to be turned to for opinion leadership than other people.¹⁶

While most of the research noted above has been conducted outside the organizational environment, there is good reason to believe that similar impact should be observable within that environment. People do not leave their CA or their stereotypes at the door when they enter an organization, much as we might wish that they would.

CA IN ORGANIZATIONS

Several studies of the impact of CA within the organizational environment have been reported. Those concerned with occupational choice, job applicant screening, job satisfaction, employment retention, and advancement are summarized below.

Occupational Choice

Given the strong tendency for high CAs to attempt to avoid being forced to communicate, it might be expected that such people would select occupations which they perceive to have minimal communication requirements. In a study of 196 college stu-

"Communication Apprehension, Social Preference and Social Behavior in a College Environment," *Communication Quarterly*, 26 (1978), 39-44.

12. See, for example, John A. Daly, James C. McCroskey, and Virginia P. Richmond, "The Relationships Between Vocal Activity and Perception of Communicators in Small Group Interaction," *Western Speech Communication*, 41 (1977), 175-187.

13. For a summary of this research, see Donald P. Hayes and Leo Meltzer, "Interpersonal Judgments Based on Talkativeness: I. Fact or Artifact?" *Sociometry*, 35 (1972), 538-561; for more recent research, see Donald P. Hayes and Leo Meltzer, "Interpersonal Judgments Based on Talkativeness: II. The Quality-Quantity Relationship," forthcoming.

14. Hayes and Meltzer, forthcoming.

15. Hayes and Meltzer, forthcoming.

16. Representative studies in this area include the following: James C. McCroskey and Virginia P. Richmond, "The Effects of Communication Apprehension on the Perception of Peers," *Western Speech Communication*, 40 (1976), 14-21; Velman J. Wenzlaff, "The Production of Leadership: A Consideration of Selected Communication Variables," M.S. thesis, Illinois State University, 1972; James C. McCroskey, John A. Daly, Virginia P. Richmond, and Barbara Cox, "The Effects of Communication Apprehension on Interpersonal Attractions," *Human Communication Research*, 2 (1975), 51-65; Virginia P. Richmond, "The Relationship Between Trait and State Communication Apprehension and Interpersonal Perceptions During Acquaintance Stages," *Human Communication Research*, 4 (1978), 338-349.

dents, Daly and McCroskey provided subjects with a list of 31 common occupations and asked them to rate how desirable each occupation was for them.¹⁷ The occupations had previously been categorized as either high or low in communication requirements. As expected, high CAs expressed a strong preference for occupations where communication requirements are low, while people with lower CA expressed a strong preference for occupations with high communication requirements. The subjects were also asked to identify the occupation which they planned to enter after graduation and to rate the amount of communication they thought that occupation would require. Again, the subjects were found to prefer occupations compatible with their CA level, high CAs reporting planning to enter low-communication occupations.

While this research with a college student population provides results consistent with what would be expected on the basis of theory related to CA, college students are not similar to everyone in the real world of organizations. Thus, generalizing beyond the college student population should be done cautiously. Fortunately, later research suggests that generalization is possible.

In a study of 243 federal and state employees in Western Pennsylvania, Scott, McCroskey, and Sheahan investigated not only occupational preferences but also actual occupation in comparison to communication requirements.¹⁸ They found, as was expected on the basis of the previous research, that the adult high CAs in this sample had a significant preference for occupations with low communication requirements. They also found that these individuals were actually in positions with lower communication requirements than the other people in their sample. The pattern for people with low CA was the exact reverse.

At first blush the results of these two studies may appear encouraging. After all, isn't it desirable that people be in positions compatible with their communication orientations? We must answer both yes and no. Yes, because these are the positions in which the person will feel most comfortable and be

most likely to succeed. No, because, with only a very few exceptions, positions with higher communication requirements are also those that carry higher status in the society and provide greater economic return to the individual. Thus, as a result of their CA, it appears that high CAs tend to self-select themselves into occupational roles that insure them comparatively lower social status and lower economic standing. While this may be desirable for the organizations involved, whether it is good for the individuals is questionable.

Job Applicant Screening

As was noted previously, research in some organizations has discovered fewer high CAs in the system than would be expected on the basis of norms for the population as a whole. This suggests the possibility that high CAs are systematically excluded from being hired, or that for one reason or another they are more likely to leave the organization than other people.

In an attempt to determine whether systematic exclusion was a reasonable explanation for the shortage of observed high CAs, Richmond devised a simulation of the job applicant screening process.¹⁹ She asked second- and third-year students majoring in business administration to evaluate the credentials of alleged job applicants. Each student evaluated one applicant. Unknown to the subjects, they all evaluated exactly the same credentials, except that half of the subjects had included in the credentials a passing reference to the person engaging in several behaviors found previously to be typical of high CAs, while the other half included reference to the typical behavior of persons with low CA. The evaluations were strikingly and significantly different. Compared to the applicant with lower CA, the high CA applicant was perceived to be less task and socially attractive, was projected to be less satisfied in their job, to have poorer relationships with peers, supervisors, and subordinates at work, to be less productive, and to have less likelihood for advancement in the organization.

In a very similar study, Daly and Leth found that the high CA applicant was perceived as

17. John A. Daly and James C. McCroskey, "Occupational Choice and Desirability as a Function of Communication Apprehension," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 22 (1975), 309-313.

18. Scott, McCroskey, and Sheahan.

19. Virginia P. Richmond, "Communication Apprehension and Success in the Job Applicant Screening Process," Paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Berlin, West Germany, 1977.

less competent and projected to be less successful on the job, to require more training, to be less satisfied on the job, and to have more difficulty establishing good relationships with coworkers. In addition, the high CA was significantly less likely to be offered employment, or even an interview.²⁰

These studies suggest, then, that the high CA is handicapped from the outset in the organizational world. Such people, if written credentials and recommendations are employed in the screening process, are not likely even to obtain an interview. At present we can only speculate about the fate of the high CA within the context of the employment interview, since no research in this area has yet been reported. However, it appears from the data available that high CAs are discriminated against in the hiring process, possibly even when the available job is most compatible with the orientations of high CA.

Job Satisfaction

Virtually all occupations require some communication between peers and between peers and supervisors. The question arises, therefore, as to how well the high CA can adjust to this reality. If people are forced to do something they don't like, it follows that they will be less satisfied with their lot than will other people.

In studies of 211 civil service employees and 189 elementary and secondary school teachers, Falcione, McCroskey, and Daly examined the relationship between CA and job satisfaction.²¹ Their results indicated that high CAs in both groups were significantly less satisfied than employees with lower CA, particularly with regard to satisfaction with their supervisor. It may be that supervisors provide more of a threat to high CAs than others since even communication from the supervisor that is intended to reward the high CA may be distasteful to such individuals. In any event, the research suggests that high CAs are less likely to be happy in their work than are other people.

Employment Retention

As we noted previously, in some organiza-

20. John A. Daly and Steven Leth, "Communication Apprehension and the Personnel Selection Decision," Paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Portland, Oregon, 1976.

21. Falcione, McCroskey, and Daly.

tions, fewer high CAs have been found than would be expected from population norms. In part, this may be a function of their never being hired. Also, as we just noted, high CAs are less satisfied in their jobs, so may leave the job voluntarily or engage in behaviors that cause them to be dismissed.

In order to determine whether the absence of high CAs in the expected numbers was simply a function of their never having been hired or was also partially a function of their leaving positions that they had occupied, Scott, McCroskey, and Sheahan examined the length of employment of the federal and state employees in their study discussed earlier.²² Since age and length of employment are highly correlated, they examined the relationship between CA and length of employment while controlling for age of the employee. They found that public employees with low CA had recorded over 50 percent more years of employment than the employees with high CA.

The results of this study, therefore, indicated that even after high CAs obtain employment, they are less likely to retain their positions than other people. High CA, then, may be a significant contributor to the turnover problems faced by many organizations.

Advancement

Given that high CAs tend to retain employment for a shorter period than other employees, it would come as no surprise to find that few high CAs advance to top positions in organizations. Each advancement requires more administrative and/or supervisory activity and an accompanying increase in communication. Additionally, the cost of poor, absent, or ineffective communication becomes higher at each step in most organizations and increases the likelihood that the high CA will fail and be removed from the position.

It appears that high CAs are well aware of both the low probability and lack of desirability for their advancement. In the Scott et al. study, the employees were asked to indicate the degree to which they desired to advance in the organization and how likely they perceived it to be that they would be promoted.²³ The high CAs not only reported that they didn't think they would be promoted, but also

22. Scott, McCroskey, and Sheahan.

23. Scott, McCroskey, and Sheahan.

indicated that they did not want to be. The employees with lower CA, on the other hand, not only wanted to be promoted but also saw their chances as good that they would be. High CAs, then, appear to be relegated to the lower levels of organizations through a tacit but usually unspoken agreement between them and their supervisors that that is where they belong.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

The results of the research involving CA in organizations presents a bleak picture. For the individual with high CA, prospects for employment, retention, and advancement are all significantly reduced. It is less likely that the person will develop good interpersonal relationships with employee peers. It is less likely that the individual will be satisfied with whatever employment he or she does obtain.

The implications for organizations are no less important. The organization which systematically excludes high CAs from employment loses many potentially valuable employees, since CA has been found to be not meaningfully related to intelligence or aptitude. However, if such people are employed, the organization is not likely to obtain the best efforts and input from these employees because of their reluctance to engage in the necessary communication required. In addition, their dissatisfaction is likely to contribute to a less positive overall organizational climate. In short, compared to other employees, high CAs are more costly to the organization. Not only are they likely to be less productive, but they are also more likely to leave or have to be dismissed and thus require an additional expenditure to train their replacements.

Managers should direct attention towards the problem of CA among their employees and prospective employees, if for no more humanistic reason than that ignoring the problem is costing money, a very significant amount of money. What, then, should organizations do? Consider the following options:

1. Screen prospective employees to determine their levels of CA. An inexpensive method is to administer a short, self-report scale which is readily available.²⁴ A more costly, but sometimes more valid, method is to carefully interview the potential employee and

24. Scott, McCroskey, and Sheahan.

people who know the person. Once the level of CA is determined, the organization can choose to exclude the high CA if it wishes or take care to place the person in a position which requires minimal communication with other people.

2. Screen current employees to determine their levels of CA. The same methods are available for this as for prospective employees. Once the employee's level of CA is determined, the organization can take care to avoid promoting the person with high CA to positions which require substantial communication. The Peter Principle suggests that employees rise through an organization until they reach their level of incompetence, where they stay from then on. While this view may be overly cynical, for the high CA it may be true. An outstanding laboratory technician may make an outstanding supervisor of the laboratory, but not if he or she is a high CA. Such people must be kept in positions which require little communication with other people for successful completion of the job.
3. Help the high CA reduce her or his level of CA. Both of the previous options are only partial solutions to the organization's problem. They will help reduce the problem, but they won't eliminate it. The real solution is to provide the help the high CA needs to overcome her or his individual problem. Such help is potentially available virtually everywhere in modern societies. Many professionals in the field of communication and most behavioral psychologists (not psychotherapists) are prepared to provide the help needed. The techniques that have been found to be most successful are behavior therapies known as "systematic desensitization" and "cognitive restructuring." Both techniques can be learned with relatively short training by lay personnel already employed by the organization, if a behavior therapist is not included on the staff.²⁵ The treatments usually can be administered to high CAs successfully in as short a period as seven weeks with only one hour of treatment per week. This represents a minimal financial investment for the organization, with the potential for major return in the form of increased employee productivity, satisfaction, and length of service.

Because it is to their economic advantage, to say nothing of the obvious human value,

25. For an explanation of one of these methods, see James C. McCroskey, "The Implementation of a large Scale Program of Systematic Desensitization for Communication Apprehension," *Speech Teacher*, 21 (1972), 255-264.

organizations should begin to direct attention towards the problem of CA among their employees. In the future, educational systems may be able to help high CAs to overcome their problem before they ever enter the job market, but that ideal state has yet to be

achieved. For the foreseeable future, the responsibility must be left to the numerous organizations in our various societies and cultures. It is to the organizations' advantage to meet this responsibility.