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A Communication Framework for Subordinate Reporting: Facilitating Organizational Assimilation and Participation

Abstract

This research produced a decision-making framework associating textual alternatives with four expectations for subordinate reporting—contribution, deference, ownership, and objectivity. Responses to two workplace reporting scenarios were obtained from 1,593 Asian and US business students. Holistic evaluation revealed that most students were unprepared to manage fundamental communication challenges for reporting to supervising managers. Trait identification and analytical scoring of selected samples facilitated framework development. Results suggest that the four framework categories are distinct and can be assessed. Further analysis indicates Asian students know more about communicating deference than contribution; the reverse is true of the US population. Besides facilitating entry into organizations and managerial supervision, results suggest usefulness of the framework for future research.

Communication Framework for Subordinate Reporting: Facilitating Organizational Assimilation and Participation

Becoming acclimated to an unfamiliar workplace environment is always a challenge. Integration sufficient for full participation is known to take time and training. New hires, particularly those fresh out of school, may have learned little that explicitly equips them for the web of workplace reporting relationships and responsibilities.

For newcomers, organizational entry is a time for learning pivotal behaviors, values, and beliefs associated with their job and organization. As Jablin (2001, p. 756) observes, it "is a time for learning what insiders consider to be 'normal' patterns of thinking and behaving (see also Schein, 1968; Van Maanen, 1975).

We know that new hires enter the workplace with a set of expectations and beliefs about how people communicate in various occupations and work settings, expectations and beliefs formed in family relationships, school activities, and various early work experiences (e.g. Bowes & Goodnow, 1996). Contact with recruiting sources and subsequent organizational efforts to socialize employees contribute more specifically. "The recruit develops initial interpretation schemes and scripts for his or her new work environment," writes Jablin (2001, p. 756) "primarily through formal and informal communication . . . including message exchanges with supervisors, peers/coworkers, and management sources" (see also Harris, 1994; Teboul, 1997).

Indeed, assimilation is facilitated via a stream of activities and message exchanges, which new entrants interpret based on past experience (Van Maanen, 1984). Formal orientation programs, employee handbooks, checklists of various kinds (e.g., Arthur, 1991; Jerris, 1993), videotapes introducing organizational traditions, customers, and products (Thralls, 1992), and mentoring or buddy systems (e.g. Davis, 1994) are some of the communications thought to help socialize new entrants in appropriate organizational behaviors and attitudes.

Research on the organizational socialization process is still in its infancy, however (Jablin, 2001). For one thing, organizational communication studies have focused on broad socialization strategies or tactics and much less on the nature of the communication itself. Even the instrument for measuring socialization *content* by Chao, et al., (1994) examines the *outcomes* of socialization (such as newcomers' *perceptions* of their task proficiency and *feelings* regarding whether they "fit in"). Chao, et al., (1994) do not deal with the text of messages exchanged in the socialization process.

The purpose of our research was to develop a communication framework that associates textual alternatives with expectations for subordinate reporting, situations consequential for new hires. We began by investigating the linguistic and rhetorical competencies of a representative group of Asian and US graduating business school students, soon-to-be new hires, using a performance assessment involving reporting bad news. We used the assessment results, plus analyses of textual traits and a testing process involving an analytical scoring tool, to build the framework, drawing on strategies of linguistic politeness, particularly those related to communicative tone. We grounded our analyses in the theoretical constructs of "writing to learn" and "organizational voice." The framework is intended to sensitize new entrants and their supervising managers to reporting concerns and related discourse features while providing an instrument for future investigations of discourse features.

LITERATURE RELEVANT TO SUBORDINATE REPORTING

The considerable research on superior-subordinate relationships covers perception, influence and maintenance tactics, as well as communication behaviors and competency. Schnake, et al., (1990), for example, identified differences in *perception* between superiors and their subordinates regarding the superiors' communication effectiveness. Superiors believed they were more effective than their subordinates believed them to be on things like communication openness, and feedback. Looking at *behavior,* Giles, et al., (1987) found that individuals are motivated to accommodate their speech styles and nonverbal behavior to their listeners in order to accomplish various power-dominance relationships.

Others have proposed various categories of tactics for influencing or maintaining upward and downward relationships, such as *ingratiation*, praising or flattering, and *rationality*, such as presenting facts in a neutral way to influence others (e.g., Schermerhorn & Bond, 1994). For instance, Yukl and Tracy (1992) speak of using logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade others that a proposal or request is viable. Falbe and Yukl (1992) identify influence tactics used by managers to obtain subordinate compliance such as inspirational appeals, consultation, rational persuasion, ingratiation, exchange, pressure, and coalition.

Tepper (1995) categorizes tactics subordinates use to achieve relational stability with their superiors as: (1) *personal*--joking, sharing personal experiences, (2) *direct*--expressing opinions, expectations, and perceptions of injustices, (3) *regulative*--providing evidence of being a good employee, avoiding delivery of bad news or asking for direction, overlooking negative comments, and (4) *contractual* or formal communication conveying conformity to role requirements and general communication conventions, such as clarifying responsibilities, sticking to agreements, sharing credit for success, accepting criticism, and showing respect (see also Waldron, 1991).

Research on communication competence coincides with the above. Communication skills seen as most important include exchanging information, interviewing, networking, public speaking, advising, persuading, giving instructions and feedback, solving problems, writing, and listening (DiSalvo, 1980; Disalvo & Larsen, 1987; DiSalvo, Larsen, & Seilor, 1976; Jablin, et al. 1994; Monge et al., 1982). Researchers taking a social cognitive perspective associate communication competence with the ability to understand self and role responsibilities that invoke self monitoring, perspective taking, and displaying empathy (Sypher, 1984; Sypher & Sypher, 1983; Sypher & Zorn, 1986; Zorn & Violanti, 1996).

Competency is also associated with individuals who understand and employ appropriate communication *patterns* (Cooley & Roach, 1984). Such patterns include norms for polite, tactful, and respectful discourse. Quite dramatic in this regard is Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam and Jablin's (1999) finding that even in Thai organizations, competent employees needed to know how to seek, process and give information, including bad news, and to propose new ideas, despite the cultural dictates of *kreng jai* (or "extreme reluctance to impose on anyone or disturb his/her personal equilibrium by direct criticism, challenge or confrontation"). As they put it, "subordinates are expected to provide their bosses with *all* the information that they need to perform their jobs and maintain face." Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam and Jablin (1999, p. 411, 413) conclude: "Subordinates need to walk a fairly high and narrow wire; they must avoid conflict and maintain harmony in their relationships with their supervisors while at the same time they are forthright and complete in sharing information with them."

Although research on communication competency relevant to subordinate-superior communications identifies "general communication conventions" (Tepper, 1995) and, to some extent, speech acts (Searle, 1969), it seldom explores how such tactics are actualized via the linguistic and rhetorical features comprising communication itself. As Morand (2000, p. 235) observed, "little attention is paid to how individuals display and communicate relative power at the face-to-face level." Giles et al., (1987, p. 41) posited: "We are in dire need of specifying the acoustic, nonverbal, sociolinguistic, and discourse features that make up convergent, divergent, and other communicative strategies in different social settings." Bilbow (1998, p. 157) noted that:

> Management is a symbolic activity that depends to a great extent on a manager's control of language resources. However, relatively little is known about the linguistic and pragmatic features of managers' spoken discourse in a range of speech events common in organizations (e.g., meetings, negotiations, presentations, and so on).

Similarly, Jablin (2001, p. 763) observed that "we know little of how such strategies are communicatively performed by organizational agents." Indeed, he continues, "few studies have explicitly focused on unpacking the communication attributes and the specific kinds of messages associated with the enactment of the strategies and tactics.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

To articulate the central role of written and oral communication performance at the linguistic and rhetorical level, our research builds on studies of communicative tone and two interrelated theoretical perspectives: "writing to learn" and "organizational voice." These perspectives view writing and speaking activities as more than organizational artifact and illustrate their integrality to organizational socialization and work performance, including performance related to subordinate reporting relevant to new entrants.

Linguistic Politeness and Communicative Tone

Linguistic and rhetorical strategies relevant to a subordinate accepting assignments--clarifying responsibilities, presenting information, proposing new ideas, and reporting bad news--remain to be harvested from scholarship on linguistic politeness explored within the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and anthropology (Brown & Gilman, 1991; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Goffman, 1959, 1967, 1983; Lakoff, 1974; Ting-Toomey, 1994). Particularly relevant are Brown and Levinson's (1987) strategies for showing sensitivity to the "face" needs of the receiver by mitigating "Face Threatening Acts" (FTAs) such as requesting and critiquing (see also Goffman, 1967, p. 5; Gumperz, 1982). Brown and Levinson categorized receiver face needs as positive and negative: positive politeness strategies addressing the receiver's desire that his/her wants and actions be regarded as desirable; negative strategies involving care not to impose. Their strategies for protecting receiver face ranged from indirectness, hedges, and passives, to the use of inclusives (e.g. "we" and "our") and honorifics, e.g. "Sir" or "Mr." (see also Brown & Gilman 1991; Fraser, 1990; Goffman, 1959; Ting-Toomey, 1994).

How these strategies may operate in business communications is explored to some degree in research on tone. Communication tone has been defined as a property of a piece of communication as a whole that resides in the "cumulative *effect* of the grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical choices" that a communicator has made (Perlman, 1981, p. 214). According to Locker (1995, p. 192), tone is the "implied attitude of the author toward the reader and the subject," a view that is consistent with Shelby and

Reinsch's (1995, p. 306-7) view of tone as "receiver response to message characteristics." We find the same perspective in Fraser and Nolen (1981, p. 96-97), who observed:

> No sentence is inherently polite or impolite . . . . It is not the expressions themselves but the conditions under which they are used that determine the judgment of politeness.

An apt example is the rhetorical debate over direct versus indirect structure: Indirectness is touted as a means of politeness in conflicted situations (Searle, 1969, 1975); yet, we also know that directness is not perceived to be impolite if the proposition is in some way beneficial for the receiver (e.g. Leech, 1983; Suchan, 1998). Inter-cultural studies find likewise. Lee-Wong (2000) observed directness valued among intimates, for example (see also Akar, 1998; Blum-Kulka, 1987; Hwang, 1990; Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Takahara, 1986; Wierzbicka, 1985; Yli-Jokipii, 1994).

While acknowledging that tone is situationally dependent and dynamic in its textual manifestation, research also suggests that some politeness strategies have relevance across contexts (e.g. David & Baker, 1994; Morand, 1996 a & b; Nickerson, 1994). Relevant to subordinate reporting specifically is Morand's (2000, p. 244) analysis of students' laboratory role plays of situations requiring the communication of "directives" (FTAs) to individuals of higher and lower organizational status. He found that "speakers share common linguistic reference points in formulating and anchoring judgments of politeness" and further that polite language is "a finite menu of weighted tactics that users choose from, liberally or sparingly, as circumstances require." Looking at organizational genre in a specific industry, Schryer (2000) discovered that insurance claim denial letters employ the traditional structure for negative messages: a neutral buffer opening, an explanation of the decision, a statement of the decision, and a close. Shelby and Reinsch's (1995) empirical analyses showed that politeness strategies, such as "positive emphasis" and "you attitude" (stating things positively from the perspective of the receiver) and buffering bad news (e.g. explaining reasons the insurance claim was denied), accomplish the desired outcomes with business receivers (see also Limaye, 2001; Locker, 1982, 1999).

One of our goals was to create a framework addressing "face" and tone issues relevant to subordinate reporting of bad news that would incorporate proven strategies in a decision-making format that could accommodate relational and contextual variations.

Notion of "Writing to Learn"

Research suggests that organizational communication can be learned on the job when individuals write together, confer on writing, or discuss written deliverables such as proposals and reports (Ackerman, 1991, 1993; Haas & Witte, 2001; Penrose, 1992). In their study of writing practices at Exxon ITD, for example, Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller (1985) recount how the prevalent practice of "document cycling" (the process of moving a piece of writing back and forth between writer and supervisor with attendant corrections from the supervisor and revisions from the writer) became a means for determining shared views and expected communicative practices. We know that document review builds consensus and commitment (van der Geest & van Gemert, 1997), that writing demonstrates membership and facilitates relationships (Ice, 1991; Lipson, 1988; Winsor, 1990, 1999), and that there is a connection between writing and employee evaluation and promotion decisions (Anderson, 1985; Couture & Rymer, 1991; Scudder & Guinan, 1989).

Directly related to subordinate reporting, Couture and Rymer (1991, p. 87) showed that a writer and a supervisor's oral and written communications during document planning, drafting, and revising (or what they call "discourse interaction") proved an effective means for the writer to get clarity on the nature of his/her tasks and to discover the most appropriate way to do the job. For example, one writer they interviewed said that he learned to depersonalize his writing (omitting "I" because it signaled an opinion instead of a professional judgment) as a result of "discourse interaction" with his manager. Although subordinates found these conversations greatly informative about organizational practices, managers viewed them as necessary only to "correct" writer mistakes.

Katz (1998a, p. 3, see also 1998b) reported similar findings in *The Dynamics of Writing Review: Opportunities for Growth and Change in the Workplace*:

> [W]riting review sessions provided opportunities for . . . newcomers to improve their ability to write appropriately for the organization. However, and perhaps more importantly, writing review sessions also provided

opportunities for them to learn about the culture of the organization, to express their resistance to aspects of the organization they found questionable, and to gain the authority necessary to change aspects of the organization they found unacceptable

Subordinates can learn the complexities of organizational roles and responsibilities by writing and talking about writing with their supervisors.

Thus, we aimed to develop a framework to help new entrants more intelligently observe, analyze, and talk about the organizational writing and speaking they are experiencing, especially in subordinate reporting.

Theory of Organizational Voice

For some time, "voice" has been used as a metaphor to explain the relationship between communication and organization, particularly issues of relationships and power that affect who can speak, how, and when (not unlike "voice as participation" in composition studies as defined by those promoting so-called "critical pedagogy," e.g. Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Freire, 1970, 1985; Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Simon, 1987). Organizational studies of empowerment associate voice with organizational participation and commitment. Those at the top of the organizational ladder are said to have substantial voice; those at the bottom, little or none (e.g. Cheney, 1995; Deetz, 1992; Pacanowsky, 1988). Not unrelated, voice is commonly used in feminist organizational studies to discuss issues of gaining voice (Clair, 1993; Marshall, 1993) and extended to issues of race and ethnicity, including to describe how minority groups may be marginalized (e.g. Nkomo, 1992). Summarizing use in organizational studies, Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman (1996, p. 391) observe that "[t]he voice metaphor centers on implicit factors that shape the role of communication, namely ideology, hegemony, legitimization to speak, and unobtrusive control."

Centering on explicit textual factors, the compositionists' notion of voice has been extended to re-conceptualize organizational voice as communicative performance (Rogers, 2002). Explicit factors of organizational voice encompass linguistic and rhetorical patterns, genre creation and use, as well as protocols for the timing and distribution of information. By this definition, organizational voice resides in the configuration of oral and written messages and practices for their use that enable and come to represent the collective relationships, roles, tasks, goals, and values of an organization. It involves all levels it textual activity ranging from word choice and sentence construction to communication distribution systems. It is both dynamic and routine; both individual and collaborative.

Dynamic and routine. Much as Orlikowski and Yates (1994) observed of organizational genre, so too organizational voice is conceived as dynamic and developing (rather than static and finished), as continually created and re-created rather than found (as in the "finding one's voice" notion of the individual-expression school) (Rogers, 2002). At the same time, we know that learned responses and patterns of behaviors are both recognized and rewarded in an organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). In fact, it has been posited that "the possibility of organized action hinges on the emergence and continued existence of common modes of interpretation that allow day-to-day activities to be taken for granted" (Driskill, 1989, p. 132; see also Smart, 1993; Suchan & Dulek, 1998; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). One could argue that learning organizational voice, including operational routines and expectations for subordinate reporting, involves becoming acquainted with and appropriating established textual forms including organizational genre and genre repertoire (Orlinkowski & Yates, 1994; Yates & Orlinkowski, 1992), as well as timing and distribution systems (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Feldman, 1994; Jablin, 2001, p. 763; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin, 1999).

Individual and collaborative. In the matter of compliance with communicative routines and expectations, organizational voice is quite distinct from “voice as individual expression” in composition. Advocates of “voice as individual expression” have emphasized the importance of writing to express one's real, authentic, unique self (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986, 1991; Graves, 1983; Lensmire, 1998; Murray, 1985). They promoted writing as a means for reflection and self-discovery. Under their guidance "voice" had "an individualistic, non-conformist strain" that viewed the "self" as "stable, coherent, unitary, and autonomous" (Lensmire, 1998, p. 263-264). Finding one’s voice had little to do with collective achievement and much to do with personal development (e.g. Graves, 1983).

By contrast, finding organizational voice involves disciplining individuality to associate with the needs and operations of an organizational entity. Much as an individual singer is expected to accept the discipline of the musical score and the director in order to perform as a member of a choir, so too the individual within an organization can assimilate and participate to the degree that s/he complies with prevailing communicative practices (Rogers, 2002; see also Redding & Tompkins, 1988).

Using organization voice as foundational, we aimed to construct a framework to examine connections between organizational expectations and textual alternatives, a framework that would pinpoint some of the communicative challenges facing the new hire, specifically for subordinate reporting. We intended the framework to identify issues of particular concern to the subordinate, such as the need to comply with reporting and relational routines, to accommodate change, and to collaborate. More than this, the framework would suggest explicit means for addressing these concerns in oral and written reports to superiors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In developing a communication framework for subordinate reporting our target users were managers with novice subordinates and soon-to-be new hires with undergraduate business training but with little or no organizational experience, a massive population that is critical for business operations around the world. We further wanted to create a framework for recurring, challenging subordinate reporting situations involving critiquing or sharing bad news (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kankaanranta, 2000; Katz, 1998a & b; Shelby & Reinsch, 1995).

Data for the Study

Our data consisted of 1,593 individual responses to two workplace scenarios. Both scenarios required written communications reporting unfavorable news to the boss--e.g., the boss requests a critique of the argument he plans to use for an upcoming sales presentation (an argument that is flawed) and further to provide suggestions for strengthening the argument. For both scenarios, respondents were given 90 minutes to produce a response, replicating time pressures in a work environment.

Responses to the first scenario, totaling 965, were collected from two populations of senior business school undergraduates. One population consisted of 636 upper-level students at Nanyang Business School (NBS) in Singapore, the other a comparable population of 329 students at University of Michigan Business School (UMBS).

Responses to the second scenario were collected from 628 of the NBS students who had participated in the first scenario. This "exit assessment" was given after these NBS students had taken a business communication course and therefore provided comparative information regarding communication problems that had not been sufficiently addressed in training just prior to graduation and workplace entry.

Population for the Study

Both the UMBS and NBS train significant populations of business entrants with competencies in International Business English. UMBS has approximately 660

Bachelor of Business Administration students (42% women and 26% minorities) with a GPA of 3.6 to 4.0 upon admission to the program. For those Michigan students seeking employment, 90% reported receiving an offer before graduation with a median salary of USD 50,000. NBS at Nanyang Technological University is the second largest of the three universities in Singapore. One of the largest business schools in the world, NBS has a student population of 4,113 undergraduates, divided between two majors, Business (1805) and Accountancy (2308). The majority of NBS students are locally born ethnic Chinese, who comprise 76.8% of the population of Singapore. The remainder is composed of Malays (13.9%), Indians (7.9%), and various other ethnic groups (1.4%).

In terms of English language background, there are similarities between UMBS and NBS. English is the language of instruction in both contexts; therefore, all the respondents for this study had facility with English sufficient to be admitted to university. In Singapore, however, English is one of four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. While an increasing number of students speak English as their first language in Singapore, it should be noted that the first language for others remains their mother tongue, e.g., Mandarin Chinese, Malay, or Tamil. In general, tertiary students in Singapore are comfortable speaking, reading, and writing in English, and government initiatives, such as Singapore's "Speak Good English Campaign," reinforce the need for English competency for all. Moreover, all the NBS participants in this study had fulfilled an advanced English requirement, e.g. the Qualifying English Test (QET) and, in some cases, additional coursework in English.

Research Team and Evaluators

Significant as primary evaluators, the authors of this study consisted of university professors with academic experience ranging from three to 20 years and involving management and business communication instruction throughout Asia, the European Union, and the United States at all educational levels (undergraduate, MBA, Executive MBA, Executive Education) and with experience designing and delivering programs for companies representing the major industries ranging from manufacturing to financial services. One researcher has been associated with training and development with a petroleum MNC for a decade. Advanced degrees include MBA and Ph.D.s covering rhetoric, composition, linguistics, and management. Cultural backgrounds represent US, Chinese Malaysian, and Singaporean. Evaluators for the holistic scoring on overall effectiveness (numbering 12 in Asia and six in the US) had similar backgrounds and included professional editors, technical writers.

Holistic Scoring of Overall Effectiveness

All 1,593 responses were scored holistically on overall effectiveness by teams of evaluators at both sites, including the authors, using blind scoring to calculate inter-rater reliability and following the established protocol used by Educational Testing Service (ETS) to score the Graduate Management Admissions Test Analytical Writing Assessment (ETS, 2001; see also Faigley et al., 1985; Lloyd-Jones, 1977; Purves, Gorman, & Takala, 1988; Williamson & Huot, 1993; Witte & Flach, 1994). Inter-rater reliability was 86% and above. Major criteria for this assessment were: audience analysis (including task fulfillment and tone), content development, organizational strategy, and language control, especially the extent to which errors interfered with communication clarity.

Holistic scores on overall effectiveness and follow-up consultations with students, both in and outside of class using analytical tools coinciding with the four assessment criteria (Rogers & Rymer, 2001), revealed that these soon-to-be-new hires lacked sufficient understanding of interpersonal issues related to communicative tone and task. Respondents, for example, lacked professional sophistication for expressing deference to the boss while reporting flaws in his/her argument.

Framework Development and Testing

Observations from the holistic evaluation regarding poor tone and inadequate task fulfillment figured strongly in our framework development. To develop the framework, we used a trait identification exercise (Lloyd-Jones, 1977; Purves, Gorman, & Takala, 1988; Rogers & Rymer, 2001), a series of tool pilots and trial runs with small groups managers and executives, and analytical scoring of a sub-sample using an analytical tool based on the framework.

For the trait identification and all the pilots, we used individual, blind analyses and scoring procedures following Educational Testing Service standards. Resulting individual scores and written notes became the basis for discussion and framework revision. Reaching consensus across our Asian and US research team allowed for comparison of textual variables from different cultures. Following Bhawuk and Triandis (1996), Lucy (1996), and most recently Thatcher (2001, p. 464) who argued that, "to establish valid cross-cultural comparisons, researchers need to start by recognizing similarities based on shared contexts and then considering differences within the framework of these similarities."

Trait identification exercise. The trait identification exercise involved examining 20 responses intensely (10 from the Asian; 10 from the US respondents) including an equal number of responses receiving high and low holistic scores on overall effectiveness. Four of the authors participated, independently (1) scoring each response holistically on tone and (2) writing notes in response to several questions:

- What major weaknesses and strengths would you discuss with this student to help him/her better understand key issues of tone?
- What examples of textual traits would you use to illustrate these strengths and weaknesses?
- How would you categorize and prioritize these in terms of significance for the population as workplace entrants with reporting responsibilities?

Although we completed this exercise independently and over a period of several weeks, our overall tone scores achieved an inter-rater reliability of 85%, indicating commonalities regarding effective and ineffective tone at a general level. Despite cultural differences among the evaluators, there was agreement on the traits believed to be significant for this population.

Comparative analysis of our categorized lists and notes reinforced the conclusion that communicative tone and task fulfillment comprised key concerns. (Some of the most blatant responses actually told the boss what s/he should do for the presentation as a whole, ignoring the assigned task altogether.) We further divided tone into three subcategories, which we eventually came to call deference, ownership, and objectivity; task became "contribution." Associating our examples with these categories allowed us to illustrate further textual features that can "help" or "hinder" subordinate reporting as suggested by the original effectiveness scores.

Analytical tool use. Over a one-year period we refined the framework including employing it as an analytical tool. The analytical tool developed for this project (see Appendix) includes all four categories, definitions of each (which were refined with use), and a six-level scoring scale following that used by Educational Testing for traditional holistic scoring. Various iterations of this tool were used with diverse groups (undergraduates, MBAs, Executive MBAs in global programs, and upper-level managers participating in executive education) and periodically scored sample responses in a controlled environment.

For example, we used the analytical tool to blind score four samples selected for use in an MBA communication course. Across all categories, agreement on scores by evaluators was 93%. The more than 50 MBAs participating in this class subsequently scored the same samples, achieving over 80% agreement with the evaluators.

Subsequently, these MBAs responded themselves individually to one of the scenarios used for the original holistic assessment. They subsequently scored their own responses and their instructor, one of us, did the same in a blind condition. Among all these scores on all the categories, only six were discrepant (varied by more than one point). Such activities contributed significantly to the final framework shown as Figure 1 as well as the decision-making version with associated examples shown as Table 1, and the analytical scoring tool found in the Appendix.

Scoring a large sample. To test and finalize the framework, the research team used the analytical tool to evaluate 100 responses, fifty each from US and Asian respondents. Each set of fifty consisted of the 25 highest and the 25 lowest scoring responses from the holistic evaluation of overall effectiveness. High and low-scoring responses were chosen to ascertain the validity of the tool by correlating the high/low holistic scores on overall effectiveness with the high/low analytical scores and further, to highlight the range of differences that might be found between the four categories and the effectiveness scores. We further expected these analyses might reveal differences between the Asian and US respondents.

For this analytical scoring we followed a protocol based on Educational Testing Service methodology that had been adapted for analytical scoring via pre- and post-assessments in conjunction with the Writing Program at the University of Michigan Business School. To comply with the controlled environment specifications, the research team met in Singapore for this scoring. Blind scoring achieved inter-rater reliability of 84% across all four categories. For purposes of clarity, the results of this scoring are described after the framework is presented directly below.

RESULTS

Framework for Subordinate Reporting

As shown in the Figure, the resulting communication framework highlights two aspects of subordinate reporting: task and tone. Conceptualized as "contribution," task involves fulfilling individual responsibilities such as those specified by the subordinate's job description, performance appraisal, and boss. For a single report it involves the degree to which the communication itself provides what was requested and needed. Meanwhile, the categories of deference, ownership, and objectivity involve the subordinate's obligation to acknowledge the relationships involved. Success in contribution means that the individual provides something the organization needs; success in deference, ownership, and objectivity means the individual understands and possesses sufficient communicative skill to acknowledge organizational relationships involving those with superior power or expertise. Contribution has to do with the degree to which the content of the communication fulfills the task the superior assigned. High contribution scores reflected communication performance, demonstrating *understanding* of the task as well as the *ability* to fulfill it via the communication.

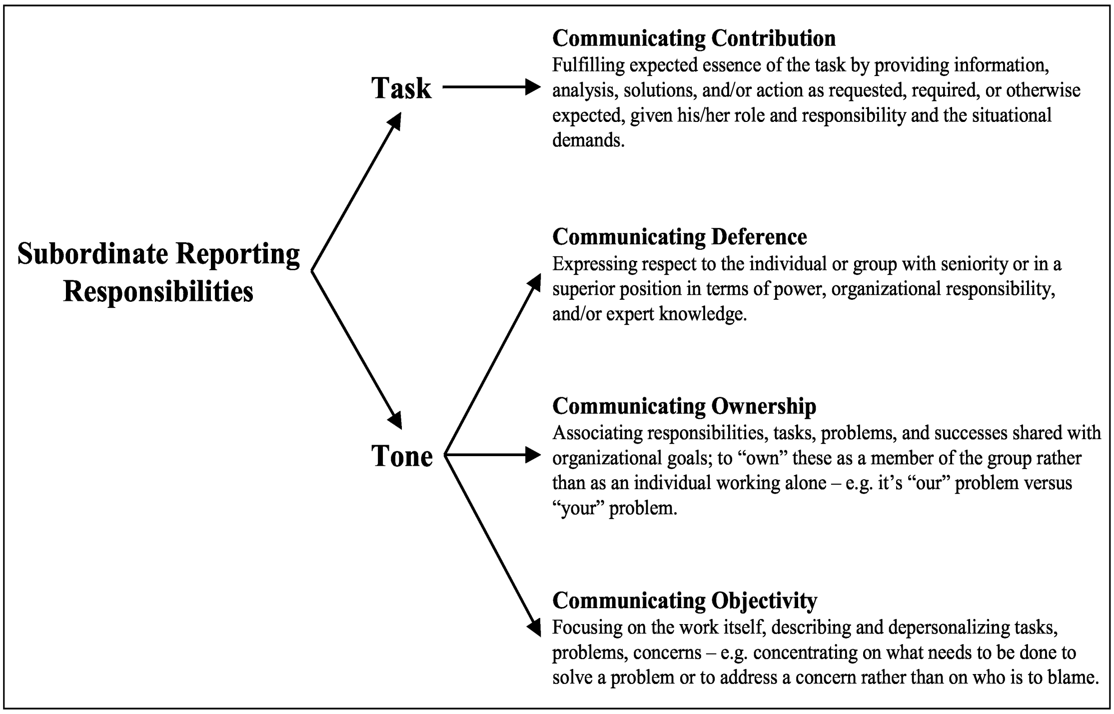

Figure: Communication Framework for Subordinate Reporting

Rhetorical and linguistic alternatives that may help or hinder the meeting of these expectations are associated with these categories in Table 1. It was desirable that the categories be global enough to apply across organizational situations and communication media. Additionally, they needed to reflect the needs identified in our sample and also jibe with prior investigations.

We envision the organizational expectations as broad universals, whereas textual components are options from which to choose depending upon the particulars of the situation. Choice was critical as this was not intended as a prescriptive but rather a decision-making framework.

Overall, the framework addresses the following questions:

- What is the connection between communication and contribution to the organization?
- How is deference shown via communications to an individual who is superior by rank or expertise?
- How is commitment to the organization expressed as it relates to accepting or "owning" tasks and problems?
- What does it mean to remain objective or to focus on tasks rather than individuals or who may be to blame?

Contribution Degree to which communicator fulfills the expected essence of the task by providing information, analysis, solutions, and/or action as requested, required, or otherwise expected, given his/her the role and responsibility and the situational demands.		**Deference** Degree to which communicator appropriately defers to the individual or group with seniority or in a superior position in terms of power, organizational responsibility, and/or expert knowledge.	
May Help	**May Hinder**	**May Help**	**May Hinder**

Providing sufficient context
• Suggesting what the communication provides, e.g.
  • "information relevant to or useful for"
  • "analysis required for XYZ"
• Focusing on information asked for or expected by the audience
• Identifying the problem, e.g.
  • "While the central figures are surely important statistics, they do not definitely demonstrate the reliability of our bearings"
  • "It is highly misleading to conclude from the given statistics that 99% of our customers are satisfied with our product …"
 	
Providing adequate specifics regarding requested response
• Identifying flaw in argument and suggesting how to fix it as the boss asked, e.g.
  • "Figures covering two years are probably not enough …"
  • "I suggest that we obtain figures that span a time period of about ten years"
  • "Daewoo would likely prefer results taken from an independent source"
	Insufficient discussion of tasks
	• Omitting information asked for or expected by audience, i.e. not identifying flaws in the argument
	
	Off-topic: Ignoring or not focusing on task
	• Suggesting how the presentation might be done, e.g.
	  • **-"I recommend highlighting the benefits…"**
	  • "You may wish to mention *offshore advantages or use economic theory to prove that using IBI will make Daewoo better off in terms of both quality and cost"*
	• Bringing in extraneous information, e.g.
	  • "One gap in your proposal involves competition"
	
	Superfluous or incorrect information
	• Providing information already known by reader (how to sell bearings, etc), e.g.
	  • "We must keep in mind that Daewoo is currently manufacturing their own bearings"
	• Including incorrect information, e.g. wrong analysis of flaw
		Hedges
		• "The data does not necessarily show…."
		• "Perhaps you can give figures for a period of 5-10 years…"
		• "... possibly ABC Motor France complaint rate data could support our claim..."
		
		Soft modals
		• "We may also want to emphasize
		• "It might work better to..."
		• "It might be inappropriate …"
		
		Qualification via limits of personal opinion
		• "The central selling point of the argument, as I understand it, is …"
		
		Conditional "if"
		○ "It may be appropriate if we …"
		○ "It may also reflect well if we …"
		
		Genuine questions (inquiry):
		• "Might we find some data on...?"
		• "Do we have...?"
		
		<u>Reference to reader by name (positive/neutral statements)</u>
		○ "Mr Oberle's ideas … are brilliant"
		○ "Another point Mr Oberle might want to consider …"
			Strong Modals, "must do this", "should be sure to"
			
			Absolute Verb "to be" (which may suggest inappropriate/unrecognized authority)
			• "This is a failure in logic."
			• "ABC is the only company…"
			
			Imperatives (telling versus suggesting what to do)
			• "Instead, focus on..."
			• "Do emphasize..."
			
			Challenging questions
			• "How can you state with certainty that...?"
			• "Did you leave them out intentionally?"
			
			Confrontational statements:
			• "You have not indicated …"
			• "You have not addressed …"
			
			Condescending, insincere, or instructional statement (i.e.., assuming superior role or communicating little or no recognition of the relationship)
			• "My advice to you is..."
			• "Thank you for the great honor.."
			• "Your outline … is a great start."
			
			<u>Reference to reader by name (negative statements)</u>
			○ "In all honesty, Mr Oberle, you have not proven …"
			○ "Mr Oberle, with this reasoning …"

Table 1: Decision-making Framework for Subordinate Reporting. Rogers, Ho, Thomas, Wong, & Cheng, 2002.

<table>
<tr>
<th colspan="2">Ownership
Degree to which communicator relates responsibilities, tasks, problems, and successes to shared organizational goals; to “own” these as a member of the group rather than as an individual working alone – e.g. it’s “our” problem versus “your” problem</th>
<th colspan="2">Objectivity
Degree to which communicator focuses on the work itself, describing and depersonalizing tasks, problems, concerns, e.g. concentrating on what needs to be done to solve a problem or to address a concern rather than on who is to blame.</th>
</tr>
<tr>
<th>May Help</th>
<th>May Hinder</th>
<th>May Help</th>
<th>May Hinder</th>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive pronouns (with fewer “I + you” constructions) – “we”, “our”, “us” , e.g.
• “I see we made a mistake...” rather than “you made a mistake”
• “your argument” becomes “our argument”
• “I have come up with a number of pointers below which might enhance our case, and also a number of possible questions that could potentially weaken our present stance”

Shared jargon, acronyms, or expressions
• “Did you file the FD-1692 from your Farr Dealership visit?”
• “Shall we target JBC, JBTC, or MCQ?”

Associating self references
• Using organizational names, labels in referencing self, e.g.
• “As a long-time Honeyweller, I believe...”

Transitioning from "I" to inclusive "We" references
• I've had experience with such calculations, much like Rajiv who also understands such procedures.
• The client asked me to . . . so we might want to respond by . . ."</td>
<td>Separating self references
• Beginning and ending with “I” and “you” statements
• “My support for your pitch...”
• “...your numbers...”
• “Good luck with your proposal.”
• “Hopefully, these suggestions will be of some benefit to you...”
• “Thank you for the opportunity to critique and strengthen your argument...I have made some suggestions...”

High formality; Aloofness
• Latinate, literary, or many multi-syllable words: “utilize,” “expedite,” “formulate,” “pursuant,” “procure”, “...for your perusal, sir.”
• Multiple sentences of more than 20 words

<u>Flattery, particularly to a superior</u>
○ “I believe that your current argument is persuasive”
○ “In order to optimize your persuasive ability …”
○ “It is a great privilege to aid you in this sales presentation”</td>
<td>Passives e.g. “could be avoided”, “could be included”

Removing pronouns, especially “the needless you”,
• “Can we assume that …?” (Not “Do you file a complaint every time …?”
• “Here are a few suggestions…” (Not “I have a few suggestions for you.”)
• “…, it is difficult to infer …”

Neutral words & transitions, e.g. “an important point”, “some suggestions”, “the issue of”

Existential “there” and “it” as subject
• “…there are very few complaints…”; “It will be appropriate…”

Suggestion as a question or request, e.g. “Why don’t we use XYZ?”; “Is it possible …?”

Numbered list to remove individuals and/or relationships, e.g. “Three suggestions follow …”

Outsider view (playing devil’s advocate, explaining via hypothetical situation or outside example), e.g. “ABC France [outside company] may not agree …”, “what would motivate me …?”</td>
<td>Judgmental words or statements rather than description/explanation
• “That’s an excellent argument”
• “Your point is a good one”
• “I am impressed by the argument …”

Absolutes (e.g. “to be” or “It + to be”)
• “It is necessary to …”,
• “Your pitch is …”

Non-neutral words
• “bogged down in logistics”
• “hard sell”, “non-sequitur argument”

Negative word choices & transitions
• “empty” , “dubious” , “poor”
• “For starters” , “however”
• “Furthermore” (i.e. transitions that suggest a long list of problems)

Fault-finding words connected with personal pronouns
• “There are a few faulty assumptions and a lack of definitions within your sales pitch that I believe weakens the overall argument”
• “Your three points to support your case fail to properly conclude …”</td>
</tr>
</table>

Table 1 continued. Rogers, Ho, Thomas, Wong, & Cheng, 2002.

Analytical and Holistic Scoring

With regard to the way the framework operated for scoring as a whole, three areas are of interest: the means of each category individually, their similarities and relationship to the medians; the differences in the stem leaf analysis of each category of responses; and the relationship of the categories to each other.

Means and medians. As a starting point of interest, simple means and medians of the scores on the four framework categories as well as the holistic scores on overall effectiveness provided an initial overview of the relationships between the categories. Each of the four categories of the framework was evaluated on a scale of 1 - 6, with 1-3 representing various degrees of problems and 4-6 indicating increasing effectiveness in the area under consideration. Holistic evaluation was done on a scale of 1-3 with 1 low and 3 high. On this scale, any number below two presented various degrees of problems and 2 and above indicated increasing overall effectiveness as seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Means and medians of scores on framework categories and holistic overall effectiveness

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median
contribution	2.76500	1.55124	2.50000
deference	2.86000	0.98237	3.00000
ownership	3.34000	1.00725	3.50000
objectivity	3.43500	0.91468	3.50000
holistic	1.78875	0.52184	1.87500

These data suggest that the framework categories' scores reflect the holistic scores.

All the tool categories had means and medians below the effectiveness level of 4, and this level of competence was repeated in the holistic mean, which was below the effectiveness level of 2. These general data, therefore, imply some relationship between the overall effectiveness of the response and the framework categories. This difference becomes more evident in more detail in the more informative Spearman Correlations discussed later. Indeed, these latter correlations complement the means/medians data, but they also show additional information that suggests the means and medians may give too positive a picture of the relationship between the holistic scores and the framework scores.

Stem Leaf Analysis. The stem leaf analysis, created by visualizing the actual number of responses scoring at each level (SAS statistical system, univariate procedure), suggests that among the four framework categories, "contribution" differs from the "deference," "ownership," and "objectivity" as seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Number of responses at each scoring level in each of the framework categories

Score	Contribution	Deference	Ownership	Objectivity
6.0	x			
5.8				
5.6				
5.4	xx		x	
5				
2				
5.0	xxxxxxxxxxxx	xx		xxxxxxx
4.8				
4.6				
4.4	xxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxx
4.2				
4.0	xxxxx		xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
3.8				
3.6				
3.4	xxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	
3.2				
3.0	xxxxxxx		xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
2.8				
2.6				
2.4	xxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxx
2.2				
2.0	xxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxx
1.8				
1.6				
1.4	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxx	xxx
1.2				
1.0	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxx	x	x

As this stem leaf chart illustrates, the contribution category shows more scores falling in the top and the bottom areas with a dip in between, whereas the other categories show scores generally bulging in the middle with fewer at the top and bottom.

The reason for this difference might be the nature of “contribution” as compared to the other categories. Success in contribution resides in the substance or informative content of the communication rather than in the range and volume of particular linguistic and rhetorical choices. For one scenario, for example, content scoring high on contribution would identify the flaw in the superior's argument and explain how the argument can be fixed. If the flaw was not identified, then the score for contribution was low. Some degrees of success in critiquing the argument were noticed, such as offering suggestions without identifying the flaw, or only seeing one part of the flaw. But generally, as the stem leaf chart shows, degrees of success are less apparent for contribution than for the other categories. The stem leaf analysis from the analytical scoring coincides with holistic scoring on overall effectiveness related to audience analysis. Respondents did not communicate sufficiently on task.

In summary, the stem leaf chart shows that the deference, ownership, and objectivity categories may allow for more incremental successes than does the contribution category. This makes sense since these categories relate to the social or interpersonal issues, sometimes called the "linguistic components of tone" (Perlman, 1981), the number of which may vary greatly in a communication.

Relationship of Categories to Each Other. Relationships between categories became clearer via the Spearman correlations. The two points of interest are (1) the contribution category was positively correlated with the holistic scores and (2) the deference, ownership, and objectivity categories were positively correlated with each other, but less so with the holistic scores.

Reviewing the means for the correlated categories shows a general relationship, but using the Spearman Correlation Coefficients model, we get a 'p' value of <0.0001 for the contribution and holistic scores and <0.0001 for the deference, ownership, and objectivity scores (Table 4).

Table 4
Spearman correlation coefficients of scores on framework categories and holistic overall effectiveness

	contribution	**deference**	**ownership**	**objectivity**	**holistic**
contribution	1.00000	0.19338 0.0539	0.10740 0.2875	0.25455 0.0106	0.58348 <.0001
deference	0.19338 0.0539	1.00000	0.46583 <.0001	0.51138 <.0001	0.20084 0.0451
ownership	0.10740 0.2875	0.46583 <.0001	1.00000	0.62597 <.0001	0.11963 0.2358
objectivity	0.25455 0.0106	0.51138 <.0001	0.62597 <.0001	1.00000	0.26382 0.0080
holistic	0.58348 <.0001	0.20084 0.1451	0.11963 0.2358	0.26382 0.0080	1.00000

As with the stem leaf chart, these data raise questions regarding why the contribution category seems to be split from the other three and positively correlated with the holistic scores while the other categories are generally consistent with one another but not as strongly correlated with the holistic scores. If one considers the focus of the holistic evaluation along with the focus of the framework categories, some possibilities are suggested. First, the holistic scoring was of overall effectiveness with a strong emphasis on whether or not the respondent completed the assigned task. This emphasis is the essence of the contribution category; therefore, the positive correlation between the holistic and contribution scores is not surprising.

Meanwhile, deference, ownership, and objectivity all relate to social relationships. They are actualized in linguistic and rhetorical constructions that have been tied to communicative tone, positive or negative, and how the communication is likely to be received.

Correlations between the deference, ownership, and objectivity categories seem more intuitive since they are interpreted from the cumulative effect of linguistic and rhetorical features and not whether the report provides the information requested. Ability to show deference means that the communicator will probably not make the superior look unintelligent for having a flaw in the argument. Therefore, the language chosen by this kind of writer is most likely to be objective rather than accusing. In the same way, a new hire with the ability to show deference and avoid blame may also use language that demonstrates personal ownership of the problem at hand. In fact, one way to avoid an accusing tone is to take ownership or to connect oneself with the issue. Language chosen in all these areas often reflect a new entrant's instinctive ability to develop and maintain relationships.

Although the above discussion suggests the similarities between the deference, ownership, and objectivity areas of the framework, there are clear differences as well. First of all, the linguistic choices used to express each of these categories are different, e.g. "we" and "our" pronouns that express the ownership category contrast with "there are" and passive constructions in the objectivity category. Second, many of the responses show strength in one category but not the others. For example, a response that uses many inclusives (e.g. "we" and "our" pronouns) but few signals of deference or objectivity can be interpreted as overwhelmingly arrogant. The differences can be subtle, but they exist. Thus, the three categories dealing with the relationship side of the message both complement each other and provide discrete information.

In addition, data on the four categories of the tool strongly suggest that holistic scoring does not address major concerns in communication between subordinates and superiors. Holistic scores address task issues to some degree, but less so relational issues. The proposed framework for subordinate reporting focuses on both reporting relationships and reporting responsibilities, particularly how these may be expressed linguistically and rhetorically.

Asian and US Differences: Evaluators and Respondents. Comparing the Asian and US-based results suggests the workability of the framework analytical tool for subsequent empirical research. Respondents' holistic scores were almost identical in the two environments as seen in Table 5. Scoring with the analytical tool based on the framework, however, picked up significant differences between the communicative performances of our Asian and US respondents, specifically on the contribution and deference categories as shown in Table 6.

Table 5
Asian and US respondent holistic overall effectiveness scores

respondents	**number**	**mean**	**std. deviation**	**min. score**	**max score**
Asian	50	1.785	.06309	1	3
US	50	1.7925	.03901	1	2.25

Table 6
Asian and US respondent scores on contribution and deference

Variable	**Sample**	**Number**	**Mean**	**P value**
contribution	NBS	50	2.43	
contribution	UMBS	50	3.1	0.0301
difference			-0.67	
deference	NBS	50	3.24	
deference	UMBS	50	2.48	<.0001
difference			0.76	

These analytical data show that the US respondents were slightly more successful at completing the task than their Asian counterparts, whereas the Asian respondents scored significantly higher on deference than US respondents. Reasons for these variations may reside in and be influenced by cultural norms, further supporting the conclusions of Hofstede (1980) and others.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that the framework is valid and can be reliably employed by evaluators across cultural contexts. Validity is established by the high degree of correlation between the scores on the framework categories and the holistic scores on overall effectiveness. Consistency in scoring across Asian and US evaluators suggests that the goal of building a framework that could be applied across cultures, as specified by Bhawuk and Triandis (1996), Lucy (1996) and Thatcher (2001), was to some degree successful.

These findings also show that the framework covers two distinct but inter-related aspects of subordinate reporting: (1) contribution, or the extent to which the substance of the report provides the information requested, or completes the assigned task, and (2) deference, ownership, and objectivity, or the social or relational awareness demonstrated by the cumulative effect of the linguistic and rhetorical components, particularly those related to tone.

By associating organizational concerns with textual alternatives, the decision-making framework for subordinate reporting has heuristic and research potential. An underlying assumption of the framework is that what one says or writes may very well determine the degree to which one is successful in an organization. But more than this, the framework posits that communication itself may comprise the deliverable or task performance itself that a subordinate is expected to produce, and the communication itself reveals one's understanding of the reporting relationship. The framework suggests a connection between linguistic and rhetorical textual choices for written and spoken reports and success in meeting organizational expectations involving reporting roles and responsibilities. It shows communication as more than cultural artifact.

The decision-making (rather than prescriptive) character of the framework facilitates application across organizational contexts. Individuals accept new jobs, get promoted, change departments, and move to different companies and countries. In the course of such transitions, individuals face different and sometimes quite unique reporting roles and responsibilities and with this the need to learn organizational voice. Related to this are cultural differences that the framework may be used to identify and cultural tendencies that may need to be self monitored and tempered. The fact that Asian students in our sample scored higher on deference than their US counterparts invites follow-up research, say of culturally diverse teams reporting over time.

Organizational concerns for contribution, deference, ownership, and objectivity are likely to remain important for subordinate reporting across contexts, although the textual enactment of these may vary considerably. In this way, the framework may serve as a guide for decisions regarding the kind of linguistic and rhetorical alternative*s* appropriate for the organization, department, or supervisor.

Learning an organization's voice is the challenge of this research. This involves developing an ability to see connections between organizational expectations and textual aspects of oral and written interactions that may help or hinder communication in a particular environment. By suggesting such connections this framework may help new entrants observe and self monitor their communications, particularly in reporting situations and thereby may hasten organizational assimilation.

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APPENDIX

Analytical Tool for Subordinate Reporting

Contribution: Degree to which the communication content provides information, analysis, solutions, and action as requested, required, or otherwise expected given the role and responsibility of the communicator and the situational demands.

1	2	3	4	5	6

No, Little, or Inappropriate Contribution | **Some Contribution** | **Appropriate Contribution**

Examples that show/hinder Contribution to justify score:

Deference: Degree to which communication appropriately defers to the individual or group with seniority or in a superior position in terms of power, organizational responsibility, and/or expert knowledge.

1	2	3	4	5	6

No, Little, or Inappropriate Deference | **Some Deference** | **Appropriate Deference**

Examples that show/hinder Deference to justify score:

Ownership: Degree to which communication relates responsibilities, tasks, problems, and successes to shared organizational goals; to "own" these as a member of the group, rather than as an individual working alone—e.g. it's "our" problem versus "your" problem.

1	2	3	4	5	6

No, Little, or Inappropriate Ownership | **Some Ownership** | **Appropriate Ownership**

Examples that show/hinder Ownership to justify score:

Objectivity: Degree to which communication focuses on the work itself, describing and depersonalizing tasks, problems, concerns, e.g., concentrating on what needs to be done to solve a problem or to address a concern rather than on who is to blame.

1	2	3	4	5	6

No, Little, or Inappropriate Objectivity | **Some Objectivity** | **Appropriate Objectivity**

Examples show/hinder Objectivity to justify score: