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Priscilla S. Rogers
University of Michigan Business School

Song Mei Lee-Wong
Nanyang Business School, Singapore

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Priscilla S. Rogers

University of Michigan Business School

<psr@umich.edu>

and

Song Mei Lee-Wong

Nanyang Business School, Singapore

<lleewong@unimelb.edu.au>

Please send correspondence to: Priscilla S. Rogers, University of Michigan Business School, 701 Tappan Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1234 USA. Email: psr@umich.edu Office: 734-764-9779

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Re-conceptualizing Politeness to Accommodate Dynamic Tensions in Subordinate-to-Superior Reporting

ABSTRACT

This research produced a framework that identifies dynamic tensions occurring as subordinates try to maintain a sufficient degree of politeness while reporting to superiors on workplace tasks. Building on politeness theory, the framework suggests how conventional categories, "deference," "solidarity," and "non-imposition," are challenged by organizational obligations and workplace tasks requiring "confidence," direction," and "individuality." The framework evolved from a series of analyses of two samples: one consisting of email between international project teams and their domestically-located supervisors; the other Asian and US business undergraduates' (soon-to-be new hires) responses to two workplace scenarios involving critiquing a superiors' work. Analyses revealed competing politeness dimensions relevant to subordinate-to-superior interactions, including dimensions that are underdeveloped in politeness literature. Examples from the data suggest that managing a sufficient level of equilibrium between these dimensions requires a substantial knowledge of rhetorical and linguistic alternatives.

Re-conceptualizing Politeness to Accommodate Dynamic Tensions in Subordinate-to-Superior Reporting

> *"To some extent, your feedback contradicted feedback Sam gave us,"* reported the representative of an international team in an email to one of two supervisors. *"Since Sam is working directly with us and with the client, we heeded his feedback over yours."*

Is this email sufficiently polite? Could the reporting team representative exercise a greater degree of tact and remain forthright? Would the supervisor whose feedback has not been used expect this? Or, consider the following:

> *"Sir, I have analyzed the draft of [your] sales presentation argument,"* said the new hire to his boss, *"and am delighted to say that its selling point is a rather strong one."*

Although the boss asked for critique, is the employee's response sufficiently courteous?

Politeness has been defined as the grease in social interaction with co-operation as one of its goals (Grice). Indeed, in a civil society where courtesy is the norm, individuals are expected to communicate with a measure of considerateness and tact so as not to impinge upon the personal pride, honor, and dignity of others (Goffman, 1959). Though few would quibble with this general principle, the ways it is understood and put into practice vary. For instance, how do conventional issues of politeness apply to the reporting situations above?

Through a rich and deep history of research, including some definitive scholarship, we know politeness is complicated by personal, situational, and cultural variations; so too, by the wide repertoire of rhetorical and linguistic alternatives that can be mixed and matched to achieve polite discourse. Polite linguistic expressions, as David Morand observes, are "integral to the elaboration and maintenance of social hierarchies in organizations" (see also Goffman, 1959).

Politeness theory and strategies focusing on interpersonal relationships have long been explored within the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and anthropology (Brown & Levinson, Brown & Gilman, Fraser, Ting-Toomey, Morand) and have been applied to business communication (e.g. Yli-Yokipii, David and Baker, Shelby and Reinsch, Locker). Issues of politeness in organizational contexts, however, remain under investigated, including at a foundational, conceptual level. Are conventional approaches to politeness relevant to working relationships in organizations? What politeness issues can employees expect to encounter, especially when reporting to a boss? Are conventional strategies sufficient and readily applicable?

This research examined conventional issues of politeness in light of organizational concerns for subordinate reporting by analyzing two samples of subordinate reports. Our goal was to identify key issues and to develop a conceptual framework to help us better understand the operations of polite discourse in recurring and consequential workplace situations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Like many politeness theorists, KumikoTakahara suggests that politeness is motivated "to facilitate interpersonal contacts by removing conflict of interest between the interlocutors and promoting their co-operation" (181. See also Grice). Interpersonal considerations also underlie proposed politeness strategies, such as Robin Lakoff's (1973) three rules of politeness, which emphasize camaraderie along with non-imposition: Rule 1. Don't impose; Rule 2. Give options; Rule 3. Be friendly.

Central to interpersonal politeness concerns is central to the notion of "face" or "the social self." "Face" is generally defined in sociological and socio-linguistic studies as "the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event" (Scollon and Scollon). As Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson put it, politeness depends upon a "mutual awareness of 'face' sensitivity, and the kinds of means-ends reasoning that this induces" (5). Ervin Goffman further explains:

> Just as the member of any group is expected to have self-respect so also he is expected to sustain a standard of considerateness; he is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present, and he is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and with their feelings (1967:10; See also 44).

An indication that 'face' concerns are deemed important can be seen in research on delivering bad news. Writers of rejection letters, for instance, experience an emotional need to gracefully and tactfully help the message receiver feel better (Schryer; see also McCord, Lariviere, Timmons).

Strategies to Save Other's Face

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's strategies for dealing with face issues are particularly well known. Their strategies center around showing sensitivity to the "face" wants and the needs of the receiver by mitigating so-called Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) such as requesting, criticizing or refusing. They characterize receiver face needs as positive and negative: "positive politeness is redress directed to the addressee's perennial desire that his wants or actions should be thought of as desirable" (106), such as claiming a common point of view or in-group membership; negative politeness, by contrast, involves care so as not to impose upon the receiver. Sensitivity to the receiver's face needs may even involve attenuating expressions of self-confidence or capability. As Axel Hubler explains:

> It is because the face work entailed in self-praise and the self-assurance generated thereby constitute a threat to the hearer in that he feels compelled either to present himself to the speaker in a good light, too, or to bow meekly to the speaker's face, with the attendant interpersonal consequences. The threat to the hearer is therefore lessened if the speaker modifies predications or sentences referring advantageously to himself (or to a referent within his field of interest). (159).

From Hubler's perspective, apodictic statements about the world or presenting one's self as a highly knowledgeable person dictate a passive role to the receiver and thwart any possible desire on the part of the receiver to give feedback and may threaten the receiver's face. Strategies to attenuate the face threat of self-confidence and knowledge include understatement or hedging (e. g. "Might the argument be strengthened if the period were longer than two years?" or "The fact that only one percent of our customers complained *may* not necessarily mean that more than one percent were satisfied, does it?").

Both Situated and Interpretative

It has also been long understood that the degree to which various strategies are *interpreted* as polite, is ultimately determined by the context. In other words, politeness is situated and interpretative. As Bruce Fraser and William Nolen observed: "No sentence is inherently polite or impolite." It "is not the expressions themselves," they continued, "but the conditions under which they are used that determine the judgment of politeness" (96-97).

Consider the strategy of "indirectness," for example. According to John Searle, "politeness is the most prominent motivation for indirectness in requests" (76; See also Yli-Yokipii). A directive, such as "Please pass the salt," is considered impolite, whereas changing the directive to a question, such as "Can you pass the salt?" reduces the illocutionary force of assertiveness. Indirect strategies have been quite thoroughly explicated (e.g. Riley) and their effectiveness empirically proven (e.g. Shelby and Reinsch).

At the same time, a number of studies show that directness can also be polite (e.g. Graham; Limaye; Locker; Shwom). In his *Tact Maxim*, for example, Geoffrey Leech argues that if a proposition does not benefit the hearer then a more indirect illocution is preferred; however, directness can be interpreted as polite if the proposition is beneficial to the hearer (e.g. "Have another helping of potatoes."). Along very similar lines, Shoshana Blum-Kulka on Israeli speakers, Anna Wierzbicka on Polish, and Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon on Hong Kong Chinese, all find that indirectness is not always perceived to be a cause for politeness, neither is it a measure of politeness. Song Mei Lee-Wong's study of politeness in Chinese culture suggests that imposition and directness may *not* be face threatening, but rather may be valued between intimates.

As for organizations, James Suchan and Ron Dulek argue that what constitutes politeness depends upon personal position and power, organizational relationships, the amount of contact between writer and reader, corporate practices, and cultural expectations. Margaret Baker Graham and Carol David contrast the "egalitarian climate perpetuated in a university setting" in which administrators tend to de-emphasize their power using indirection, indebtedness, and indirectness, and the corporate setting in which hierarchy and efficiency invite direct politeness strategies (5; see also Graham).

Routine and Predictable

While accepting the variable nature of polite discourse, business communication and organizational research and pedagogy also recognizes the existence of *politeness routines*, particularly linguistic patterns associated with positive tone and bad news messages (Locker; Graham and David; Perlman). Annette Shelby and Lamar Reinsch's 1995 empirical study suggests that stating things positively from the perspective of the receiver and buffering bad news really do have desirable effects for business communications. Their findings are echoed by Catherine Schryer's analysis of insurance claim denial letters and Kitty Locker's experiments soliciting responses to letters refusing credit and denying admission to graduate school. Luuk Van Waes and Carel van Wijk found that individuals of all ages responded most favorably to corporate recall letters that allowed them some freedom of action, letters favoring indirectness, questions, and passive voice instead of directional statements (see also Hagge and Kostelnick). Some linguists concur that politeness routines work. John Searle, for example, concluded that "certain forms naturally tend to become the conventionally polite ways of making requests" (76; See also Yli-Yokipii).

More recently and directly relevant to this study, David Morand (2000) discovered routine and predictable superior-subordinate interactions. He transcribed the laboratory role-plays of 84 full-time university students performing four different FTAs toward persons of either lower or higher organizational status. Analysis of this corpus revealed a frequency of specific politeness tactics; indeed, his regressions indicated that the students shared "common linguistic reference points in formulating and anchoring judgments of politeness. Polite language," he concluded, "is thus envisioned as a *finite* menu of weighted tactics that users choose from, liberally or sparingly, as circumstances require" (244).

Organizational Associations and Obligations

To some degree, politeness strategies have been associated with group and organizational obligations (e.g. Suchan and Dulek; Graham and David). For example, Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon observe that the "self" projected by Asians is more collectivistic and more connected to membership in family and working groups. Displays of membership include the inclusive "we," (Brown and Gilman; Brown and Levinson), which has also been used as a marker of corporate identity (Van Waes and van Wijk; Swales and Rogers; Rogers and Swales). Various speech acts are also associated with types of relationships and organization involvement. Bruce Fraser and William Nolen conclude that to request reflects an equal status, while to order reflects a higher status.

Meanwhile, studies of communication competency in organizations identify the ability to show empathy, to self-monitor, and to listen as critical. These abilities are closely tied to an awareness of receiver face needs (e.g. Zorn and Violanti; Jablin el al.; DiSalvo; DiSalvo and Larsen; Monge et al.). Some experts in workplace competency suggest the importance of subordinates providing the boss with information, including bad news, so that the boss can perform his/her job and maintain "face" in the organization (Lawler, et al.). As Nongluck Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam and Fredric Jablin discovered, even in so-called high-context cultures (Hofstede) like Thailand, where *kreng jai* (or "extreme reluctance to impose on anyone or disturb his/her personal equilibrium by direct criticism, challenge or confrontation") strongly influences organizational communication, "supervisors rated those subordinates who provide complete information to them, as well as those who ask their supervisors questions about unclear matters, as highly competent communicators"

(411-11). “Paradoxically,” they continue, “while communicatively competent subordinates in Thai organizations are expected to be open and straightforward, they are also expected to know how and when to communicate to avoid conflict and interpersonal problems with their supervisors” (412).

Significance of this Study

The initial impetus for this study was an assessment of junior and senior undergraduates at two major business schools, one in the US Midwest and one in South Asia. The assessment required written responses to workplace reporting scenarios involving FTAs, i.e. critiquing a superiors’ work. Two such scenarios were used to obtain a total of 1,592 responses. These were scored holistically on overall effectiveness by communication faculty at both schools, including the authors, using Educational Testing Service procedures to achieve inter-rater reliability. Criteria for this assessment of overall effectiveness covered: Audience Analysis, Content Development, Organizational Strategy, and Language Control. In conjunction with this assessment, evaluators at both the Asian and US sites concluded that these soon-to-be new hires lacked communicative skills for subordinate reporting. Respondents had difficulty providing the information required in a professional tone that reflected some understanding of the reporting relationship.

At the same time, research on issues of politeness for recurring organizational situations, such as subordinate reporting, remains limited. Business communication research tends to examine politeness as it relates to negative or bad news generally, or as it involves external communications, especially corporate public relations or interactions with clients and customers (e.g. insurance denial claim letters, letters refusing credit or denying school admission, recall letters, and auditor's suggestion letters). Meanwhile, conventional politeness strategies tend to focus on receiver face needs. A communicator is encouraged to communicate in a non-imposing manner (e.g. indirectness or hedging) and to temper FTAs and expressions of self-assurance in the interest of receiver face, for example. Quite exceptional is Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam and Jablin's research, which associates receiver face needs and communicator obligations, such as the need to report information that may require self-assertion. Our intent was to explore this association as it relates to politeness in subordinate reporting.

METHOD

Research Sample

Our data included: (1) individual responses to two workplace tasks collected in a controlled environment, and (2) two-way subordinate-superior email for the duration of actual company projects. The first sample was drawn from the corpus of 1,592 Asian and US responses to two workplace scenarios described above. The holistic scores on overall effectiveness allowed us to pull a sample representing responses at every scoring level ranging from most to least effective.

The second sample consisted of all the email between six MBA teams working on actual company projects in international locations, and their home-based faculty supervisors. These were real workplace projects in companies around the world, not classroom exercises. More than this, all team members came to the projects with considerable work experience, mostly consulting, and were selected by special application. For the seven-week duration of the projects, teams relied heavily on email to report to their supervisors.

It should also be noted that the sample of email was drawn from a corpus of email from 44 teams, some of which were supervised by one of the authors. The six teams selected met some key criteria: (1) their email comprised the primary, and sometimes the only, means of communication between the team and the supervisor; (2) their email represented diverse projects from a wide spectrum of industries--consumer goods, biochemical, financial services, consulting--which also varied in size and organizational structure, including start-ups. Pseudonyms are used here as a condition of access.

Analysis of the Samples

Analyses involved a series of individual, blind readings, and discussions to reach consensus, with one analysis leading to the next. The overall goal was to address two interrelated questions: (1) What conventional politeness issues are particularly relevant for subordinate reporting? (2) Do expectations for subordinate reporting impact standing issues of politeness?

Analysis began with a trait identification procedure (e.g. Rogers & Rymer). This analysis included 200 scenario responses representing each scoring level on overall effectiveness and all the email from the international project teams. Each author read through these data quickly several times keeping a basic question in mind: What politeness issues would you discuss with this writer? We then compared our notes and began to categorize our observations. With full agreement we found three dimensions from conventional politeness literature as particularly relevant: *deference*, *solidarity*, and *non-imposition*.

To examine the deference, solidarity, and non-imposition dimensions, we individually scored the degree to which each dimension was discernible and operative in our samples using a high, medium, and low scheme. For this analysis we identified together email strings, each of which we numbered prior to scoring. Then we independently awarded a single score to each email string. We used the same high, medium, low scoring scheme for 20 scenario responses, 10 from US and 10 from the Asian respondents. These had been identified as possible classroom examples by the initial evaluators of overall effectiveness described above. Although for this study we did not attempt to achieve inter-rater reliability, our agreement on scoring was over 90 percent.

This second analysis affirmed our earlier impression that deference, solidarity, and non-imposition dimensions of conventional politeness are highly relevant to subordinate reporting. Reviews of samples receiving high and low scores also suggested that the traditional, receiver-focused politeness strategies did not sufficiently accommodate the subordinate's personal organizational obligations—e.g. The subordinate's task was to critique, a FTA that might not be achieved if the communication was too hedged or indirect. Our samples revealed that respondents struggled to report adverse findings, display respect, and associate with the superior and organization. As has been reported, displays of confidence can pose a face threat to the superior if not tactfully communicated (Hubler, 1983).

Next, for each conventional politeness dimension, we identified a counterpart. (In 1991**,** Robert Quinn et al. used a similar point/counter-point process to construct their Competing Values Framework). The intent was to conceptualize tensions between "receiver face and self face" issues, tensions that a subordinate may need to negotiate in reporting situations, especially those involving some sort of bad news. Three counter dimensions resulted from this analysis: deference was challenged by the need to display *confidence* in reporting; non-imposition by the need for personal *direction* or know-how; and solidarity was tempered by the expectation of *individually*.

Our last analysis involved finding representative examples to reexamine, define, and illustrate the dimensions and tensions involved. For this we again independently reviewed all the team-supervisor emails and a sample of 51 scenario responses, 25 US and 26 Asian representing the full range of holistic scores on overall effectiveness. The framework presented here was finalized via this process.

POLITENESS FRAMEWORK FOR SUBORDINATE REPORTING

The proposed framework in Figure 1 presents six communicative dimensions for subordinate reporting: deference, non-imposition, solidarity on one side; confidence, direction, and individuality on the other. Dimensions on the left half of the framework (deference, non-imposition, and solidarity) involve relational needs; dimensions on the right (confidence, direction, and individuality) relate to individual work obligations.

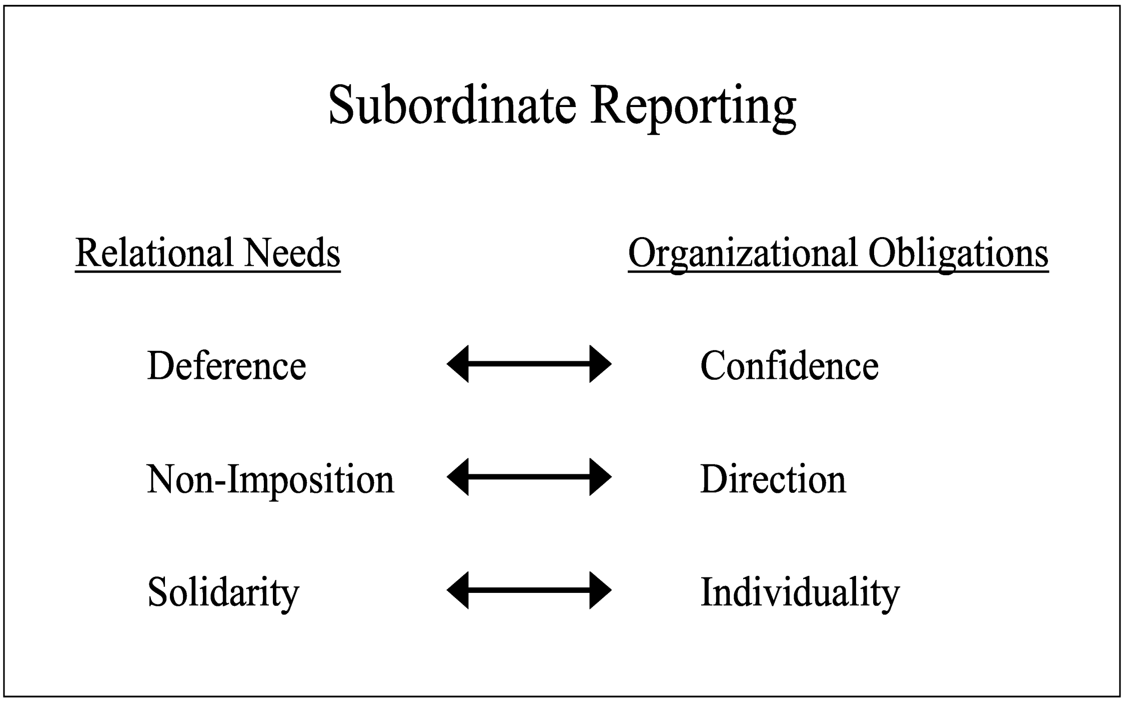

Figure 1: Politeness Framework for Subordinate Reporting

The fact that these dimensions are organized on two sides is significant. Dimensions on the left, as emphasized in politeness literature, involve the notion of "face" wants and discourse strategies that a communicator may use to protect the receiver's self image and defer to the receiver's status role. Meanwhile, dimensions on the right are based on the premise that individuals are hired because they have experience, expertise, or capabilities that the organization requires. Juxtaposing these illustrates tensions that an individual may need to negotiate in order to produce polite discourse that fulfills both relational expectations and organizational obligations. The framework suggests that subordinate reporting involves displaying appropriate *deference* to the superior, as conventional strategies suggest, but, at the same time, displaying a sufficient level of personal *confidence*, say to assert a point of view particularly in areas of expertise for which one is paid. It involves communicating as a contributing member, showing *solidarity* as belonging, and yet doing so as an *individual* who brings unique skills and insights to the organization. According to the framework, subordinate reporting also involves demonstrating *direction*, such as an ability to ask important questions or proceed to complete the task without much oversight, and to do so *without imposing* upon that boss's territory or ego, particularly if the report is bad news. Conceptualizing these tensions, we believe, may be a step toward managing them. Furthermore, emphasizing equally the relational needs, which already receive attention, and the organizational obligations involving expectations for personal performance, may temper the tendency to become overly anxious about and driven by receiver face needs alone. Conventional politeness strategies may look a bit different when counterbalanced by organizational needs.

To clarify the interplay we take a closer look at the tensions across the framework using examples from the data. One cautionary note: it should *not* be assumed that the tensions between relational needs and organizational obligations are as neat as suggested by our pairings below. As the examples illustrate, there is an intermingling of the dimensions and great overlap in politeness strategies that can be appropriated to address them.

Deference and Confidence

Communicating confidently without overstepping the expectations for deference involves tricky balancing. Sometimes, a subordinate must share unfavorable conclusions, make suggestions or requests, and promote some sort of organizational change, all potentially FTAs.

Deference		*Confidence*
Communication displays an understanding of and respect for reporting relationships and the organizational structure. Such communications reflect the relative power of individuals in the workplace, which change with various workplace situations. Deferent communications show an awareness that organizational relationships are asymmetrical in one way or another, if not by an imposed pecking order, then by expertise and experience.	⟺	Communication demonstrates an awareness that one can contribute to the organization through personal expertise, through work, and by supporting various initiatives. Expressions of confidence provide others with assurance that the communicator can be relied on to complete assigned tasks. Confident communications suggest to the receiver that it was a good decision to hire and to assign particular tasks to the reporting party.

Consider the subordinate's judgment of her superior's presentation argument in 1.1 below:

1.1: *It is a great privilege to aid you in this sales presentation. I noticed that there are a few faulty assumptions and a lack of definitions within your sales pitch that I believe weakens the overall argument.*

Here the reporting subordinate acknowledges the asymmetrical role relationship and attempts to convey deference; indeed, the statement in the first line suggests positive politeness as Brown and

Levinson (1987) define it. Here the "I believe" functions as a hedge, suggesting that the subordinate is confident enough to say what he thinks. A linguistic balance is struck here. However, for some receivers, expressions of confidence, such as the second sentence above, might also come across as arrogance or sureness to the point of being obnoxious. Removing the personal pronouns might attenuate this possibility—e.g. changing "your sales pitch" to "the sales pitch" (or to communicate solidarity, perhaps even "*our* sales pitch").

Examples 1.2 and 1.3 are more likely to be interpreted as *failed expressions* of politeness.

> 1.2: *Sir, I have analyzed the draft of [your] sales presentation argument and am delighted to say that its selling point is a rather strong one.*

As in example 1.1 above, in 1.2 the subordinate's task is to critique the boss's presentation argument, a FTA. The subordinate must have sufficient confidence to do so. Passing judgment, including giving praise, may not be in keeping with the superior-subordinate role-relationship, however. Here compliment is outside the parameters of the task; critique does not require compliment. Praising the superior may communicate a lack of deference, suggesting judgment about the performance of the superior overall, which is not in keeping with the interactants' relative positions in the hierarchy. Whereas praise *from* the superior to the subordinate could function as positive politeness, in reverse it functions otherwise.

> 1.3: *Since Sam [our other faculty supervisor] is working directly with us and with the client, we heeded his feedback over yours . . . . Many of your comments we chose not to incorporate . . . . Given our professional experience (3 of us have between 3 to 8 years*

consulting experience and the other 3 years of auditing), we felt confident about moving forward. . . Your comments regarding communicating in the form of reason vs. benefit were helpful, however, we were unable to respond due to the time constraint. We apologize. Lastly, we did not add your name to the Project Roles and Responsibilities list because as far as the client is concerned you're an invisible part of our infrastructure. The client is not familiar with who you are.

In example 1.3 the confidence-deference tension is not balanced. Clearly, the reporting team is confident and says so: "we felt confident about moving forward." The entire passage shows initiative, independence, direction, and even some measure of politeness in extending an apology for not responding in due time. Yet it could be interpreted as extremely face threatening because:

- the status of the superior in the organization is explicitly denied (". . . you're an invisible part of our infrastructure.") and because
- the superior is told point blank that he is irrelevant and unimportant ("The client is not familiar with who you are.")

Such statements frame the boss's input as irrelevant to the teams' fieldwork and display a lack of consideration and respect, of tact and diplomacy. If what is intended as confidence entails being dismissive about the role and contribution of the other person, superior or otherwise, then communicative arrogance displaces confidence. By contrast, deferent communications may include explicit expressions of appreciation and acknowledgement of input or assistance. Deferent communications indicate respect for the other's knowledge and abilities, demonstrate understanding of the other's work obligations and time constraints, and employ tone and forms of address that do not overstep the superior-subordinate status as expected in the particular environment.

Sample 1:4 below shows greater skill in managing the deferent-confident tension.

1.4: *Thank you both for taking the time to make suggestions for changes to the engagement letter. I've tried to incorporate your suggestions. I think the plan of attack from this point is to work with Jim [our company contact] and see if this fulfills his and our needs. Thanks again for your help.*

Here the reporting team member expresses appreciation for the superior's suggestions and explains how the suggestions were implemented. The subordinate also employs an inclusive "our" to refer to the end product, the engagement letter. At the same time, the team member explains that the letter may need to be modified should the client request it, suggesting that they know how to proceed if it becomes necessary. In 1.4 below, the subordinate may be said to succeed in communicating politeness because s/he conveys gratitude and acts in good faith on superior's suggestion, displaying trust in his competence and expertise. Meanwhile, the use of hedges (e.g. verb "think"; conditional "I think" and "if this fulfills his and our needs..") suggests tentativeness as a subordinate who is open to the superior's counsel.

Balancing deference-confidence when the FTA of critique is necessary, as in our scenario data, is more complicated. In 1.5 below the subordinate is quite successful in responding to the superior's request for critique of slides for an upcoming presentation.

1.5: *We could show that our experience in the industry gives us a technological advantage . . . . Our specialization could also be included with the data above to underscore the better quality of IBI Bearings.*

Here the subordinate critiques the boss's argument using the inclusive pronouns and hedged suggestions—e.g. "We could show…." Coupled with the soft verb "could," these inclusive references communicate a good deal of deference, yet the suggestions stand as useful, informative critique. Similarly deferential is example 1.6 in which a team member lets the supervising faculty member know the plans mapped out with the team have been changed by their company representative.

1.6: *There has been a slight change of plans since my last email. I just spoke to Rajiv and we confirmed the following:*

1. *There will be no conference ...*
2. *Rajiv does not need to see a summary of our strategy before the presentation.*

Professor, we look forward to seeing you on Monday. ...Many thanks.

In example 1.6, positive tone involves expressing what is to be done rather than what will not be done and the deferential title, "Professor," is coupled with "thanks." Overall, the message does not detract from the superior's role, expertise, and experience, yet communicates that the subordinate is proceeding to get the job done.

Non-Imposition and Direction

As long recognized in politeness literature, respecting the receiver's autonomy can require some degree of distancing. Imposition may be felt if the communicator espouses or asserts his/her views in clear definitive terms or makes suggestions in a manner that does not allow the receiver to negotiate, differ, or reject. Not imposing one's views is said to be interpreted as an act of humility and a form of politeness.

According to the proposed framework, however, displaying little or no sense of direction can be interpreted as a lack of willingness or ability to participate fully. Perhaps communicating a sense of direction necessitates some form of imposition?

Non-imposition

Communication involves not burdening others with needless (or endless) requests, providing sufficient lead-time and expressing openness to refusal. Not imposing may also involve refraining from assuming the responsibility of others.

Non-intrusive communications may employ indirectness to express one's views and efforts to neutralize communications, perhaps by focusing on the ideas or tasks without reference to the parties involved. Tone is moderate in pointing out weaknesses (using soft modals such as "might" or "could" as hedges, for example). Communication displays openness the superior's input (e.g. "Would you agree?").

Direction

Communication indicates a sense of how to proceed, especially when it comes to completing assigned tasks and meeting individual performance demands. It suggests little need for "hand holding" from a superior.

Directed "talk" demonstrates an understanding that questions may need to be asked to insure that tasks are understood but, once understood, these tasks can and will be tackled solo, without a lot of supervision. Direction may also involve taking initiative for assigned projects, even anticipating pitfalls and constructing plans for dealing with them. Communications reveal a proactive approach involving problem-solving and personal initiative.

Being decisive while maintaining a non-intrusive stance requires linguistic and rhetorical gymnastics, e.g. mixing strong and weak modal verbs, hedging and declaring, evaluating and inquiring, incorporating questions to express openness to alternatives and input. Still, a sense of direction may be overtaxed if the message registers as too authoritative, too pushy, or too unaware of the superior's time pressures, expertise, and obligations. Observe the report to a supervisor in 2.1 below.

> 2.1: *Since we are planning to leave for Toledo very early tomorrow, I would like to request that we have your comments some time tonight in order to incorporate any changes for presentation to Jim [our company contact]. Thanks for your time.*

Here expressing the need for haste might garner a more receptive hearing if the request were replaced with inquiry, e.g. "Might it be possible for you to take a quick look at our presentation slides tonight or early tomorrow?" In 2.2, the reporting team member balances non-imposition and direction more successfully.

> 2.2: *Just a quick note to coordinate the final report feedback plan for next week . . . . It is our current plan to . . .We were hoping that you could provide feedback sometime on Tuesday . . . Do you have time available on Tuesday? We wanted to give you plenty of advance notice so we don't disrupt your schedule at the last minute. . . . Please let us know if this works for you.*

Overall, the writer of 2.2 is not as assertive as the writer of 2.1. In 2.2 the tone is tentative, considerate, and reassuring. The superior could comfortably respond "No, I can't do it on Tuesday."

In other words, the desire not to impose is apparent in the message; the supervisor's autonomy is not impinged upon. At the same time the writer is not directionless; she does suggest a specific day, albeit softened by the follow-up question, "Do you have time available on Tuesday?"

Examples 2.3 and 2.4 skirt the imposition related to time and further suggests that steps have been taken to make the report easy for the superior to process.

> 2.3: *Please find updated to the web page the European Community interviews and the status report for 4/9/01. Note in the status report the matter for [your] review. We have also revised the categories and the visual presentation of the web page. We hope these revision[s] will make the web page easier to follow. . . . The team would like to meet with you. . . . Would Wednesday at 10:00 am fit into your schedules?*

> 2.4: *We apologize for the confusion, but thought posting the 2 different documents in different places would make it less confusing.*

The unique and challenging dilemma facing the reporting subordinate is further demonstrated when one considers how non-imposition and direction differ for the superior. While subordinates must balance directive communication with non-imposition, superiors are expected to give orders. Consider 2.5 and 2.6 for example.

> 2.5: *We expect teams to file a report for each country/city that you work in.*

2:6 *Having just arrived in Europe a few hours ago, and feeling the effects of jet lag myself, I certainly understand your "strong" wish to get back to the States as originally planned. Nevertheless,* in my experience *the extra day in turnaround won't benefit you significantly, and the $805 per person makes the XYZ flight unreasonable. . . .*the XYZ flight is out of the question*. That's $3,200. For a night's sleep . . . . The Amsterdam connection sounds fine . . . . Then you could overnight in Stamford and be well rested for the presentation . . . .* Keep me aware of your selections.

Strong verbs, such as “expect,” and the imperative “Keep me aware,” coupled with the note of non-negotiability communicated by the statement “the XYZ flight is out of the question,” give the subordinate little opportunity to refuse or negotiate alternatives. In 2.6, the phrase, “in my experience” cleverly hedges the boss's directive while reminding the receivers' that she is indeed the boss with considerable experience.

Solidarity and Individuality

At first glance, solidarity and individuality seem like uncompromising opposites. Solidarity necessitates a display of belonging; individuality implies independence. Individuality spells uniqueness and difference; solidarity often means similarity and agreement.

Solidarity

Communication acknowledges an obligation to work with others. Tasks, issues, and problems are expressed in communal terms. Overall, the communicator writes and speaks as an insider who belongs and who assumes a collaborative role even when "playing the devil's advocate." Differences are framed from the perspective of commonalities (e.g. "While in principle we agree, there seem to be some important differences in the way we might approach this problem."). Personal opinion, challenges, and calls for change are expressed as beneficial for the group.

The discourse of solidarity suggests cohesion, trust, commitment, and even enjoyment in working with others.

Individuality

Communication acknowledges that contribution is expected; that by nature of being an employee, one has some degree of personal responsibility to think and perform independently, bringing unique expertise, experience, and insight to workplace issues, problems, and tasks.

The discourse of individuality registers as a willingness to contribute by sharing views--e.g. "I think that might be a problem." Commonalities are used to introduce differences (e.g. "While in principle we agree, there seem to be some important differences in the way we might approach this problem."). Discourse displays confidence, and an ability to remain objective despite group influences.

In subordinate reporting, solidarity and individuality may be said to operate as two sides of the same coin. A subordinate reports results from individual action and yet does so on behalf of a superior and, ultimately, on behalf on the entity as a whole. Individuality when accepting and completing a task may need to dissolve into joint ownership ultimately. Ideas and deliverables independently produced become the property of the group. "Mine versus yours" evolves into "we" and "our," or the report may be altogether free of pronouns ("With the gaps filled, this presentation…"). This ideal may not be achieved to the fullest degree in the subordinate's critique of the boss's argument in 3.1 below.

3.1: *Regarding our earlier conversation concerning ABC Motor of Poland, I've completed your assigned task [to critique your argument]. The holes I've found [in your argument] are easily mendable. With the gaps filled, your presentation will be airtight . . .*

The critique in 3.1 possesses a strong "mine versus yours" character. Two "I" and two "you" references overcast the initial "our"; meanwhile, the flaws in the argument are clearly associated with the superior. Proactively and positively suggesting alternatives, rather than finding fault with the boss's argument, and eliminating some references to the boss individually could attenuate this problem (e g. "Might X be associated with Y? Then we could claim that . . . ").

In example 3.2 alternatives are provided, however the writer's strong assertion of what should be done could be construed as insensitive to hierarchical order despite the use of corporate "we."

3.2. *The figures are merely taken over a two-year time period and are derived from customers who took time to complain. . . . Consequently we must provide them with more objective data that encompasses a longer time period. [W]e must emphasize the cost advantages of our bearings ...*

In this instance, verbs may assert individual opinion too strongly. This subordinate could be seen as overly intrusive rather than eager to work as an integral part of the organization. On the other hand, being overly solicitous (e.g. "Do you think perhaps we could provide. . . .?") is not the answer either.

Although for a somewhat different situation, individuality and solidarity seem more appropriately balanced in 3.3. Here the boss's input is not dismissed even though it was too late to be entirely useful.

3.3. *The power point presentation I posted . . . has changed pretty significantly since the initial draft [which you reviewed], but I will use your comments as a spring board [nevertheless].*

In 3.3 the subordinate reports that individual work was completed to meet the client's presentation schedule although without the benefit of the superior's timely input. In reporting this, however, the subordinate clearly respects the boss's feedback and promises to use it ("I will use your comments"). The fact that the boss's feedback came too late remains in the subtext. In contrast to 3.1 and 3.2, example 3.3 implies a "working side-by-side" approach with individuality and solidarity appropriately balanced.

At an organizational level, individuality without solidarity could contribute to group chaos; yet, it is also known that solidarity without individuality may result in "group think." Being overly presumptuous about a supervisor's agreement or overtly imposing one's point of view and ignoring the organizational hierarchy, is individuality at the cost of solidarity.

CONCLUSION

The idea that certain tensions accompany attempts to achieve polite discourse is by no means new (cf. Goffman, 1967). It is questionable whether a nod toward "self respect" fully captures the degree of self-initiative and personal contribution expected in workplace reporting, however. Nor is it clear that conventional politeness strategies capture the mutuality of "face." Focusing on saving the receiver's face and on the pragmatic and overarching goal of co-operation may come at the expense of self-assertion and vice versa.

Situated in the context of subordinate reporting, conventional politeness dimensions are challenged we argue. Subordinates encounter communicative dilemmas involving ostensibly opposing activities—e.g. expressing findings with sufficient confidence so that they get heard may readily come at the expense of deferential regard for those with superior standing. Our data analysis suggests that while conventional strategies long associated with receiver "face" requirements remain critical, such strategies must also accommodate individual assertion.

The proposed framework would have us reconceptualize conventional politeness (deference, non-imposition, and solidarity) and the notion of face for subordinate reporting. Obviously the expectation of politeness and co-operation remain. At the same time, the subordinate is also expected to communicate personal capability, confidence, and drive. Individuals with advanced education, like the soon-to-be new hires at the undergraduate and MBA levels in our sample, are hired not to capitulate, but rather because they have expertise, experience, or something to contribute to the well being of an organization. According to the framework, successful reporting depends on the subordinate's ability to negotiate the dynamic interplay between dimensions, displaying an appropriate level of understanding and respect for the reporting relationship and, at the same time, fulfilling individual responsibilities by meeting organizational obligations.

While the literature explicating politeness strategies is richly detailed, it focuses on strategies for dimensions in the right column (deference, non-imposition, and solidarity) neglecting the need to communicate confidence, direction, and individuality. Investigating the communicative means by which appropriate equilibrium between these dimensions may be achieved in recurring workplace situations, seems to be a logical next step.

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