

TEACHER LEADERSHIP SKILLS: AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

DOUGLAS E. ROBY

*Associate Professor of Educational Leadership
Wright State University*

This study involved 107 teachers assessing their apprehension in communicating within group settings, one-to-one, in meetings, and in large public speaking circumstances. Those involved in the study were teachers pursuing graduate degrees in teacher leadership. School administrator's acknowledging the talents and gifts of teaching faculty, and their potential positive influence in the school will gain insight on one very important teacher leadership skill – communication.

The assessment instrument administered is referred to as the Personal Record of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). Teachers involved in the study completed the PRCA-24 survey instrument designed by McCroskey (1982). The study analyzed the level of fear or anxiety associated with real and anticipated oral communication encounters teachers experience on a daily basis. The scoring instrument assessed communication apprehension in the four specific domains mentioned above, and then an overall communication apprehension score was computed. Teachers involved in the study used the results to focus on specific target areas for improving speaking skills.

The analysis includes mean scores, standard deviations, and z ratios for the study group. Results for the study group were compared to national norms, and individual results were given to each teacher for initiating an improvement plan for weak areas. Communication strengths were also highlighted, so the teachers involved in the study were conscious of their speaking effectiveness.

Becoming aware of leadership skill strengths and weaknesses is crucial for growing as teachers, and for leading coworkers to higher levels of contribution at the workplace. As part of the requirements for a graduate class in leadership behavior, students completed the Personal Record of Communication Apprehension, commonly referred to as the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1985). This survey was used to measure communication apprehension of the teachers in the course, which is defined as “an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communi-

cation with another person or persons.” (McCroskey, 1978). Beatty (1988) defined this fear as “anticipatory audience anxiety”, the anxiety experienced by a speaker before an oral presentation.

Review of Literature

Witt and Behnke (2006) investigated anticipatory public speaking anxiety to the nature of speech assignments in communication courses. The studies were based on uncertainty reduction theory, which focuses on communicators' level of comfort speaking in unfamiliar or unpredictable contexts. Anticipatory speech anxiety was

detected during informative speeches that were impromptu, extemporaneous, and completed by reading a manuscript. In a study conducted by Limon and La France (2005), communication traits of team members in workplaces were examined. Those emerging as leaders were associated with argumentativeness and communication apprehension, and combined were better predictors of leadership than either communication trait individually.

There is research citing the relationship of listening style preferences and verbal aggressiveness (Worthington, 2005). In this empirical study, specific focus was on the relationship between a person's tendency to engage in verbal aggressiveness and listening style preferences. Results of the study indicate there is an inverse relationship between verbal aggressiveness and content listening. Berger (2004) noted in his study of speechlessness that emotions experienced before and after the event, along with the social consequences and lack of knowledge affected levels of communication apprehension.

In a research study by Heningsen and Heningsen (2004) it was discovered that group decision-making was more successful when they considered group members' cognition, social desirability, and apprehensiveness to communicate. Sharing information in group discussions led to more openness for all members to share, thus reducing communication apprehension and increasing the frequency of communicating. Bartoo and Sias (2004) identified a positive relationship between supervisor communication apprehension and the information load reported by employees. As the information load from

supervisors increased, apprehensiveness to communicate increased. Too much information tended to lower the chances of verbal communication between employees and supervisors.

There is research indicating visualization has been affective in reducing communication apprehension (Ayers & Ayers, 2003; Ayers, 1996). Using a combination of words and images, it was noted that this became the most effective way to help coworkers reduce public speaking apprehension (defined as very large group speaking; McCroskey, 1982). Those in the study exposed to text accompanied by visual drawings reported lower public speaking apprehension and envisioned themselves as public speakers who were positive, vivid, and in control. McCroskey et al (2002) note in their article that the study of instructional communication, pedagogy, and subject matter are of equal importance in preparing effective educators, thus reducing communication apprehension.

Kelly and Keaten (2000), Beatty, McCroskey and Heise (1998), and Beatty and Valencic (2000) investigated the relationship between heredity and communication anxiety. Personality factors were reviewed for potential speech apprehensiveness, especially public speaking. These research studies found novel stimuli and the threat of punishment to be key factors triggering communication apprehension. The demand for speech preparation skills was noted, as speaking apprehension significantly predicted anticipatory anxiety.

Impromptu speech exercises reduced communication apprehension, according to a study by Rumbough (1999). Trait

communication apprehension was measured using McCroskey's PRCA-24 instrument. Rumbough noted that study participants who completed the impromptu speech significantly lowered their apprehension to communicate effectively. When eliminating the speech evaluative factor, students had a greater opportunity to control their apprehensiveness to speak, thus improving their speaking skills instead of having concern about their grade. The importance of working on speaking skills to reduce communication apprehension is also supported in a study by Robinson (1997). He noted that a skills-training approach was necessary during regular class time, which created a supportive and positive classroom environment for reducing feelings of apprehension.

Dyer (1998) studied communication apprehension as it relates to gender and learning style preference. Students enrolled in a speaking course at a large midwestern university were part of the study. Apprehensive speaking was significantly correlated with learning style preference for women, but not for male students. In another public speaking course, students were required to videotape themselves for assessing their communication skills. The experiment noted that levels of apprehension about communicating at meetings decreased after using videotape feedback. However, the greatest speech improvement was in classroom settings.

A meta-analytic review of communication apprehension studies noted there is a consistent negative relationship between the level of communication apprehension and communication skills (Allen and Bourhis, 1996). The researchers noted that

as a person becomes more apprehensive about speaking, both the quality and quantity of communication behavior diminishes. Virtually no research has focused on communication apprehension's impact on the day-to-day communication of teachers in the field of education.

Purpose

As school administrators become more reliant on the gifts and talents of teachers that are considered informal leaders, it will be crucial to become aware of speaking anxieties that may inhibit teacher leaders. Those teachers recognized as leaders in their schools would ideally possess low communication apprehension (CA). Speaking fluently and without anxiety to parents, administrators, educators, community members, and students is a leadership quality and skill worth pursuing. It is essential for seeking the highest level of contribution to the school. As teachers continue to grow through professional development opportunities and continued graduate work, it is noted that speaking skills, and specifically speaking anxieties, need to be addressed and developed. This study focuses on that development, through an analysis of speaking anxiety of the teachers participating.

Methodology

Participants

The subjects of this study were K-12 teachers in rural, suburban, and urban Ohio school districts pursuing graduate degrees in teacher leadership. They were enrolled in the Wright State University, College of Education and Human Services Teacher

Leader Program. They completed a communication apprehension survey as a self-analysis technique, specifically geared toward discovering and enhancing leadership strengths and weaknesses. The majority of the teachers worked at elementary schools, between the ages of 26-35, and were female (Table 1). Most were Caucasian, early in their teaching career (1-5 years).

Instrument

The Personal Record of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) was used to attain the level of fear or anxiety experienced by the subjects. It consists of 24 Likert-type statements, with 12 of the statements reversed to avoid response bias. The PRCA-24 is based on four communication contexts suggested to be the most relevant to speaking anxiety: speaking in small groups, speaking in meetings, interpersonal speaking, and public speaking (McCroskey, 1982).

Table 1 Demographics (N=107)

Grade Level Teaching	N	%
Elementary	63	58.9
Middle/Junior High	15	14.0
Secondary	29	27.1
Age		
25 or younger	21	19.6
26-35	55	51.4
36-46	16	15.0
47-55	14	13.0
55+	1	1.0
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	101	94.4
African-American	3	2.8
Hispanic	2	1.8
Other	1	1.0
Gender		
Male	20	18.7
Female	87	81.3
Teaching Experience		
1-5 Years	62	58.0
6-10 Years	26	24.3
11-20	15	14.0
20+	4	3.7

Six items on the survey instrument represent each area. Those completing the survey receive sub-scores in small group speaking, speaking at meetings, one-on-one speaking, and public speaking. Even though the sub-groups have proven to be reliable, they are less consistent because of the reduced number of items as compared to the total PRCA-24 score.

Results

Those completing the PRCA-24 will have total scores falling within a range of 24-120 points. National norms reveal that total scores below 51 points indicate very low CA. Total scores in the range of 51-80 points are considered moderate. PRCA-24 scores of 81 points and higher are congruent with a high level of anxiety when communicating. Results can be broken down into four sub-categories, based on the type of speaking venue. Group (3-15 people) sub-scores more than 20 points indicate a high level of CA, while those with scores under 11 points have low CA in this type of setting. The Meeting sub-

group (approximately 16-30 people) discloses a high level of CA for the speaker if the score is more than twenty. Those with sub-scores less than 13 have high CA. Dyad, defined as one-on-one speaking, finds norms higher than 18 points being considered high CA, and scores less than 11 are indicative of low CA in this sub-category. The final sub-score of the PRCA-24 is Public (very large audience). Speakers scoring more than 24 points have high CA. Those scoring less than 14 points are determined to have low CA.

Table 2 lists the compiled results of the study group (N=107) with established national norms. Overall results illustrate the study group participants have less CA in all sub-categories of the PRCA-24, when compared with the national norms in each area. Statistically significant differences ($p \leq .01$) are noted in Group, Meeting, and Public speaking venues. The total PRCA-24 mean scores reveal a significant difference ($p \leq .05$) between comparison groups.

Table 2 PRCA-24 Results

	N	Group		Meeting		Dyad		Public		Overall	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
National Norms	25,000	15.4	4.8	16.4	4.8	14.5	4.2	19.3	5.1	65.6	15.2
Study Group	107	13.9	4.6	15.1	5.2	14.4	4.3	18.3	5.2	61.7	16.4
z ratio		3.36*		2.57*		0.24		3.90*		2.44**	

* $p \leq .01$

** $p \leq .05$

Conclusion

Graduate students participating in the study have specific focus areas to address to reduce CA in group settings, meetings, one-to-one dialogue, and public speaking situations. Graduate teachers that found speaking skills to be a target area for improvement developed a plan to address weaknesses. Leadership courses will be continually modified to accommodate and assess those working on specific CA skill areas, for comparison analysis. Continued research is needed to evaluate differences (if any) in CA between male and female teachers, the effects of workplace culture on CA (e.g., employee/supervisor relationships), relationships between teaching experience and CA, and the relationship of CA to listening awareness.

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