Supervisor Impression Management: Message Content and Channel Effects on Impressions
Catherine Y. Kingsley Westerman & David Westerman

The current study focuses on the delivery of negative feedback and how supervisors can accomplish that delivery while maintaining their own image and their employees’ face. We look at delivery of feedback with and without face-saving messages through two different channels: face-to-face (FtF) and email. Results indicate that the inclusion of face-saving messages had relatively consistent positive effects on a variety of employees’ impressions of supervisors. Channel was found to interact with message content to impact perceived face threat of a message and the perception of the supervisor’s appropriateness. These findings are discussed in terms of theoretical and practical applications, as are limitations and directions for future research.

Keywords: Dual Capacity Model; Face-Saving; Impression Management; Negative Feedback; Social Information Processing Theory

In organizations, success is predicated in part upon effective communication between supervisors and the employees they supervise. A supervisor’s ability to communicate effectively with employees may depend on being able to maintain a certain impression—for example, employees may listen more attentively to a supervisor who is seen as trustworthy and as an expert. However, maintaining a positive impression with employees may be difficult for supervisors when giving messages

Catherine Y. Kingsley Westerman (PhD, Michigan State University) conducts research in organizational communication and health behaviors. David Westerman (PhD, Michigan State University) is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the 2009 NCA conference in Chicago, IL. Correspondence to: David Westerman, West Virginia University, Department of Communication Studies, 108 Armstrong Hall, Morgantown, WV 26506, USA. E-mail: david.westerman@mail.wvu.edu

ISSN 1051-0974 (print)/ISSN 1745-1035 (online) © 2010 Central States Communication Association
DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2010.514674
that may be unpopular but necessary. The current study examines the impressions of supervisors that employees form when negative feedback is being delivered. More specifically, we look at how the face-saving content supervisors may include in feedback messages can affect employees’ impressions of their supervisors. The current research focuses on two unique elements of face-saving: First, what can happen when managers use face-saving content to help their employees save face (rather than when employees use face-saving content to save their own face) and, second, revealing the nuance of different perceptions of the sender that arise from negative feedback messages. Past research on face-saving has largely focused on employees saving their own face when communicating with their supervisors and on the receiver’s perceptions of the level and type of threat they experience (rather than what they think about the sender of the message). In addition, the research examines how the channel used to send a feedback message can be utilized as a cue for employees’ impressions of their supervisors.

**Impression Management**

Impression management in organizational settings is most commonly thought of as something that workers utilize in order to keep their bosses happy and keep their jobs (Kacmar, Wayne, & Wright, 1996). Past research on the topic has focused on employees managing impressions in job interviews (e.g., Higgins & Judge, 2004), in performance appraisals (e.g., Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska, & Shaw, 2007; Wayne & Liden, 1995), and for career success (e.g., Wayne, Liden, Graf, & Ferris, 1997). What seems to be considered less frequently is the need for managers and supervisors to engage in impression management tactics to maintain positive impressions with their subordinates. However, this is critical, as when managers are admired and respected by their workers, they have more freedom when attempting to get workers to do things for them (Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1985). Also, when managers are seen as competent and proficient, they are more likely to receive positive subordinate evaluations (Yukl & Falbe, 1990). In other words, it may be quite beneficial for managers to use communication with their employees in a way that allows them to be seen in a positive light by their employees.

Providing feedback is one communication interaction during which supervisors may want to manage their employees’ impressions of them. Examining common day-to-day interactions such as feedback exchanges is useful to “help explain variation in employee communication behavior” (Bartoo & Sias, 2004, p. 16). Further, studies have found that when people providing feedback are seen as more expert and credible, higher job performance and more positive job-related attitudes emerge (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; O’Reilly & Anderson, 1980). For managers, the ability to manage impressions may be particularly practical given the day-to-day nature of feedback exchanges and the positive results that can be gained from being perceived positively.

Feedback is defined here as information received by an individual about his/her past performance (Ammons, 1956; Annett, 1969). Impression management is especially critical when providing negative feedback because delivering an unpopular
message can easily engender negative perceptions of the supervisor delivering the message. People receiving positive feedback generally have more positive impressions of their supervisors than those receiving negative feedback (Kacmar et al., 1996), yet it is generally believed that negative feedback improves performance in organizations through the association of undesirable behaviors with receiving negative feedback (Clement & Frandsen, 1976; Haeggberg, 2000). Negative feedback is, then, a necessary evil that supervisors must present carefully in order to maintain a positive impression with their employees while still getting the message across. The current study focuses specifically on perceptions after the delivery of negative feedback. If research can bring to light the types of receiver perceptions that arise from negative feedback messages, it may provide an opportunity for supervisors to carefully choose their message content to maintain a positive image with their employees. The current article will examine two ways for supervisors to manage their impressions with their employees when delivering such feedback: through the messages utilized to deliver negative feedback and through the channels selected to deliver the messages.

**Messages**

One way managers may attempt to maintain positive impressions is through message content. Research indicates that when a supervisor included messages suggesting they were competent and likable with negative feedback messages it did not change subordinates’ responses to the feedback (Kacmar et al., 1996). Although these are likely key impressions for supervisors to manage, they are not the only way to attempt to manage one’s impression. Another tactic that may be employed by a manager while delivering negative feedback is crafting the message in a way that saves face for the employee. Perhaps supervisors can use face-saving messages to serve a dual purpose of helping the employee to save face while receiving negative feedback and also to maintain a positive image of their supervisor. That is, managers can engage in impression management through face-saving for the employee.

**Face-Saving**

Face is defined as the public display of one’s self (Holtgraves, Eck, & Lasky, 1997) and can be considered from two perspectives: impression management and face-saving. Goffman (1955) emphasizes maintaining one’s own image, also known as impression management, whereas Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) emphasizes upholding and preserving others’ images, also known as face-saving. Face-saving considerations come into play when a sender must deliver a face threat. Although most of the time people would prefer to avoid making face-threatening statements, there are some situations in which posing a potential face threat is almost unavoidable, such as the delivery of negative feedback by a supervisor. In those cases, it may be possible to use face-saving message content to soften the face threat to the receiver. In general, however, it is expected that supervisors would be less likely to use face-saving strategies than employees because of their higher status relative to
employees. For example, Morand (2000) found that lower status speakers such as employees were more likely to employ politeness (i.e., face-saving) strategies than were higher status speakers such as supervisors.

Despite this, using face-saving strategies may be advisable for supervisors. Kingsley Westerman and Park (2007) found that in some cases the use of face-saving strategies by a supervisor delivering negative feedback decreased perceptions of face threat for the receiver and was associated with increased self-efficacy and intentions to improve their performance. Delivering a negative feedback message not only threatens the face of the receiver (i.e., the employee) but it may also affect the receiver’s impression of the deliverer (i.e., the supervisor) as a communicator and a source of information. For example, the supervisor may be seen as mean or unfair. This study focuses on whether or not the use of face-saving messages that are beneficial to the receiver will also help the sender (i.e., the manager) by generating a positive image in the eyes of the employee. First, it is important to examine how face-threatening negative feedback messages seem to be to the employees receiving them. Based on past research, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H1: Negative feedback messages not using face-saving content will be seen as more face threatening than negative feedback messages using face-saving content.

In order for a communicator to be seen in a positive light, he/she may also want to influence perceptions of things like communication competence and source credibility. This study focuses on these variables because they are source variables often considered of importance in delivering messages successfully and because they are also likely to rate highly in importance in the receivers’ eyes. Canary and Spitzberg (1987) define communication competence as the ability of a speaker to meet two requirements when interacting: effectiveness and appropriateness. Effectiveness describes communication that allows a communicator to accomplish what they intend to accomplish and appropriateness describes communication that follows the “rules” of a given communication context (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987). Source credibility generally consists of three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and goodwill. Expertise is the degree to which a perceiver believes a sender has knowledge or ability, goodwill is the degree to which a perceiver believes a sender cares about them, and trustworthiness is the degree to which a perceiver believes a sender will tell the truth as he or she knows it (Perloff, 2003). Perceptions of communication competence and source credibility are likely key elements for supervisors working to maintain a positive impression with their employees.

H2: Supervisors using negative feedback messages with face-saving content will be viewed more positively by employees than those not using face-saving content. This will be seen in employee ratings of supervisors’:
   a. Communication competence-effectiveness;
   b. Communication competence-appropriateness;
   c. Source credibility-expertise;
d. Source credibility-goodwill;
e. Source credibility-trustworthiness.

Perceptions of justice are also an essential consideration for supervisors delivering negative feedback. Ensuring that employees perceive their supervisors’ actions as fair is crucial to achieving positive organizational outcomes, such as altruism, courtesy, sportsmanship, and conscientiousness (Moorman, 1991), and lower turnover (Jones & Skarlicki, 2003). Because of this, the current study also examines the effects of message content on distributive and interpersonal justice. Distributive justice refers to perceptions of whether the message itself was fair or unfair. Interpersonal justice refers to justice pertaining to the individual involved in the interaction (i.e., the supervisor delivering the feedback). In general, it is expected that face-saving messages will be perceived as more just than those without face-saving content.

H3: When employees receive negative feedback messages with face-saving content, they will perceive higher levels of justice compared to those receiving messages without face-saving content. This will be seen in employee ratings of:
a. Distributive justice;
b. Interpersonal justice.

Message construction is not the only way managers can attempt to manage their impressions and to save face with employees. Managers may also attempt to accomplish this goal by selecting different channels through which to send messages. The current article draws upon two perspectives to highlight the potential for differing judgments based on channel usage: Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT; Walther, 1992) and Dual Capacity Model (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Barrios-Choplin, 1992).

Channel Effects

One approach to explaining the process of online interactions is Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1992). This approach assumes that communicators make attempts to achieve communication goals in online settings as much as in offline settings. However, when the lack of cues available in an online setting presents obstacles to accomplishing their goals, users rely upon the cues that are available and adapt their communication accordingly. For example, when nonverbal cues are reduced, communicators will use the cues that are available in order to make meaning of a message, such as chronemics (Walther & Tidwell, 1995). Also, because communicators lack the nonverbals often used to reduce uncertainty in face-to-face (FtF) interactions, they adapt their behaviors in computer-mediated communication (CMC) settings and ask more questions and self-disclose more to accomplish that goal (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Westerman & Tamborini, 2006) and they substitute textual statements to replace the missing nonverbal cues (Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005).

Online interactions offer many other pieces of information that can be used to make meaning of messages, including the channel selected to send a message. The
Dual Capacity Model (Sitkin et al., 1992) is one model that focuses attention on this idea by suggesting that every communication channel has two characteristics: what the authors refer to as a data-carrying capacity (DCC) and a symbol-carrying capacity (SCC). According to this model, a channel’s DCC is a set amount of data that can be sent through it (thought of in terms of media richness; Daft & Langel, 1984). SIPT would suggest that the limits to a channel’s DCC can be overcome by utilizing strategies mentioned in the preceding paragraph and by interacting for longer periods of time (Walther, 1992).

According to Dual Capacity Model, each channel also has an SCC, or an ability to manifest symbolic meaning that varies across situations. What this suggests is a message sent through one channel may not mean the same as the same message sent through a different channel because, even though the data capacity may be the same, each channel may manifest symbolic meaning differently because it has a different SCC. One way that a channel can carry symbolic meaning is by attaining status as a symbol itself. In this way, mere use of the channel can elicit a particular meaning. In SIPT terms, the channel that a message is sent through may be one piece of social information that communicators use to create meaning with a message. O’Sullivan (2004) has referred to this notion as “channesics” and suggests that they might be an especially utilized cue when channel expectations are violated (for example, being proposed to over a voicemail). The example given by Sitkin et al. (1992) is sending a thank you note. They suggest that a handwritten thank you note that is recopied and unpersonalized for 50 people is likely to be seen as more personal than a computer-generated form letter thank you note that contains person-specific information. Although it is an empirical question as to whether this situation would unfold as suggested or not, the example points out the potential for channels to contain meaning by becoming symbols themselves.

At its base, the Dual Capacity Model is meant to be an organizational channel selection model and, thus, is meant to explain what channels people will use to send messages. However, as Sitkin et al. (1992) also point out, a central part of knowing what channels to select is knowing what meanings people take from the messages that are sent through them, thus allowing a person to have a better idea of how to craft a message and through what channel to send that message. Thus Sitkin et al. place a premium on recipients of messages, because it is recipients’ responses that eventually end up driving channel selection. Because of this, it is helpful to determine the meanings people take from and responses they have to messages sent through different channels.

Combining these viewpoints, we can say that people will use the information that is provided to create meaning around a message (SIPT) and the use of different channels has the potential to be a vital piece of information used to derive meaning about the message sent through it (DCM). Although this is an important element to highlight, it is not clear exactly what social information people will take from differing channels in the instance of negative feedback messages. It is possible that people would appreciate the potential face-saving qualities of not having to synchronously interact with the person delivering the negative feedback, similar to findings for why people may choose to send some messages through mediated channels (O’Sullivan, 2000). However,
deciding not to deliver this type of information FtF may also be seen as a type of cop-out, where the manager is perceived as not having the courage to deliver a negative message in person. The following research questions address the effect of channel on perceptions of the senders in the context of negative feedback delivery:

RQ1: How does channel influence employees’ perceptions of the level of face threat presented by negative feedback messages with and without face-saving messages?

RQ2: How does channel influence employees’ impressions of supervisors who utilize negative feedback messages with and without face-saving messages?

RQ3: How does channel influence employees’ perceptions of justice in situations surrounding negative feedback messages with and without face-saving messages?

Method

Overview

A 2 (threat message with no face-saving content vs. threat message with face-saving content) × 2 (FtF vs. Email) fully crossed experimental design was utilized to examine the relationship between negative feedback messages, communication channel, and various impressions. Participants read one of four messages from a hypothetical manager and were asked to report on several different impressions of that manager. Descriptive statistics for each impression variable are presented for the complete data set and each of the four conditions in Table 1.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables by Condition and the Complete Dataset
Participants

A sample of 253 working adults was collected via an online survey. The participants were recruited by students in a communication class at a large Mid-Atlantic university. Participants were required to have worked at their current job a minimum of 1 year. Seven participants were eliminated; 5 because they did not meet the 1-year criteria and 2 because they did not report their organizational tenure, resulting in a final sample of 246. Organizational tenure of the sample ranged from 1 year up to 35 years ($M = 7.45$ years, $SD = 8.86$). Age of the participants ranged from 18–60, with an average age of 34.21 ($SD = 14.07$). Of the 246 participants, 121 (49.2%) were male and 124 (50.4%) were female (one did not indicate sex). The ethnicities of the sample are as follows: Caucasian (95.1%), African American (3.7%), Asian American (0.4%), Native American (0.4%), and Other (0.4%).

Procedure

The students were given a letter explaining the research and the procedure required to give to participants they recruited. Participants were to go to the Website for the study, which included a copy of the consent form and a button to click to enter the study. Clicking on the button randomly assigned each participant to one of the four conditions. Each participant went through and completed the survey at his/her leisure.

Channel and Message Content

Participants in the study were asked to read and respond to a situation involving a boss’ message to them. All participants first read this: “Now we need you to use your imagination to place yourself in a situation. Imagine what would you think and how would you feel and respond if A FICTIONAL BOSS behaved in the way described below.” Channel used for the delivery of a message was then manipulated as the account continued. For the FtF condition, the statement read, “Imagine this fictional supervisor stops by your work area to talk with you about some recent work you had performed. He/she says . . .” followed by one of two threat messages. In the email condition, the message read, “Imagine this fictional supervisor sends you an email about some recent work you had performed. The email says . . .” followed by one of two threat messages. To ensure participants could easily recall the message they received while responding to the items, beginning with “Imagine this fictional supervisor . . .,” the feedback message was made visible at the top of each page of the survey with items pertaining to the message.

The second manipulation involved the fictitious boss’ use of face-saving content for the threatening feedback message. The threat message without face-saving content included content designed to threaten the receiver’s feeling of competence (i.e., “You screwed up. Your performance is not up to par and the job needs to be redone”) and the threat message with face-saving content featured the addition of face-saving
statements to assuage the threat (i.e., “What was expected of you may not have been clear, though. You’re on the right track and your work has potential. I’d greatly appreciate it if you would keep putting in good effort”). For more detail on the development of these specific message manipulations, see Kingsley Westerman (2008). Each of the threat messages was paired with each channel once, resulting in a fully crossed experimental design with the following conditions: (a) threat without face-saving content, FtF; (b) threat with face-saving content, FtF; (c) threat without face-saving content, Email; and (d) threat with face-saving content, Email.

Measures

Competence face threat
Perceived competence face threat was measured with an eight-item scale previously used in Kingsley Westerman (2008). Participants responded to items on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating they thought the message implied their supervisor thought they weren’t competent. All items started with the same sentence: “In delivering this message, my supervisor...” followed by the eight items, including “Showed he/she thought I was incompetent at the task,” “Pointed out he/she thought I failed miserably,” and “Showed he/she expected a lot better work to complete the task well.” Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) revealed an eight-item unidimensional solution with a reliability (Cronbach’s α) of .91.

Communication competence
After reading the message, participants were asked to rate the communication competence of the fictional supervisor who delivered the message. The items for this scale were taken from a scale presented in Canary and Spitzberg (1987) and modified slightly to fit the current scenario. Participants rated their agreement with the items on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), such that higher scores would indicate higher levels of competence. The items used were broken down into two scales: general appropriateness (nine items) and effectiveness (eight items). CFA was performed on each of these scales. The general appropriateness scale was reduced to seven items because of large errors associated with two of the original items. The remaining items include, for example, “He or she said something that seemed out of place (recoded),” and “Her or his message was very suitable to the situation.” The reliability (Cronbach’s α) of these remaining seven items was .90. The effectiveness scale was reduced to five items after the removal of three items because of large errors associated with them. The remaining items include those such as “He or she achieved what he or she apparently wanted to achieve,” and “He or she was effective.” The reliability (Cronbach’s α) of this scale was .73.

Source credibility
Participants also completed a scale measuring their perceptions of the fictional supervisor’s source credibility. The source credibility measure is comprised of three
scales measuring levels of competence (i.e., expertise), trustworthiness, and goodwill (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Each scale had six semantic differential items and CFA was performed on each. Each semantic differential item was rated on a 9-point scale and required the participant to indicate their feelings about the supervisor described in the story as delivering a message to them. The items were set up so that higher scores indicate more positive perceptions of source credibility. Six items formed a unidimensional solution for the competence scale, with a reliability (Cronbach’s α) of .91. The scale included items such as “Intelligent...Unintelligent” and “Trained...Untrained.” Six items formed a unidimensional scale for expertise, including items such as “Honest...Dishonest” and “Moral...Immoral.” This scale had a reliability (Cronbach’s α) of .90. Finally, five of six items for goodwill formed a unidimensional solution with a reliability (Cronbach’s α) of .91. This final scale included items such as “Cares about me...Doesn’t care about me” and “Sensitive...Insensitive.”

**Distributive justice**
Participants answered five semantic differential items to indicate whether they thought they were treated fairly. First participants read this lead-in “The feedback I received was...” and then a list of semantic differentials including “Unfair...Fair” and “Unjust...Just.” Higher scores indicated things were seen as more fair. CFA was performed on this scale and all five items formed a unidimensional solution with a reliability (Cronbach’s α) of .93.

**Interpersonal justice**
Participants also answered five semantic differential items to indicate whether they thought the supervisor acted fairly. First participants read the lead-in statement, “In communicating the feedback to me, the superior was...” and the same list of semantic differentials as were listed for distributive justice. CFA was performed on the scale and all five items formed a unidimensional solution with a reliability (Cronbach’s α) of .95.

**Results**
To test the hypotheses and answer the research questions, a series of 2 (threat without face-saving content vs. threat with face-saving content) × 2 (FtF vs. Email) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed for each dependent variable. Main effects of message content were examined for the hypotheses, and main effects for channel as well as interaction effects between message content and channel were examined to address the research questions (for descriptive statistics, please see Table 1).

Hypothesis 1 predicted that a message without face-saving content would make a negative feedback message seem more face threatening to receivers then the same
message with face-saving content. A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on perceived face threat showed no main effect for message content, $F(3, 245) = 2.36, p > .05$. Thus, the data are not consistent with Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2a predicted that face-saving content would lead to higher perceptions of the supervisor’s communication competence in terms of perceived communication effectiveness. A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on perceived communication effectiveness showed a main effect for message content, $F(3, 238) = 3.77, p < .05$. Supervisors using face-saving content in their negative feedback message were seen as more effective communicators ($M = 3.21, SD = .56$) than those not using face-saving content ($M = 3.07, SD = .52$). Thus, the data are consistent with Hypothesis 2a.

Hypothesis 2b predicted that face-saving content would lead to higher perceptions of the supervisor’s communication competence in terms of perceived communication appropriateness. A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on perceived communication appropriateness showed a main effect for message content, $F(3, 238) = 6.59, p < .05$. Supervisors using face-saving content in their negative feedback message were seen as more appropriate communicators ($M = 2.85, SD = .93$) than those not using face-saving content ($M = 2.56, SD = 1.01$). Thus, the data are consistent with Hypothesis 2b.

Hypothesis 2c predicted that face-saving content would lead to higher levels of perceived expertise of the source of the message. A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on perceived source expertise showed no main effect for message content, $F(3, 238) = 2.31, p > .05$. Thus, the data are not consistent with Hypothesis 2c.

Hypothesis 2d predicted that face-saving content would lead to higher levels of perceived goodwill with the source of the message. A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on perceived communication goodwill showed a main effect for message content, $F(3, 238) = 11.44, p < .005$. Supervisors using face-saving content in their negative feedback message elicited more goodwill with the receiver of the message ($M = 5.41, SD = 1.52$) than those not using face-saving content ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.73$). Thus, the data are consistent with Hypothesis 2d.

Hypothesis 2e predicted that face-saving content would lead to higher levels of perceived trustworthiness of the source of the message. A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on perceived trustworthiness showed a main effect for message content, $F(3, 238) = 5.25, p < .05$. Supervisors using face-saving content in their negative feedback message were perceived as more trustworthy by the receiver of the message ($M = 5.60, SD = 1.37$) than those not using face-saving content ($M = 5.20, SD = 1.49$). Thus, the data are consistent with Hypothesis 2e.

Hypothesis 3a predicted that using face-saving content would lead receivers of a message to perceive higher levels of distributive justice. A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on distributive justice perceptions showed a main effect for message content, $F(3, 241) = 4.91, p < .05$. When face-saving content was used in a negative feedback message, receivers of the message perceived more distributive justice ($M = 5.52, SD = 1.65$) than those not receiving face-saving content ($M = 4.99, SD = 2.02$). Thus, the data are consistent with hypothesis 3a.

Hypothesis 3b predicted that using face-saving content would lead receivers of a message to perceive higher levels of interpersonal justice. A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on
interpersonal justice perceptions showed a main effect for message content, $F(3, 241) = 7.18, p < .01$. When face-saving content was used in a negative feedback message, receivers of the message perceived more interpersonal justice ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.85$) than those not receiving face-saving content ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 2.18$). Thus, the data are consistent with hypothesis 3b.

Research Question 1 asked about the effect of channel on perceptions of the level of face threat presented by negative feedback messages with and without face-saving content. The $2 \times 2$ ANOVA showed no main effect for channel, $F(3, 245) = .46, p > .05$. However, a significant interaction effect was found, $F(3, 245) = 4.83, p < .05$. The highest level of face threat was perceived in the threat without face-saving content, FtF condition ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.11$), the lowest level in the threat with face-saving content, FtF condition ($M = 2.57$, $SD = .91$), with the threat without face-saving content, Email ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.18$) and threat with face-saving content, Email ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.03$) conditions falling between the two FtF conditions.

Research Question 2 asked about channel effects on perceptions of managers using negative feedback messages that posed a threat with versus without face-saving content. As reported above, the $2 \times 2$ ANOVA on perceived communication appropriateness showed a main effect for message content. However, this result is qualified by a marginally significant interaction effect, $F(3, 238) = 3.58, p = .06$, showing the highest level of appropriateness was perceived in the threat with face-saving content, FtF condition ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .95$), the lowest level in the threat without face-saving content, FtF condition ($M = 2.48$, $SD = .91$), with the threat without face-saving content, Email ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.02$) and threat with face-saving content, Email ($M = 2.69$, $SD = .92$) conditions falling between the two FtF conditions. This was the only main effect of channel or interaction effect that even approached significance for the dependent variables associated with Research Question 2.

Research Question 3 asked about channel effects on perceptions of justice associated with negative feedback messages that posed a threat with versus without face-saving content. There were no significant main effects of channel or interaction effects between channel and message content for either distributive or interpersonal justice. Of these tests, the interaction effect for interpersonal justice most closely approached significance, $F(3, 241) = 2.42, p = .12$.

**Discussion**

Supervisors often have the unenviable task of delivering negative feedback. Although this feedback may be a necessary evil to improve employee performance, it also carries with it the possibility of upsetting employees and thus decreasing productivity. The current article was concerned with ways that supervisors could manage their image during delivery of negative feedback. Specifically, the current article examined the effects of face-saving messages and channel selection on impressions of negative-feedback messages and the managers who deliver them. Overall, the $2 \times 2$
experiment found fairly consistent effects of message content, such that face-saving messages led to more positive impressions of managers than non-face-saving messages. Although channel effects were found less consistently, channel was found to interact with message in some key areas. Results are discussed in more detail below.

Competence face threat did not differ because of message content or channel alone but was affected by the interaction of the two. More specifically, one cell (threat with face-saving content in FtF) is much lower in perceived threat than the other three. This interaction qualifies the two nonsignificant main effects and suggests that face-saving messages may be more effective only in FtF because face-saving did not make a difference for Email. In addition, email may be seen as a less appropriate channel for negative feedback, with or without face-saving messages.

For communication competence, face-saving messages led to perceptions of the supervisor as both a more effective and more appropriate communicator. Channel alone did not affect perceptions of either dimension of communication competence. For appropriateness, the main effect for message content was qualified by an interaction between content and channel. This interaction involves one cell (threat with face-saving content in FtF) being higher in appropriateness than the other three. This interaction suggests that face-saving negative messages are deemed more appropriate only in FtF conditions and gives more evidence to the claim that email is seen as a less appropriate channel for negative feedback, with or without face-saving messages.

The pattern of interactions for both perceived face threat and appropriateness is interesting because it suggests that channel matters in receivers’ interpretations of messages. The Dual Capacity Model (Sitkin et al., 1992) suggests that a channel can impact the meaning of a message in two ways: its data-carrying capacity and its symbol-carrying capacity. Although the original formulation of Dual Capacity Model suggesting that each channel has a set and static amount of data-carrying capacity has been challenged by other theories (e.g., social information processing theory; Walther, 1992), the current study does speak to the usefulness of considering the symbol-carrying capacity of a channel. It is important to consider the ways in which the meaning of messages changes when they are sent through different channels. The socially constructed meaning each channel inherently holds for a population can be seen as a sort of social information to be used in forming impressions about others, as per Walther’s SIPT. This is likely not just the case in organizational settings but in interpersonal ones as well. For example, the trailer for the recent movie *He’s Just Not That Into You Anyway* (Juvonen & Kwapis, 2009) shows a scene where actress Drew Barrymore’s character tells people that someone has “myspaced” her. The two men she tells this to respond by cringing and telling her that myspace means a “booty call.” This scene highlights the potential for a given channel to manifest meaning in and of itself, independent of actual message content.

As for source credibility, trustworthiness and goodwill were higher with a feedback message that combined threat with face-saving content, whereas perceptions of
expertise did not differ for the different message content. This suggests that elements pertaining to the relationship between the parties (i.e., can the supervisor be believed, does the supervisor have my best interests at heart) were affected by the inclusion of face-saving content more so than evaluations of the supervisor’s abilities as an individual. It may be that expertise is judged based on actual knowledge, education, or some other independent factors, whereas more relational variables are affected more by the way negative feedback is delivered.

Messages with face-saving content were seen as more just in terms of both distributive and interpersonal justice. Face-saving messages generally do something to show the employee that the supervisor is not being completely unreasonable, whether that means taking some of the blame or pointing out that the employee is known to be a competent individual. Making these types of supportive statements may have helped the supervisor to be seen as more fair and acknowledging the flaws in making a judgment on the employee’s work may have made the feedback itself seem fairer.

Practical Implications

Based on the findings from this study, supervisors may want to consider both content and channel when delivering negative feedback messages. The combination of including face-saving content with a face-threatening message and delivering the message FtF resulted in the message being perceived as less threatening and the supervisor’s communication being perceived as more appropriate. Supervisors may want to focus specifically on developing their ability to include face-saving content when speaking with employees. Although it is discussed here in a rather antiseptic way (i.e., as if we can simply add or subtract face-saving content), the inclusion of face-saving content in a genuine manner seems a useful skill for supervisors to develop and practice. The inclusion of face-saving content alone led to perceptions that the supervisor was more trustworthy and had more goodwill as well as perceptions that the message was more just in terms of both the outcome and interpersonally. Based on these findings, learning how to help employees save face is a skill well worth developing.

Although the current data suggest that FtF is perceived as an appropriate channel for delivering negative feedback, there is also a need to be aware of the dynamics and norms in each individual workplace or organization, as this might not always be the case. Supervisors should be aware of the possibility that certain channels may take on meaning in and of themselves. If employees at their organization begin to perceive the use of a certain channel as carrying a negative meaning, supervisors may want to reconsider the use of that channel. For example, if employees begin to perceive that every FtF meeting with a supervisor is a meeting where they are being reprimanded, it may be beneficial to try to use FtF for other purposes, such as positive feedback, or to consider using a different channel or combination of FtF and another channel to deliver reprimands. Thus, attention to “channelesics” (O’Sullivan, 2004) may be a notable part of communication competence in the workplace and other contexts (Spitzberg, 2006).
Limitations and Future Directions

The main limitation of this study is the use of a hypothetical supervisor and message in the method. Although this method allows for better experimental control, it cannot duplicate the complex real-life relationship between a supervisor and employee. It is also difficult to duplicate the words a supervisor might use when delivering negative feedback. For the purpose of experimental design, the negative feedback message for this study was designed to be strongly negative (i.e., you screwed up!) and consistent across all participants. Real supervisors may draw from a broad spectrum of language when delivering negative feedback; some may use more polite language and others may use more rude language when delivering feedback. Further studies should be conducted to attempt to determine if perceptions will be similar in real-life supervisor-employee relationships with real-life negative feedback messages.

A second limitation of the current study is the channels used. Only FtF and email were represented in the situations provided to respondents. Although these were seen as the two most likely channels over which to send negative feedback to an employee, they are not the only possible channels. The modern workplace is increasingly being permeated by a variety of different communication channels, each with a possibility of different symbol-carrying capacity. For example, what would it mean if a manager left a negative feedback message in the relative privacy of an employee’s answering machine versus the relative publicity of that same employee’s Facebook page? It is possible, and very likely, that even the same message given in these two channels would be received very differently by the employee. Thus, future studies in this area should examine other channels in addition to FtF and email.

Conclusion

In general, the findings seem to indicate that the use of face-saving messages when delivering negative feedback is a good idea. This finding in combination with Kingsley Westerman and Park’s (2007) findings seems to suggest that supervisors should seriously consider the use of face-saving messages when they are delivering negative feedback. In addition, the current study indicates that FtF delivery may be preferable to email delivery in the context of negative feedback delivery. Whether these findings will hold across different organizational and interpersonal functions remains a question for future studies.

References


