

Ethos And Senior Leader Communication: Examining Responses To A Policy Change Memo

**Sarah E. Martin, Cynthia L. King
Naval Postgraduate School**

Abstract

Senior leaders use persuasive messages to achieve a variety of outcomes in the organizations they lead. Previous studies have examined discourse in senior leader messages to draw conclusions about leader communication, but little has been done to explicate the nature of the assumptions and judgments that emerge in intent and reception of these messages. This paper examines the relationship between senior leader intent and audience reception of a policy memo in a large government agency. Using a think-aloud protocol, 24 qualitative interviews were conducted—one with the director and 23 with employees. Rhetorical and thematic analysis of interview transcripts indicated that Aristotle’s three components of ethos—good sense, good character, and goodwill—emerged as primary themes in both the director’s intent and employee reception. Findings illustrate the manner in which ethos can operate in senior leader messages. This study concludes that ethos is an important rhetorical appeal in leadership messages and basis of reader judgments. Implications for the relevance of ethos to business communication are discussed.

Introduction

Somewhere between setting the vision of the future, making policy decisions, and attending the meeting about the meeting lies a central aspect of leadership: achievement through others. As much as they may desire otherwise, leaders of any organization cannot simply *will* those they lead to behave a certain way. Leaders instead must rely on effective communication to get things done and make things happen to achieve the organization’s mission. The possibility that one has failed to communicate is often met with resistance. When a breakdown of communication occurs, one may naturally ask, “How could this be? Wasn’t this clear? It says so right there!” Oftentimes, senior leaders forget that effective communication requires more than organizing and transmitting facts. They forget it requires persuasion. What, then, makes senior leaders persuasive when they communicate? One key answer often lies in their perceived credibility.

Several factors contribute to persuasive communication, but perceptions of credibility play a significant role in whether messages are followed. As Conger (1998) suggests, persuasion is more than “presenting great arguments” (p. 87). He adds that “Credibility is the cornerstone of effective persuasion; without it, a persuader won’t be given the time of day” (p. 90). Yet, the need for senior leaders of an organization to be perceived as credible is not always considered. After all, their words spring from legitimate authority, able to reward and punish subsequent behaviors and actions (French & Raven, 1959). Some might expect that once one has reached senior leader status, their word would automatically be accepted and followed. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As Cialdini (2001) warns, “Playing the ‘because I’m the boss’ card is out” and adds that, “persuasion skills exert far greater influence over others behavior than formal power structures do” (p. 72). Conger (1998) notes that senior leaders often

presume their status and positional power are sufficient to establish credibility, presumptions that he argues can be overzealous: “Our research strongly suggests that most managers overestimate their own credibility—considerably” (p. 88). These misperceptions can also obscure awareness of *how* one’s credibility is actually perceived.

Some behavioral research in persuasion provides insight into how one can achieve credibility. For example, Cialdini’s (2001) work on effective persuasion illustrates several findings that emphasize the importance of credibility. For example, he suggests that the principle of “liking,” in which a speaker benefits from similarity and familiarity with their audiences, “creates a presumption of goodwill and trustworthiness” (p. 74). Clearly, perceptions of goodwill and trustworthiness benefit any leader who desires to be perceived as credible. Cialdini also notes that “authority,” or deference to expertise, plays a powerful role in persuasion. Having strong expertise is beneficial for credibility, as audiences are more likely to follow what someone is advocating when they have experience in a certain topic area.

While the behavioral approach to credibility is instructive, it is also limited in terms of understanding how credibility is established and maintained. For example, although “liking” and “authority” appear to be important aspects of credibility, Cialdini’s work implies that managers, by demonstrating certain behaviors, have some control over others’ perceptions of their credibility. For example, when discussing “authority” he writes, “Since there’s good reason to defer to experts, executives should take pains to ensure that they establish their own expertise before they attempt to exert influence” (p. 77). He then presents an example of how a manager chose to “display all the awards, diplomas, and certifications of her staff on the walls” as a way to influence clients to follow the staff’s directions. He continues by saying that “the staff’s expertise was real—all we had to do was make it visible” (p. 77).

In this way, Cialdini presents an instrumental view of credibility in which certain actions lead to particular outcomes. However, while his research suggests relationships between certain actions and persuasiveness, he acknowledges that establishing credibility is actually more subtle. For example, he notes that executives cannot just “nail their diplomas to the wall and wait for everyone to notice” (p. 77). He hints at the value of a more rhetorical approach by suggesting that communication through narratives can aid credibility: “perhaps [one can] tell an anecdote about successfully solving a problem similar to the one that’s on the agenda at the next day’s meeting” (p. 77).

Eckhouse (1999) emphasizes the role of communication in how people make judgments, arguing that understanding credibility is “less about the statements a speaker or writer might make as a matter of direct self-reference, and more about the indirect evidence language provides about that person” (p. 120). More plainly, he suggests that perceptions of credibility are not summoned only by what the speaker says *about* their experience but rather what can be gleaned about their experience through the language they use. To put it another way, there is a difference between *stating* the expertise one has—e.g., *I am an expert because I have done this for 30 years*—and *showing* the expertise one has by what one says—e.g., *Doing X is useful because when we tried X before, it had positive results*. Eckhouse further characterizes this distinction as a difference between a “pronouncement” (the stating) and a “practice” (the showing) (p. 120). As he proposes, “What better evidence of intelligence, in the form of a reasoning agent, than the very demonstration of reasoning itself?” (p. 125). Accordingly, credibility can be demonstrated through language in a variety of ways. It is, therefore, important to consider how people make judgments about credibility as it can play a key role in the persuasiveness of messages.

To better understand reader judgments about the persuasiveness of leader messages—whether those judgments are about credibility or other issues relative to leader communication—it is beneficial to gather and analyze audience reception data. By looking at reception data, we can better explore nuances in how readers judge components of messages and other situational factors that they may point to as having impacted their responses. Accordingly, this research examines a case in which the director of a large government agency, with approximately 4,000 employees, issued a policy memo to achieve specific outcomes. This research explores the sender’s intentions for issuing the memo as well as the audience’s responses.

Like many other large, complex machine bureaucracies (Mintzberg, 1981), government agencies are typically structured hierarchically with multiple layers. Decisions are made at the top, and information regarding these decisions is filtered down through the various layers of the organization. Communication through policy memos, often distributed via e-mail, has become a standard way of disseminating critical information throughout large organizations in a timely fashion (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Markus, 1994; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Employees are expected to identify, understand, and implement changes and actions communicated in these memos.

Senior leaders in government, as in other organizations, generally adhere to certain rules and norms (constraints) that constitute acceptable modes of discourse, but often their primary concern is to be clear. However, popular conceptions of clarity are often based on information transfer models of communication that do not take seriously the role of language and the relational goals of messages (Suchan & Dulek, 1990). In the information transfer model, the primary objective is to transfer information accurately and efficiently, which invites a focus on the denotative meaning in messages. The questions that arise from such a focus are often about whether or not receivers understand the literal meaning of the message. However, even the most mundane messages have a persuasive aspect to them, and readers are often responding to the connotative meanings of messages; these meanings and interpretations are not easily discerned by senders. Thus, researchers need to turn their analysis to how readers make judgments based on connotative meanings, an approach that calls for a focus on receivers, how they make sense of messages as they read them, and the connotative meaning that they derive based on their perspective.

Reception of a Policy Change Memo

In the case examined here, the agency director issued a memo to remind employees of a policy change instituted nine months earlier: the elimination of a controversial performance metric. The memo had multiple goals, both informative and persuasive. In practical terms, the director’s primary goals for the memo were to reiterate that the policy had changed, explain the basis behind the changes, and institute additional changes and directives to employees. Additionally, the director sought to alter employee behavior and influence employee perceptions related to the elimination of the metric.

In assessing what the director intended to accomplish through the memo and how she wanted employees to perceive it, a common theme of credibility emerged surrounding both the sender’s intention and the participants’ reception of the memo. Specifically, judgments of credibility, both positive and negative, emerged in early analysis of qualitative interviews with the director and 23 employees. In practical terms, the director created the policy memo with the expectation that it would mitigate the tensions employees were experiencing and ensure that employees were properly following

the new policy correctly. She wanted employees to perceive the memo and herself as the director in a certain way and, in turn, to have them alter their behavior in accordance with what the memo was advocating. Interestingly, participants indicated they were clear about the memo on a denotative level: they understood the directives and what the policy changes meant. However, they questioned whether the directive and the changes were the right thing to do. In other words, employee responses centered on judgments about whether what the director was advocating in the memo was sensible. In this way, the employees were evaluating the director's credibility. When people question whether what someone is advocating is sensible, they are ultimately judging the sensibility (and, in turn, credibility) of the person announcing the new directives. More plainly, in the space between the common expression "If I say jump, and you say how high" is an evaluation of credibility. Those who answer "how high" have already accepted that the one saying "jump" is credible.

Once it became clear that credibility was a key theme in the director's intent and employee reception of the memo, Aristotle's three components of ethos—good sense, good moral character, and goodwill—were used as a theoretical framework for better understanding judgments of leader ethos. Aristotle's ethos framework has been used productively by other business communication scholars in previous studies (Beason, 1991; Eckhouse, 1999; Griffin, 2009; Hyland, 1998; Isaksson & Jørgensen, 2010; Kallendorf & Kallendorf, 1985; Stoddard 1985; Williams, 2008; Walzer, 1981). As method, Aristotle's framework is useful because it provides a heuristic for making sense of qualitative reception data. As a practical matter, the framework offers a valuable categorization scheme to make explicit how and in what ways readers are making specific judgments about leader ethos.

Intention, Reception, and The Role Of Ethos

In order to explore how people make judgments of credibility and its role in the persuasiveness of senior leader messages, this study began with inquiry into the relationship between leader intention and employee reception of the memo. It considers the assumptions and intentions that leaders have when creating and distributing messages to achieve specific outcomes in the organizations they lead. Specifically, the director's communication intentions, expectations, and desires for how readers would interpret the memo were explored in addition to the employees' perceptions of the memo and of the director based on the memo. Based on transcriptions of qualitative interviews with the director and 23 employees, thematic analysis showed that credibility emerged as a key theme in both the intent behind the memo and in the way that it was received. These initial findings then led to an investigation of the director's intentions and assumptions about ethos—as encoded in the memo—as well as employee judgments about the director's ethos based on the memo. Accordingly, this research explores what emerges when we examine the director's intentions as ethos appeals, as well as the ethos judgments employees made about the director based on the memo.

Ethos in Business Communication

At their core, organizations exist to achieve a set of goals or objectives. Whether these objectives are to generate profit, provide services, or carry out missions, organizations must act in such a way that encourages the accomplishment of their objectives. In other words, organizations are transactional in nature; their actions are directed towards achieving a specific purpose. Therefore, leaders of any organization must be able to influence and direct people's actions and behaviors to be consistent with what the organization wants to accomplish. As a result, leaders must persuade members of an

organization to behave in a certain way, whether it is via compliance with rules and regulations, belief in mission and strategy, or commitment to the organization. As such, business communication is inherently persuasive. Kallendorf and Kallendorf (1985) provide a useful rationale for how persuasive appeals operate in business communication, explaining how all types of business prose have persuasive functions:

An annual report not only states facts but also—and arguably foremost—persuades stockholders and the public to have confidence in the company. A proposal not only outlines the services or products a company can provide, but also persuades its readers—perhaps overtly, perhaps subtly—that this company’s proposal is the most advantageous for the customer. And memos not only report opinions and directives, but also persuade their recipients that these opinions are sound and these directives are by all means to be followed. (p. 43)

Scholars have studied persuasive appeals ever since Aristotle presented the concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos in his seminal work, the *Rhetoric*. Specifically, they have sought to understand the means through which persuasive appeals operate and their corresponding influence. Of the three modes of persuasive appeals, Aristotle considered ethos, which addresses judgments of speaker credibility, most important (Aristotle, 2007, p. 39). Additionally, many business communication scholars have argued for the relevance of ethos to business communication (Beason, 1991; Eckhouse, 1999; Griffin, 2009; Hyland, 1998; Isaksson & Jørgensen, 2010; Kallendorf & Kallendorf, 1985; Stoddard 1985; Williams, 2008; Walzer, 1981). Eckhouse (1999), for example, makes ethos the “unifying concept” for business communicators in his text *Competitive Communication: A Rhetoric for Modern Business* (p. xii). Eckhouse argues that Aristotle’s notion of ethos is relevant for business communicators because it can “ease acceptance for most claims” and “put the audience in a particular frame of mind, or emotional state [...] that is more receptive to the writer’s or speaker’s point of view” (p. 121).

Ethos is often used interchangeably with credibility, and business-communication scholars have noted that credibility plays an integral role in the success of persuasive appeals. For example, Kallendorf and Kallendorf (1985) note how credibility plays out in commonly accepted business principles; that is, behaving a certain way to maintain professionalism, communicate expertise, or to be perceived as trustworthy. Eckhouse (1999) devotes five chapters of his book to components of the writing process that affect credibility, including conciseness, word choice, syntax, punctuation, and grammar. Accordingly, ethos provides a useful theoretical framework for exploring the relationship between business discourse and reader judgments.

Past business-communication research has examined distinctive ways in which ethos operates in various spheres of business communication. For example, Williams (2008) found that corporate mission statements included expressions of positive values such as integrity, excellence, innovation, citizenship, and safety in attempts to develop a desirable corporate identity and influence stakeholder perceptions. Arguments and narratives geared towards maintaining positive corporate identity further draw upon ethos and its relevance to crisis communication. Griffin (2009) found that ethos appeals were important for maintaining a positive corporate identity during a crisis and showed how Merck tried to develop a corporate identity of “understanding, sympathy, and trust” through public letters. Expressions of ethos as it relates to corporate identity have also been examined in the ways public relations agencies attempt

to express credibility. For example, Isaksson and Jørgensen (2010) found that public relations agencies convey expertise, trustworthiness, and empathy on their websites in order to build ethos.

Ethos also has relevance to business communication even for circumstances in which the need for ethos appeals may be less obvious. For example, scholars have noted the significance of ethos in technical writing and show that ethos plays a role in messages that seemingly would not depend on anything more than clarity in order to be successful (Shenk, 1995; Stoddard, 1985). Stoddard (1985) provides a fitting example of the relevance and power of ethos in the simplest of written instructions: those on the back of a can of charcoal-lighter fluid:

The instructions must persuade the reader that for her well-being she must follow them exactly. If she fails to follow them, she may be severely injured. In this case of persuasion, logos and pathos (fear) may prove stronger than ethos. But if for any reason, the reader is lead to doubt the credibility (ethos) of the instructions, she will not follow them [...]. If they are too technical, garbled, or even so simple as to be insulting, she may ignore them. If they are full of misspellings or use an unreadable format, she may ignore them. (p. 235)

Ethos is clearly an important area of study for business communication. As demonstrated above, the scope of ethos in business communication spans a variety of organizational messages such as basic internal memos, employee handbooks, annual reports, and mission statements. However, it is important to clearly define ethos as a persuasive appeal.

Defining Ethos

The notion of ethos encompasses the interplay between the concepts of character and credibility. More specifically, ethos is commonly conceptualized as consideration of a rhetor's (a speaker's or writer's) character as a source of persuasion. The basic principle is that audiences are more likely to consider a rhetor's proclamation as true, fitting, or believable if they have a generally positive view of that person's character. Accordingly, based on interpretations about the nature of a rhetor's character, audiences ultimately make judgments about the rhetor's credibility. Taken together, these judgments influence the perception and reception of the message the rhetor is conveying, and, in a final dynamic interplay, the message itself influences judgments of a rhetor's character and credibility. Aristotle explains how judgments of character originate in the discourse a rhetor uses: "[There is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence" (Aristotle, 2007, p. 38).

According to Aristotle, there are three primary components of an audience's judgments of a rhetor's ethos: good sense, good moral character, and goodwill (Aristotle, 2007, p. 112).

Aristotle (as cited in Miller, 1974) relates good sense to prudence (phronesis) and explains that it requires a "settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions" (p. 312). In this way, good sense is an audience judgment about whether a rhetor makes appropriate decisions about the best course of action in relation to the specific conventions surrounding a speech event. In order to be perceived as credible, a rhetor must be perceived as having and be able to convey sufficient understanding of the needs, emotions, and desires of the audience and situation.

Second, Aristotle argues that good moral character (*arête*), is the nature of a rhetor's virtue or goodness. An audience must perceive that the rhetor engages in behaviors consistent with conceptions of good moral character in order to be perceived as credible. As Miller (1974) puts it, "Whether a person is worthy of praise or is worthy of being trusted or believed, lies in the virtue of the person involved" (p. 314).

The third indicator of ethos, goodwill (*eunoia*), is the rhetor's attitude or manner towards the audience; that is, audiences will make inferences about a speaker's credibility based on how they see a rhetor as perceiving them. As Griffin (2009) explains, "The speaker can cultivate the audience's perceptions of his goodwill, says Aristotle, if he is able to convince the listeners that he wishes good things for them, preferably appearing to have no benefit for the speaker" (p. 65). Aristotle warns that even if a rhetor exhibits good sense and good character, failure to convey goodwill can result in a perceived lack of credibility.

Methods

The site for the study was a United States government financial organization with approximately 4,000 employees in various locations across the United States and abroad. Research locations for the study were based on the geographic dispersion of the organization, participant availability, and schedule requirements. Two sites with jurisdiction over employees from different regions of the country were selected as research locations. Study participation was offered to employees at all levels of the organization in each research location via e-mail. Twenty-three employee volunteers were randomly selected as study participants. Participation in the study was confidential and all references in the study to employees are solely based on job function within the organization.

The participants consisted of employees in various job functions and were placed into subgroups designated as field, management, and senior-management levels; these broad categories were useful both for making comparisons and protecting anonymity. The distribution of participants from each job function was approximately 35% from the field level, 39% from the management level, and 26% from the senior-management level, respectively. Gender distribution was 57% male and 43% female. Participants' time of service at the organization ranged from under five years or less, to over thirty years. All participants had an undergraduate degree, and approximately 87% of participants had some level of graduate education or a professional certificate. Approximately 48% of participants had previously worked in government at the federal, state, or local level, while 61% had previous non-government job experience, and 22% had worked only in the organization.

The primary materials analyzed for this study were transcripts of interview data obtained from participants. Qualitative semi-structured interviews using a think-aloud protocol (TAP) were used to generate evidence for how participants were constructing the meaning of the memo, in addition to gleaning insights about the director's intentions in sending the memo. TAP is beneficial because it allows for immediate feedback from the participant, and the inquirer is able to observe firsthand response of the reader as they engage with a text (Kucan & Beck, 1997). The policy memo written by the director of the organization served as the focus for the participants in the interviews. This memo was distributed to all employees via the organization's e-mail system approximately three months prior to the beginning of the study. The memo was chosen because it reflected a change in organizational policy and practices

and called for specific action items. The memo length was typical of other similar memos authored by the director, as was the way in which it was disseminated.

To assess common themes of reader judgments in the interview transcripts, the authors used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory calls for a process of constant comparison of similarities and differences among perspectives and draws from qualitative interview data as one primary unit of analysis. Additionally, this analysis was also guided by a rhetorical approach to language. Rhetorical critics are grounded in a social constructionist perspective and examine language choices for insights into rhetorical motives (Burke, 1969). A rhetorical approach was useful in assessing similarities and differences among participants in terms of the motives, rationalizations, and justifications they made in their assumptions and judgments about messages. Specifically, cluster and metaphor analysis were used to gain insights into rhetorical motives inherent in the data. These methods helped to address the nature of the director's communication intentions, expectations, and desires for how readers would interpret the memo, as well as the employees' perception of the memo and of the director based on the memo. Rhetorical analysis provided insights into the value judgments of participants, which led to a focus on ethos, and further inquiry into exploring the director's intentions as ethos appeals and employees' corresponding judgments. Together, these methodological approaches guided thematic comparisons about the relationship between the director's intent and the employees' reception of the memo, as well as the way in which ethos impacted reader judgments.

The Director's Intent

Three primary themes characterized the director's stated intentions for the creation and distribution of the memo. First, she expressed that she wanted the memo to serve as a friendly reminder that reiterated and clarified the requirements of the policy change. Second, she wanted to communicate her understanding of the pressures and struggles the workforce was facing. Third, she wanted the memo to be perceived as important.

A Friendly Reminder

The policy change that appeared in the memo was not new, but rather a reiteration of a policy change that had taken place nine months previously. In her interview, the director expressed her intention for the memo to act as a reminder. For example, in one instance she said, "I wanted to remind employees [of the policy change],"¹ In addition, however, she implied that she wanted the reminder to be friendly and non-threatening, rather than harsh or overtly critical. For example, she stated her desire to keep her own attitude positive and to remind employees of the policy change "in a nice way with a smile on my face." Specifically, the interview data suggested that she sought a friendly tone through promoting shared responsibility for the confusion, providing a form of assistance, maintaining a degree of informality, and conveying a positive attitude.

One of the ways the director indicated she wanted to convey the reminder as friendly was by acknowledging that the cause of any confusion regarding the policy was partly the responsibility of

¹ All quoted interview data in this study is derived from personal communication with study participants (Martin & King, 2009).

headquarters and not simply the employees' fault: "I wanted to say maybe it's [headquarters'] fault, versus saying, 'Part of this agency isn't following [guidance].'" She stressed the responsibility of headquarters in other instances as well; for example, she said she wanted to convey that "Maybe [headquarters] didn't clarify it right. Maybe there is confusion regarding the policy." Another way in which the director implied that the memo was a friendly reminder was to offer the memo as a means of help for employees. For example, she wanted to be heard as saying: "here's the new policy, and here's some things to help. That's what I'm hoping to get across."

Throughout the director's interview, there were several indications that her attitude toward employees in the memo was meant to be informal, which further supports the characterization of the memo as friendly. For example, her use of terms was indicative of her informal approach: "I began to realize that we needed to nudge our people a little bit more, to say, 'Hey, guys, we don't have [the old metric], but pay attention to these dates.'" In this instance, she characterized her action as providing a "nudge" toward the policy, and uses the informal address of "Hey guys." Throughout the interview, she often used the informal sentiment of "Hey guys" or "You guys" when describing what she was trying to convey. For example, she described her intent for a directive in the memo as, "Hey guys, when you're setting that due date, be sure you do this first step."

The final way the director expressed that she wanted to convey the memo as friendly was by her focus on conveying the message in a positive manner. This was indicated by her inclusion of positive sentiments about employee behaviors. For example, the director indicated that she wanted to convey her appreciation of employee efforts by stating, "I wanted to get across that 'I really appreciate, as the director, what you do.'" She further expressed her appreciation of their efforts by including positive reinforcement of their work along with reassurance: "I want to keep giving positive reinforcement, telling people, 'It's okay. You didn't do anything wrong. These [things] are complex. It's okay.'"

Conveying Sincere Understanding of Employee Issues

The data also indicated the director's intention to communicate her understanding of challenges facing the workforce; that is, she wanted them to know that she understood where they were coming from. For example, she said, "I hope [after reading the memo] employees would say I'm understanding [...] that 'the director understands [our job] and doesn't sit in an ivory tower.'" Specifically, the interview data suggested that the director sought to be understanding of three primary issues: the pressures of past policies, the challenges inherent in the new policy, and the problems with expectations of perfection.

The director noted repeatedly that the past policies had put undue pressure on employees. For example, in comments about the metrics of the former policy, she said, "The [old metric] was a detriment to our people. It was an impediment and a barrier to our people." She also characterized the old policy as threatening: "There was a sense [among employees] that if they don't [meet the metric] they'll be out of a job. There was always that threat." In turn, the Director indicated that she wanted to convey she not only understood the problems with the policy and what it implied, but also that the policy itself had encouraged employees to make bad decisions: "It was over-compliance. People took it [the policy] to the extreme and didn't go beyond it [the old metric] because they felt [if they did] someone would ask a question."

Although the director stated that changing the policy was a good thing, she also wanted to convey her understanding that the new policy would not alleviate all the pressures employees were facing. For example, she noted that “I want to make sure [employees] understand that I know there are a lot [of pressures] on them.” She also expressed her concern that employees might have difficulty with the new policy, which is why she desired for them to discuss it with management: “We wanted the managers to sit down with their staff and talk about it, and say, ‘All right, what does this mean to us? What are the barriers? What are the concerns? Let’s talk about it.’”

Additionally, she wanted employees to know she understood it would be difficult for them to address the challenges they were facing: “I want to make sure [employees] understand that I know it’s not easy.” Following her acknowledgement of the difficulties employees faced, she also noted that she did not have unrealistic expectations: “I want to get across that I know it’s not a perfect world.” Part of her attempt to convey that she did not have unrealistic expectations was acknowledging that it wasn’t realistic to expect immediate changes and that employees needed time to adjust to the change: “I didn’t want to give a reminder [on the policy] too soon, because it would be a slap on the wrist—we changed something and now you guys aren’t complying. I wanted to give them time.”

Conveying The Memo as Important

Although the director wanted to present the content of the memo in a friendly manner and to communicate her understanding of the issues facing the workforce, she also indicated that she wanted the memo to be perceived as important. For example, the director characterized the memo as “something serious that [employees] need to follow.”

One of the ways the director sought to indicate seriousness was to issue the memo herself instead of having it come from the department in the agency that typically issues policy memos. The director said that she was hoping for the following reaction from employees by sending the memo herself: “Oh, wow! This is serious; they want us to [stop using the old metric].” In another example, the director expressed that she hoped issuing the memo herself would make employees more inclined to read it. She said, “I wanted people to say, ‘I need to open it because it’s a message from the director’ [...] and I wanted the pop of ‘Oh, my God! I better read this!’”

Another way she intended to stress the importance of the memo was by addressing it to all employees across the agency. In her interview she stated, “I wanted it to go to every employee so they understood that this was something really important.” More specifically, she indicated that she wanted to achieve a similar affect as authoring the memo herself in terms of increased readership of the memo: “I was hoping [a memo addressed to all employees] was viewed as pretty big, so people would say, ‘Oh, the director sent something to all employees; I better read it.’”

The director also indicated she sought to stress the importance of the memo by including specific instructions in it. For example, in the memo she advocated a different way to proceed when employees encountered issues with their reports that might challenge the status quo: “I said to issue a [different type of recommendation] that employees are [hesitant] to use, so for employees they go, ‘Oh, my God, that’s big! That means they’re serious.’” She also indicated she intended to convey that the memo was important by including in it a specific instruction for managers to review the memo with their staff. For

example, she said, “Requiring managers to discuss this [memo] at staff meetings was an attempt to put this back on the forefront.”

The Director’s Intentions and Ethos

While the director’s intentions may point to a number of things, one of the things that came through was that she wanted to be perceived as credible. A desire to be perceived as credible underlies the director’s intentions in two ways. First, failure to achieve credibility would result in her intentions not being met. If she was not perceived as credible, then her desire to convey the message in a friendly manner would fall through, she would not be perceived as sincere, and the memo would ultimately not be perceived as important. Second, the nature of the director’s intentions indicates an implicit desire to be perceived as credible. That is, her desire to convey the message in a friendly manner, express sincere understanding, and stress the importance of the memo are consistent with Aristotle’s position on conveying good sense, good moral character, and goodwill.

Given that the director’s interview data reflected her desire to be perceived as credible, a fitting way to examine employee-reception data was through an Aristotelian frame of ethos. Analysis of employee-reception data resulted in findings suggestive of an inherent preoccupation with ethos based on the way participants commented about how they perceived the memo. In turn, a suitable way to organize the reception findings was to use Aristotle’s three components of ethos. Therefore, employee-reception data findings were categorized based upon their connection to good sense, good moral character, and goodwill.

Employee Reception of The Memo

The majority of the participants’ comments regarding the reception of the memo centered on judgments related to the director’s credibility. First, there were comments that suggested evaluations of the director’s good sense (phronesis). Second, there were comments that suggested judgments about the director’s perceived goodwill (eunoia) towards employees. Third, there were comments that indicated judgments about the director’s excellence in habit, or good moral character (arête). There were also statements from participants associated with the director’s credibility that were not directly associated with the memo, or that were sparked by previous experience. These statements also corresponded with assessments of the director’s credibility in terms of excellence in habit.

Evaluations of Phronesis: Good Sense

The data suggested that participants made both negative and positive judgments about the director’s phronesis, or good sense, based on the memo. In general, the data suggested a greater emphasis on challenges to the director’s wisdom and judgment; however, the data also suggested support for her wisdom and judgment.

In their interviews, respondents expressed that there were places in the memo indicative of poor wisdom and judgment on the director’s part. Specifically, they indicated the director lacked an understanding of the working environment. For example, some participants indicated that her views of the working environment were unrealistic: “This isn’t how the real life is out there. This is the fairy tale

world where we have all the time [we need].”² Other respondents characterized this lack of awareness as being out of touch and that she didn’t have a true conception of what went on outside of headquarters. As one employee put it, “She’s not very intimate with what goes on at the working level,” and another noted that “[Through] some of her comments, it’s clear she’s clueless as to what’s really going on in the field.”

Participants also challenged the director’s wisdom and judgment through comments that she lacked general expertise of business practices. For example, one participant claimed that she lacked current experience: “She hasn’t done [field work] in 20 years.” Other respondents indicated that she not only lacked current experience but also experience in general: “She talks about field experience, but she doesn’t have any.” In addition to not having field experience, participants pointed to areas in the memo that suggested she lacked expertise and misunderstood policy rules. For example, one participant said, “[The rulebook says] if customers won’t give you an extension when you call them, you qualify it. Here, she’s saying that, no, you return it.” Another respondent asserted that she was using incorrect terminology in her policy description: “There’s no such thing as a field work due date. That’s wrong.”

In addition to making claims that the director misunderstood organizational policy, participants pointed to places in the memo where she was inaccurately assessing issues. In one case, a participant indicated that the director was incorrectly characterizing routine practices as problems in the memo: “Why can’t we do that? She’s saying this is causing a problem. I never had a problem.” In other instances participants noted that not only was the director incorrectly characterizing problems, but also she was failing to address problems that were pertinent to the policy in the memo: “What is not said here is that [customers] are used to [the old metric] and that is the real problem.” Another employee commented, “I don’t think it [the memo] really address what’s going on, all right?”

Following from the inaccurate assessment of issues, participants also suggested that the director’s proposed changes for mitigating problems were ineffective. For example, one participant indicated that a change she was advocating in the memo was ultimately not useful: “This [option] is not going to be very useful. Why would you do this?” Another employee explained how the changes were neither helpful nor a good use of resources: “This [option] would be a waste of time because it doesn’t do anybody any good. It’s like finding a diagnosis on a patient after the patient’s dead, you know?”

The final way in which participants challenged the wisdom and judgment of the director was through claims that she had unrealistic expectations. For example, participants commented that specific goals in the memo were unattainable because some things were beyond their control: “Once [the report] goes to supervisor review we have no control of when or if it will be issued”; “We’re not sending inadequate proposals back, because half the time we don’t know if it’s adequate or inadequate until half way through the report.” Participants also suggested that her directives in the memo were impractical and not likely to be followed: “[This option] basically says that we didn’t do anything. So we probably wouldn’t do that.”

² All quoted interview data in this study is derived from personal communication with study participants: Martin, S., & King, C. (Interviewers) & Anonymous Employee Participants (Interviewees), (September, 2009). *Naval Postgraduate School Communication Study: Reception of a Policy Change Memo* [Interview Transcript].

In other instances, however, respondents made claims that supported the wisdom and judgment of the director. For example, one of the ways in which participants provided support for the director's wisdom and judgment was by indicating that she made correct assessments of issues facing the workforce in the memo. Specifically, participants pointed to places in the memo in which she recognized and acknowledged actual problems they were facing. One person said, "[Establishing a realistic due date] is a problem and terribly difficult." Participants also confirmed that the memo addressed policy issues that were in fact problems. For example, one person concurred with her assessment of problems relating to proposals: "[Reviewing proposals for adequacy] is something people neglect to do." Similarly, respondents offered general confirmation that the memo highlighted a variety of issues they agreed were problems. Such confirmation was marked by the following types of sentiments: "This is true," or "This is a problem," and "The majority of employees have done this."

Not only did participants identify places in the memo in which they perceived the director was correctly assessing issues, they also noted that the proposed changes she was making to alleviate these issues were effective. For example, one respondent noted the positive outcome of a change instituted in the memo: "There's been a positive result of [this requirement]." Another respondent further articulated that the change was beneficial because it advocated desired behavior: "[The requirement] is a good thing, so employees aren't just arbitrarily extending the date."

The final way participants supported the director's wisdom and judgment was by indicating that she had a clear understanding of agency policy and procedures. For example, they pointed to places in the memo that aligned with their understanding of several policies. One respondent noted that "[Reviewing proposals for adequacy] is just a statement of fact. It's something we always do." In addition, some participants agreed with her rationale regarding certain directives in the memo because they followed policy logic. As one participant commented, "[Customers] need a realistic due date because once they get our product then they're going to take certain actions with that product."

Evaluations of Goodwill Toward The Audience

The data also suggested that participants made judgments regarding the nature of the attitude the director was conveying towards them in the memo. Specifically, the data indicated participants perceived the director as having both favorable and unfavorable opinions of employees.

Several themes in the data indicated that some participants perceived the director had an unfavorable opinion of employees. For example, participants pointed to the memo as suggesting that they were unintelligent. Specifically, they took issue with the director pointing out in the memo something they were obviously already familiar with. One person commented, "You're telling me something I already know [which says], 'See. You guys are really dumb.'" In other instances, participants suggested that the director indicated they were incapable of following direction. For example, one person said, "She's saying some people don't know how to follow the guidance."

More specially, the data suggested that participants saw the director as saying employees could not handle their responsibilities. For example, one participant asserted that the memo suggested they could not handle things without management involvement: "[They think because the supervisor] is involved *now* things are going to get done" (emphasis added). Accordingly, based on their perception that the director was saying they could not handle responsibilities without management involvement, some

participants suggested that she was lessening their responsibilities in the memo: “Requiring [this signature] takes responsibility away from employees.” Others associated taking away responsibility with her saying that they were not doing a good job: “She takes responsibility away from employees [so] she doesn’t think employees are doing their job.”

In addition to lacking intelligence and not being able to handle responsibilities, participants suggested that the director characterized them as avoiding accountability. For example, participants saw her as conveying that they were placing blame on others in the memo: “She’s saying employees are pointing fingers. “It’s not me. I’ve done my thing. It’s somebody else.” Additionally, they saw her as saying that because employees were avoiding responsibility, they were compromising the professionalism of the agency: “[She’s saying] it’s finger-pointing or whatever, which doesn’t give a good impression to the outside and is not very professional.”

While there were more instances of negative perceptions, some participants indicated their perception that the director had a favorable opinion of them based on the memo. These comments were marked by sentiments expressing their acceptance of her views as favorable towards them. For example, as one person said, “That’s nice. She’s recognizing the stresses employees face.” In particular, participants indicated a general appreciation of good work and acknowledgement from the director. Another person characterized a statement in the memo in the following way: “It’s recognition for the fine work that is being done.” Other participants linked acknowledgement of good work to indications she appreciated employee effort: “[She’s saying] the efforts that are being performed out in the field are being appreciated, which is nice.”

Participants also indicated the director had a favorable opinion towards them based on her explicit acknowledgment in the memo of issues they were facing. They considered this acknowledgment as favorable in the sense that she understood the challenges they were facing, thus giving them the benefit of the doubt. For example, they suggested she recognized issues facing the agency: “It’s an acknowledgement of the struggles that we’re going through as an agency.” Other participants noted the director was acknowledging challenges due to stresses and change in the agency: “The director is recognizing the stresses being laid on [employees] which is important” and, “It’s recognition regarding the tremendous amount of change we’ve hit [employees] with, which is good.”

Evaluations of Good Habit: Excellence in Action

The final way the data suggested participants made judgments about the director’s credibility was through claims that her behaviors were reflective of either poor or good actions. These assessments stemmed from comments directly related to the memo as well as previous experience with the director. Interpretation of the nature of one’s habits reasonably calls for consideration of claims stemming from both the memo and previous experience. Accordingly, the findings recorded reflect how participants made assessments of her based on the memo and on their experiences with her outside the memo.

The data indicated that some participants made judgments of the director’s behavior as unsatisfactory in terms of their conception of appropriate actions. One of the ways respondents accounted for poor actions on the director’s part was through claims that she was disingenuous. For example, in reference to a statement the director made in the memo about employees working hard, one person commented, “The first part of that sentence is just BS. I don’t think she believes that, frankly.” More specifically, they

indicated that she intentionally included positive sentiments about their work efforts because she was expected to: “The fact that she *has* to put that in there should tell people something” (emphasis added). In other instances participants asserted she was disingenuous by indicating she was giving mixed messages in the memo: “[If she thinks] employees string [customers] along, it conflicts with the message in the last paragraph that we’re doing good work. I see some undertones here that I’m concerned about.”

In addition to expressions that the director was disingenuous, the data suggested a general indication of poor habits on the director’s part. For example, one participant suggested that she did not value concerns from field employees: “The bottom line is that [she thinks] stuff coming from the field isn’t important. That’s the way she operates.” They further indicated that she only focused on pleasing her superiors: “Whatever gets done is whatever [her bosses] tell her to do. Nothing else.” Another employee mimicked the director’s focus on pleasing superiors in terms of why she even sent the memo: “[She’s] covering her a___. From her bosses.”

The data also suggested, however, that participants made judgments that the director’s behavior was good in terms of their conception of appropriate actions. For example, they indicated that she was sincere. One employee simply stated, “She’s sincere.” When responding to a place in the memo in which the director thanked employees for their work efforts, another person said, “I don’t doubt that she’s not sincere.” Another way they expressed this sincerity was by indicating that she was not just trying to pay them lip service with fancy buzzwords in the memo: “She’s not just saying the words or putting the words in there, [like] buzzwords or catchphrases.”

Participants also indicated the director had strong abilities to lead the agency. For example, one person expressed the director was capable of leading the agency through tough times: “I was very glad when she got the position, because I felt she could handle this.” More specifically, they indicated the agency would benefit from her leadership because her actions would lead to improvements: “As long as she’s getting out, and I think she does, things are bound to improve.” Other comments were more explicit about her abilities—specifically, that she had a strong work ethic, was dedicated, and involved: “She works as hard as anybody,” “She’s very involved,” and “She’s real dedicated.”

Not only did participants indicate that the director had the ability to lead the agency, but also they saw her as wanting the best for the agency, which they considered a positive action. For example, participants described the director’s focus on improving the agency by making the agency a priority: “She’s putting the agency first in terms of our priorities.” Accordingly, some participants associated her commitment with dedication to her job: “She takes her job very seriously.” In other instances they indicated that she wanted what was best for the agency because she was trying to change things for the better: “She’s trying to change things,” and “She’s trying to make changes that make our organization better.”

The final way in which the data suggested participants saw the director as engaging in good actions was that she had a positive outlook and that she consistently expressed this attitude. For example, participants commented about her positive personality. One person said, “She’s very positive.” Another participant linked their assessment of the director’s positive personality with optimism, based on the way the director communicated: “[She’s] a positive individual. An optimistic person. That’s the type of personality I see in her in the way she communicates.”

Discussion of Intent and Reception Data

Assessment of the director's intentions and employee reception of the memo provides insight into the assumptions that senior leaders can have when creating and distributing messages to achieve desired outcomes. Specifically, this study illustrates assumptions about what the director thought would make her credible. Additionally, this study illustrates that employee judgments of credibility do not necessarily align with director intentions. Ultimately, the director's intentions illustrate four key assumptions that she held about her own credibility in terms of how the memo would be received by employees. The findings show that the ways participants made judgments of her credibility often differed from the assumptions she held about how her credibility would be perceived.

First, the Director associated conveying the memo in a friendly manner, via promoting the idea of headquarters' shared responsibility in the confusion about the policy, with positive reception of the memo. So, by promoting the idea that leadership shared responsibility for the possible confusion over the policy change, the director hoped to be perceived as giving employees the "benefit of the doubt" and putting them "at ease" rather than "blaming" them. However, the data suggest that participants based their positive perceptions on whether the director correctly assessed issues related to the policy, put forth effective proposed changes, and acknowledged their good work in the memo. They did not associate or characterize these things as being "friendly." Participants, also, did not necessarily perceive the director as promoting shared responsibility in the memo, which is what she was counting on in order to be perceived as friendly. Ironically, despite the director's intent to the contrary, some participants suggested that she was saying employees were to blame for problems related to the policy change. For example, they indicated that her message in the memo was that employees were "finger-pointing" and not giving a "good impression" of the agency. They also suggested that she was saying they "couldn't handle responsibilities" and "needed supervision."

Second, the director assumed that if she expressed empathy and understanding towards employees that they would perceive her as being "in touch." For example, she linked being understanding with being in touch when discussing her intentions for the memo: "I hope [after reading the memo] employees would say I'm understanding [...] that 'the director understands [our job] and doesn't sit in an ivory tower.'" However, participants did not always associate her being understanding with being in touch. Some participants indicated that the director did recognize and acknowledge in the memo the struggles they were facing (i.e., that she was being understanding), but they associated this with positive judgments of credibility in terms of conveying goodwill, and not necessarily with being in touch (good sense). For example, they associated her acknowledgment of the challenges and issues they were facing with having a favorable attitude towards them (i.e., goodwill): "This is an acknowledgement from the director that we're all out there working hard, which I think is good." Participants viewed her as being understanding through her acknowledgment of their good work and challenges, but they did not necessarily see her acknowledgment of their struggles as true empathy based on accurate knowledge of field conditions.

Although the director assumed being in touch (having good sense) equated with showing that she understood pressures, challenges, and the appropriate level of expectations of employees, participants perceived good sense differently. Participants associated good sense with the director's ability to provide helpful changes in the memo, something that many of them saw her as failing to do. For example, participants who suggested that she was out of touch indicated that she came across in the memo as misunderstanding policy rules, incorrectly characterizing problems, or failing to address issues

they were facing. Specifically, they indicated that the changes the director was making in the memo were not a good use of resources, did not suit the situation, were excessive, failed to address the right issue, or were unattainable. Again, the director's assumptions about what would make her credible differed from how participants actually judged her credibility.

Third, the director associated calling for increased management involvement with being perceived as providing help to employees who were struggling with the new policy. In short, she equated management involvement, including her own, with being helpful. For example, she indicated that she wrote the memo herself with the intent that it would be perceived as a form of assistance to employees. She said she wanted to be heard as saying, "Okay, guys, maybe [headquarters] erred in not making the policy clear, so now I'm going to help you." Her intent, as she put it, was to come across as saying "here's the new policy, and here's some things to help." She was making the assumption that management involvement would be perceived as helpful, as would be issuing the memo in the first place. She also noted that her intent was for employees to discuss the memo with their managers; something she thought would be a way to help employees overcome any barriers they were experiencing in meeting the new requirements. "I wanted them to sit down with their teams and talk about it. To find out what the issues were and [resolve] them." In turn, several directives in the memo called for more management involvement. For example, she indicated that requiring management approval on report extensions would be helpful because managers would be more aware of what employees were dealing with and would be able to assist employees if they were having trouble with report due dates: "[Management approval] was intended for the manager and the supervisor to get engaged in the reports and help employees out." While she hoped that this involvement would be perceived as helpful, some participants saw it as condescending and taking away their responsibilities; that is, they associated increased management involvement with the director conveying poor goodwill towards them: "The impact of [requiring a manager's signature] has been that, 'They don't trust me with anything.'"

Lastly, she associated her positional power with conveying the importance of the memo. Specifically, she indicated that she sent out the memo under her signature so that employees would see it as important and, in turn, comply with what it said. Interestingly, participants did not necessarily look to the director's position in the agency when they made judgments about her credibility, but rather they looked to her behaviors (i.e., good action) as a leader. For example, participants noted her work ethic and involvement as a leader, rather than simply acknowledging her position. Consider the following comments: "She works as hard as anybody"; "She's very involved"; and "She's real dedicated." None of these comments imply that respondents perceived her as dedicated and involved *because* she held the position of director. Instead, participants made judgments of her credibility based on what they thought she was doing or demonstrating in regard to leadership with the memo. For example, they said things like, "She's trying to make changes that make our organization better," and "She's changing the agency more in the way that I'd like to see it." In all these examples, it is clear that her actions were the focus rather than her position.

In fact, some participants actually associated her positional status with negative judgments of good habit. For example, one person noted her position in the agency as a negative indicator of sincerity: "I don't trust anybody over GS-12, so when I see something like this I always take it with a grain of salt." Another participant associated her position with what they saw as obligatory statements in the memo,

which they indicated as a reason for questioning how genuine the statements were: “The fact that she *has* to put that in there should tell people something” (emphasis added).

Although participant comments centered on both positive and negative perceptions of the director’s credibility, interestingly, the ways in which they made these evaluations differed from her assumptions. That is, whether they perceived her as credible or not was grounded in different criteria in response to the memo than she expected.

Implications for Senior Leader Ethos

This study demonstrates the value of examining the ways people make judgments of credibility in senior leader messages. Specifically, it provides insight into what types of things audiences may look to in senior leader messages when constructing evaluations of credibility. The findings also show that what audiences look to as a basis for credibility can be very different from the assumptions senior leaders may hold about what will be important for establishing their credibility.

In this case, regardless of the director’s intentions, participants saw her *has* having positive credibility largely when they perceived her as *demonstrating* certain things, such as *being* understanding and *being* helpful by sending out the memo. As Eckhouse (1999) argued, a rhetor must demonstrate credibility through practice rather than simply pronouncement. Accordingly, even if the director was making a pronouncement that was true (i.e., even if she were, in fact, understanding), this pronouncement did not insure positive judgments about credibility, particularly in the area of good sense.

Cialdini (2001) also provides a useful frame to understand the importance of practice versus pronouncement in his seven triggers of influence to persuasion. Specifically, Cialdini draws our attention to the role of “liking” for establishing persuadability of an audience. This concept, which suggests that people like those who like them, was also evident in this case. In the case presented in this research, it was clear it was important for the director to demonstrate how she was similar to her audience as participants described her as “disconnected” and “out of touch.” However, this study illustrates that what a senior leader may assume will contribute to liking, or any other concept integral to credibility, can differ from how it is perceived by the audience. In turn, this study suggests that it is not sufficient for senior leaders to assume certain qualities or characteristics—such as attending the same university as employees, or holding a similar position in the past—will translate into positive perceptions of credibility.

This research also demonstrates the importance of comparing communicator intention with audience reception. The findings in this study explicate some of the ways in which employees made judgments about a senior leader’s credibility—in this case, based upon a policy memo. Assessing how participants actually made judgments about leader credibility can help inform future communication. Accordingly, this study shows that senior leaders may be unaware of how judgments of their credibility are being made, resulting in faulty assumptions about reader perception. As Conger (1998) argued, people often overestimate their own credibility. In addition, as the findings here demonstrate, senior leaders may wrongly emphasize issues that, in fact, do not build their credibility.

Lastly, this study suggests that ethos emerges as an important characteristic in employee reception of a policy memo and judgments about its author. As such, leaders need to attend to ethos considerations

deliberately. On the broadest level, the director had fairly simple intentions: issue a memo to remind people of a policy change and include directives in the memo in order to achieve desired results. This is something that occurs on a daily basis in many organizations. As the case for this study demonstrated, it was not a question of merely transmitting information as a means to get these priorities across to employees. In actuality, the director held certain assumptions related to her intentions in the memo—and, in turn, to her credibility—that were different from how participants perceived her intentions in the memo.

In conclusion, one cannot count on establishing credibility based on a position as a senior leader or on any other characteristics. Consequently, this study has important implications for business communication research. Establishing credibility is an important aspect of effective communication, yet, as this case demonstrated, it is much more subtle than just listing and stating qualifications. As these results show, senior leaders still must demonstrate credibility rather than simply stating it, and they must be cautious of the assumptions they may hold regarding how certain behaviors they demonstrate will contribute to audience judgments of credibility.

References

- Aristotle. (2007). *On rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse*. (G.A. Kennedy, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Beason, L. (1991). Strategies for establishing an effective persona: An analysis of appeals to ethos in business speeches. *Journal of Business Communication*, 28(4), 326–346.
- Burke, K. (1969). *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ceccarelli, L. (2001). Rhetorical criticism and the rhetoric of science. *Western Journal of Communication*, 65(3), 314–329.
- Cialdini, R.B. (2001). Harnessing the science of persuasion. *Harvard Business Review*, 79(9), 72–80.
- Conger, J.A. (1998). The necessary art of persuasion. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(3), 84–96.
- Daft, R.L., & Lengel, R.H. (1984). Information richness: A new approach to managerial behavior and organizational design. In L.L. Cummings & B.M. Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior*, (pp. 191–233). Homewood, IL: JAI Press.
- Eckhouse, B. (1999). *Competitive communication: A rhetoric for modern business*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- French, J.R.P., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright & A. Zander (Eds.), *Group dynamics*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Griffin, F. (2009). Merck's open letters and the teaching of ethos. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 72(1), 61–72.

- Halloran, S.M. (1982). Aristotle's concept of ethos, or if not his, somebody else's. *Rhetoric Review*, 1, 58–63.
- Harris, R.A. (Ed.). (1997). *Landmark essays on rhetoric of science: Case studies*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Harris, R.A. (2005). Reception studies in the rhetoric of science. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 14(3), 249–255.
- Hyland, K. (1998). Exploring corporate rhetoric: Metadiscourse in the CEO's letter. *Journal of Business Communication*, 35(2), 224–245.
- Isaksson M., & Jørgensen, P. (2010). Communicating corporate ethos on the web: The self-presentation of PR agencies. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(2), 119–140.
- Johnson, N. (1984). Ethos and the aims of rhetoric. In R.E. Connors (Ed.), *Essays on classical rhetoric and modern discourse* (pp. 98–114). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Kallendorf, C., & Kallendorf, C. (1985). The figures of speech, ethos, and Aristotle: Notes toward a rhetoric of business communication. *The Journals of Business Communication*, 22(1), 35–50.
- Kucan, L., & Beck, I.L. (1997). Thinking aloud and reading comprehension research: Inquiry, instruction, and social interaction. *Review of Educational Research*, 67(3), 271–199.
- Markus, M.L. (1994). Electronic mail as the medium of managerial choice. *Organization Science*, 5(4), 502–527.
- Martin, S., & King, C. (Interviewers). (2009, September). *Naval Postgraduate School communication study: Reception of a policy change memo* [Tape recording transcript]. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA.
- Miller, A.B. (1974). Aristotle on habit and character: Implications for the Rhetoric. *Speech Monographs*, 41, 309–316.
- Mintzberg, H. (1981). Organizational design: Fashion or fit? *Harvard Business Review*, 59(1), 103–116.
- Paul, D., Charney, D., & Kendall, A. (2001). Moving beyond the moment: Reception studies in the rhetoric of science. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 15(3), 372–399.
- Sattler, W.M. (1947). Conceptions of ethos in ancient rhetoric. *Speech Monographs*, 14, 55–65.
- Schwandt, T. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Shenk, R. (1995). Ethos at sea. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 58(1), 5–11.
- Sproull, L., & Kiesler, S. (1986). Reducing social context cues: Electronic mail in organizational communication. *Management Science*, 32, 1492–1512.
- Stoddard, E.W. (1985). The role of ethos in the theory of technical writing. *Technical Writing Teacher*, 11(3), 229–241.

- Suchan, J., & Dulek, R. (1990). A Reassessment of clarity in written managerial communications. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 4(1), 87–93.
- Walzer, A.E. (1981). Ethos, technical writing, and the liberal arts. *Technical Writing Teacher*, 8, 50–53.
- Williams, L.S. (2008). The mission statement. *Journal of Business Communication*, 45(2), 94–119.
- Winsor, D.A. (1990). The construction of knowledge in organizations: Asking the right questions about the challenger. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 4(2), 7–20.

SARAH E. MARTIN is a Research Associate in the Graduate School of Business and Public Policy at the Naval Postgraduate School. She received her Master of Business Administration from the Naval Postgraduate School in June 2010.

CYNTHIA L. KING is Assistant Professor of Management Communication and Associate Director of the Center for Defense Management Reform at the Naval Postgraduate School. Her research interests include rhetoric, strategic communication, and organizational change.