## Abstract

Most research and theories of interpersonal communication reflect mainstream U.S. culture. In an attempt to better understand the communication practices of Spanish-speaking cultures, an exploratory study of interpersonal communication was conducted involving Puerto Rican managers. The Index of Interpersonal Communication Competence (IICC) was translated into Spanish and administered in two large international pharmaceutical companies in Puerto Rico. The results of the study are discussed in terms of implications for communication theory and applied communication research.




*Bobby C. Vaught* / John D. Pettit, Jr.** / José R. Goris****

# Cultural Diversity of Interpersonal Communication Competence: A Study of Puerto Rican Managers

## Introduction

The importance of communication in organizational functioning is well recognized by organizational theorists and practitioners. It has long been suggested that effective organizational functioning depends mainly on communication (Barnard, 1968; Bavelas and Barrett, 1951). Barnard, Bavelas and Barrett viewed communication as a process out of which all other organizational functions are derived. Rogers and Rogers (1976) suggested that "communication is the lifeblood of an organization, if we could somehow remove communication flows from an organization," they argued, "we could not have an organization" (p. 7). The relevance and challenges of intercultural communication in the quality of organizational life are also recognized (Gancel and Hills, 1998; Lehman and Taylor, 1994; Beamer, 1992).

The empirical research on interpersonal communication and managerial effectiveness is significant (Hemsath, 1998; Allen and Griffeth, 1997). For example, effective communication has been linked with job satisfaction (Pettit, et al., 1997; Downs et al., 1988), employee performance (Penley, et al., 1991; Scudder and Guillani, 1989), work stress (Smeltzer, 1987), and leadership style (Penley and Hawkins, 1985). Although more

*Bobby C. Vaught, Department of Management, Southwest Missouri State University
**John D. Pettit, Jr., Ph.D.
***José M. Goris, Department of Business Administration, Southwestern Adventist University, Keene, Texas.

difficult to define and measure, productivity has been linked to communication through such variables as job enrichment, quality circles, and feedback (Downs, et al., 1988). Trust in communication also has been found to influence the level of satisfaction derived from participation in the decision-making process (Driscoll, 1978; Falcione, 1974). Thus, organizations need interpersonally competent managers in order to foster productive and satisfied employees.

Effective communication throughout the organization means finding ways to produce authentic relationships (interpersonal competence) among people. The impact of communication competence in organizations is well recognized in the communication literature (Berman and Hellweg, 1989; Argyris, 1962). Argyris (1962) says that five conditions are necessary for organizational effectiveness:

(1) Giving and receiving non-evaluative descriptive feedback.

(2) Owning and helping others to own their values, attitudes, ideas and feelings.

(3) Openness to new values, attitudes and feelings as well as helping others to develop their degree of openness.

(4) Experimenting (and helping others to do the same) with new values, attitudes, ideas and feelings.

(5) Taking risks with new values, attitudes, ideas, and feelings (Argyris, 1962, p. 26).

Vaught and Pettit (1983, 1988) have developed a model of communication competence as applied to the manager/subordinate relationship. Interpersonal competence is the ability of a supervisor to help solve employee-related problems seen as important to both the subordinate and the supervisor to the mutual satisfaction of both parties. The model draws heavily upon the fields of general semantics and humanistic psychology.

The model of communication competence is composed of primarily two variables, **empathy** and **direction**. Communicating with ***empathy*** means the supervisor must respond with high levels of trust, respect, genuineness, and a general high regard for the subordinate as a person. ***Direction*** means that the supervisor communicates the need to discover ways and means of problem solving. The presence of one variable in the





communication exchange does not necessarily mean the other variable is also present.

Supervisors can "possess" varying degrees or levels of communication competence. Some supervisors may possess the ability to communicate with both empathy and direction, called subordinate-oriented communication. That is, effective supervisors show a genuine concern for the employee's feelings but at the same time are able to help the employee gain insight into solving his/her problems. Other supervisors may not be able to exhibit any (or very little) interpersonal competence. Called supervisor-oriented communication, these managers are quick to criticize the subordinate and provide little or no direction for future problem-solving. Supervisors falling in the middle of the continuum are empathic; that is, they are concerned about the employee's problems but they do not know how to provide any direction to help in problem solving.

## Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this research is three-fold:

(1) to explore the interpersonal communication competence of a select group of Puerto Rican managers in two industrial organizations,

(2) to explore the relationships between this measure of interpersonal communication competence and the selected demographics of age, education, and years of supervisory experience.

(3) to discuss implications for communication theory development and applied communication research.

Most research and theories of interpersonal communication reflect mainstream U.S. culture. Can an American manager use these same research and theories when transferring to a different culture? Or, will managers from other cultures effectively use U.S. research and theories of interpersonal communication when performing managerial tasks in their own countries? Condon and Yousef (1975) propose that the idea of a "universal communicator" is a myth. This point of view appears to be congruent with findings reported by Smith, Misumi, Tayeb, Peterson, and Bond (1989) in suggesting that leader styles differ across cultures. They state

that "It appears that transcultural dimensions of leader style can indeed be identified, but that the skill of executing each style effectively varies by cultural setting..." (p. 108). Referring to quality of work life, Hofstede (1984) says:

> At the level of culture, work and life cannot and should not be separated. "Quality," by definition, is a matter of values. It relates to standards for "good" and "bad." Values depend partly on personal choices, but to a large extent what one considers good or bad is dictated by one's cultural context (p. 389).

This research on Puerto Rican managers' interpersonal communication competence appears to be relevant due to the close political, economic, financial, and educational relationship that the U.S. maintains with Puerto Rico since 1898. Puerto Rico is a Caribbean island with a Hispanic cultural background. It is estimated that three-quarters of all investments in the territory come from external sources, primarily from the U.S. (Dietz, 1986). Dietz reports that "of the international firms that have located in Puerto Rico, 80 percent are subsidiaries of a parent corporation headquartered in the United States" (p. 267). These firms are mostly managed based on U.S. managerial paradigms. Business education as provided by local colleges and universities to educate and train managers mimics what U.S. colleges and universities do. Even textbooks and periodicals utilized are the same. Local managerial research is minimal. The present research effort should help to clarify the uniqueness of interpersonal communication competence among Puerto Rican managers.

A paper and pencil test was used to measure quantitatively a manager's interpersonal competence in eight simulated communication encounters. Based upon the model by Vaught & Pettit (1983, 1988), the test measures the ability of the manager to solve a series of employee-related problems seen as important to both the subordinate and the supervisor to the mutual satisfaction of both. How effective the respondent is in communicating with both **empathy** and **direction** would be a measure of his/her communication competence.

Called the **Index of Interpersonal Communicative Competence (IICC)**, the test contains eight "typical" supervisor/subordinate encounters. The respondent is asked to read each encounter and choose the one alternative (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) which best describes his/her communication reaction.





Respondents are assured that whatever answer they select is right for them since all people have their own preferences for communication methods.

The IICC is scored to determine at what level the manager is responding: at a high level of communication competence, a low level of competence, or somewhere in between. Thus, a respondent's score could range from 8 to 40. The lowest level identified by the test, level one, ranges from 8 to 12; level two, from 13 to 20; level three from 21 to 28; level four from 29 to 36; and level five from 37 to 40. For example, encounter number six from the IICC describes a subordinate who has been continually arriving late for work and the available choices of the respondent:

> For the past few days you have noticed one of your employees, Jane Ross, continually arriving late for work. Knowing this will eventually cause trouble among the rest of the employees (the company requires everyone to be at work on time) you decide to call her into your office to determine what the problem is. Reluctantly, Jane explains that her six-year-old daughter must catch the school bus at 8 a.m. every morning. Since Jane does not want to leave her alone at the bus stop, it is causing Jane to be 30 minutes late for work. Jane then asks the question, "I can't just leave her all alone, can I?"

Your response would be:

(1) "Seems like you don't know how to solve the problem and it's causing you to feel bad."

(2) "You feel bad because you can't work this thing out but you want to do what's right."

(3) "Why don't you make some arrangements to have her taken care of in the morning?"

(4) "Sounds like you are torn between your daughter and your job, and this is causing you to feel bad."

(5) "You know that company policy requires everyone to be at work promptly at 8 a.m."

Response number five in the Jane Ross example above is the lowest level of communication competence as defined by the model and test (score of 1). It is judgmental in nature and contains no empathy or direction for

the subordinate. Response number three is advisory in nature and is thus quasi-directional. However, it is non-empathic (score of 2). Response number four is empathic but contains no direction for problem-solving (score of 3). Response number one is empathic plus it places the responsibility for change upon the subordinate (score of 4). And finally, response number two is the highest level of interpersonal competence in that it is empathic to the subordinate's problem and provides directions for problem-solving (score of 5). The remaining seven encounters from the test are scored in a like manner.

The IICC uses a simulated approach to measuring interpersonal competence, thus making the result one of communication discrimination. Also, a supervisor may "know" the correct response but in the everyday world of work may not be able to communicate effectively. Nevertheless, the test does provide a picture of communication "knowledge".

Test-retest reliability of the IICC is .81. Cronbach's Alpha, a measure of internal consistency, is .68. The test has been shown to be statistically valid in its ability to identify individuals having the capacity to function as helpers in an interpersonal encounter (Vaught, Pettit and Littlefield, 1984). The IICC is also related to highly effective leaders (Tagle, 1988) and self-actualization (Pettit and Vaught, 1984). The test has also been used successfully as a pre and post measure of interpersonal competence in communication training (Vaught and Pettit, 1988).

The English version of the IICC was translated into Spanish, substituting typical Spanish names (four females and four males) for each encounter on the test. The translation involved two Spanish instructors, a graduate business professor and a Research Methodology professor of a large Puerto Rican private university. The readability and accuracy of the IICC Spanish version was checked by administering the test to a group of MBA students of the same university. The IICC was then distributed to 105 Spanish-speaking managers (a convenience sample) in two pharmaceutical companies in Puerto Rico. These companies are subsidiaries of two U.S. firms. The managers were asked to participate in a study of communication methods by describing the way they communicate with their subordinates.





## Results

A total of 72 usable tests were returned through inter-office mail to the personnel managers of the respective companies. The average age and managerial experience of the respondents (in years) was 38 and 8.6, respectively. As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of the responding managers (76%) had at least a Bachelor's degree with 14% having at least a Master's.

**TABLE 1**
**EDUCATION OF PUERTO RICAN MANAGERS**

| EDUCATION LEVEL | NUMBER | PERCENTAGE |
|---|---|---|
| • Did not finish high school | 1 | 1.4 |
| • High school diploma | 1 | 1.4 |
| • One year of college | 0 | .0 |
| • Two years of college | 7 | 9.7 |
| • Three years of college | 4 | 5.6 |
| • Four years of college | 4 | 5.6 |
| • Bachelor Degree | 22 | 30.5 |
| • Bachelor Degree plus graduate courses | 23 | 31.9 |
| • Master Degree | 9 | 12.5 |
| • Master Degree plus doctoral courses | 1 | 1.4 |
| • Doctorate | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 72 | 100.0 |

The IICC scores of the Puerto Rican managers were grouped into the five levels of competence as defined by the test. As can be seen from Table 2, only one manager scored at level one while the majority scored at level two (75%). A minority scored at level three (22.2%) with only one manager scoring at level four. There were no managers in level five, the highest level of communication competence. The average score for all 72 managers was 18.3, with a standard deviation of 3.2, indicating a high level two capability. The majority of the Puerto Rican managers who took the

IICC are advice givers (level 2). However, since the direction (advice) is communicated with no empathy, the advice is from the viewpoint of the supervisor.

TABLE 2

**IICC SCORES OF PUERTO RICAN MANAGERS**

| LEVEL | NUMBER | PERCENTAGE | LOW | HIGH |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Level One (8-12) | 1 | 1.4 | 12 | 12 |
| Level Two (13-20) | 54 | 75.0 | 14 | 20 |
| Level Three (21-28) | 16 | 22.2 | 21 | 27 |
| Level Four (29-36) | 1 | 1.4 | 29 | 29 |
| Level Five (37-40) | 0 | 0.0 | - | - |
| **Total** | **72** | **100.0** | **12** | **29** |

This average score of 18.3 can be compared to an average score of 21.7 for U.S. managers. Using a comparable sample, Pettit and Vaught (1984) found the typical American manager scoring at level three on the IICC. A t-value of 5.5 was statistically significant at the .01 level of confidence. Thus, while it appears that both samples lack the higher levels of communication competence (levels four and five), the Puerto Rican managers possess less interpersonal skills, as defined by the IICC, than their American counterparts. The majority Puerto Rican manager is a high level two respondent while the average American manager is a low level three respondent.

A secondary purpose of this research was to determine the relationships between interpersonal competence and the selected demographics of age, education, and years of supervisory experience. A correlation analysis between the IICC and these variables yielded no statistically significant relationships: Pearson r = .06 (age), .03 (education) and -.07 (experience). In an earlier study Vaught and Pettit (1983) found younger American managers scoring higher on the IICC than older managers. Also, years of formal education correlated positively with scores on the IICC. The findings are in contrast to the study here involving Puerto Rican managers.





## Discussion and conclusions

By scoring 18.3 in the IICC, Puerto Rican managers exhibit a level two behavior (advisory behavior); this behavior is characterized by an "I-oriented" approach. Accordingly, the majority Puerto Rican respondent looks at a problem from his/her own personal viewpoint, not as the subordinate perceives the situation. The response provided is in the form of advice and looking to the future in an effort to get the subordinate to change his/her behavior or attitude. The response does give advice or direction; however, such direction only reflects the supervisor's point of view.

Research conducted by Pettit and Vaught (1984) showed that the average American manager scored 21.7 on the IICC, representing a low level three behavior (empathic understanding). As such, the average American manager's behavior denotes the ingredients of empathy and genuineness. The communication response allows the subordinate to be himself/herself. By a show of empathy the subordinate feels that the U.S. manager cares about his/her problem. Thus, Puerto Rican managers are not similar to U.S. managers in terms of interpersonal communicative capability. Perhaps the Puerto Rican culture is such that subordinates simply desire advice from their bosses. It is possible that Puerto Rican managers have discovered that the most effective communication style is one of direct straight-forward advice without the need for empathic understanding. As Hofstede points out, in countries with large power distances (i.e. Latin American countries) there is a dependence on the more powerful in the society. Although Puerto Rico was not included in Hofstede's original study, there are many similarities between it and other Latin American societies in the region. "Subordinates expect superiors to behave autocratically and not to consult them" (Hofstede, 1984, p. 394).

The present investigation showed no statistically significant correlation between the IICC and age, education, and experience. This finding is not congruent with the result of an earlier study utilizing U.S. managers (Vaught and Pettit, 1983). This study showed that older American managers were less able to communicate effectively than their younger counterparts. It appears that as U.S. managers become older they prefer to communicate at the lower and more "authoritarian" levels of the IICC. Also, U.S. managers who were more educated possessed more effective communicative skills as measured by the IICC; they tended to become more "democratic and participative" oriented.

Do the findings of the current investigation reflect Puerto Rican managers' interpersonal communicative competence as measured by the IICC? Can it be said that interpersonal communicative competence of Puerto Rican managers differ from that of U.S. managers? A word of caution is in order. The exploratory nature of this investigation requires that the results be taken as strictly preliminary. The fact that the participants of this study were selected from two U.S. pharmaceutical companies in Puerto Rico may suggest that the responses provided on the IICC may reflect more the industrial culture and values than the Puerto Rican culture at large. It is possible that pharmaceutical firms, no matter where they are established, require more advisory or directive communication than other companies in order to secure the quality and safety required by the nature of their operations. This may also be the explanation for not finding any correlation between the IICC and age, education, and experience. And finally, although the authors feel confident about the quality of the translation of the IICC, further investigation may be needed to establish the reliability of the translation.

Further study of other Puerto Rican managers performing in other organizational settings is desirable. It would add more credence to the findings to replicate the present study among managers of other companies in Puerto Rico. Also, communicative competence interaction with other variables, in the Puerto Rican culture, such as leadership, satisfaction, and productivity, needs to be investigated. Additional research could provide enlightening insight into the role of cultural diversity on interpersonal communicative competence and the impact of this construct on organizational effectiveness.

## Implications

The results of this exploratory research offer many more possibilities for future research efforts than definitive, exhaustive conclusions. On the one hand, research possibilities exist for additional investigation into interpersonal communication as it occurs in various cultures. Research opportunities prevail for constructing written and spoken messages to different people involved in the interpersonal encounter. At all points along this possibility continuum, the central issue on which any research effort is based invariably involves adaptation—fitting the message to the minds of receivers.

Most communication theorists and practitioners agree that the act of communicating is not a result of heredity. Put differently, communication





is a learned activity—one that is a function of environment and not heredity. Like the communication activity itself, the significant parts of the process are acquired from others, especially the mental process known as filtering. And the filtering process exists at the core of message adaptation—selecting words, designing sentences, and constructing ideas so that intended meaning is conveyed effectively in a message.

The human filter consists of a unique combination of knowledge, viewpoints, and emotions. Always in a state of change, the filter gives meaning to stimuli that reach it through sensory perceptions that people make. The results of this research point to these filter differences between two cultures, although they only skim the surface of the myriad of differences that possibly exist. That the sample of Puerto Rican managers scored Level 2 (advisory) and that a sample of American managers scored Level 3 (empathic understanding) point to differences in filter makeup between the two sample groups. But what are the reasons for the filter differences in the Puerto Rican sample? As discussed previously, age, experience, and education do not correlate with the IICC score. Are there other demographics—nativity, locale, familiar status, personality factors, and such—that account for the score? And can such factors help to further analyze filter differences and thus provide new clues to adaptation? Only additional research can answer these questions.

It should be remembered that the IICC was designed around U.S.-based theories and models of interpersonal communication. Scoring high or low on the IICC may only reflect the capability of U.S. managers who are supervising U.S. subordinates. Puerto Rican managers may not feel the need to communicate with empathy in order to be successful leaders. A similar conclusion was drawn by Page and Wiseman (1993) regarding Mexican supervisors. As Smith, et al. (1989) admit, a leader's style may vary by cultural setting.

Regardless of the reasons that may account for the score of the Puerto Rican sample, a second and more penetrating point to address is the unique type of message that the human mind requires. More specifically, when others communicate to the advisory state of Puerto Rican managers, they will need to be sensitive to the symbols used to construct messages. As business communication researchers have found, a message that is not in accord with the structure of a receiver's mind will likely be rejected. Contrastingly, when messages are in accord with the viewpoints, they will likely be accepted.

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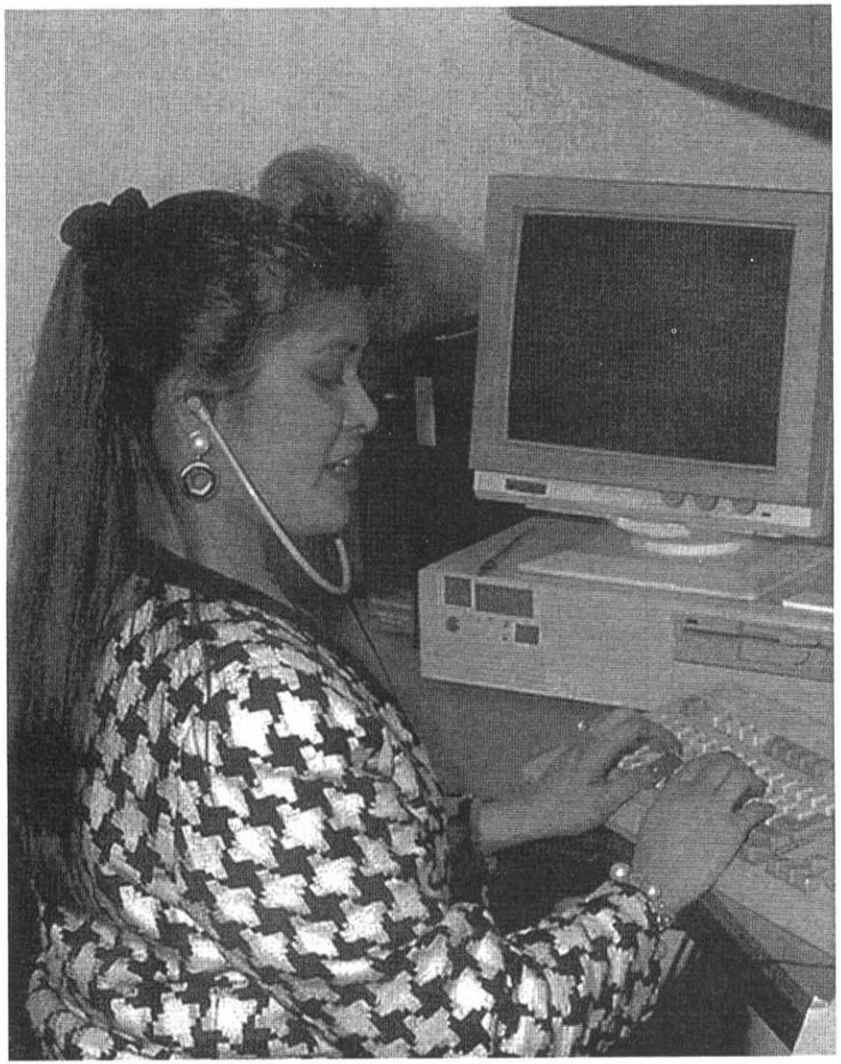
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