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The Impact of Perceived Research and Teaching Competence on the Credibility of a Basic Course Director: A Case Study

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Credibility can be defined as the degree to which an audience perceives the speaker as being competent, knowledgeable, and personable (Civikly, 1992). It seems logical, then, to believe that the perceived credibility of a leader would have an impact on the relationship between that leader and his or her subordinates. Research in communication has supported this belief. One potential leader/subordinate relationship is that of teacher and student. Scholars in instructional communication have posited that the credibility of a teacher to her or his students is an essential component of effective instruction. Without this credibility, students tend to question even minor decisions by the teacher and so cause an adversarial relationship to develop (Civikly, 1992; Cooper, 1991; Seiler, Schuelke, & Lieb-Brilhart, 1984). Another potential leader/subordinate relationship is that of manager and co-worker. Scholars in leadership communication have noted that one of the primary communication objectives as a

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leader/manager is to be perceived as a credible source of information by co-workers and, when the coworkers are dependent on the leader for advice or assistance, expertise and the overall impression of this person are primary determiners of that credibility (Frank & Brownell, 1989; Yukl, 1989).

It seems interesting, then, that no research can be found in the published literature that specifically addresses the credibility of the basic course director (BCD) to his or her staff. Surely this role relationship of BCD to staff members is at least somewhat analogous to that of teacher and student and/or manager and co-worker. Further, the above information from instructional and leadership scholars in communication indicate that credibility is an important factor in success in such relationships. Why, then, has no research been conducted in this area?

One reason may be that this relationship seems not to differ from other relationships that have been studied and so may not warrant specific investigation into this context. This reasoning does not hold up well under scrutiny, however. It is difficult to imagine a relationship more complex than this one. In particular, the notion of power of this boss may seem convoluted. While the BCD may be the only supervisor the basic course staff answers to directly, other faculty may subtly or not-so-subtly indicate to the staff that the real decisions are made by a committee, the entire faculty and/or the department chair. Is the BCD a person to work hard to please or not, then? In addition, seldom does one find a context where the staff, especially if most are graduate teaching assistants (GTAs or GAs), is as torn between "job" responsibilities as this one. Is the teaching that important or should GTAs concentrate on their graduate coursework and research? If teaching is not important, then the relationship between the GTA and the BCD pales; if teaching is important, then the relationship takes on much more significance. Once again, is this a person to work hard to please or not? In short, it. would seem foolish

to avoid research into credibility in this context because of a belief that this context holds nothing unique to study.

Another possible reason to avoid research into the realm of credibility between a BCD and her or his staff may be that it is not an important consideration for this particular relationship. 'The boss is the boss" and so little else matters; besides, this "boss" is only a temporary one so time spent fostering this relationship is not time well spent. Recently, two experiences at Central Michigan University, a midwestern university of about 16,000 students, encouraged these researchers to question this possible assumption that credibility of the BCD may not be a factor that would affect the relationship between him or her and the staff. Seemingly simple changes in the status quo at Central Michigan University produced noticeable differences in staff motivation and attitudes.

First, two of the researchers, both faculty members (one was the BCD), were asked to present a two-hour workshop on effective teaching for about 200 first-year and returning GTAs from across campus in a newly-instituted, campus-wide training program. We were the only faculty to be asked to do so and so were presented as authorities on teaching and GTA training. At a departmental gathering hours after the workshop, not at all related to the workshop or GTA training, our own GTAs indicated how lucky they felt after hearing GTAs in other departments bemoan their lack of training by qualified people. Rather than viewing GTA training as a time-consuming, exhausting activity, sentiments expressed by previous groups of incoming GTAs, this group saw immediate value in spending three weeks of their summer preparing to teach. These GTAs expressed more readiness to engage in training activities and more fully believed in the value of such activities. In addition, their willingness to accept input from the BCD about policies, procedures, effective teaching, and so on seemed to come with much less resistance than in previous

groups and their motivation to excel was clearly higher over-all.

Second, as part of an introduction to graduate study course, faculty were asked to hand out resumes containing, among other things, a list of their presentations and publications. In our department, the BCD has a strong presentation and publication record. Again, a noticeable change seemed to occur in the overall acceptance of decisions, ideas and input from the BCD in her dealings with the GTAs in the basic course. Whereas in prior semesters early interactions with GTAs had focused primarily on the day-to-day exigencies of teaching the basic course, interactions this year were as likely to deal with more cerebral aspects of teaching and education in general.

The belief that the relationship between a BCD and her or his staff (especially GTAs) is a unique one worthy of investigation and the growing suspicion that a heightened credibility can affect this relationship prompted this case study of a BCD and his or her staff members. Specifically, the roles of both perceived teaching expertise and perceived research expertise in the judgment of perceived credibility were isolated for this initial investigation. Four questions guided this inquiry: (a) How important is the perceived credibility of a basic course director to the staff, (b) what effect would low perceived credibility have on staff members, (c) what is the relative importance of teaching competence and research competence to this perceived credibility, and (d) what skills/behaviors influence this perceived credibility?

METHOD

In an attempt to gather insights from staff members to illustrate and add to our own experiences working with GTAs, a detailed case study combining quantitative and qualitative measures was undertaken. Data were collected from the entire population of all GTAs teaching in the basic course in

Table 1
Raw Data and Content Analysis of Questionnaire[1]

Research Question 1: How important is the perceived credibility of a basic course director to his/her staff?

Data from questionnaire questions 1 and 2 below were used in discussing this research question.

Questionnaire Question #1: Overall, how important is it to you that your basic course director be credible in your eyes (1 = not very important, 5 = very important)?

   (1 person answered 2) (5 persons answered 4)
   (13 persons answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #2: Why do you feel this way?

   5 persons viewed the idea of role model producing credibility
   3 persons viewed the BCD as a foundation of support person to lean upon
   3 persons would reject the advice/direction if lacking in credibility
   4 persons viewed depth of knowledge and amount of experience as being important
   2 persons believed a sense of humanness, faith and trust are necessary
   2 persons believed confidence and professional distance are important

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[1]Questions 2 and 3 were open-ended questions; questions 1 and 4 through 14 asked for responses based on a Likert-type scale. The last two, open-ended questionnaire questions are not included in this table. The questions were as follows: Question 15: Is there anything else about [your BCD] that has added to her credibility (or lack thereof) as a BCD in your eyes? Please list and state how important this credential/behavior is to your assessment, and Question 16: What else might [your BCD] or another BCD do to establish credibility with his/her staff? The vast disparity of answers given resulted in the development of the broad categories of answers already elaborated on in the text of this paper in the discussion of the fourth research question.

Research Question 2: What effect would low perceived credibility have on staff members?

Data from questionnaire question 3 below was used in discussing this research question.

Questionnaire Question #3: What effect(s) might a lack of credibility have:? What are you more or less likely to do if your BCD lacks credibility in your eyes?

5 claimed that GTAs would take matters into their own hands

4 claimed that GTAs would either avoid or ignore the feedback from the BCD

3 claimed that it would cause GTAs to feel insecure and lacking in confidence in themselves as well as the BCD

4 claimed that it would cause a lack of respect for the BCD among the GTAs

5 claimed that it would cause the department to look badly

6 claimed that it would cause GTAs to suffer from bad attitudes toward the course, department, and the BCD

4 claimed that a lack of foundation, direction, and consistency would lead to poor work ethics

1 person felt credibility is not important

Research Question #3: What is the relative importance of teaching competence and research competence to this perceived credibility?

Data from questionnaire questions 4 through 7 below were used in discussing this research question.

Questionnaire Question #4: For the following, 1 = not very credible and 5 = very credible. Overall, how credible to you feel [your BCD] is in her role as BCD?

(1 person answered 4) (18 persons answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #5: How credible is [your BCD] as a role model for being an effective researcher?

(2 persons answered 3) (5 persons answered 4)
(12 persons answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #6: How credible is [your BCD] as a role model for being an effective researcher?

(2 persons answered 3) (5 persons answered 4)
(14 persons answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #7: Which competence (teacher or researcher) is more important to you as you make your judgment about her as a basic course director?

(4 claimed both are equally important)
(11 claimed teaching competence is somewhat more important)
(3 claimed that teaching competence is the most important)
(1 person refused to answer, stating that both are equally important but neither is really very important)

Research Question 4: What skills/behaviors influence this perceived credibility?

Data from questionnaire questions 8 through 14b below and the final two open-ended questions (see footnote 1) were used in discussing this research question.

On a scale from 1-5 with 1 = not very important and 5 = very important, how would you rate the following credentials/behaviors in terms of their overall affect on your assessment of [your BCD] as a credible BCD?

Questionnaire Question #8: Knowledge of [your BCD's] teaching experiences:

(2 answered 1) (1 answered 3)
(4 answered 4) (12 answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #9: Knowledge of [your BCD's] teaching awards/commendations:

(2 answered 1) (2 answered 2) (7 answered 3)
(7 answered 4) (1 answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #10: Knowledge of [your BCD's publication record:

(3 answered 2) (6 answered 3)
(6 answered 4) (4 answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #11: Actual experience watching [your BCD] teach:

(1 answered 2) (5 answered 4) (13 answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #12: Actual experience watching [your BCD] present/conduct research:

(2 answered 1) (4 answered 3)
(10 answered 4) (3 answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #13: Private conversations with [your BCD] about teaching:

(1 answered 1) (1 answered 3)
(6 answered 4) (11 answered 5)

Questionnaire Question #14: Private conversations with [your BCD] about research:

(2 answered 1) (6 answered 3)
(8 answered 4) (3 answered 5)

our department during the spring semester, 1992. The staff consisted of 3 GTAs who had just started teaching a week prior to the meeting and 16 GTAs who had completed one to three semesters of teaching prior to the meeting. All 19 had completed the three-week, pre-semester training session prior to the fall semester, 1991.

The questionnaire was developed by the researchers to gain insight into the four research questions posed. The questionnaire consisted of 12 Likert-type questions and 4 open-ended questions. This questionnaire was distributed during a staff meeting. Since the subjects were few in number and homogeneous in context (i.e., all from the same program), results will be reported only in a general way to note apparent trends implied through this case study, possible implications of this information, and future paths for research. Table 1 presents the actual raw data and the content analysis results from the questionnaire. Table 1 also indicates what items from the questionnaire were used in the discussion of each of the four research questions posed in this case study.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: How important is the perceived credibility of a basic course director to his/her staff?

Certainly few people would believe that credibility would be of no importance, but this was a question we had given little thought to prior to our investigation. However, the experiences related at the start of this paper seemed to indicate that overall credibility may be of great importance. This suspicion was supported. On a 5-point scale (5 = very important), all but one GTA rated the importance of the BCD being credible to them as either a 4 or a 5. The one GTA who rated this question a 2 stated that what mattered was the staff's ability to teach and so the BCD's ability to teach, conduct research, etc. was of little importance. As logical as this might seem, this belief was held by only one GTA!

When asked why they felt as they did, the GTAs made some interesting observations. Overall, they described the need to put "trust and faith" in that person if the basic course were to be kept running smoothly. "It would be very difficult

to accept advice, information, etc. from *anyone* who I didn't find credible." Without credibility, it would be "difficult to take her seriously." "The confidence I have in her ability in her role gives me confidence in my role." Further, many GTAs stated that the credibility of the BCD helped form their impressions of the department: "This individual represents the department as the 'Communication Guru' and needs to have established a great deal of credibility to fulfill this role." It was quite clear that this group of GTAs felt that the credibility of the BCD was extremely important to their success as a GTA and even as a graduate student overall.

Research Question 2: What effect would low perceived credibility have on staff members?

Once again, the GTAs had strong opinions here. 'When a person's professional accomplishments are great, he or she is more credible to me a d thus commands more of my respect, causing me to work harder for his or her approval, etc." While the typical response just stated might not be all that surprising, other comments were much stronger. "I would also have a more difficult time taking my own job as a GA seriously." "I would be very unlikely to ask for assistance from a director with low credibility. Also, evaluation and criticism would be very difficult to receive from such an individual." "Lack of credibility would also result in my *not* paying much attention to ideas and suggestions for improvements." If such comments imply mutiny, that's just what some GTAs indicated, in no uncertain terms. "A lack of credibility could create a nonprofessional work climate which could lead to nonprofessional work ethics." Further, "I would probably tend to stray off of the specific format set up by the course director and 'do my own thing.'" "If I didn't see him or her as credible I may base my decisions more on my own assumptions." "I would be more likely to take [it] upon myself to research the material I thought appropriate and teach as I see fit." "If I perceived my

basic course director to lack credibility, I would be less apt to follow the regulations that go along with teaching the basic course." "If I did have a BCD who lacked credibility], my ulti-mate task would be to create a program (syllabus, lesson format, etc.) that I could live with, and try to minimize the negative impact of such a director." Again, a detrimental effect on the department as a whole was suggested. "If I don't respect my boss, for example in some past jobs, I tend not to favor the job or the work environment. This not only affects my work performance but might also affect the image I pre-sent for the organization." The power of the above assertions seems heightened when it is kept in mind that this group of GTAs consists entirely of Master's students with little or, most commonly, no prior teaching experience before becoming a GTA and that the basic course at Central Michigan Univer-sity is completely standardized (common syllabus, assign-ments, grading criteria, attendance policy, tests, and so on). These GTAs' responses lead to the belief that the lack of cred-ibility by a BCD would have a dramatic negative effect on the basic course program and, possibly, even the graduate pro-gram!

Research question 3: What is the relative impor-tance of teaching competence and research compe-tence to this perceived credibility?

One question on the questionnaire asked the students to rate which competence, researcher or teacher, was more important to their judgment of credibility of their BCD: 1 = research competence is the most important, 2 = research com-petence is somewhat more important, 3 = both are equally important, 4 = teaching competence is somewhat more impor-tant, and 5 = teaching competence is the most important. One GTA refused to answer, stating that "this teaching and research stuff is irrelevant." (This same student went on to state that "She is most competent because she has co-

authored the textbook and helped design the present system for teaching.") However, most GTAs (11 of the 19) circled 4 - teaching competence is somewhat more important. Three GTAs circled 3 - teaching competence is the most important, but four GTAs circled 5 - both are equally important. While these data show that teaching competence is perceived by this group of GTAs as more important than research competence, what may be surprising is how significant research competence became as part of the total evaluation of credibility. In fact, it was interesting to note that these GTAs felt that their BCD was very credible in her overall role of BCD (18 answered 5, the highest option indicating credibility). In their responses to how credible she was as a researcher and then as a teacher, more GTAs rated her higher as a credible role model in research than they did in teaching! Once again, for the GTAs in this case study, research expertise ranked comparably with teaching expertise in terms of the affect of these two competence areas on credibility.

Research Question 4: What skills/behaviors influence this perceived credibility?

On the questionnaire, certain skills/behaviors were provided to the GTAs for their reactions (1 = not very important and 5 = very important). Knowledge of the BCD's teaching experiences were rated as important (mostly 4s and 5s), knowledge of teaching awards/commendations received varied responses (3s and 4s were the most common responses), knowledge of her publication record seemed somewhat important (10 of 19 responded with a 4 or 5 and 6 students answered with a 3), actual experience watching her teach was considered very important (18 of the 19 responded with a 4 or 5; most used 5), actual experience watching her present/conduct research was viewed as important (13 rated this a 4 or 5), private conversations with her about teaching were seen as extremely important (17 of the 19 rated this a 4 or 5;

most used a 5), and private conversations with her about research seemed somewhat important (11 rated this a 4 or a 5). From least important to most important, it appears that this group of GTAs ranked the above skills/behaviors in this way: knowledge of the BCD's teaching awards/experiences, knowledge of the BCD's teaching experiences, knowledge of the BCD's publication record, private conversations with the BCD about research, actual experience watching the BCD present/conduct research, actual experience watching the BCD teach, and private conversations with the BCD about teaching. Once again, although teaching behaviors seemed to outrank publication endeavors, knowledge of and experience with the BCD in the area of publication was important and outranked some of the items concerned only with teaching. Further, behaviors that included direct interaction between the BCD and the GTAs were evaluated as most important in developing their assessment of credibility.

On the open-ended questions seeking input from the GTAs about other behaviors/skills that could add to the credibility of a BCD, a variety of items were listed. Interpersonal abilities mentioned included the following: willingness to listen to feedback, support of the staff, keeping a professional distance yet a warm relationship, demonstrating caring toward the staff, socializing with the staff, listening ability, empathy, and being fair and open-minded. Leadership behaviors such as problem-solving abilities, open-door policy, knowledge of management procedures, years of experience, consistency, providing specific expectations for the staff, and maintaining control also were listed. Other items included research in teaching areas, overall knowledge of the field of communication, professional dress, speaking style, being a role model for effective teaching, personal standards, and seldom being wrong.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUMMARY

While this inquiry provides only an initial look at credibility as it impacts on the relationship between a BCD and the staff, some interesting insights have been gathered. First of all, the potential impact of a lack of credibility on the behaviors of the staff was frightening. Many GTAs openly admitted to mutiny! The distinct potential for such blatant conflict found in this case study lends credence to the claim that credibility is worth building with staff members.

Second, even though teaching competence was seen by GTAs as more important to the assessment of credibility of the BCD than was research, this finding was not surprising. What was surprising was the extent to which research skills and publications influenced their overall judgment of the credibility of the BCD! This finding could lead to the conclusion that an active researcher may be a solid choice for the role of BCD. Further, BCDs might make knowledge of their experiences/accomplishments in both teaching and research a part of the information they share with their staff members. This process should be approached with caution, however. This particular group of GTAs gained access to information regarding the experiences/ accomplishments of the BCD by way of another class. The instructor of that class encouraged the sharing of vitae as a method of getting acquainted with the faculty of thedepartment. If a BCD were to hand out her or his vita for the sole purpose of announcing qualifications, that person then runs the risk of a whiplash effect (who does she think she is?). Rather than building credibility, that person may, in fact, be perceived as egotistical and/or lacking in self-esteem (and so feel the need to build credibility through a listing of accomplishments rather than relying on his or her behaviors with the staff to build credibility). Either perception could harm overall perceptions of credibility. Sharing knowledge of the BCD's accomplishments in teaching and research might best be done through more subtle behaviors such as

using past experiences in discussions about graduate life and being sure that any "credential" associated with that teaching/research experience is part of the information shared, etc. Indeed, the GTAs in this case study referred to the importance of direct contact with the BCD in forming opinions about credibility (watching her teach and conduct research, talking with her in private, etc.). BCDs in programs too large to incorporate this direct contact, or where the commitment to the BCD (or by the BCD) does not allow the released time necessary for such individual contact, may encourage a low credibility assessment of the BCD by the staff and, therefore, encourage some of the negative behaviors that could arise from this view of the BCD. Regardless of how the sharing of information concerning the BCD's teaching and professional experiences is done, the data from this case study indicate that it is important to find some mechanism to have the information shared with the staff.

Third, as evidenced by the diverse list of items in the open-ended sections, credibility of a BCD is a complex variable that probably has different meanings for different GTAs (and other staff members) due to backgrounds, personality characteristics, the present environment, and so on. Surely the impact of knowledge of teaching and research competence is only the beginning in identifying factors that could lead to a positive assessment of credibility by staff members. Many of the items generated by these GTAs could be isolated and researched more specifically for their potential impact on a BCD's credibility. In addition, it is our suspicion that the environment in which the BCD operates may have an impact on overall credibility. Is the BCD treated with respect by colleagues and/or administrators? What is the overall image of the basic course on that campus? Is the basic course and BCD supported with office space, materials, classroom space, reassigned time, and so on? It may be possible that the staff members themselves transfer their own treatment as professionals to the BCD, believing that her or his credibility

translates into better working conditions for them (office space, copying facilities, secretarial help, access to computers, etc.).

Further research into the effects of credibility on the relationship between a BCD and the, staff is warranted. Certainly our experiences and those of our GTAs may not be typical. Indeed, there may be reasons to believe that our situation is not typical. The BCD at Central Michigan University is well supported by the administration and the faculty. The BCD herself is, as one GTA wrote, "more than marvelous, she is motivating." In addition, the basic course staff at Central Michigan University consists solely of Master's level GTAs with little or no prior teaching experience. A broader base of perceptions is needed in order to generalize about the possible effects of credibility on the relationship between a BCD and the staff. However, this case study as an initial inquiry provides some tantalizing possibilities for avenues to be explored as researchers continue to look for ways to strengthen the all-important yet all-too-tenuous relationship between a BCD and the staff.

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