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WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

What *The Apprentice* Teaches About Communication Skills

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This article reports the results of a content analysis of the debut season of the reality television show, The Apprentice. All 15 episodes were examined to determine the role that communication competencies played in competitors' success or elimination. Results indicate that the ability to persuade effectively was most critical to winning tasks, but leadership skills and interpersonal skills were the most common sources of praise and criticism from teammates and Donald Trump and his associates. Women appeared to be judged more critically for their interpersonal skills than men, whereas evaluations of men focused primarily on their leadership abilities.

Keywords: *business communication; The Apprentice; leadership; interpersonal communication; gender*

IS IT POSSIBLE to learn strategies for business success from a reality television show? No more than one can learn emergency surgery from watching *ER*, suggests one critic (Gyenes, 2004). But many businesspeople, college professors, their students, and millions of other fans of the hit reality TV series *The Apprentice* disagree. Since the series' debut on January 8, 2004, an average of more than 19 million television viewers tuned in each week to catch the season's number one new series, *The Apprentice* (Jones & Keveney, 2004). The gist of the show: 16 young professionals with impressive credentials and uncommon good looks compete in team challenges for a chance to earn a US\$250,000 salary and the title of president of one of business mogul Donald Trump's enterprises. At the conclusion of each episode, the losing team is called to Trump's boardroom, where one player is eliminated with Trump's now trademarked phrase, "You're fired!"

The show's potential influence on young viewers—who are beginning to form their perceptions of business world norms of behavior and strategies for success—is revealed in the show's demographics. In

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its debut season, *The Apprentice* was the highest rated new show among the advertiser-coveted 18- to 49-year-old age group and was second only to *American Idol* among existing series ("About the Show," 2005). *The Apprentice* attracted the third youngest audience of all NBC shows, after *Average Joe* and *Fear Factor* (Jones & Keveney, 2004). The success of the show also fueled sales of two of Trump's business advice books. In April 2004, *How to Get Rich* and the reissued *The Art of the Deal* were Number 1 and Number 5 respectively on the *USA Today* Money section bestseller list. The show has continued to generate impressive ratings.

Despite critics' contentions that *The Apprentice's* made-for-TV scenarios do not represent the reality of American business, college professors across the United States are using the show to provide real-life examples in their classes. Some have built entire courses around the class, such as the University of Washington's course titled Management Lessons From "The Apprentice" (Gyenes, 2004; Ho, 2004). In a letter to the editor in *The Wall Street Journal* responding to a critical article by Yale School of Management Dean Jeffrey Sonnenfeld (2004), Trump claimed that many business schools have made *The Apprentice* mandatory viewing and that he has received many letters asking that the episodes be packaged for the educational market (Trump, 2004). In addition, a number of career advice Web sites (e.g., MSN Careers, Entrepreneur.com, and CareerBuilder.com) ran pieces that used *Apprentice* episodes as the basis for career advice; *USA Today* devoted a weekly feature to the series in its Money section. In perhaps the strongest endorsement of *The Apprentice* as a teaching tool for business success, in January 2005, the American Management Association (AMA) began posting a weekly Lessons Learned column on its Web site. The column offers management and leadership lessons based on issues raised in each week's *Apprentice* episode ("American Management Association," 2005). Interestingly, the lesson corresponding to the second episode of season 3, "Communicating in Stressful Situations," written by the AMA president, focused on communication skills.

The Apprentice's rise as a cultural phenomenon may be due to its unique premise, which resonates with the ideals of American capitalism as well as many Americans' personal struggles to succeed in a competitive, sometimes cutthroat workplace. Whereas television history is replete with game shows and, more recently, "reality"-based challenges, *The Apprentice* stands alone as the first television show to use business savvy and business scenarios as the basis for competition, to pit businesspeople against each other, and to purport to be able to identify the next highly successful executive. Because of this unique focus, the popularity of the show, and its prolific use as a career advice tool, it is

important to systematically identify the “lessons” that it contains. A search of academic databases revealed no previously published empirical studies of *The Apprentice*. This study marks the first known content analysis of the show. Examining the series from the perspective of communication scholars, we wondered, to what extent are the lessons learned from the show really about communication skills and communicating effectively, rather than classic business school concepts? Are communication skills a deciding factor in who stays on and who is eliminated in the show? And finally, what lessons related to workplace communication can college professors glean from the show to educate a future generation of professionals? In this article, we review relevant literature and report the results of a content analysis of the first season of *The Apprentice* that seeks to answer these questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of communication skills for those who seek to gain employment or advance in their career fields is well documented. For example, in an influential 1991 report, the U.S. Department of Labor Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) identified interpersonal skills and basic communication skills, including speaking and listening, as two of eight essential competencies necessary for success in the workplace. Interpersonal skills were defined as the ability to work on teams, teach others, serve customers, lead, negotiate, and work well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Subsequently, North and Worth (2004) found that interpersonal skills were the most frequently mentioned competency required in entry-level job ads from newspapers in 10 metropolitan areas. Eighty percent of ads noted that candidates should have strong interpersonal skills. Similarly, they found 49% of entry-level ads included requirements for basic skills related to communication, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Several studies have found correlations between employees’ communication skills and supervisors’ perceptions of job performance (Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Scudder & Guinan, 1989). Oral communication is consistently identified both as the most important competency in evaluating entry-level job candidates (Maes et al., 1997) and as the most critical attribute for managerial success (Seymour, 1989).

Numerous studies have compared leaders with nonleaders to determine distinguishing characteristics of leaders. Analyses of these studies indicate that the majority of the distinguishing characteristics of leaders

involve social and interpersonal skills, including social nearness and friendliness, group task supportiveness, cohesion and teamwork, emotional balance and control, nurturant behavior, and verbal fluency (Bass, 1981). Pincus and DeBonis (2004) contended that leadership is at its heart a communication process because it seeks to strengthen human relationships by increasing trust and understanding. This definition of leadership as communication is shared by leading organizational communication textbooks (Conrad & Poole, 2002; Eisenberg & Goodall, 2004; O'Hair, Friedrich, & Dixon, 2002; Shockley-Zalabak, 2002).

Despite the importance of communication skills, scholars have documented significant deficiencies in employees' communication skills (Bednar & Olney, 1987; Peterson, 1997). As a result, organizations make substantial investments in training to improve these skills. *Training* magazine reported in 1999 that 88% of U.S. companies provide communication skills training to employees, including most commonly team building (77%), public speaking/presentation (70%), interviewing (70%), and business/technical writing (64%) (Industry Report, 1999).

Business schools have been criticized for not adequately teaching the communication skills and competencies needed in today's service-oriented, team-oriented, and decentralized environment (Maupin, 1993; Neller-moe, Weirich, & Reinstein, 1999; Pincus, Rayfield, & Ohl, 1994). Maes et al. (1997) noted that the five classical management functions of planning, organizing, commanding, controlling, and coordinating, as developed by Fayol (1949), continue to be the managerial skills emphasized in business textbooks. These functions are highly dependent on effective communication skills. Neller-moe et al. (1999) found that in top accounting firms, 80% of work time is spent in communication. Peterson (1997) found oral communication, decision making, and leadership were the most important competencies evaluated in hiring decisions.

Moreover, the nature of class assignments may also give short shrift to the range of communication skills that are required by business leaders. Maes et al. (1997) noted that business course work often requires formal classroom presentations, but few courses require students to engage in other forms of communication, such as conducting meetings or resolving conflicts. This is so even though business professionals and business faculty similarly value such business communication competencies (Waner, 1995). Perhaps not surprisingly, Peterson (1997) surveyed 253 corporate recruiters and found that they were dissatisfied with the communication skills of potential hires. Kane's (1993) survey of MBA recruiters for *Fortune* 500 companies found that

most assumed that graduates had requisite technical and managerial knowledge, so recruiters instead focused on communication skills as the primary criteria for differentiating among candidates. Recruiters' top three criteria for evaluating candidates applying for management positions were strong interpersonal skills, communication skills, and team-oriented skills (Kane, 1993). As Krapels and Davis (2000) argued, educators would help companies reduce their training costs by developing course activities to enhance students' communication skills. As previously noted, classroom viewing of *The Apprentice* has become one such pedagogical tool.

What is the impact of viewing television programming, like *The Apprentice*, that allows viewers to observe others' workplace communication skills and weaknesses? The literature provides a theoretical foundation that supports the likelihood of media effects. Both Bandura's social learning theory (1977) and Gerbner, Gross, and Signorielli's cultivation theory (1979, 1980) suggest that viewers learn attitudes, norms, values, and behaviors from television role models. Cultivation theory holds that the cumulative effects of messages from mass media, and particularly television, shape our views about what the world is like by providing a stable, consistent depiction of the world, although the depiction presented by media may in fact be a distorted image of reality. Brummett (1984) suggested that "representative anecdotes" from television programs provide audiences with "equipment for living" by helping them live vicariously through situations they may face in the future. These anecdotes suggest strategies that viewers might employ or avoid in those situations (pp. 161, 164). Geis, Brown, Walstedt, and Porter (1984) found that even actors in television commercials function as role models, and the professional status portrayed by female actors in commercials influenced the career achievement goals of female viewers. Experimental research by Davies, Spencer, and Steele (2005) confirmed that exposure to stereotypic commercials undermined women's aspirations on a subsequent leadership task. Female subjects who saw gender stereotypic commercials were more likely to choose support roles than leadership roles when given a choice in a group task.

In sum, the literature suggests that communication skills are becoming increasingly important for success in the contemporary workplace environment. Whereas business schools have generally been slow to adapt their curricula to emphasize communication skills, these skills are increasingly recognized by academe and employers as essential to managerial success. Media effects theory suggests that television depictions of the workplace that consistently emphasize the same characteristics over

time will be accepted as realistic depictions of the workplace, and viewers will learn vicariously about workplace norms, values, and effective and ineffective behaviors from the role models they see on television.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the study is to determine the extent to which communication skills are presented as critical to success in contemporary American business in *The Apprentice*. Because the show is being legitimated by college educators and career advice media as a means to learn career success strategies, and because the show draws a vast audience, the messages that it conveys about communication in the workplace are particularly influential and worthy of study.

RQ1: What communication skills are most heavily emphasized in team challenges?

RQ2: To what extent are communication skills and activities specified as required elements of each episode's challenge?

RQ3: Based on competitors' and Trump and associates' criticisms and praise, which communication skills are presented as most important for workplace success?

RQ4: To what extent are communication skills specified as reasons for competitors' success or failure?

RQ5: Are there differences between the first five competitors to be fired and the last five remaining in terms of their communication competencies, as revealed by the criticisms and praise of others on the show?

Although communication is sometimes defined more broadly, for purposes of this study we focus on aspects of communication that have been consistently noted in the literature as associated with job success. As noted in the preceding review of literature, this includes basic oral communication skills, interpersonal communication skills, written communication skills, teamwork skills, intercultural communication skills, persuasive communication/negotiating skills, and ethical communication.

METHOD

The study employed standard content analysis methodology designed to yield description of media content. A census of all 15 episodes of season 1 (airing in fall 2004) of *The Apprentice* provided the basis for the

study. This yielded a total of 16 ½ hours of television viewing, including one 90-minute episode, two 48-minute expanded episodes, and the 1-hour finale. It also included one episode (Episode 11) that recapped season highlights to that point in time but did not include new challenges or eliminations.

Coding Categories

A coding instrument was constructed to evaluate each episode. The codesheet contained a variety of measures that provided a detailed examination of the role of communication in each week's challenge as well as in verbalized criticisms, praise, and advice by the competitors, Trump and his associates, and corporate clients (see the appendix for the codesheet). Major coding categories were defined as follows.

Required communication tasks. This item identified any communication activities that were specifically mentioned by Trump and his associates or a narrator as a required element of the task. Examples of required communication tasks listed as codesheet items included making a formal presentation; making phone calls; sending e-mails or meeting with others outside the team; developing a written proposal or other document; developing a creative message, slogan, ad, or jingle; developing a multimedia or PowerPoint presentation; conducting interviews of others; being interviewed; a directive to be ethical in communication; or "other."

"Trumpisms." In the series, Donald Trump provides occasional asides to the audience to share his personal advice or philosophy. This codesheet item examined whether the Trumpism related to communication skills and, if so, identified that advice.

Communication-related criticisms and praise. Any criticism or praise of competitors' communication skills was recorded verbatim. The person verbalizing the criticism or praise and the person criticized or praised were identified, as was the focus of the comment. For comparative purposes, the gender of the speaker and of the person criticized or praised were also recorded.

Communication as a factor in win or elimination. Boardroom scenes were analyzed to determine if Trump and/or his associates specifically mentioned communication skills as a contributing factor to a team's win or loss or to an individual competitor's firing.

Lessons learned by eliminated competitors. As fired competitors leave Trump Tower in a taxi at the end of each episode, any self-disclosures about lessons learned that they verbalized were recorded.

Procedure

Three independent coders were used to code each episode. Two were undergraduate communication majors who were compensated as research assistants for their work. The third was a graduate student who was not compensated. In an initial training session, the coders were given oral and written instructions, including examples of coding definitions, and participated in practice coding and discussion. A DVD of *The Apprentice*, Season 1, was used in training so that coders could learn to use the codesheet with actual footage from the show. Coders were permitted to pause, rewind, and replay the episodes as often as necessary to complete the coding.

Each episode was then coded by two of the three coders. The third coder's responses were used to resolve discrepancies in the two sets of ratings to produce a final set for use in the data analysis. The coders were not informed about the authors' specific research questions, and they worked independently. Intercoder reliability was computed using Kassarjian's (1977) percentage of agreement. Intercoder reliability scores ranging from a low of 66% to a high of 100% were achieved on all coding categories. Average percentage agreement for all items was 90.75, with a median intercoder reliability score of 93.3.

Analysis

Data were analyzed to determine frequencies for all variables. Data were then sorted by gender to determine if differences existed between male and female competitors. The data were also sorted to compare frequencies for criticisms and praise for the first five candidates to be eliminated versus the last five remaining. To determine which types of communication skills were emphasized most on the show, each specific communication activity or skill that was identified as part of a team challenge or as the focus of praise or criticism was categorized into one of eight business communication competency categories. These categories were interpersonal skills, negotiating skills, teamwork skills, presentation skills, ethical communication, leadership skills, intercultural communication skills, and written communication skills.

FINDINGS

Of the 15 episodes of *The Apprentice*, 9 emphasized sales, with the team selling the most winning; 2 emphasized creation of an advertising or marketing creative plan; 1 emphasized negotiation of prices; 1 emphasized interviewing skills; 1, the finale, emphasized event management; and 1 was a recap of the season to date. Thus, in 13 of 15 episodes—every episode but the latter 2—the ability to persuade through interpersonal communication or a coordinated campaign was critical to success. It is noteworthy that in 12 of 15 episodes, Trump specified communication activities as required elements of the challenge. Most commonly, this mandatory communication activity was meeting with others outside the team to persuade them of something or sell them something ($n=12$). Other required communication activities were making a formal presentation ($n=1$), developing a creative message or campaign ($n=1$), and being interviewed by others ($n=1$). Frequencies of communication tasks identified as either central to a challenge or specifically required by Trump are noted in Table 1.

“Trumpisms”

Donald Trump offered four asides to the camera that provided advice for communicating in business scenarios. Each of these “Trumpisms” focuses on persuasion in interpersonal contexts.

- “Deal directly with the boss whenever possible” (Episode 2). Trump notes that failing to do so misses an opportunity to establish a relationship with the boss and places responsibility for selling your ideas on a go-between who may not have your passion or knowledge.
- “Negotiation is a very delicate art. Sometimes you have to be tough; sometimes you have to be sweet as pie—it depends upon who you are dealing with” (Episode 3). “In negotiations, try and figure out your opponent” (Episode 6). Negotiating skill is a communication competency involving elements of interpersonal communication, audience analysis, and persuasive message design.
- “Stand up for yourself—if you don’t no one else will” (Episode 5). Trump reinforced this philosophy by firing competitors who did not effectively defend themselves in the boardroom.
- “Never beg when trying to sell” (Episode 8). Effective persuasive communication appeals to the interests of the target and does not project an air of desperation.

Table 1. Nature of Communication Tasks as Portrayed in Weekly Team Challenges

	<i>Central to Challenge (Number of Episodes)</i>	<i>Required by Trump (Number of Episodes)</i>
Making phone calls, sending e-mails, or meeting with others outside the team to persuade them of something or to sell them something	10	12
Developing a creative message, slogan, ad, or jingle	2	1
Conducting interviews for research purposes or hiring purposes	1	1
Negotiation of prices	1	0
Event management	1	0
Making a formal presentation to a potential customer, partner, donor or others	0	1
Developing a written proposal, letter, or other document	0	0
Developing a multimedia presentation, PowerPoint presentation, or video	0	0
Being ethical in communication	0	0
Total	13	15

NOTE: The series contained 15 weekly episodes. In 13 of 15 episodes, the ability to persuade through interpersonal communication or a coordinated campaign was critical to success.

Criticisms of Competitors' Communication Skills

Competitors criticized each others' communication skills 31 times. The most common criticism for all competitors was poor leadership skills ($n = 15$), followed by poor interpersonal skills ($n = 10$). Teamwork skills and negotiating skills were each criticized twice. Presentation skills and unethical communication (dishonesty in a sales pitch) were each criticized once.

The communication skills of females were criticized 15 times, those of males 13 times. Although cell sizes were too small to allow tests for significant differences, several gender differences were apparent in the nature of the criticisms. Women's interpersonal skills were twice as likely to be criticized as males' ($n = 6$ vs. $n = 3$), with criticisms including "too flustered and emotional," "too confrontational," talking to a client "like he was a 4-year-old," and "blurting out" inappropriately in meetings. The criticisms of males' interpersonal skills focused only on poor

listening skills. For example, Jason criticized his project manager, Troy, because "The leader is supposed to listen, take everything in, then decide what is going on—not all of sudden get out of the gate and start delegating." Team members expressed frustration that the project manager delegated without having listened to his team's input.

Gender differences were also found in criticisms of leadership skills. Criticisms of males focused almost exclusively on their leadership skills. Males were more likely to be criticized for their leadership skills than females ($n = 9$ vs. $n = 6$) and were more than 4 times as likely to be criticized for their leadership skills than any other communication skill. Criticisms of males' leadership skills included "lets things slide to avoid conflict" (instead of addressing problems with a team member head-on), a nondemocratic leadership style, micromanagement of team members, and loss of emotional control. "When we have to tell the leader, 'Calm down, stay calm,' that's not the sign of a good leader," noted one competitor about his male project manager. Criticisms of females' leadership skills included team leaders' failure to motivate the team, leading by consensus rather than making key decisions independently, and failure to listen and respond to the team.

On other communication criteria, no obvious gender-based pattern emerged. Although women were criticized for poor teamwork skills twice, male competitors were not criticized for this communication competency. Criticisms of women's teamwork skills included needing to be "the star" of every transaction instead of allowing others to take over and expressing negative attitudes toward the team. Both males and females were criticized once for poor negotiating skills. One male competitor was criticized for unethical communication, dishonesty in a sales pitch. Nick criticized Troy for "misleading people to think Kwame is some kind of hero" by charging customers US\$5 to get his signature on a Planet Hollywood basketball. Finally, females were criticized for presentation skills ($n = 1$), whereas males were not criticized for this skill.

Trump and his associates were shown criticizing competitors' communication skills in 10 of the 15 episodes. Leadership skills were criticized most frequently ($n = 8$), followed by presentation skills ($n = 4$). Negotiation skills, interpersonal skills, and teamwork skills were each criticized by Trump and his associates twice. For example, Nick was heavily criticized for his teamwork even though he seemed to have sound ethical arguments for not participating in the collection of money from the sale of Planet Hollywood basketballs signed by another competitor, Kwame. Trump chastised Nick, saying, "You gave

up on your team.” His associates agreed that Nick was “not a team player—when something doesn’t go his way, he checks out of the game.”

Trump and his associates criticized male competitors for poor communication skills more frequently than females ($n = 11$ vs. $n = 7$). More than half of the criticisms of males focused on poor leadership ($n = 6$), including a team leader who chose not to communicate with the client for a challenge. Males’ negotiating skills and interpersonal skills (“You talked down to VIPs like they were third-graders,” “Listen, don’t interrupt”) were each criticized twice. Male competitors’ presentation skills were criticized once (“You looked like you were dying out there”), whereas no criticism was made of males’ teamwork skills.

Trump and his associates criticized female competitors for poor presentation skills ($n = 3$). For example, Trump scolded a competitor who did not defend herself in the boardroom, declaring, “You never even said anything in your own defense!” Finalist Amy spoke in trite generalities in a final interview. Trump’s associates noted that her “words had no context,” her “answers were meaningless,” and there was “little substance behind her words.” Other criticisms of competitors included poor leadership skills ($n = 2$) and poor teamwork skills ($n = 2$), including disloyalty to teammates. In one example of disloyalty, Tammy publicly criticized her own team in the presence of both teams and Trump and his associates, agreeing with Trump that her team had been “duped” by the competing team. Combined frequencies for criticisms from competitors and Trump and his associates are reported in Table 2.

Praise of Competitors’ Communication Skills

Competitors were shown praising each others’ communication skills a total of 11 times in eight episodes of the show. Gender-based differences were apparent in the data for competitors’ praise. Despite the fact that all-female teams won the challenges in the first four episodes of the show, only one female competitor (Heidi) received any praise from teammates for her communication skills. She was praised by a male teammate for her presentation skills in sales. In contrast, five male competitors received a total of 10 compliments on their communication skills from teammates. Among males, leadership was complimented most frequently ($n = 8$), including the abilities to “generate a positive team attitude,” recognize and verbally reward team members’ efforts, and “take charge” of their groups. Males were also compli-

Table 2. Criticisms of Competitors' Communication Skills From Competitors and Trump and Associates

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
Leadership	23	15	8
Interpersonal	12	4	6
Presentation	5	1	4
Negotiation	4	3	1
Teamwork	4	0	4
Ethical	1	1	0
Total	49	24	23

NOTE: No examples of criticisms of intercultural or written communication skills were found.

mented for teamwork skills ($n = 1$) and negotiating skills ($n = 1$). Of the 11 instances of praise, 7 were offered by males and 4 were offered by females, the latter all praising male teammates. No instances of praise were offered relating to interpersonal communication, ethical communication, intercultural communication, or written communication. Across all 15 episodes, Trump and his associates did not praise any of the competitors for their communication skills.

Role of Communication Skills in Wins and Eliminations

In boardroom scenes, Trump and his associates did not specifically note effective communication skills as a contributing factor to a team's win in any episode. However, the reverse appeared to be true. Poor communication skills were noted as a factor in a team's loss in 5 of the 15 episodes and were noted as a reason for an individual's firing in more than half of the episodes ($n = 8$). When these eight competitors were fired, ineffective communication was specifically mentioned by Trump and/or his associates as a direct contributing factor to their firing. For example, Jason did not communicate with the client, Jessie was the "worst negotiator" and did not defend herself, Ereka was "too emotional for business," Omarosa made too many excuses, and Heidi and David did not display leadership. The communication weaknesses noted by Trump and associates for both men and women included poor leadership skills ($n = 4$), poor presentation skills ($n = 2$), poor teamwork skills ($n = 2$), poor interpersonal skills ($n = 1$), and poor negotiation skills ($n = 1$). (Some competitors were criticized for more than one of the above weaknesses.) Communication skills were 3 times

as likely to be cited as a factor in firings for women than for men ($n = 6$ vs. $n = 2$).

Comparison of Top and Bottom Finishers

A comparison of the first five players to be eliminated from the competition versus the last five to remain reveals that the top finishers were considerably more likely to be praised for their communication skills. Top-five finishers were praised a total of nine times by their competitors, whereas only one compliment related to communication skills was directed to a bottom-five competitor.

This comparison also reveals that leadership skills were the most important criterion by which competitors were judged. Combined frequencies for praises and criticisms from competitors and Trump and his associates identify leadership skills as the most frequent focus of criticism as well as praise for both the top five and bottom five finishers. Although both the top five and bottom five finishers received the same number of criticisms for their leadership skills ($n = 7$), the top five finishers were praised for leadership skills seven times, whereas only one of the bottom five competitors was praised for leadership skills. The top five finishers were also praised for teamwork ($n = 1$) and negotiating skills ($n = 1$).

Regardless of how they fared in the competition, females appeared to be judged more harshly on their communication skills. Of the top five finishers, only one, Amy, who made it to the final three competitors, was female. She received no comments of praise for her communication skills from teammates or Trump and his associates, and two criticisms. Of the bottom five finishers, again only one, Kristi, was female. Four of the nine criticisms of bottom finishers were directed toward her.

Communication Lessons Learned

In four of the episodes, fired competitors expressed lessons that they had learned from their experiences on the show as they were being driven away from Trump Tower. In two of these, competitors' lessons related to their communication skills.

Sam, whose interpersonal style was viewed as abrasive by teammates, said he now understands that "there are better ways to communicate with certain people." Heidi commented that she learned that her strength was in personal selling.

DISCUSSION

This content analysis documents that *The Apprentice* emphasizes communication skills as important attributes for career success. This emphasis is revealed in the nature of team challenges, in communication activities specified as mandatory elements of team tasks, in “Trumpisms” focusing on communication advice, and in the criticisms and praise voiced by competitors and Trump and his associates. Consistent with previous studies that rank communication skills as the most important attributes sought by employers, this study finds leadership and interpersonal skills to be most important to the success of competitors on *The Apprentice*.

Disproportionate Emphasis on Persuasion

The business world as presented on *The Apprentice* is one whose ultimate goal is persuading others. The nature of the challenges given to competitors required effective use of persuasion more than any other type of communication skill. Only in the final challenge, involving event management, was persuasive ability not critical to the win. Whereas this emphasis on persuasion is perhaps a distortion of reality—a more accurate reflection of some managerial positions than others—its emphasis tends to highlight the importance of communication skills and, in particular, the ability to persuade and negotiate with others.

Communication Skills Most Essential to Success

The analysis of criticisms, praise, and reasons for elimination produced a consistent picture of the communication skills most valued by competitors and Trump and his associates. Leadership skills and interpersonal skills were the most frequent subjects of criticisms, which far outnumbered comments of praise. It should be noted that interpersonal skills were criticized only by competitors, rather than Trump, which suggests that in real life, the boss's vantage point may be substantially different than coworkers, and thus the boss may use different criteria for evaluation. Compared to the bottom five finishers, the top five finalists' communication styles reflected strong interpersonal competency: even-temperedness, diplomacy and the ability to avoid alienating others, and a collaborative rather than bossy or dictatorial approach.

Leadership skills also emerged as the most frequent subject of praise ($n = 8$), whereas no other communication skill was praised more than once. An important implication is that although strong communication skills may not be noticed enough to draw praise from the boss (Trump and his associates did not offer any praise related to communication skills), the lack of them is a reason for criticism and firing. In other words, effective leadership and interpersonal skills are considered an essential “must have”; lack of them is a fatal flaw. In several episodes, both teams performed admirably, so communication failures became the default focus of eliminations.

Communication competencies of secondary importance were presentation skills, teamwork skills, and negotiating skills. Although they were the subject of fewer praises and criticisms, their prominent display in the action of the show suggests to viewers that they are important attributes.

What *The Apprentice* Does Not Teach

We found it surprising that communication that could be classified as unethical was the focus of few criticisms, despite several ethical lapses apparent to the authors and criticized by some competitors. For example, Bill and Nick refused to work with their teammates in marketing Kwame, a Wall Street broker, as a “famous New Yorker” while he autographed basketballs that children purchased for US\$5. If asked directly, Kwame would state that he worked on Wall Street. However, many Planet Hollywood customers drew the conclusion that he was a famous basketball player because of the manner in which he was presented. Although two team members were filmed expressing their reluctance to go along with the scheme, Trump and his associates never criticized it. In another episode, the women’s team was chastised for using sex appeal and skimpy attire to sell a product to New York pedestrians. Rather than addressing the matter himself, Trump sent his female associate. The ensuing discussion never framed the incident as an ethical issue. Mixed messages continued in a subsequent episode when the men’s team complained the women’s flirtatiousness gave them an unfair advantage. Trump simply told the men to step up their game—in effect, excusing the women’s behavior. Finally, in the series finale, where previous contestants were invited to team with the two finalists for a final challenge, Omarosa’s blatant lies thwarted finalist Kwame’s chance to win. Although Kwame was asked why he did not fire Omarosa, she was never criticized by Trump for her clearly unethical behavior.

Trump's failure to condemn unethical behaviors may suggest to viewers that the mentality of "win at all costs" is still the rule in business and is more important than ethical communication—a dangerous notion in an era that has come to be defined by corporate scandals of the likes of Enron and WorldCom.

Educators looking for *The Apprentice* to underscore the importance of writing skills and intercultural competency will also be disappointed. Neither competitors nor Trump and his associates were shown making any comments about intercultural or written communication skills, an unfortunate finding that we believe downplays the importance of these essential skills in today's business world. Although audiences may have inferred that it was necessary for teams to write to create an ad campaign or a business proposal, the writing process was never shown. We hypothesize that showing someone typing at a computer does not make for scintillating television, and perhaps these scenes ended up on the proverbial cutting room floor. But we argue that removing the writing process from the portrait of what professionals do gives young viewers an unrealistic and overly glamorous picture of what life as a junior executive is like.

With regard to intercultural communication skills, none of the team challenges required intercultural communication competency. This is regrettable on several fronts. How much more interesting such a scenario would have made the show than selling bottled water and other mundane products! But target audiences were homogeneous, requiring little consideration of demographics or outreach to ethnically diverse groups. This is rarely the practice in today's sophisticated marketing environment of audience segmentation, media fragmentation, and globalization. Based on our casual viewing of subsequent seasons of *The Apprentice*, the series continues to ignore the importance of this communication skill.

Leadership as the Critical Attribute

Leadership is consistently highly valued in *The Apprentice*. Consistent with the literature, leadership as presented in *The Apprentice* is based extensively on the ability to communicate effectively. Those perceived to have strong leadership skills were rewarded and advanced in the game; those perceived not to have them were criticized and eliminated. We find it noteworthy that despite the prominence given to persuasion as the ultimate goal, persuasive ability, such as negotiating skill, was not the most frequently cited reason for competitors' wins and losses. Leadership skills were consistently identified most frequently as

being critical to success, followed by interpersonal skills. The message here is that to win a persuasive task as a team, leadership and interpersonal skills are necessary to smooth the path toward the ultimate goal of persuading others. It is interesting that although Trump emphasized successful persuasion as the criterion for team wins when assigning the tasks, he assessed the competitors primarily for their leadership skills. Strengths in negotiating skills alone were not enough to save competitors like Heidi and Troy, who were praised by teammates for their negotiating skills but fired by Trump, who perceived weaknesses in leadership skills.

Gender Issues

The findings suggest several gender-based implications. First, the ability to lead is critical for men. More than half of the criticisms of men (58%) focused on their leadership abilities, compared to 34% of the criticisms of women. Whereas this could indicate that the male competitors were simply less effective as leaders than the female competitors, role expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & Miller, 1985) suggests another possibility. Expectancy violations theory suggests that if society expects men to be leaders, when men fail to live up to these expectations they are evaluated more harshly than women, who may not carry the same level of expectations for leadership.

Whereas men were scrutinized for their leadership abilities, women were criticized for a broader range of communication skills, particularly interpersonal communication skills. Criticisms of female competitors' communication skills reinforced gender stereotypes by focusing on emotional instability ("too emotional and irrational," "too confrontational," "too flustered," "a loose cannon"). By contrast, only one male competitor was criticized for loss of emotional control. Contradictory criticisms of male and female team leaders may reflect differing societal expectations for male and female leadership styles: Whereas Bill was criticized for making decisions without seeking consensus, Kristi was criticized specifically because she did lead by consensus and did not make key decisions on her own.

For the first 4 weeks of the series, teams were divided by gender, men versus women, and the women's team went undefeated, forcing producers to switch to mixed-gender teams because the male team had become so depleted due to eliminations. Despite the women's success, by a margin of 10 to 1, women were substantially less likely to be complimented for their communication skills than men. Women clearly were

not complimenting and supporting each other, although they offered compliments to male teammates when teams became co-ed. Again, expectancy violation theory may provide an explanation. The theory suggests that if we expect women to have strong interpersonal skills, we may view their demonstration of these skills as “normal” rather than praiseworthy. Conversely, we are likely to make note of the lack of these “expected” skills and evaluate women more harshly if they fail to live up to expectations. *The Apprentice* demonstrated that women may be their own harshest critics. When teams were reconstituted to become co-ed, every woman but one was eliminated in the next seven consecutive episodes, largely because males were perceived to be the stronger leaders. Although men were not immune from criticism of their leadership, they were not fired. This prompted a civil rights organization executive to write that *The Apprentice* had exposed the reality of the glass ceiling (Herrera, 2004).

Women, it seems, must negotiate a fine and ever-shifting line between being assertive but not confrontational, attractive but not sexual, invested but not emotional when things go wrong, democratic leaders but also independent decision makers. It should be noted that every woman selected to be a competitor met “model” standards of beauty—sending an implicit message that if you are a woman, attractiveness is a requirement to get ahead. Male competitors included an overweight Bowie and the vertically challenged Sam.

Lessons for Business Schools/Educators

This study reinforces the call from academics and industry for greater emphasis on communication instruction in business curriculum. Business schools have for too long focused on analytical ability at the expense of using effective communication skills to accomplish goals. Leadership historically has been viewed as a trait that some are born with, not as a teachable skill. Similarly, interpersonal communication is often viewed as being outside the purview of the business school, therefore expendable. The research literature and *The Apprentice* demonstrate that leadership and interpersonal skills are as essential to success in business as any other skill. The communication elements of leadership, such as delegating, facilitating, instructing, team building, motivating, decision making, managing conflict, and serving as spokesperson are critical to future business leaders’ success but are rarely explicitly taught in core business curriculum. Business schools and future business leaders should not take these skills for granted. Simi-

larly, stronger emphasis on teaching ethical communication may be necessary to counteract the mixed messages provided in shows like *The Apprentice*.

Future Research

Future studies should examine audience effects of *The Apprentice*. In particular, what representative anecdotes become “take-away” points for viewers? To what extent do average viewers learn lessons for success from the show? To what extent do they recognize communication skills in these lessons, and to what extent do they subsequently employ these strategies in their own careers? Additional studies focusing on the scholarship of teaching might document the extent to which adoption of *The Apprentice* in college course work has expanded and the satisfaction of students and professors with *The Apprentice* as a pedagogical tool.

Realism or Reality Check

Is *The Apprentice* a realistic portrayal of the corporate environment? The answer is certainly debatable. The compressed time frames for completing challenges and sometimes overly simplistic tasks (such as selling lemonade) are clearly made for television. However, the ability to work cooperatively on a team, to lead a team, to meet deadlines, and to deliver on assigned tasks is an undeniably real demand of today’s workforce.

The editing and storytelling techniques employed by reality television—including a need for tension and conflict—are particularly well suited to dramatizing the consequences of communication failures. Although this may explain why criticisms of competitors far outnumbered praises, the focus on communication mistakes is valuable because it highlights to viewers the critical importance of these skills. The legacy of this television show for educators is that it is driving home the need for effective communication skills in vivid and memorable ways that business schools have failed to provide. If audience members get the message, whether the show is realistic is probably beside the point.

APPENDIX
The Apprentice Codesheet

Coder Name: _____

Episode # _____ Episode Title: _____ Season: 1

Nature of the challenge in this episode: _____

SECTION 1: THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE

1. Are any of the following communication activities specifically mentioned by Trump and his team or the narrator as a **required** element of the task assigned to the competitors? (Check all that apply):

- _____ Making a formal presentation to a potential customer, partner, donor or others
- _____ Making phone calls, sending e-mails, or meeting with others outside the team to persuade them of something
- _____ Developing a written proposal, letter, or other document
- _____ Developing a creative message, slogan, ad, or jingle
- _____ Developing a multimedia presentation, PowerPoint presentation, or video
- _____ Conducting interviews for research purposes or hiring purposes
- _____ Being interviewed by others, including being interviewed by Trump's associates
- _____ Being ethical in communication
- _____ Other communication activity (please describe): _____

2. "Trumpisms": Does the advice or philosophy given by Donald Trump directly to the TV audience relate to communication skills?

_____ No

_____ Yes. (If yes, describe advice): _____

SECTION II: CONDUCTING THE TASK—CRITICISM AND PRAISE

3. During the task, or in the boardroom, do any of the **competitors criticize** their teammates' communication skills?

_____ No

_____ Yes (If yes, answer the following):

FEMALES:

Name of criticizer: _____

Person they criticized: _____

Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____

Person they criticized: _____

Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____

Person they criticized: _____

Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____

Person they criticized: _____

Nature of criticism: _____

MALES:

Name of criticizer: _____

Person they criticized: _____

Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____

Person they criticized: _____

Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____

Person they criticized: _____

Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

- a) Total number of females who were criticized in #3 for their communication skills: _____
- b) Total number of males who were criticized in #3 for their communication skills: _____

4. During the task or in the boardroom, do **Trump and/or his associates (including corporate representatives from Mattel, Proctor & Gamble, etc.) criticize** any of the competitors for their communication skills?

_____ No

_____ Yes (If yes, answer the following):

FEMALES:

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

MALES:

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

Name of criticizer: _____
Person they criticized: _____
Nature of criticism: _____

- a) Total number of females who were criticized in #4 for their communication skills: _____
- b) Total number of males who were criticized in #4 for their communication skills: _____

5. During the task or in the boardroom, do any of the **competitors praise** their teammates' communication skills?

_____ No

_____ Yes (If yes, answer the following):

FEMALES:

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

MALES:

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

a) Total number of females praised in #5: _____

b) Total number of males praised in #5: _____

6. During the task or in the boardroom, do **Trump and/or his associates praise (including corporate representatives) praise** any of the competitors for their communication skills?

_____ No

_____ Yes (If yes, answer the following):

FEMALES:

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

MALES:

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

Name of praiser: _____

Person they praised: _____

Nature of praise: _____

a) Total number of females praised in #6: _____

b) Total number of males praised in #6: _____

SECTION III: THE BOARDROOM—WINNERS AND LOSERS

7. Who **won**? (list team and names): _____

8. Do Trump and/or his associates specify communication skills as a contributing factor in the win?

_____ No

_____ Yes (If yes, answer the following):

a) What are the communication skills specified? _____

9. Who **lost**? (list team and names): _____

10. Are communication skills specified by Trump and/or his associates as a contributing factor for the loser/s?

_____ No

_____ Yes (If yes, answer the following):

a) What are the communication skills identified? _____

SECTION IV: LOSERS IN THE BOARDROOM—“YOU’RE FIRED!”

11. Who is fired? (list): _____

12. Is ineffective communication noted as a weakness or contributing factor to the firing?

_____ No

_____ Yes (If yes, identify communication weaknesses noted in the boardroom): _____

13. What, if any, is the lesson learned expressed by the person fired? (given while in the limo driving away)

_____ None

_____ Yes (If yes, identify all): _____

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