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THESIS

**ETHOS AND SENIOR LEADER COMMUNICATION:
EXAMINING RESPONSES TO A POLICY CHANGE
MEMO**

by

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June 2010

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**ETHOS AND SENIOR LEADER COMMUNICATION: EXAMINING
RESPONSES TO A POLICY CHANGE MEMO**

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ABSTRACT

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

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. SENIOR LEADER COMMUNICATION

1. Persuasion and Senior Leader Credibility

Somewhere between setting the vision of the future, making policy decisions, and attending the meeting about the meeting lies the most central aspect of leadership: achievement through others. As much as they may desire otherwise, leaders of any organization cannot simply *will* those they lead to behave a certain way. Leaders instead must rely on effective communication to get things done and make things happen to achieve the organization's mission. When a chief executive officer, agency director, or company president writes a report, issues a memo, or signs a new code of conduct, there is usually the expectation that whatever they have communicated will happen. After all, their words spring from legitimate authority, able to reward and punish subsequent behaviors and actions (French & Raven, 1959). The possibility that one has failed to communicate is often met with resistance. When a breakdown of communication occurs, one may naturally ask, "How could this be? Wasn't this clear? It says so right there!" Oftentimes, senior leaders forget that effective communication requires more than organizing and transmitting facts. They forget it requires persuasion. What, then, makes senior leaders persuasive when they communicate? One key answer often lies in their perceived credibility.

Several factors contribute to persuasive communication, but perceptions of credibility play a significant role in whether messages are followed. As Conger (1998) suggests, persuasion is more than "presenting great arguments" (p. 87). He adds that "Credibility is the cornerstone of effective persuasion; without it, a persuader won't be given the time of day" (p. 90). Yet, the need for senior leaders of an organization to be perceived as credible is not always considered. Some might expect that once one has reached senior leader status, their word would automatically be accepted and followed. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As Cialdini (2001) warns, "Playing the 'because I'm the boss' card is out" and adds that, "persuasion skills exert far greater influence over

others behavior than formal power structures do” (p. 72). Conger (1998) notes that senior leaders often presume their status and positional power are sufficient to establish credibility, presumptions that he argues can be overzealous: “Our research strongly suggests that most managers overestimate their own credibility—considerably” (p. 88). These misperceptions can also obscure awareness of *how* one’s credibility is actually perceived.

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

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

In this way, Cialdini presents an instrumental view of credibility in which certain actions lead to particular outcomes. However, while his research suggests relationships between certain actions and persuasiveness, he acknowledges that establishing credibility

is actually more subtle. For example, he notes that executives cannot just “nail their diplomas to the wall and wait for everyone to notice” (p. 77). He hints at the value of a more rhetorical approach by suggesting that communication through narratives can aid credibility: “perhaps [one can] tell an anecdote about successfully solving a problem similar to the one that’s on the agenda at the next day’s meeting” (p. 77).

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

2. Judgments of Senior Leader Messages

To better understand reader judgments about the persuasiveness of leader messages—whether those judgments are about credibility or other issues relative to leader communication—it is beneficial to gather and analyze audience reception data. By looking at reception data, we can better explore nuances in how readers judge components of messages and other situational factors that they may point to as having impacted their responses. It is particularly useful to examine responses to an actual (rather than a simulated) senior leader message that attempts to change behavior within

an organization. Accordingly, this thesis examines a case in which the director of a large government agency, with approximately 4,000 employees, issued a policy memo to achieve specific outcomes. This research explores the sender's intentions for issuing the memo as well as the audience's responses.

Like many other large, complex machine bureaucracies (Mintzberg, 1981), government agencies are typically structured hierarchically with multiple layers. Decisions are made at the top, and information regarding these decisions is filtered down through the various layers of the organization. Communication through policy memos, often distributed via e-mail, has become a standard way of disseminating critical information throughout large organizations in a timely fashion (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Markus, 1994; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Employees are expected to identify, understand, and implement changes and actions communicated in these memos. Senior leaders in government, as in other organizations, generally adhere to certain rules and norms (constraints) that constitute acceptable modes of discourse, but often their primary concern is to be clear. However, popular conceptions of clarity are often based on information transfer models of communication that do not take seriously the role of language and the relational goals of messages (Suchan & Dulek, 1990). In the information transfer model, the primary objective is to transfer information accurately and efficiently, which invites a focus on the denotative meaning in messages. The questions that arise from such a focus are often about whether or not receivers understand the literal meaning of the message. However, even the most mundane messages have a persuasive aspect to them, and readers are often responding to the connotative meanings of messages; these meanings and interpretations are not easily discerned by senders. Thus, researchers need to turn their analysis to how readers make judgments based on connotative meanings, an approach that calls for a focus on receivers, how they make sense of messages as they read them, and the connotative meaning that they derive based on their perspective.

3. Reception of a Policy Change Memo

In the case examined here, the agency director issued a memo to remind employees of a policy change that had taken place nine months earlier: the elimination of a controversial performance metric. The memo had multiple goals, both informative and persuasive. In practical terms, the director's primary goals for the memo were to reiterate that the policy had changed, explain the basis behind the changes, and institute additional changes and directives to employees. These changes were designed to enable employees to continue to achieve desired work product results given the removal of the old metric. Additionally, the director sought to alter employee behavior and influence employee perceptions related to the elimination of the metric.

The director faced several challenges in achieving her goals for the memo. First, she was changing a performance metric that had been a primary standard of evaluation in the agency. As a result, there were employee expectations, based on this metric, of a key criterion for success: the completion of reports within a certain timeframe. However, the former performance metric was also controversial because it was associated with negatively impacting employees' ability to adhere to standards of quality work. In this way, the director believed the metric was flawed because it incentivized poor behavior, and the quality of reports suffered as a result. Nonetheless, by changing the metric, she faced a significant challenge because the metric was ingrained in the agency's culture as a golden benchmark of evaluation.

The second challenge the director faced was that the release and dissemination of the memo took place during a time when the agency's performance was under significant scrutiny and pressure from external stakeholders. One key focus of the external scrutiny regarded unintended consequences that had occurred as a result of the performance metric; namely, that work quality had suffered because of the stringent adherence to meeting the metric. This external oversight caused a great deal of apprehension among employees, who were overly cautious about making mistakes given increased scrutiny. Additionally, once the metric had been removed, there were new challenges with completing work products in a timely and efficient manner. Consequently, the culture of the agency was impacted: employees were fearful, confused, and under a substantial

amount of pressure. With this memo, the director attempted to influence employee perceptions of the policy change as well as more broadly alleviate their concerns.

In this study's assessment of what the director intended to accomplish through the memo and how she wanted employees to perceive it, a common theme of credibility emerged surrounding both the sender's intention and the participants' reception of the memo. Specifically, judgments of credibility, both positive and negative, emerged in early analysis of qualitative interviews with the director and 23 employees. In practical terms, the director created the policy memo with the expectation that it would mitigate the tensions employees were experiencing and ensure that employees were properly following the new policy correctly. She wanted employees to perceive the memo and herself as the director in a certain way and, in turn, to have them alter their behavior in accordance with what the memo was advocating. Interestingly, participants indicated they were clear about the memo on a denotative level: they understood the directives and what the policy changes meant. However, they questioned whether the directive and the changes were the right thing to do. In other words, employee responses centered on judgments about whether what the director was advocating in the memo was sensible. In this way, the employees were evaluating the director's credibility. When people question whether what someone is advocating is sensible, they are ultimately judging the sensibility (and, in turn, credibility) of the person announcing the new directives. More plainly, in the space between the common expression "If I say jump, and you say how high" is an evaluation of credibility. Those who answer "how high" have already accepted that the one saying "jump" is credible.

B. RESEARCH INQUIRY

Once it became clear that credibility was a key theme in the director's intent and employee reception of the memo, I turned to Aristotle's three components of ethos—good sense, good moral character, and goodwill—to provide a theoretical framework for better understanding judgments of leader ethos, both positive and negative. Aristotle's ethos framework has been used productively by other business communication scholars in previous studies (Beason, 1991; Eckhouse, 1999; Griffin, 2009; Hyland, 1998;

Isaksson & Jørgensen, 2010; Kallendorf & Kallendorf, 1985; Stoddard 1985; Williams, 2008; Walzer, 1981). The framework can be particularly useful in a specific case of leader communication for both methodological and practical purposes. As method, Aristotle's framework provides a heuristic for making sense of qualitative reception data. As a practical matter, the framework offers a valuable categorization scheme to make explicit how and in what ways readers are making specific judgments about leader ethos.

1. Intention, Reception, and the Role of Ethos

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how people make judgments of credibility and its role in the persuasiveness of senior leader messages. Specifically, I consider the assumptions and intentions that leaders have when creating and distributing messages to achieve specific outcomes in the organizations they lead. I address the importance and relevance of ethos as a persuasive appeal and its implications for leader communication.

There are four primary research questions that governed my analysis. First, I was interested broadly in the relationship between leader intention and employee reception of written communication in a government organization.

RQ1: What are the director's communication intentions, expectations, and desires for how readers will interpret a memo?

RQ2: What are the employees' perceptions of the memo and of the director based on the memo?

Based on transcriptions of qualitative interviews with the director and 23 employees, I conducted a thematic analysis consistent with key principles of grounded theory, an approach that begins with data in order to derive theoretical constructs rather than beginning with a particular theoretical framework prior to analyzing the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through this analysis, credibility emerged as a key theme in both the intent behind the memo and in the way that it was received. These initial findings then led to a second set of research questions that specifically investigated the director's intentions and assumptions about ethos—as encoded in the memo—as well as employee judgments about the director's ethos based on the memo.

RQ3: When we examine the director's intentions as ethos appeals, what do we find?

RQ4: What positive and negative ethos judgments do employees make about the director based on the memo?

C. OVERVIEW OF REMAINING CHAPTERS

This thesis is divided into four remaining chapters: Literature Review, Methods, Findings, and Discussion and Conclusions.

1. Literature Review

Chapter II reviews how ethos is used as a persuasive appeal to better understand what contributes to judgments of credibility. In addition, traditional conceptualizations of ethos are explored to understand the different perspectives regarding the link between ethos, credibility, and character. The characterization of an Aristotelian and Platonic frame of ethos is examined, as well as providing an outline of the main conceptual distinctions in the literature regarding ethos. Finally, a discussion is provided regarding how ethos has been as studied and applied in business communication.

2. Methods

Chapter III discusses the methods by which the data for this study was attained and analyzed. This includes further explanation of the case study, the research site, and the participants. It explains the level of involvement of the agency's director and employees, and the ways in which the intention and reception data was obtained. Furthermore, it explains the relevance of using rhetorical thematic analysis to explore how perceptions of ethos are influenced.

3. Findings

Chapter IV presents the findings from the data analysis. Specifically, both sender intention and audience reception are thematized based on Aristotle's three components of ethos. Chapter IV describes the director's stated intentions in sending the memo and provide explanation for findings related to the participants corresponding reception of the

memo. In addition, the director's intentions of using the memo as a reminder of policy change are discussed, to impart her understanding of challenges facing the workforce and express positive goodwill towards employees. Also included in this chapter, are the ways in which participants made claims that ultimately related to perception of the director's credibility.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Chapter V discusses the ways in which ethos was presented in the case study for this thesis. Assumptions of senior leaders, when creating and distributing messages, are considered. There is a specific focus on how these assumptions related to actual judgments of credibility. Also considered, are the director's implicit assumptions about what employees would perceive as contributing to positive credibility in the memo, which is followed by a discussion on the distinction between her intentions, how participants perceived the memo, and what participants looked to in making judgments of her credibility. Chapter V is concluded with a consideration of the implications for senior leader ethos and its role in business communication. Finally, the value of ethos as a rhetorical appeal in leadership messages, and framework for understanding the basis of reader judgments, are discussed.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. ETHOS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

At their core, organizations exist to achieve a set of goals or objectives. Whether these objectives are to generate profit, provide services, or carry out missions, organizations must act in such a way that encourages the accomplishment of their objectives. In other words, organizations are transactional in nature; their actions are directed towards achieving a specific purpose. Therefore, leaders of any organization must be able to influence and direct people's actions and behaviors to be consistent with what the organization wants to accomplish. As a result, leaders must persuade members of an organization to behave in a certain way, whether it is via compliance with rules and regulations, belief in mission and strategy, or commitment to the organization. As such, business communication is inherently persuasive. Kallendorf and Kallendorf (1985) provide a useful rationale for how persuasive appeals operate in business communication, explaining how all types of business prose have persuasive functions:

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

Scholars have studied persuasive appeals ever since Aristotle presented the concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos in his seminal work, the *Rhetoric*. Specifically, they have sought to understand the means through which persuasive appeals operate and their corresponding influence. Of the three modes of persuasive appeals, Aristotle considered ethos, which addresses judgments of speaker credibility, most important (Aristotle, 2007, p. 39). Additionally, many business communication scholars have argued for the relevance of ethos to business communication (Beason, 1991; Eckhouse, 1999; Griffin, 2009; Hyland, 1998; Isaksson & Jørgensen, 2010; Kallendorf & Kallendorf, 1985; Stoddard 1985; Williams, 2008; Walzer, 1981). Eckhouse (1999), for example, makes

ethos the “unifying concept” for business communicators in his text *Competitive Communication: A Rhetoric for Modern Business* (p. xii). Eckhouse argues that Aristotle’s notion of ethos is relevant for business communicators because it can “ease acceptance for most claims” and “put the audience in a particular frame of mind, or emotional state [...] that is more receptive to the writer’s or speaker’s point of view” (p. 121).

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

Past business-communication research has examined distinctive ways in which ethos operates in various spheres of business communication. For example, Williams (2008) found that corporate mission statements included expressions of positive values such as integrity, excellence, innovation, citizenship, and safety in attempts to develop a desirable corporate identity and influence stakeholder perceptions. Arguments and narratives geared towards maintaining positive corporate identity further draw upon ethos and its relevance to crisis communication. Griffin (2009) found that ethos appeals were important for maintaining a positive corporate identity during a crisis and showed how Merck tried to develop a corporate identity of “understanding, sympathy, and trust” through public letters. Expressions of ethos as it relates to corporate identity have also been examined in the ways public relations agencies attempt to express credibility. For example, Isaksson and Jørgensen (2010) found that public relations agencies convey expertise, trustworthiness, and empathy on their websites in order to build ethos.

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

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

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

B. DEFINING ETHOS

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

rhetor uses: “[There is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence” (Aristotle, 2007, p. 38). Additionally, Aristotle argues that character is not a static trait, but something that is constructed through the discourse:

But since rhetoric is concerned with making a judgment (people judge what is said in deliberation, and judicial proceedings are also a judgment) it is necessary not only to look to the argument, that it may be demonstrative and persuasive but also [for the speaker] to construct a view of himself as a certain kind of person. (Aristotle, 2007, p. 112)

In short, ethos is continually being constructed based on the communication event in which it is occurring. During every rhetorical transaction, audiences are drawing inferences and making judgments about a rhetor’s ethos.

1. Discussion of Aristotle’s Components of Ethos

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

a. Good Sense

Aristotle (as cited in Miller, 1974) relates good sense to prudence (phronesis) and explains that it requires a “settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions” (p. 312). In this way, good sense is an audience judgment about whether a rhetor makes appropriate decisions about the best course of action in relation to the specific conventions surrounding a speech event. For example, consider a football coach announcing the starting lineup of a championship game against the toughest team in the league. His decision regarding who will play is reflective of his consideration about who the best players are, which players are injured, and how he thinks the other team will perform. Accordingly, the players will make judgments regarding who the coach says will play by evaluating the coach’s consideration of the specific circumstances surrounding the game. In this way, evaluations of good sense are often gleaned through expressions of the wisdom and judgment of the rhetor. In order to be perceived as credible, a rhetor must be perceived as having sufficient understanding of

the needs, emotions, and desires of the audience, in addition to any other things that may come to bear on the situation. The rhetor must be able to convey that he or she has evaluated and considered these things and made appropriate judgments about how to proceed accordingly. Johnson (1984) provides a helpful explanation of this relationship by stating, “Throughout the *Rhetoric* Aristotle stresses the importance of the orator’s assessment of ‘subject’, ‘persons addressed’, and ‘occasion’” (p. 102). Put more plainly, audiences must perceive that a rhetor essentially knows what is going on and can guide them appropriately.

b. Good Moral Character

The second indicator of ethos, good moral character (*arête*), is understood as the nature of a rhetor’s virtue or goodness. An audience must perceive that the rhetor engages in behaviors consistent with conceptions of good moral character in order to be perceived as credible. Miller (1974) provides a useful description of Aristotle’s conception of good moral character as outlined in the *Rhetoric*: “Whether a person is worthy of praise or is worthy of being trusted or believed, lies in the virtue of the person involved” (p. 314). Aristotle associated various types of virtues in connection with good moral character such as justice (following the law), courage (doing noble deeds), temperance (restraint from excess and magnanimity), and generosity of spirit to others (Aristotle, 2007, p. 76). In short, whether an audience perceives a rhetor’s actions as desirable impacts perceptions of speaker credibility. For example, consider our football coach announcing the starting lineup of the big game and stating that he found a page from the opposing team’s playbook in the parking lot. Whether the coach proceeds to share the contents of the playbook or not, his statements elicit evaluations of his credibility. Some players may perceive the coach as being a great guy who wants to help them win if he shares the playbook, while others may perceive the coach as being a great guy by wanting to play fairly if he does not share the playbook. Either way, the players will make judgments about the coach’s credibility based on what he says about the playbook.

c. Goodwill

The third indicator of ethos, goodwill (*eunoia*), is the rhetor's attitude or manner towards the audience. Audiences will make inferences about a speaker's credibility based on how they see a rhetor as perceiving them. For example, if our football coach announcing the starting lineup says he chose the players because of their strong abilities to beat the other team, then the players, whether they are starting or not, are more likely to perceive the coach as having a positive opinion of them, which can influence their perception of his credibility. In other words, if an audience perceives that a rhetor has their best interest in mind, or thinks highly of them, then they will make positive judgments about the rhetor's character. As Griffin (2009) explains, "The speaker can cultivate the audience's perceptions of his goodwill, says Aristotle, if he is able to convince the listeners that he wishes good things for them, preferably appearing to have no benefit for the speaker" (p. 65). Aristotle warns that even if a rhetor exhibits good sense and good character, failure to convey goodwill can result in a perceived lack of credibility. He explains that one of the ways "speakers make mistakes" is if "they are prudent and fair-minded but lack good will" (Aristotle, 2007, p. 112). Plainly put, a rhetor must also be perceived as having the best interest of the audience in mind, even if he or she displays good sense and good character; without goodwill, his or her message may be a moot point.

2. Plato Versus Aristotle

While scholars generally agree that ethos is a perception derived from evaluation of a rhetor's character grounded in their habits, there is debate over the ways in which this perception is influenced. Two key questions summarize distinctions in the literature surrounding this issue. First, to what extent are a rhetor's habits, as gleaned through discourse, indicative of the true nature of his or her character? This question addresses whether a rhetor must truly be prudent, noble, and just, or simply be perceived as such. More plainly, must a rhetor walk the walk, so to speak? Second, to what extent are perceptions and evaluations of character and habit based solely on the discourse itself versus derived from other experience? This debate addresses whether judgments of ethos

are based only on the discourse at hand or if prior evaluations of a rhetor's actions and behaviors come to bare on audience interpretation of messages. In short, when it comes to evaluations of ethos, does one's reputation precede them?

a. *Perspectives on True Moral Good and Credibility*

The first question up for consideration—whether a rhetor must in fact engage in good habits and be of true moral virtue in order to be perceived as credible—has roots in classical conceptualizations of rhetoric. Plato claims a rhetor must engage in behaviors reflective of true moral virtue in order to be perceived as credible, while Aristotle argues that the virtue of these behaviors is actually determined by the audience. Johnson (1984) provides a helpful explanation of the core points of deviation in perspectives on this issue, and he outlines what contributes to a Platonic versus Aristotelian notion of ethos:

In *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* the nature of ideal truth and absolute goodness are central issues in Plato's argument for reformed rhetorical practice; the reality of the speaker's virtue is presented as a prerequisite to effective speaking. In contrast, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* presents rhetoric as a strategic art which facilitates decisions in civil matter and accepts the appearance of goodness as sufficient to inspire conviction in hearers. (p. 99)

Plato argues that the duty of a rhetor is to express his or her understanding of virtuous habits and ideas to others. For that reason, a rhetor must be of true virtue. Without actually being of true virtue, a rhetor cannot, and should not, instruct others on these matters. Johnson (1984) writes, "Plato proposes in *Gorgias* that the true aim of oratory should be the 'moral good,' not merely persuasion as an end in itself [...]. The rhetorician, he argues, should be a philosopher, not a panderer, and should aim to lead the souls of his hearers to the 'knowledge of ideas,' not merely belief or pleasure" (p. 99). In other words, Plato's concept holds that a rhetor must, in fact, engage in behaviors considered to be reflective of true moral goodness, in order to fulfill what he believes to be the goal of rhetoric in the first place: informing others of how to be virtuous themselves.

However, some scholars have challenged Plato's view. Sattler (1947), for example, points out how the denotative meaning of ethos may have given rise to a true "moral good" perspective, but he argues that ethos includes other qualities as well:

The traits or qualities that make up ethos are of course approved and respected by the society in question, but such traits do not necessarily have the status of "welfare principles." That is to say, ethos refers to qualities other than those considered to have moral import. In short, ethos may be defined as "totality of characteristic traits," rather than in terms of mere custom or morally approved habits. (p. 55)

Sattler's (1947) view of ethos is consistent with an Aristotelian perspective. Aristotle argues that judgments of ethos can incorporate actions beyond true moral virtue. As noted earlier, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle conceptualizes ethos as an impression of goodness rather than a manifestation of true moral nature. He defines rhetoric as the "ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" and does not contend, like Plato, that the aim of rhetoric must be knowledge and education of the moral good (Aristotle, 2007, p. 37). Aristotle argues that rhetoric can and should incorporate what an audience perceives as good or appropriate behavior, not just true moral behavior as Plato suggests. Johnson explains how Aristotle accounts for this perspective, showing how rhetoric should aim to align with audiences' conceptions of the subject at hand:

Rhetoric, in Aristotle's view, is a nonpartisan art that exists to "affect the giving of decisions" about matters that fall within the "general ken of all men." [...] The art of rhetoric consists of inventing arguments based on "common notions" (received opinions or enthymemes) that persuade hearers towards some specific change in attitude, behavior or judgment. (p. 90–91, 101)

Aristotle's notion of ethos allows for consideration of an audience's perspective on what they consider good or appropriate behavior, and he posits that messages should be conveyed in accordance with what they consider good. In this way, Plato's conception of rhetoric is limiting because it potentially disregards the needs and desires of those who may not subscribe to a static conception of what constitutes moral goodness. An audience will evaluate a rhetor's ethos based on their subjective view of what they regard as appropriate moral behavior. Therefore, a rhetor must be able to

convey that he or she is communicating in accordance with the audience's accepted views or opinions of what they consider appropriate. While some would argue that Aristotle's stance implies a manipulation of an audience, Johnson (1984) argues that Aristotle's focus on consideration of audience perspectives is a strength rather than weakness.

Ethos is a strategy in Aristotle's rhetoric but a beneficent rather than a manipulative one; "making one's character look right" results from deliberation about the nature of the audience and the "mean course appropriate to the subject and the situation. In other words, ethos is a result of a considered choice about how the Good is best defined and conveyed within the boundaries of received opinion. (p. 102)

Aristotle's view of ethos accounts for the different ways audiences may regard different behavior as morally good and does not limit ethos to static conventions of true moral goodness that may be conveyed within messages.

b. Ethos and Prior Actions

In addition to the debates over true versus perspectivized moral goodness, scholars have also debated the question of whether evaluations of a rhetor's prior actions and behaviors impact audience perceptions of ethos. Miller (1974) provides a useful analysis of how the etymology of ethos bears on interpretations of whether judgments of ethos are based on habits, customs, and manner of life that have been practiced by a rhetor and observed by others, or whether it must be expressed through discourse (see also Sattler (1947) for further discussion on the impacts of the etymology of ethos). Specifically, Miller (1974) discusses the link between habit and character; that is, he considers whether Aristotle was implying that one's character is developed by habitually engaging in certain actions that are witnessed by others. More plainly, if someone witnesses a rhetor do something that they think is favorable, Miller addresses the question of whether those observations will influence future judgments the person may have of that rhetor's character.

Some scholars argue that judgments of ethos are influenced by both reputation and by the discourse itself. For example, Stoddard (1985) argues that judgments of ethos that are influenced by a rhetor's reputation comprise "initial" ethos, whereas judgments based on the discourse itself comprise "derived" ethos (p. 232). Halloran (1982) also supports the notion that a rhetor's reputation may impact judgments of ethos, but that a rhetor's reputation must be in conjunction with what emerges in the discourse. Specifically, he argues that a rhetor achieves positive ethos "in part by bringing to the rhetorical occasion a good reputation, but he must also manifest the proper character through choices made in his speech" (p. 60).

Aristotle, however, contends that ethos originates in the discourse itself and is not drawn from any former judgments or previous interactions with a rhetor. After describing the ways ethos influences audience perception, Aristotle states, "And this [ethos] should result from the speech, not from previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person" (Aristotle, 2007, p. 38). To Aristotle, ethos is a function of rhetorical invention; that is, he argues that a rhetor's choices about how to express their character are gleaned through style, delivery, and content of a message (Sattler, 1947). Accordingly, ethos can be examined by looking at the discourse itself because rhetors have embedded certain choices into their messages in the hope of being perceived as credible by the audience. Therefore, it is fitting to focus on what is occurring in the discourse to explore how audiences make judgments regarding ethos, as many business-communication scholars have done (Beason, 1991; Eckhouse, 1999; Griffin, 2009; Hyland, 1998; Isaksson & Jørgensen, 2010; Kallendorf & Kallendorf, 1985; Stoddard 1985; Williams, 2008; Walzer, 1981). Eckhouse (1999) makes the distinction this way:

Unlike reputation, which one acquires and brings to an act of communication, ethos arises from that very act. Thus one might have a reputation for being honest, trustworthy, or credible, but that is an attribute of character or person that can stand apart from the use of language. Ethos, on the other hand, cannot be separated from the act of communication. (p. 119-120)

Beason (1991) also focuses on ethos as arising from the discourse itself, and he presents the concept of “signaled ethos” in an attempt isolate linguistic features as a way of discerning how audiences may respond when making judgments of character and credibility.

In addition to a focus on the discourse itself, scholars have argued for the importance of studying how audiences respond to the discourse. For example, Stoddard (1985) provides a strong rationale as to why ethos should be studied in connection with consideration of an audience’s interpretation of messages:

Given our pluralistic society, different audiences with different purposes will regard various types of intelligence and character negatively or positively. Thus ethos cannot be considered in isolation from audience analysis. [...] Although we can define a writer’s ethos independently, it cannot be used effectively without consideration of specific audience attitudes and interests. (p. 232)

Stoddard makes an important point about combining a focus on discourse with a focus on audience reception. Other rhetorical scholars have similarly argued for the importance of audience reception for rhetorical studies in general (e.g., Ceccarelli, 2001; Harris, 1997, 2005; Paul, Charney & Kendall, 2001; Winsor, 1990).

The importance of audience reception draws attention to the value of understanding the ways judgments of ethos are made. In other words, if ethos emerges as a major theme in audience reception, then it is beneficial to cast a wide net in order to capture all the things audiences may be pointing to as influencing their perceptions of a rhetor’s credibility. It is, therefore, fitting to apply an Aristotelian concept of ethos in order to understand how these judgments are being made. An Aristotelian frame calls for considerations of ethos that are not limited to moral concepts of character and that look to the discourse for how people are possibly making judgments of ethos. It allows one to consider, without boundaries, what an audience includes in their subjective view of what is good. After all, it is the audience that the rhetor desires to persuade.

This study combines an Aristotelian conception of ethos as derived from the discourse as well as a focus on the audience’s perceptions and interpretations. In the case that forms the basis for this thesis, an examination of employee responses to a policy

change memo suggests that ethos was a key basis for reader judgments. Specifically, the findings demonstrate the ways in which readers made judgments about the director's good sense, good moral character, and goodwill when reflecting on the meaning of a policy change memo.

III. METHODS

A. INTRODUCTION TO METHODS USED

A constructionist approach was used to explore the relationship between senior leader intent and audience reception. Social constructionism emphasizes the participant's perspective of a situation in which researchers seek understanding of "how social actors recognize, produce, and reproduce social actions and how they come to share an intersubjective understanding of specific life circumstances" (Schwandt, 2001, pp. 31-32). In this study, I was interested in exploring the ways in which people in an organization constructed meaning and made judgments about senior leader messages as well as common themes that emerged among participants. To derive these themes, I was also guided by a grounded theory approach, which begins from data to derive theoretical concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory calls for a process of constant comparison of similarities and differences among perspectives and draws from qualitative interview data as one primary unit of analysis.

This analysis was also guided by a rhetorical approach to language. Rhetorical analysis views language as a strategic response to a situation and examines the ways in which humans use language to define experiences, express attitudes, and convey their understanding of the world. Rhetorical critics are grounded in a social constructionist perspective and examine language choices for insights into rhetorical motives (Burke, 1969). A rhetorical approach was useful in assessing similarities and differences among participants in terms of the motives, rationalizations, and justifications participants make in their assumptions and judgments about messages.

One particularly useful approach that I used to gain insights into rhetorical motives was a cluster and metaphor analysis. I relied on this method to address the first two research questions: *RQ1: What are the director's communication intentions, expectations, and desires for how readers will interpret a memo?* *RQ2: What are the employees' perceptions of the memo and of the director based on the memo?* In this method of analysis, a researcher isolates key terms and metaphors based on frequency

and intensity, and then examines them in subsequent analysis passes in terms of placement and relationship to other terms. As a result, textual patterns and common themes emerge for further analysis. This first exploratory step provided insights into the value judgments of participants, led to my focus on ethos, and resulted in a second set of research questions: *RQ3: When we examine the director intentions as ethos appeals, what do we find? RQ4: What positive and negative ethos judgments do employees make about the director based on the memo?*

Together, these methodological approaches enabled me to make thematic comparisons about the relationship between the director's intent and the employees' reception of the memo, as well as the way in which ethos impacted reader judgments.

B. SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

The site for the study was a United States government financial organization with approximately 4,000 employees in various locations across the United States and abroad. Because the relationship between senior leader intent and audience reception was the main interest of this study, specific details about the organization were kept confidential. Research locations for the study were based on the geographic dispersion of the organization, participant availability, and schedule requirements. Two sites with jurisdiction over employees from different regions of the country were selected as research locations.

Study participation was offered to employees at all levels of the organization via e-mail. The e-mail included a letter describing the study and participant involvement. Employees were given two weeks to respond to the request to account for equity in their ability to reply. After the two-week period closed, participants were chosen through a random selection process that accounted for dispersion among job function. Twenty-seven employees volunteered to participate, and 23 were selected as study participants. Participation in the study was confidential and all references in the study to employees are solely based on job function within the organization.

The participants consisted of employees in various job functions and were placed into subgroups designated as field, management, and senior-management levels; these broad categories were useful both for making comparisons and protecting anonymity. The distribution of participants from each job function was approximately 35% from the field level, 39% from the management level, and 26% from the senior-management level, respectively. Gender distribution was 57% male and 43% female. Participants' time of service at the organization ranged from under five years or less, to over thirty years. All participants had an undergraduate degree, and approximately 87% of participants had some level of graduate education or a professional certificate.¹ Approximately 48% of participants had previously worked in government at the federal, state, or local level, while 61% had previous non-government job experience, and 22% had worked only in the organization.

C. MATERIALS

The primary materials analyzed for this study were transcripts of interview data obtained from participants. However, the policy memo written by the director of the organization served as the focus for the participants in the interviews. This memo was distributed to all employees via the organization's e-mail system approximately three months prior to the beginning of the study. The memo was chosen because it reflected a change in organizational policy and practices and called for specific action items. The memo length was typical of other similar memos authored by the director, as was the way in which it was disseminated.

D. PROCEDURES

Qualitative semi-structured interviews using a think-aloud protocol (TAP) were used to assess the director's intent and the employee's reception of the memo. TAP is a method by which participants verbalize their thoughts as they engage with a text. The purpose of this method in rhetorical analysis is to generate evidence for how participants are constructing meaning of a text. TAP is beneficial because it allows for immediate

¹ Professional certification is typical in the type of work the organization performs.

feedback from the participant, and the inquirer is able to observe firsthand response of the reader as they engage with a text (Kucan & Beck, 1997).

The interviews were held on-site at the organization and lasted approximately one hour. As part of the procedure, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and to provide basic background information about their role within the organization. The TAP method was described to the participants and a brief example of the process was demonstrated using a text unrelated to the study. Participants were provided with a copy of the memo and asked to read it aloud and articulate what they were thinking or feeling when they felt inclined to do so. They were also given generic probes throughout the reading such as, “What does that mean?” or “What are you thinking when you read that?” at indeterminate places in the text to assist with verbalization. The TAP process was also used with the director, with variations of the probes to capture her intentions in writing the memo. These included probes such as, “Who is the intended audience?” and “What are you trying to get across?” Before each verbalization, the amount of text read by the participants varied, ranging from one sentence to one paragraph at a time; participants often stopped mid-sentence to comment about what they were thinking. Interviews were audio-recorded with interviewee consent and transcribed for data-analysis purposes. Any additional comments received from participants after the interviews were added to the participant’s file and also included in the data analysis.

IV. FINDINGS

A. THE DIRECTOR'S INTENT

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

1. A Friendly Reminder

The policy change that appeared in the memo was not new, but rather a reiteration of a policy change that had taken place nine months previously. In her interview, the director expressed her intention for the memo to act as a reminder. For example, in one instance she said, "I wanted to remind employees [of the policy change]," and in another instance she noted, "I thought this [memo] would be a good reminder."²

In addition, however, she implied that she wanted the reminder to be friendly and non-threatening, rather than harsh or overtly critical. For example, she stated her desire to keep her own attitude positive and to remind employees of the policy change "in a nice way with a smile on my face." Specifically, the interview data suggested that she sought a friendly tone through promoting shared responsibility for the confusion, providing a form of assistance, maintaining a degree of informality, and conveying a positive attitude.

a. *Promoting Shared Responsibility*

First, the director wanted to convey the reminder as friendly by acknowledging that the cause of any confusion regarding the policy was partly the responsibility of headquarters and not simply the employees' fault: "I wanted to say maybe it's [headquarters'] fault, versus saying, 'Part of this agency isn't following

² All quoted interview data in this thesis is derived from personal communication with study participants (Martin & King, 2009).

[guidance].” She stressed the responsibility of headquarters in other instances as well; for example, she said she wanted to convey that “Maybe [headquarters] didn’t clarify it right. Maybe there is confusion regarding the policy.” Given that the responsibility was partly shared with headquarters, she also indicated her desire to give the employees the benefit of the doubt as to why the policy was not being followed: “I’m trying to get away from the ‘You shall not do that again’ and give them [the employees] the benefit of the doubt to say, maybe they don’t think we’re [really changing the policy], or there really is confusion.”

b. Providing a Form of Assistance

Another way in which the director implied that the memo was a friendly reminder was to offer the memo as a means of help for employees. For example, she wanted to be heard as saying “Okay, guys, maybe [headquarters] erred in not making the policy clear, so now I’m going to help you.” She indicated her intention was for the memo to be a form of assistance in other instances as well; for example, she wanted to be heard as saying: “here’s the new policy, and here’s some things to help. That’s what I’m hoping to get across.” In another example, she pointed out that the memo would be helpful because it provided beneficial clarification and direction: “So, it’s time to clarify and say, ‘be sure you look at [these reports] for adequacy, this will help reduce [the problems].’”

c. Informality

Throughout the director’s interview, there were several indications that her attitude toward employees in the memo was meant to be informal, which further supports the characterization of the memo as friendly. For example, her use of terms was indicative of her informal approach: “I began to realize that we needed to nudge our people a little bit more, to say, ‘Hey, guys, we don’t have [the old metric], but pay attention to these dates.’” In this instance, she characterized her action as providing a “nudge” toward the policy, and uses the informal address of “Hey guys.” Throughout the interview, she often used the informal sentiment of “Hey guys” or “You guys” whe

describing what she was trying to convey. For example, she described her intent for a directive in the memo as, “Hey guys, when you’re setting that due date, be sure you do this first step.”

d. *Positive Attitude*

Finally, the director expressed that she wanted to convey the memo in a positive manner. This was indicated by her inclusion of positive sentiments about employee behaviors. For example, the director indicated that she wanted to convey her appreciation of employee efforts by stating, “I wanted to get across that ‘I really appreciate, as the director, what you do.’” She further expressed her appreciation of their efforts by including positive reinforcement of their work along with reassurance: “I want to keep giving positive reinforcement, telling people, ‘It’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong. These [things] are complex. It’s okay.’” The director also noted the importance of expressing positive sentiments in policy memos in general, which she indicated was not always the case: “Policy memos didn’t have positive things to say, but I feel that is important. Every [employee] is reading this, and if I have an opportunity to say something positive about their work, I’m going to say it.” She further indicated that expressing her appreciation towards employees was important and explained her commitment to consistently do so: “I always try to end in something positive,” she said, emphasizing a specific sentence in the memo itself; “I said, ‘I know that each and every one of you is working hard to comply with all the additional requirements that have been placed upon you over the past year.’ [...] [T]hat could be in every memo I issue.”

In addition to including positive sentiments about employee efforts, the director associated the positive manner of the memo with achieving a specific feeling when employees read the memo. When describing why she included a positive sentiment about employee work efforts she said, “To end with that positive feeling of, ‘You do a really good job and I know it’s challenging and I appreciate what you do in the work force.’” The director also attempted to achieve this type of positive feeling through particular word choices. For example, she said, “I carefully chose the word ‘due date’ [instead of] ‘cycle time’ because it had a negative connotation in the past.” She also

noted her desire to avoid negative feelings by indicating that she wanted to avoid employee defensiveness and put them at ease: “I don’t want to put them on edge right away when they read something.”

2. Conveying Sincere Understanding of Employee Issues

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

a. Pressures of Past Policies

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

b. Challenges Inherent in the New Policy

In addition to wanting to convey understanding of employee pressures, she also wanted to convey understanding that the new policy would not alleviate all the pressures. For example, she noted that “I want to make sure [employees] understand that

I know there are a lot [of pressures] on them.” One of the pressures she indicated was difficulty with managing the amount of time it takes to complete reports. She said, “We can’t be taking all the time in the world; we’re going to have to do what we can to be timely.” She also expressed her concern that employees might have difficulty with the new policy, which is why she desired for them to discuss it with management: “We wanted the managers to sit down with their staff and talk about it, and say, ‘All right, what does this mean to us? What are the barriers? What are the concerns? Let’s talk about it.’”

c. Not a Perfect World

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

3. Conveying the Memo as Important

Although the director wanted to present the content of the memo in a friendly manner and to communicate her understanding of the issues facing the workforce, she also indicated that she wanted the memo to be perceived as important. For example, the director characterized the memo as “something serious that [employees] need to follow.” Specifically, she intended to express the seriousness of the memo by authoring the memo herself, addressing the memo to all employees, and including specific directives in the memo.

a. *Director as Author*

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

b. *Addressed to All Employees*

Another way she intended to stress the importance of the memo was by addressing it to all employees across the agency. In her interview she stated, “I wanted it to go to every employee so they understood that this was something really important.” More specifically, she indicated that she wanted to achieve a similar affect as authoring the memo herself in terms of increased readership of the memo: “I was hoping [a memo addressed to all employees] was viewed as pretty big, so people would say, ‘Oh, the director sent something to all employees; I better read it.’” She also noted that addressing the memo to all employees was not typical and was something unique to this memo: “One of the differences is that we addressed this guidance memo to every employee. In the past it had been very rare for the director to send something directly to every employee.” She expressed that although it was rare to addresses policy memos to every employee, it was imperative for the occasion so there were no issues with transmission: “I wanted to make sure that this got in the hands of every employee so that there wouldn’t be an issue of ‘Did it get down to the office? Did it get distributed to all the various chains of command?’”

c. *Specific Instructions*

The director also indicated she sought to stress the importance of the memo by including specific instructions in it. For example, in the memo she advocated a different way to proceed when employees encountered issues with their reports that might

challenge the status quo: “I said to issue a [different type of recommendation] that employees are [hesitant] to use, so for employees they go, ‘Oh, my God, that’s big! That means they’re serious.’ She also indicated she intended to convey that the memo was important by including in it a specific instruction for managers to review the memo with their staff. For example, she said, “Requiring managers to discuss this [memo] at staff meetings was an attempt to put this back on the forefront.” In addition, she indicated that including a specific instruction for managers to review the memo with their staff would ensure greater attention to the policy change and continue to emphasize that it was a priority: “I didn’t want to just float it out. I wanted the managers to sit down with their staff and to talk about it. I thought [...] if there isn’t an active discussion, it could just be put aside.” Specifically, she indicated that having management discuss the memo with their staff would emphasize the seriousness of the policy change. She said, “If all the managers talked to their people about it, it should have gotten across that this is serious, don’t use the [old metric].” She also included a specific date in the memo that she wanted management to review the memo with their staff by, further indicating her attempt to convey the importance of the memo.

B. THE DIRECTOR’S INTENTIONS AND ETHOS

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

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

C. EMPLOYEE RECEPTION OF THE MEMO

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

1. Evaluations of Phronesis: Good Sense

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

a. Challenges to Wisdom and Judgment

In their interviews, respondents expressed that there were places in the memo indicative of poor wisdom and judgment on the director's part. Specifically, they indicated the director lacked an understanding of the working environment, lacked

expertise regarding business practices and that she provided ineffective solutions to problems in the agency. Ultimately, respondents indicated that because of these things, the director was out of touch, not accurately assessing issues facing the workforce, and had unrealistic expectations.

(1) Lacking Awareness of the Working Environment. One key theme that emerged was that the director lacked an understanding of the general working environment. For example, some participants indicated that her views of the working environment were unrealistic: “This isn’t how the real life is out there. This is the fairy tale world where we have all the time [we need].”³ Other respondents characterized this lack of awareness as being out of touch and that she didn’t have a true conception of what went on outside of headquarters. As one employee put it, “She’s not very intimate with what goes on at the working level,” and another noted that “[Through] some of her comments, it’s clear she’s clueless as to what’s really going on in the field.” Other comments were more specific, arguing that the director’s guidance in the memo was evidence she was out of touch. For example, one employee commented, “That’s terrible guidance. Terrible. It’s not real-world, so disconnect.”

(2) Lacking Expertise. Participants also challenged the director’s wisdom and judgment through comments that she lacked general expertise of business practices. For example, one participant claimed that she lacked current experience: “She hasn’t done [field work] in 20 years.” Other respondents indicated that she not only lacked current experience but also experience in general: “She talks about field experience, but she doesn’t have any.” In addition to not having field experience, participants pointed to areas in the memo that suggested she lacked expertise and misunderstood policy rules. For example, one participant said, “[The rulebook says] if customers won’t give you an extension when you call them, you qualify it. Here, she’s saying that, no, you return it.” One respondent suggested that the director lacked an understanding of employee roles: “It’s the manager’s job to review the proposal for

³ All quoted interview data in this thesis is derived from personal communication with study participants: Martin, S., & King, C. (Interviewers) & Anonymous Employee Participants (Interviewees), (September, 2009). *Naval Postgraduate School Communication Study: Reception of a Policy Change Memo* [Interview Transcript].

adequacy before they assign the report out, not the [field staff].” Another respondent asserted that she was using incorrect terminology in her policy description: “There’s no such thing as a field work due date. That’s wrong.”

(3) Inaccurate Assessment of Issues. In addition to making claims that the director misunderstood organizational policy, participants pointed to places in the memo where she was inaccurately assessing issues. In one case, a participant indicated that the director was incorrectly characterizing routine practices as problems in the memo: “Why can’t we do that? She’s saying this is causing a problem. I never had a problem.” In other instances participants noted that not only was the director incorrectly characterizing problems, but also she was failing to address problems that were pertinent to the policy in the memo: “What is not said here is that [customers] are used to [the old metric] and that is the real problem.” Another employee commented, “I don’t think it [the memo] really address what’s going on, all right?” One participant went so far as to say that her view was “utopian” and that she failed to offer necessary guidance for what was really happening: “This is utopian, like you’re looking up at the beginning. Now, you get to day 25 and you’re finding you’re not getting what you need from the [customer], you have some issues that have surfaced, the risk has increased because things are different from what your expectation was, then what do you do?”

(4) Ineffective Proposed Changes. Following from the inaccurate assessment of issues, participants also suggested that the director’s proposed changes for mitigating problems were ineffective. For example, one participant indicated that a change she was advocating in the memo was ultimately not useful: “This [option] is not going to be very useful. Why would you do this? It doesn’t make sense to me.” Another employee explained how the changes were neither helpful nor a good use of resources: “This [option] would be a waste of time because it doesn’t do anybody any good. It’s like finding a diagnosis on a patient after the patient’s dead, you know?” In other instances participants suggested that the proposed changes did not suit the situation. For example, one change in the memo was a requirement for management approval in the form of a signature on a report extension request. One employee commented, “A formal letter sent is way beyond the pale as far as what’s necessary. This is ridiculous.” More

specifically, participants charged that changes were excessive and failed to address the right issue; “Having the manager involved in an extension is overkill. [...] [S]he needed to better stress keeping [people] informed.”

(5) Unrealistic Expectations. The final way in which participants challenged the wisdom and judgment of the director was through claims that she had unrealistic expectations. For example, participants commented that specific goals in the memo were unattainable because some things were beyond their control: “Once [the report] goes to supervisor review we have no control of when or if it will be issued”; “We’re not sending inadequate proposals back, because half the time we don’t know if it’s adequate or inadequate until half way through the report.” Participants also suggested that her directives in the memo were impractical and not likely to be followed. For example, one employee explained how one of the directives in the memo would reflect poorly on them: “[This option] basically says that we didn’t do anything. So we probably wouldn’t do that.” Other comments emphasized that employees lacked the ability to do what she was asking: “There’s not one in ten [employees] that know how to do a risk assessment or figure out what to do once you get the risk assessment done.”

b. Support for Wisdom and Judgment

In other instances, respondents made claims that supported the wisdom and judgment of the director. These positive assessments included assertions that she made correct assessments of issues in the memo, identified effective proposed changes to these issues, and had a strong understanding of agency policy and procedures.

(1) Correct assessment of issues. One of the ways participants provided support for the director’s wisdom and judgment was by indicating that she made correct assessments of issues facing the workforce in the memo. For example, participants pointed to places in the memo in which she recognized and acknowledged actual problems they were facing. One person said, “[Establishing a realistic due date] is a problem and terribly difficult because you think, ‘Oh, yeah, we’ll get it done. We’ll get it done. We’re going to get it done.’” Participants also confirmed that the memo addressed policy issues that were in fact problems. For example, one person concurred with her assessment of problems relating to proposals: “[Reviewing proposals for

adequacy] is something people neglect to do.” Similarly, respondents offered general confirmation that the memo highlighted a variety of issues they agreed were problems. Such confirmation was marked by the following types of sentiments: “This is true,” or “This is a problem,” and “The majority of employees have done this.”

(2) Effective proposed changes. Not only did participants identify places in the memo in which they perceived the director was correctly assessing issues, they also noted that the proposed changes she was making to alleviate these issues were effective. For example, one respondent noted that a change requiring management to approve report due-date extensions had a positive outcome: “There’s been a positive result of [this requirement].” Another respondent further articulated that the change was beneficial because it advocated desired behavior: “[The requirement] is a good thing, so employees aren’t just arbitrarily extending the date.” In other instances, participants pointed to how this change increased management involvement, which was something they considered as beneficial; for example, one respondent said, “It’s important management is aware we’re requesting these due dates.”

(3) Understands Agency Policy. The final way participants supported the director’s wisdom and judgment was by indicating that she had a clear understanding of agency policy and procedures. For example, they pointed to places in the memo that aligned with their understanding of several policies. One respondent noted that “[Reviewing proposals for adequacy] is just a statement of fact. It’s something we always do.” In addition, some participants agreed with her rationale regarding certain directives in the memo because they followed policy logic. As one participant commented, “[Customers] need a realistic due date because once they get our product then they’re going to take certain actions with that product.” More specifically, one participant indicated that what the director was advocating in the memo was the best way to execute policy. For example, one employee explained how the director’s guidance aligned with their conception of why the new policy is better: “We need to be setting the due date based on the time that we need, not what the customer may want and not this arbitrary [old metric] that we had.”

2. Evaluations of Goodwill Toward the Audience

The data also suggested that participants made judgments regarding the nature of the attitude the director was conveying towards them in the memo. Specifically, the data indicated participants perceived the director as having both favorable and unfavorable opinions of employees. There were also places where participants indicated that they acknowledged the director's attempt to convey certain attitudes towards employees.

a. Unfavorable Attitude Toward Employees

Several themes in the data indicated that some participants perceived the director had an unfavorable opinion of employees. First, they suggested that she portrayed them as unintelligent in general. Additionally, they indicated that she was saying they couldn't handle their responsibilities. They also indicated that she was saying they avoid accountability for their actions.

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

(2) Employees Cannot Handle Responsibilities. More specially, the data suggested that participants saw the director as saying employees could not handle their responsibilities. For example, one participant asserted that the memo suggested they could not handle things without management involvement: "[They think because the supervisor] is involved *now* things are going to get done" (emphasis added). Requiring management supervision to complete work tasks was also linked to indications that they were untrustworthy. One participant noted, "The impact of [requiring a manager's signature] has been that, 'They don't trust me with anything,'" and another said, "Not being able to [communicate with the customer without management involvement] goes back to that you don't trust employees." Accordingly, based on their perception that the

director was saying they could not handle responsibilities without management involvement, some participants suggested that she was lessening their responsibilities in the memo: “Requiring [this signature] takes responsibility away from employees.” Participants also alluded to the negative impact of reducing employee responsibilities: “Taking responsibility away from the employee is kind of a slap in the face,” and “You’re taking away some of the prestige of it going out under my signature.” Others associated taking away responsibility with her saying that they were not doing a good job: “She takes responsibility away from employees [so] she doesn’t think employees are doing their job.” One employee drew from a past experience to illustrate negative feelings associated with this: “When I was a GS-7, my name on the back [of the report] would be removed completely because of my grade. And yet they let me conduct the whole [report] all by myself. You go, ‘Was it that bad? Was I completely off base?’”

(3) Employees Avoid Accountability. In addition to lacking intelligence and not being able to handle responsibilities, participants suggested that the director characterized them as avoiding accountability. For example, participants saw her as conveying that they were placing blame on others in the memo: “She’s saying employees are pointing fingers. “It’s not me. I’ve done my thing. It’s somebody else.” Additionally, they saw her as saying that because employees were avoiding responsibility, they were compromising the professionalism of the agency: “[She’s saying] it’s finger-pointing or whatever, which doesn’t give a good impression to the outside and is not very professional.” Finally, the claims of employees avoiding responsibility were also being linked, participants said, to creating tension within management: “[She’s saying] the managers are upset with employees because employees are sabotaging the reputation or timeliness of [reports] when they [point fingers].”

b. Favorable Attitude Toward Audience

While there were more instances of negative perceptions, some participants indicated their perception that the director had a favorable opinion of them based on the memo. These comments were marked by sentiments expressing their acceptance of her views as favorable towards them. For example, as one person said,

“That’s nice. She’s recognizing the stresses employees face.” In particular, participants indicated a general appreciation of good work and acknowledgement from the director.

(1) Acknowledgment of Good Work. Participants saw the director as having a favorable attitude towards employees because of her acknowledgement of their good work. For example, one person characterized a statement in the memo in the following way: “It’s recognition for the fine work that is being done.” Other participants linked acknowledgement of good work to indications she appreciated employee effort: “[She’s saying] the efforts that are being performed out in the field are being appreciated, which is nice.” In other instances, they noted the positive impact of the director’s acknowledgement of their efforts: “This is an acknowledgement from the director that we’re all out there working hard, which I think is good. So this is a positive statement.”

(2) Acknowledgment of Challenges. Participants also indicated the director had a favorable opinion towards them based on her explicit acknowledgment in the memo of issues they were facing. They considered this acknowledgment as favorable in the sense that she understood the challenges they were facing, thus giving them the benefit of the doubt. For example, they suggested she recognized issues facing the agency: “It’s an acknowledgement of the struggles that we’re going through as an agency.” Specifically, they characterized these issues as extra stresses and noted that it was important for her to recognize these. As one participant said, “The director is recognizing the stresses being laid on [employees] which is important.” Other participants also indicated it was good she recognized challenges they were facing due to the significant change in the agency. For example, one person noted, “It’s a recognition regarding the tremendous amount of change we’ve hit [employees] with. That is good she included that.”

c. *Acknowledged Attempt at Favorable Attitude Toward Audience*

The data also suggested there were places in the memo in which participants acknowledged the director’s *attempt* to convey a favorable attitude towards them. In these instances, they acknowledged what they saw as attempts to convey a favorable opinion of employees, even if they did not necessarily see the attempts as

successful. For example, as one person put it, “She’s making the effort.” Specifically, participants saw her as attempting to acknowledge their good work, provide encouragement, and acknowledge challenges.

(1) Attempt to Acknowledge Good Work. The first way participants indicated that they recognized the director’s attempt to convey a favorable opinion of them was that she was making an effort to acknowledge good work. One person said, “[The last paragraph] is an *attempt* to commend employees [for their efforts] because we are feeling pretty beat up these days” (emphasis added). Similarly, another participant said, “That’s *kind of* her pep squad talk to try and let employees know she thinks [we’re doing good work]” (emphasis added). Other respondents linked her attempt to acknowledge good work with an attempt to convey appreciation: “That’s her *attempt* to let us know that despite all the things that are going on [our work] is appreciated” (emphasis added).

(2) Attempt to Provide Encouragement. Participants also saw the director as aiming to provide encouragement to the workforce. For example, one person noted that “[The last paragraph] is *kind of* a pat on the back, and *trying* to encourage the field,” and “She’s *trying* to give us words of encouragement” (emphasis added). Other respondents characterized the nature of her attempt to provide encouragement as a specific impression that she was trying to achieve: “We’ve got to pull through, and better days are ahead. That’s the impression she *tries* to give” (emphasis added).

(3) Attempt to Acknowledge Challenges. The final way participants characterized these attempts was that the director was making an effort to mention challenges facing employees. One person said, “[In the last paragraph] she’s *at least acknowledging* things are changing within the organization” (emphasis added). Another said, “She’s *trying to acknowledge* that there are a lot of changes” (emphasis added). Specifically, they noted that some of these changes included adjusting to additional guidance and pointed out that she was acknowledging this: “She acknowledges there’s a lot of new guidance.”

3. Evaluations of Good Habit: Excellence in Action

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

a. Indications of Poor Actions

The data indicated that some participants made judgments of the director's behavior as unsatisfactory in terms of their conception of appropriate actions. Specifically, they indicated that she was disingenuous and also pointed out several instances reflective of her poor habits in general.

(1) Disingenuous. One of the ways respondents accounted for poor actions on the director's part was through claims that she was disingenuous. For example, in reference to a statement the director made in the memo about employees working hard, one person commented, "The first part of that sentence is just BS. I don't think she believes that, frankly." More specifically, they indicated that she intentionally included positive sentiments about their work efforts because she was expected to: "The fact that she *has* to put that in there should tell people something" (emphasis added). Others pointed to her position in the organization as grounds for questioning her sincerity, implying that whatever she was saying was probably not genuine: "I don't trust anybody over GS-12, so when I see something like this I always take it with a grain of salt." In other instances participants asserted she was disingenuous by indicating she was giving mixed messages in the memo: "[If she thinks] employees string [customers] along, it conflicts with the message in the last paragraph that we're doing good work. I see some undertones here that I'm concerned about."

(2) General Indication of Bad Habits. In addition to expressions that she was disingenuous, the data suggested a general indication of poor habits on the director's part. For example, one participant characterized her in this way: "Impersonal. Just austere. She's got this real stern façade and not really empathetic." Another participant suggested that she did not value concerns from field employees: "The bottom line is that [she thinks] stuff coming from the field isn't important. That's the way she operates." They further indicated that she only focused on pleasing her superiors: "Whatever gets done is whatever [her bosses] tell her to do. Nothing else." Another employee mimicked the director's focus on pleasing superiors in terms of why she even sent the memo: "[She's] covering her a___. From her bosses." In contrast, one employee commented on the director's interaction with superiors as poor: "[She's] got a lesson to learn. You can't just tell people [above you] 'You don't understand what we're doing, so you're wrong.'" In other instances participants pointed to their prior experience with her: "She left kind of a bad taste in my mouth." More specifically, they alluded to the impact of the encounter: "If I hadn't had that experience, I probably would say she is a very caring and dedicated person. I'll just leave it at that."

b. Indications of Good Actions

The data also suggested participants made judgments that the director's behavior was good in terms of their conception of appropriate actions. For example, they indicated that she was sincere. They also indicated that she had strong abilities to lead the agency, and she ultimately had the agency's best interests in mind. Finally, they pointed to her general positive outlook as reflective of good actions.

(1) Sincere. One of the ways participants expressed good actions on the director's part was by indicating she was sincere. For example, one employee simply stated, "She's sincere." When responding to a place in the memo in which the director thanked employees for their work efforts, another person said, "I don't doubt that she's not sincere." Another way they expressed this sincerity was by indicating that she was not just trying to pay them lip service with fancy buzzwords in the memo: "She's not just saying the words or putting the words in there, [like] buzzwords or catchphrases."

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

(3) Wants What’s Best for the Agency. Not only did participants indicate that the director had the ability to lead the agency, but also they saw her as wanting the best for the agency, which they considered a positive action. For example, participants described the director’s focus on improving the agency by making the agency a priority: “She’s putting the agency first in terms of our priorities.” They indicated it was clear the agency was a priority to her because of the amount of time she allocated towards it, and they associated this with commitment to the agency: “The agency is her life, so there’s no doubt that she’s committed.” Accordingly, some participants associated her commitment with dedication to her job: “She takes her job very seriously.” In other instances they indicated that she wanted what was best for the agency based on her attempts to make changes: “I think she’s trying to change things.” They further linked these changes to improvements in the agency: “She’s trying to make changes that make our organization better.” Accordingly, they agreed that making improvements to the agency was the right thing to do: “She’s trying to do what’s right.” They also noted that they considered the changes she was making to be positive and indicated that she had made beneficial improvements; for example, “She’s done some good things,” and “She’s done very well.” Other respondents associated these positive improvements as aligning with their vision of the agency: “She’s changing the agency more in the way that I’d like to see it.”

(4) Positive Outlook. The final way in which the data suggested participants saw the director as engaging in good actions was that she had a positive outlook and that she consistently expressed this attitude. For example, participants commented about her positive personality. One person said, “She’s very positive.” Another participant linked their assessment of the director’s positive personality with optimism, based on the way the director communicated: “[She’s] a positive individual. An optimistic person. That’s the type of personality I see in her in the way she communicates.” In other instances participants confirmed their perception of the director’s positive outlook by recalling prior experience with her: “She is absolutely the most positive person that I’ve come across in my entire life.” Other comments associated her positive attitude with being personable; for example, “She’s more oriented to the people,” and “She’s been the only director that will allow you to talk to them.”

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A. DISCUSSION OF INTENT AND RECEPTION DATA

Assessment of the director's intentions and employee reception of the memo demonstrates two key things. First, the director's intentions provide insight into the assumptions that senior leaders can have when creating and distributing messages to achieve desired outcomes. Specifically, the findings in this case illustrate how the director's assumptions related to credibility. Second, the reception data demonstrates that the director's assumptions about what employees would look to in the memo in making judgments of her credibility differed from how they ultimately made these judgments. Considering the director's implicit assumptions about what employees would perceive as contributing to positive credibility in the memo illustrates the distinction between her intentions, how employees perceived the memo, and what participants looked to in making judgments of her credibility in response.

In this case, the director associated certain intentions with positive employee reception of the memo. One of her assumptions, implicit from her interview data, was that she associated conveying the memo in a friendly manner with positive reception of the memo. For example, the director indicated that by promoting the idea that leadership shared responsibility for the possible confusion over the policy change, she would be perceived as giving employees the "benefit of the doubt." In other words, she equated promoting the idea of shared responsibility with positive reception of the memo, believing that by doing so she would put employees "at ease." She was ultimately making the assumption that in order to be perceived as friendly, it was important to not be viewed as "blaming" employees in the memo. However, participants did not necessarily point to the Director as being friendly in the memo as a reason for why they did or did not perceive her message in a positive manner. The reception data suggests that positive reception of the memo was based on whether participants thought the director correctly assessed issues related to the policy, put forth effective proposed changes, and acknowledged their good work in the memo. They did not associate or characterize these things as being "friendly."

Additionally, participants did not necessarily perceive the director as promoting shared responsibility in the memo, which is what she was counting on in order to be perceived as friendly. Ironically, despite the director's intent to the contrary, some participants suggested that she was saying employees were to blame for problems related to the policy change. For example, they indicated that her message in the memo was that employees were "finger-pointing" and not giving a "good impression" of the agency. They also suggested that she was saying they "couldn't handle responsibilities" and "needed supervision."

These examples illustrate that what the director believed would establish her credibility through goodwill, was at odds with how many of the participants judged her goodwill. Specifically, the director assumed that promoting shared responsibility would help the memo be received in a friendly manner. However, some participants did not view the memo as promoting shared responsibility, and they instead judged her credibility negatively because they perceived her as blaming them and portraying them as not doing the right thing.

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

towards them personally as opposed to being in touch with what goes on outside of headquarters. In other words, they did not necessarily see her acknowledgment of their struggles as true empathy based on accurate knowledge of field conditions.

Although the director assumed being in touch (having good sense) equated with showing that she understood pressures, challenges, and the appropriate level of expectations of employees, participants perceived good sense differently. Participants associated good sense with the director's ability to provide helpful changes in the memo, something that many of them saw her as failing to do. For example, participants who suggested that she was out of touch indicated that she came across in the memo as misunderstanding policy rules, incorrectly characterizing problems, or failing to address issues they were facing. Specifically, they indicated that the changes the director was making in the memo were not a good use of resources, did not suit the situation, were excessive, failed to address the right issue, or were unattainable. Again, the director's assumptions about what would make her credible differed from how participants actually judged her credibility.

Another way the director indicated an assumption about how employees would make judgments of her credibility was that she equated management involvement, including her own, with being helpful. For example, she indicated that she wrote the memo herself with the intent that it would be perceived as a form of assistance to employees. She said she wanted to be heard as saying, "Okay, guys, maybe [headquarters] erred in not making the policy clear, so now I'm going to help you." Her intent, as she put it, was to come across as saying "here's the new policy, and here's some things to help." She was making the assumption that management involvement would be perceived as helpful, as would issuing the memo in the first place. She also noted that her intent was for employees to discuss the memo with their managers, something she thought would be a way to help employees overcome any barriers they were experiencing in meeting the new requirements. "I wanted them to sit down with their teams and talk about it. To find out what the issues were and [resolve] them." In turn, several directives in the memo called for more management involvement. For example, she indicated that requiring management approval on report extensions would be helpful because managers

would be more aware of what employees were dealing with and would be able to assist employees if they were having trouble with report due dates: “[Management approval] was intended for the manager and the supervisor to get engaged in the reports and help employees out.” While she hoped that this involvement would be perceived as helpful, some participants saw it as condescending and taking away their responsibilities; that is, they associated increased management involvement with the director conveying poor goodwill towards them: “The impact of [requiring a manager’s signature] has been that, ‘They don’t trust me with anything.’”

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

In fact, some participants actually associated her positional status with negative judgments of good habit. For example, one person noted her position in the agency as a negative indicator of sincerity: “I don’t trust anybody over GS-12, so when I see something like this I always take it with a grain of salt.” Another participant associated her position with what they saw as obligatory statements in the memo, which they indicated as a reason for questioning how genuine the statements were: “The fact that she *has* to put that in there should tell people something” (emphasis added).

Ultimately, the director's intentions illustrate certain assumptions that she held about her own credibility in terms of how the memo would be perceived. First, she associated conveying the memo in a friendly manner, via promoting the idea of headquarters' shared responsibility in the confusion about the policy, with positive reception of the memo. Second, she assumed that if she expressed empathy and understanding towards employees that they would perceive her as being "in touch." Third, the director associated calling for increased management involvement with being perceived as providing help to employees who were struggling with the new policy. Lastly, she associated her positional power with conveying the importance of the memo. Although participant comments centered on both positive and negative perceptions of the director's credibility, interestingly, the ways in which they made these evaluations differed from her assumptions. That is, whether they perceived her as credible or not was grounded in different criteria in response to the memo than she expected.

B. IMPLICATIONS FOR SENIOR LEADER ETHOS

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

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

Cialdini (2001) also provides a useful frame to understand the importance of practice versus pronouncement in his seven triggers of influence to persuasion. Specifically, Cialdini draws our attention to the role of "liking" for establishing

persuadability of an audience. This concept, which suggests that people like those who like them, was also evident in this thesis. In the case presented in this thesis, it was clear it was important for the director to demonstrate how she was similar to her audience as participants described her as “disconnected” and “out of touch.” However, this study illustrates that what a senior leader may assume will contribute to liking, or any other concept integral to credibility, can differ from how it is perceived by the audience. For example, in keeping with Cialdini’s concept of liking, senior leaders may state that they are similar to their audience—that they went to the same university, or held a similar position—but they cannot assume that these things will result in positive judgments of credibility.

To further illustrate how certain traits and experiences do not automatically translate into positive perceptions of credibility, consider the role of a resume in terms of how potential employers make judgments about an applicant’s skills. A resume may state that an applicant was a department manager responsible for five product lines, but the value of that to the applicant’s future employer is subjective. Naturally, an applicant may have included it in his or her resume with the assumption that it would show his or her leadership and multi-tasking skills. However, the applicant’s future employer may point to different things in the resume as to why they perceived the applicant as a leader or multi-tasker. That is, the way an applicant describes this or any other position in his or her resume demonstrates how he or she is a leader and multi-tasker. The applicant’s role as a department manager may not solely be the reason. This is not to say that the applicant’s role as a department manager is not important. It may very well be a contributing factor to the future employer’s perception of whether an applicant is a leader and multi-tasker, but it may not *always* be the reason. As Cialdini noted, formal power structures may not matter as much to persuasion in terms of credibility. In other words, judgments of credibility are subjective. Sometimes things like formal power structures will matter to credibility, and sometimes they will not. Consequently, this thesis suggests that it is not sufficient for senior leaders to assume certain qualities or characteristics will

translate into positive perceptions of credibility. This research also demonstrates the importance of considering the different things audiences may look to in making judgments of credibility.

This research also demonstrates the importance of comparing communicator intention with audience reception. The findings in this thesis explicate some of the ways in which employees made judgments about a senior leader's credibility—in this case, based upon a policy memo. Assessing how participants actually made judgments about leader credibility can help inform future communication.

Additionally, this thesis shows that senior leaders may be unaware of how judgments of their credibility are being made, resulting in faulty assumptions about reader perception. As Conger (1998) argued, people often overestimate their own credibility. In addition, as the findings here demonstrate, senior leaders may wrongly emphasize issues that, in fact, do not build their credibility.

Finally, this thesis suggests that ethos emerges as an important characteristic in employee reception of a policy memo and judgments about its author. As such, leaders need to attend to ethos considerations deliberately. On the broadest level, the director had fairly simple intentions: issue a memo to remind people of a policy change and include directives in the memo in order to achieve desired results. This is something that occurs on a daily basis in many organizations. As the case discussed in this thesis demonstrated, it was not a question of merely transmitting information as a means to get these priorities across to employees. In actuality, the director held certain assumptions related to her intentions in the memo—and, in turn, to her credibility—that were different from how participants perceived her intentions in the memo.

In conclusion, one cannot count on establishing credibility based on a position as a senior leader or on any other characteristics. Consequently, this thesis has important implications for business communication research. Establishing credibility is an important aspect of effective communication, yet, as the case in this thesis demonstrated, it is much more subtle than just listing and stating qualifications. The need to establish credibility is often mentioned in the same breath as other factors that contribute to

effective communication, such as using clear topic sentences or making sure the spell-check function is on. However, as these results show, senior leaders still must demonstrate credibility rather than simply stating it.

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