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Interpersonal elements of written feedback: Implications for cross-cultural management

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Abstract

Purpose:

This study explores an important issue for programme leaders of postgraduate courses in English-medium universities: Consistency in the style of feedback given by lecturers, whose expectations of the way feedback should be framed may differ from those of their colleagues and students. The interpersonal elements of the way feedback is communicated in writing to students may be a reflection of hidden values underlying these different expectations, as well as of previously experienced organizational norms. Interpersonal style may be a key factor in influencing student evaluations of lecturer feedback, which contribute to overall ratings of degree programmes and word-of-mouth business in a competitive market. Similar mechanisms can be found in corporate settings, where managers' and employees' communication with clients may affect organizational performance.

Design:

Empirical data consisting of [240] paragraphs of feedback on [4] postgraduate research assignments provided by lecturers from three different language backgrounds were analysed for comparison using Hyland and Hyland's (2006) linguistically derived framework for interpersonal written feedback. After coding (inductively and deductively) by two independent raters, occurrences in each of four categories were (1) analysed quantitatively (frequency) and (2) qualitatively (content analysis). A panel of students from different language backgrounds were asked to individually rate the feedback styles in representative examples, by means of a short Likert-scale questionnaire.

Findings:

The findings presented focus on two categories where the greatest disparity was found between styles. Results indicate that lecturers either foregrounded the institutional perspective over their own opinions, or vice versa; their styles ranged along a continuum of (in)directness. Student judgments on the different feedback styles offer an illuminating window on how particular interpersonal elements are perceived.

Research limitations/implications:

Limitations of the study were fourfold; firstly, a small sample size. Secondly, language background was equated with cultural background for the purposes of the study. Thirdly, the study was not controlled for participants' different exposure times to the organisational culture. Lecturers/students had been working/studying in the UK higher education environment for different periods of time and may already/may not yet have become acculturated to 'the way we do things round here'. Fourthly, the dynamic aspect of styles and preferences was not taken into account: both the interpersonal elements of lecturer feedback styles and student preferences for these may have changed over time.

Practical implications:

This study has practical implications for all organizational settings and in particular cross-cultural management. It contributes to raising managers' awareness of the role of interpersonal elements in

giving feedback in a multicultural environment, particularly in written communication. It simultaneously offers a useful strategy for standardising feedback styles in terms of their interpersonal elements, whereby subordinates' practices that derive from previous exposure to different organisational cultures can be systematically brought into alignment.

What is original/ what is the value of the paper?

The linguistically derived framework for analysing the interpersonal elements of written feedback has not previously been generalized to apply to organisational culture. The results draw attention to aspects of communication that largely remain implicit in workplaces. This has clear implications for management of the potentially negative impact of cross-culturally diverse feedback styles among colleagues on consumers.

Keywords: *feedback, communication style, personal attribution, indirectness, institutional perspective, cultural differences*