

Middle Managers' Workplace Communication in Relation to Subordinates' Motivation

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between middle managers' speech acts and the motivation levels of their subordinates at Jose Rizal Memorial State University (JRMSU). Specifically, it examines how different communication styles—assertive, directive, and expressive speech acts—impact subordinates' motivation, focusing on key dimensions of motivation such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study employs a quantitative, correlational research design, using statistical analyses to assess the differences in speech acts based on demographic factors such as age, sex, educational attainment, length of service, and type of employment. The findings indicate that directive and expressive speech acts significantly enhance subordinates' motivation, while assertive speech acts, when skillfully applied, also play a meaningful role in influencing outcomes. Furthermore, significant differences in motivation were observed based on age, sex, and educational attainment, with subordinates rating relatedness as the most motivating factor. The study suggests that middle managers should adopt tailored communication strategies to foster a more motivated, engaged, and productive workforce. Recommendations include the promotion of age-specific, gender-sensitive, and education-based motivational approaches, along with the emphasis on directive and expressive communication to enhance subordinates' intrinsic motivation. The study culminated in the development of a communication guide that serves as a strategic reference tool designed to offer evidence-based communication approaches aimed at fostering a motivated, engaged, and productive workforce. It emphasizes the application of tailored, inclusive, and relationally focused communication techniques. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of personalized communication in enhancing job satisfaction, performance, and organizational success.

Keywords: middle managers, speech acts, motivation, autonomy, competence, relatedness

Introduction

Effective communication plays a pivotal role in educational institutions, particularly in shaping leadership dynamics and workplace motivation. In a university setting, middle managers such as deans, associate deans, and office heads serve as crucial links between top administration and subordinates, including faculty and staff. Their speech act styles—whether assertive, directive, or expressive—not only reflect their leadership approach but also significantly influence subordinates' motivation and engagement. Recognizing this, the present study investigates the communication practices of middle managers at Jose Rizal Memorial State University and their impact on subordinate motivation. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the research question: How do the speech act styles of middle managers affect the motivation of their subordinates? The objectives of this study are to (1) identify the prevalent speech act styles used by middle managers, (2) determine the motivational responses of subordinates to these styles, and (3) examine how demographic variables such as age, sex, tenure, and educational attainment moderate this relationship. By understanding these dynamics, the study aims to provide insights that can guide more effective, inclusive, and emotionally intelligent leadership communication strategies within academic institutions.

Literature Review

Leadership and communication are intricately linked. Martinez (2015) emphasizes that effective leaders must be visionary communicators capable of articulating goals and motivating individuals toward a shared purpose. Similarly, Luthra and Dahiya (2015) assert that communication is at the heart of leadership, not just as a means to relay information but also as a tool for inspiration and engagement. Kunnanatt (2016) furthers this idea by identifying positive reinforcement, discipline, and extinction as vital communication strategies for influencing employee behavior. In the educational sector, Zorina et al. (2018) highlight the critical role of communication competence and leadership abilities among educators, particularly given the increasing complexity of institutional operations. Supporting this, Yongjun et al. (2023) reveal that a leader's communication ability and organizational orientation significantly predict their effectiveness.

Various leadership styles incorporate communication as a central element. Transformational leadership, introduced by Bass and Avolio, prioritizes inspirational communication that encourages intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence. This style has been consistently linked to higher levels of performance and well-being (Arnold, 2017; Gawke et al., 2017; Harms et al., 2017; Berger et al., 2019). On the other hand, transactional leadership, grounded in structured communication and performance-based interactions, is most

effective in results-driven environments (Dong, 2023; Antonakis & House, 2014). Servant leadership, conceptualized by Greenleaf and supported by Northouse (2016), places communication at the service of followers—emphasizing empathy, ethical conduct, and empowerment through active listening and inclusive dialogue (Asher, 2015).

Communication also plays a pivotal role in conflict resolution and feedback. Maan (2021) and Chilala (2021) demonstrate that leaders who manage conflicts constructively and communicate with clarity and support foster greater team cohesion and productivity. Plocharczyk (2007, as cited in Jackson, 2022) discusses the importance of speech acts in leadership discourse, particularly illocutionary and commissive acts, which leaders use to offer direction, build consensus, and maintain authority. Granito et al. (2014, as cited in Meirinhos, 2023) and Saeed et al. (2014) add that effective feedback—specific, timely, and constructive—is essential for aligning team performance with organizational goals.

In addition to these external leadership models, internal motivational processes are key to understanding the effects of leadership communication. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), posits that people are most motivated when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. Autonomy refers to the sense of volition and choice in one's actions, competence is the feeling of effectiveness in one's tasks, and relatedness is the sense of connectedness with others. Leaders who communicate in ways that support these needs—by inviting participation in decision-making, providing constructive feedback, and fostering a sense of community—encourage intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and improved performance (Ryan & Deci, 2020). SDT enhances our understanding of leadership communication by explaining its psychological impact on subordinates, making it a powerful complement to speech act theory.

Speech Act Theory, introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969), contends that language does not simply convey information but also performs actions. These include assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts. In the context of leadership, these acts are essential tools for guiding behavior, establishing expectations, and building relationships. Through strategic use of speech acts, leaders influence organizational culture, resolve conflicts, and engage their teams.

Together, Speech Act Theory and Self-Determination Theory form a robust theoretical framework for analyzing how middle managers use language to lead and motivate their subordinates. Leadership theories such as transformational, transactional, and servant leadership further enrich this framework by providing contextual insights into different communication styles and their impact on team dynamics. Transformational leaders inspire and stimulate through visionary communication, transactional leaders maintain performance through clear structures, and servant leaders build trust through empathetic interaction. By integrating these theories, this study seeks to uncover how the speech act styles of middle managers not only direct action but also fulfill psychological needs, fostering a productive and motivated educational environment.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative method using a correlational descriptive design, aligning with the study's aim to determine the relationship between the speech act styles of middle managers and the motivation levels of their subordinates. The quantitative approach allowed for the use of frequency counts, mean scores, and statistical analyses to quantify the usage of specific speech acts—assertive, directive, and expressive—and to determine the significant relationships between communication behaviors and motivational outcomes among employees.

The study was conducted at Jose Rizal Memorial State University (JRMSU), a public higher education institution in the Philippines. JRMSU serves as an ideal research site due to its structured organizational system comprising various administrative departments and units. These settings inherently demand effective communication and robust leadership, which makes them appropriate for examining speech act usage in workplace communication. Participants included middle managers and their respective subordinates, whose dynamic interactions reflect the real-time effects of speech acts on workplace motivation.

A total of 90 participants took part in the study: 30 middle managers (including deans, associate deans, and administrative heads) and 60 subordinates (faculty members, office staff, and secretaries). Middle managers were purposively selected based on their administrative designations, which inherently involve regular communication with teams. Subordinates were chosen from among personnel directly supervised by these middle managers. Their inclusion was vital to provide empirical data on how managerial speech act styles influence employee motivation. This dual-perspective approach enabled the study to assess the interplay between the managers' communication and the subordinates' motivational disposition.

The primary research instrument employed in this study was a structured survey questionnaire developed by the researcher and subjected to rigorous validation by a panel of experts in the fields of language studies, communication, and educational management. The instrument was divided into three major parts. The first part focused on gathering the profile of the respondents, which included key demographic and professional information such as age, sex,

educational attainment, length of service, and type of employment. The second part measured the speech act styles—specifically assertiveness, directiveness, and expressiveness—utilized by middle managers in their interactions with subordinates. This portion was composed of carefully constructed statements, each rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The items were designed to assess the frequency and intensity of specific speech behaviors observed in workplace communication. The third part of the instrument evaluated the motivation of subordinates, anchored on the Self-Determination Theory, which encompasses the components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Similar to the second section, this part employed a five-point Likert scale to quantify respondents' perceptions of their motivational experiences in relation to their interactions with middle managers. To ensure both content and construct validity, the questionnaire underwent a series of reviews and pilot testing procedures. Feedback from the validation process was meticulously incorporated to enhance clarity, reliability, and appropriateness of the instrument for the intended academic and organizational setting.

To determine the level of "Assertiveness" exhibited by middle managers, the study utilized a five-point scale with corresponding descriptive ranges. A score of 4.21 to 5.00 was interpreted as "Very Much Assertive," 3.41 to 4.20 as "Much Assertive," 2.61 to 3.40 as "Assertive," 1.81 to 2.60 as "Less Assertive," and 1.00 to 1.80 as "Not Assertive." The same scale was employed to assess the level of "Directiveness" among middle managers, with corresponding interpretations: 4.21 to 5.00 as "Very Much Directive," 3.41 to 4.20 as "Much Directive," 2.61 to 3.40 as "Directive," 1.81 to 2.60 as "Less Directive," and 1.00 to 1.80 as "Not Directive." Furthermore, to evaluate "Expressiveness," a similar range was applied: scores between 4.21 and 5.00 were considered "Very Much Expressive," 3.41 to 4.20 as "Much Expressive," 2.61 to 3.40 as "Expressive," 1.81 to 2.60 as "Less Expressive," and 1.00 to 1.80 as "Not Expressive." In assessing subordinates' motivation, particularly in terms of "Autonomy," "Competence," and "Relatedness," the same five-point scale was applied: 4.21 to 5.00 indicated "Very Much Motivating," 3.41 to 4.20 as "Much Motivating," 2.61 to 3.40 as "Motivating," 1.81 to 2.60 as "Less Motivating," and 1.00 to 1.80 as "Not Motivating."

In order to commence data collection, a formal letter was sent to the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School at Jose Rizal Memorial State University, Main Campus, Dapitan City, requesting endorsement to the University President for the administration of the research instrument. Before any data collection activities took place, ethical clearance was sought from the Research Ethics Committee to ensure adherence to ethical standards in research involving human participants. Upon approval, the researcher personally administered the instrument to the selected respondents. Following the acquisition of informed consent, participants were requested to complete a profiling form to capture necessary background information, followed by the main survey instrument. The gathered data provided quantitative insights into the utilization of various speech acts within the workplace setting. After retrieval, the survey responses were processed and interpreted using appropriate statistical tools. Data were then systematically analyzed to identify prevailing patterns, observable trends, and significant correlations between the speech acts of middle managers and the motivation levels of their subordinates. Any inconsistencies or gaps in the responses were addressed through verification, ensuring the reliability and integrity of the findings. Throughout the data gathering process, ethical principles were rigorously upheld, particularly concerning confidentiality and respect for participant privacy.

To facilitate analysis, several statistical tools were employed in the study. Frequency counting and percentage were used to establish the demographic and professional profile of both middle managers and subordinates in terms of variables such as age, sex, educational attainment, length of service, type of employment, and the speech act styles employed. The mean was calculated to determine the overall numerical rating of the speech act styles used by the middle managers and the level of motivation experienced by subordinates. To analyze significant differences in the dependent variables—speech acts and motivation levels—based on profile variables with more than two groups (such as age, educational attainment, and length of service), the Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed. For profile variables with two categories (such as sex and type of employment), the Mann-Whitney U test was utilized to determine whether statistically significant differences existed in the speech acts of middle managers and in the motivational responses of subordinates.

The study was conducted in strict accordance with the Data Privacy Act of the Philippines and followed all pertinent laws, policies, and regulations governing research involving human participants. The principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and the minimization of potential harm were central to the research design. Prior to data collection, all prospective participants were provided with a detailed consent form that clearly articulated the study's purpose, methodology, potential risks and benefits, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality. Participants were informed that their involvement was strictly voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Written consent was obtained prior to participation. All personal identifiers were removed from the dataset to protect the anonymity of the respondents, with responses coded accordingly. All data were stored in a secure manner and access was limited to the researcher. The study was carefully designed to mitigate any psychological, emotional, or reputational harm to participants. Furthermore, transparency was maintained throughout the study, and participants were given a full explanation of how the data

would be used. The final research report is committed to presenting accurate and truthful findings, with no fabrication or misrepresentation of data.

Results

The findings of the study revealed notable demographic patterns and communication dynamics between middle managers and their subordinates at Jose Rizal Memorial State University. A considerable portion of middle managers were aged between 36 to 45 years (41.18%), while the largest group of subordinates belonged to the 26 to 35-year age bracket (55.00%), indicating a relatively younger workforce occupying subordinate roles. This age diversity may foster a range of perspectives in the workplace, enriching institutional discourse. In terms of gender distribution, females represented the majority in both managerial (58.82%) and subordinate (61.67%) positions, suggesting a predominantly female workforce, which may influence the prevailing communication and relational norms. Educational attainment was also notably high among the respondents; most middle managers held a Doctoral Degree (47.06%), while a significant number of subordinates possessed a Master's Degree (38.33%). These figures point to a well-qualified academic community capable of high-level intellectual and professional engagement.

Length of service among the respondents varied; a plurality of middle managers had served the institution for 16 to 20 years (29.41%), denoting seasoned leadership, whereas most subordinates had 6 to 10 years of service (41.67%), reflecting a moderately experienced group. This balance suggests a workplace enriched by both institutional memory and emerging talent. Employment type data showed that the majority of both groups—70.59% of middle managers and 68.33% of subordinates—were in teaching roles, underscoring the academic focus of the university and the critical need for effective communication in instructional contexts.

Regarding the use of speech act styles, the findings showed that assertive speech acts were the least frequently employed by middle managers, with an average weighted value (AWV) of 2.13 ("Rarely"), while subordinates rated them at 2.58 ("Sometimes"). This indicates a general tendency to avoid confrontational or strongly self-assured communication in favor of other styles. In contrast, directive speech acts were often used, with middle managers recording an AWV of 4.16 and subordinates 3.82, both indicating frequent reliance on direct communication to convey expectations and instructions. Expressive speech acts were also prevalent, with AWVs of 3.91 ("Often") for middle managers and 4.44 ("Always") for subordinates, highlighting a workplace culture where emotional support, appreciation, and empathy are highly valued. Overall, speech acts of middle managers were dominated by directive and expressive styles, with assertiveness being least common. The grand mean AWV was 3.40 ("Sometimes") for middle managers and 3.61 ("Often") for subordinates, suggesting a balanced yet relationally inclined communication pattern.

In terms of subordinate motivation, the findings revealed high levels of engagement across all dimensions. Autonomy was rated as "Much Motivating" (AWV = 4.01), implying that when subordinates are entrusted with independent task management, their motivation improves significantly. The competence dimension was likewise rated as "Much Motivating" (AWV = 3.98), underscoring the importance of skill recognition and opportunities for mastery. Relatedness scored the highest (AWV = 4.43, "Very Much Motivating"), confirming the critical role of interpersonal connection, emotional support, and a sense of belonging in fostering motivation. The grand mean AWV for overall motivation was 4.14 ("Much Motivating"), with relatedness emerging as the most influential factor.

Significant differences in the speech acts of middle managers were observed based on sex, educational attainment, and length of service, while no notable variations were found concerning age or type of employment. These findings suggest that demographic factors such as gender, academic background, and professional tenure shape communication behavior among leaders. In parallel, subordinates' motivation levels were significantly influenced by age, sex, and educational attainment, but not by length of service or employment type. This implies the need for targeted motivational strategies that account for individual differences in demographic profiles.

Correlational analyses revealed that assertive speech acts had no significant relationship with any of the three motivational dimensions—autonomy, competence, or relatedness. However, both directive and expressive speech acts demonstrated significant positive relationships with all dimensions of motivation. This indicates that subordinates respond more favorably to communication styles characterized by clarity, encouragement, and empathy. The overall statistical analysis confirmed a moderate positive relationship between middle managers' speech acts and subordinates' motivation, with an r -value of 0.37 and a P -value of 0.002. This suggests that effective use of directive and expressive speech acts by middle managers can meaningfully enhance the motivation and engagement of their subordinates, thereby contributing to a more dynamic and harmonious institutional environment.

Discussion

Based on the findings of the study, several key analyses may be drawn that provide valuable insights into the workplace dynamics and communicative practices of middle managers and their subordinates. First, the age distribution suggests that middle managers bring maturity and professional experience, while subordinates are

largely in a developmental stage of their careers. This generational composition offers a rich interplay of seasoned insight and fresh ambition. Both groups are predominantly female, presenting a promising opportunity to promote gender-inclusive leadership development within the institution. Furthermore, the high level of educational attainment across both cohorts reflects a well-informed academic workforce, necessitating communication and management strategies that are responsive to varying levels of scholarly background and professional maturity.

The tenure of middle managers—often spanning over a decade—underscores the importance of fostering institutional memory while also embracing new ideas brought by younger staff. The dominance of teaching roles among both groups highlights the imperative of effective communication in driving academic success. Notably, assertive speech acts were the least employed, while directive and expressive speech acts were more common. This finding indicates a managerial preference for clear, structured communication and empathetic engagement, rather than confrontation. Such a preference aligns with a cooperative and supportive work culture that values emotional resonance as much as clarity.

This study further emphasizes the vital role of emotional intelligence in the communicative strategies of middle managers. Expressive speech acts—marked by empathy, appreciation, and relational depth—were found to significantly contribute to subordinates' motivation, particularly in fostering a strong sense of relatedness and belonging. Directive speech acts were instrumental in enhancing subordinates' sense of competence, helping them better understand and fulfill their roles. While assertive communication was used less frequently, it nonetheless holds value when aligned with subordinates' need for autonomy. A balanced communication style—one that avoids authoritarianism while fostering collaboration—is therefore essential in motivating and empowering personnel.

Motivational strategies must also be adaptive to demographic variables such as sex, age, and educational attainment. Subordinates reported the highest motivation when experiencing autonomy, competence, and relatedness—underscoring the importance of personalized approaches. However, uniform strategies can effectively apply to factors like length of service and employment type, where motivation appears less variable.

Ultimately, the research affirms that middle managers who practice a nuanced blend of directive and expressive communication can cultivate higher motivation, stronger engagement, and greater job satisfaction among subordinates. A workplace environment founded on empathy, clarity, and mutual respect aligns with the university's mission and contributes meaningfully to institutional excellence. As such, ongoing capacity-building initiatives for middle managers—particularly those focused on emotional intelligence and strategic communication—are strongly recommended.

Conclusion

In light of the study's findings and conclusions, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of middle managers' communication and motivational strategies within the academic workplace. First and foremost, middle managers are encouraged to develop age-specific motivational strategies that cater to the developmental stages of their subordinates. Younger employees, who are in pursuit of growth and career advancement, would benefit from structured mentorship and professional development opportunities. Given the predominance of female employees in both managerial and subordinate roles, it is also imperative to adopt gender-sensitive approaches that ensure inclusivity and responsiveness to gender-specific needs. Furthermore, communication should be tailored to the educational backgrounds of staff, providing advanced learning opportunities for those with higher academic credentials and practical training for those who may require foundational support.

To effectively address the diversity in length of service among staff, managers should encourage collaboration between long-serving personnel and newer employees, fostering an environment where institutional wisdom and innovative ideas intersect. Enhancing the deliberate use of assertive, directive, and expressive speech acts is critical. Clear, empathetic, and supportive communication not only clarifies expectations but also strengthens relationships, which are essential for organizational cohesion and productivity. Managers are urged to empower subordinates by promoting autonomy in task execution and decision-making, thereby increasing their engagement and intrinsic motivation. Acknowledging and developing competencies through training, recognition, and challenging assignments contributes significantly to a sense of competence and job satisfaction.

Equally vital is the fostering of relatedness—a motivational pillar revealed to be of paramount importance in this study. Middle managers should cultivate a workplace culture that is supportive and inclusive, encouraging team-building and consistent interpersonal interaction. The use of expressive speech acts to convey empathy, appreciation, and connection can help build a strong sense of community and emotional security among team members. It is therefore recommended that middle managers undergo regular training on effective communication and motivational strategies, grounded in the latest research and best practices, to sustain their relevance and impact.

In addition, establishing clear and consistent feedback mechanisms is essential for maintaining motivation and performance. Regular performance evaluations and constructive feedback sessions serve not only to guide

improvement but also to affirm subordinates' value and contributions. Middle managers are encouraged to implement recognition and reward systems aligned with the specific motivational drivers of their team members. These practices reinforce positive behavior and foster a culture of appreciation.

Creating a culture that champions continuous learning is another key recommendation. Middle managers should actively support their teams in pursuing further studies, participating in seminars, and engaging in professional development. This investment in human capital not only enhances the organization's competencies but also reflects its commitment to the holistic growth of its workforce. Parallel to this is the cultivation of open communication, which serves as a conduit for trust, inclusivity, and mutual respect. Managers must maintain an open-door policy and encourage dialogue, feedback, and idea-sharing, employing expressive speech acts to build rapport and reinforce a sense of belonging.

To ensure long-term managerial effectiveness, institutions must embed communication training into their core leadership development programs. These should cover key areas such as speech act theory, emotional intelligence, active listening, conflict resolution, and motivational communication. By institutionalizing communication as a leadership competency, organizations can nurture a new generation of leaders who are capable of motivating and guiding teams with both strategic insight and emotional acumen.

Finally, middle managers must lead by example. Their conduct should exemplify the professionalism, empathy, and commitment they wish to cultivate within their teams. When managers consistently demonstrate the effective use of speech acts—balancing clarity, support, and empathy—they not only inspire but also shape the organizational culture. Through intentional leadership and modeled behavior, they set the tone for excellence, fostering a resilient and motivated workforce aligned with the institution's goals and values.

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