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It's More Than Just Talk: Patterns of CEO Impromptu Communication

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Abstract

This article investigates whether CEOs actually demonstrate the communication strengths and weaknesses they think they have. Videotaped interviews with CEOs in the initial stage of executive coaching were analyzed to identify categories of communication strength and weakness: delivery, content, audience, and character. Next, the interviews and transcriptions were coded to track use of rhetorical formats, delivery stress, disfluencies, and timing. Speakers who identified themselves as having both delivery and content strengths or weaknesses differed significantly from the other CEOs. This has important implications for the study of impromptu communication, executive coaching, and business communication.

Keywords

CEOs, impromptu communication, executive coaching, teaching self-awareness

Nearly instantaneous transmission marks business communication in today's technology-filled world, increasing the stakes of every communicative event from internal chance encounters to business town halls and press interviews. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch CEO Mike Jeffries said in a 2006 interview that he only wants young, beautiful, thin people wearing his exclusive brand and experienced relatively little immediate backlash. Flash forward to May 2013 and an interview in web-only news outlet *Business Insider* with Robin Lewis. She recounted his statements, which immediately went viral, sparking a petition on Change.org with over 70,000 signatures and boycotts of the store, resulting in plummeting stock prices (Temin, 2013). In 6 short years the increased presence, range, and attention to web-based media turned a

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CEO interview misstep into a corporate crash. Numerous studies since about 1990 have emphasized the public relations function of the CEO, often noting the role of media and technology in augmenting the visibility of the CEO (Foster, 1990; Grunig, 1997; Marston, 1993; Park & Berger, 2004; Pincus, Rayfield, & Cozzens, 1991). As a result, recruitment notices for CEO-level positions have reflected a similar focus on communication and interpersonal skills (Cullen, 2010).

In an effort to ensure that CEOs and senior executives have these skills, companies spend approximately $2 billion annually on executive coaching (Walker-Fraser, 2011). Studies exist on how to teach communication skills (Antonakis, Fenley, & Liechti, 2011; Atkinson, 1984; Towler, 2003), and some even measure the effectiveness of executive coaching programs for teaching a specific set of skills (Frese, Beimel, & Schoenborn, 2003), but all of these studies focus on formal communication, speeches, or media interactions where a business leader has had preparation. Recognizing the importance of unrehearsed communication, one nonprofit CEO in our study said, "I'm not very good at extemporaneous speaking" and came for coaching to improve her skills in this area. Even with all this need, though, Cyphert's (2010) call "to give some serious attention to the rhetorical analysis and criticism of the public discourse of business leaders, in particular, contemporary corporate officers" (p. 356) remains salient. This is especially true in regard to impromptu CEO communication, which is a significant lacuna in studies of business communication, coaching, and teaching.

Impromptu communication spans everything from daily interactions with colleagues to unscripted, spontaneous interactions with media. Though it varies significantly from setting to setting, the defining feature of impromptu communication is its spontaneity. Both the common person and the dictionary conflate the definitions of impromptu and extemporaneous. For example, *The American Heritage Dictionary*'s definition of "extemporaneous" demonstrates this overlap: "1. Carried out or performed with little or no preparation; impromptu. 2. Prepared in advance but delivered without notes or text. 3. Skilled at or given to unrehearsed speech or performance" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, n.d.). While the distinction between impromptu and extemporaneous communication is slight, public speaking textbooks and scholars do make a distinction, as Lucas (1989) does in *The Art of Public Speaking* when describing four types of speeches: reading from a manuscript, reciting from memory, speaking impromptu, and speaking extemporaneously (pp. 233–235), with impromptu speaking "delivered without any immediate preparation whatever" (p. 234). While CEOs engage in both impromptu and extemporaneous communication routinely, we focus specifically on impromptu communication that fits Lucas's definition because it is high stress and most reflective of the speaker's natural style. It is, therefore, generally more representative of the kind of communication that a CEO will use spontaneously when surprised by an unexpected interview question, media encounter, or internal situation. Without speech writers, multiple takes, and preparation time, CEOs must rely on their own communication styles, and—given the potential for each communication event to ignite controversy or inspire confidence—their communication skills are more important now than ever. Yet this area of communication remains virtually unstudied. Teaching a CEO how to give prepared speeches is one thing, but given

that the vast majority of CEO communication is now spontaneous and unrehearsed, a CEO's impromptu communication skills can actually have the most impact on audience and listener perception. In settings without the benefit of preparation, do CEOs actually demonstrate the communication strengths and weaknesses they believe they have?

Our team of an executive coach who conducted recorded initial interviews of 40 CEOs and a university researcher who worked with the data obtained from those interviews explores these issues and the above research question. Specifically, we focus on their responses to two questions asking them to identify their communication strengths and weaknesses. Not only is this population unique, but also the interview questions require them to critically analyze their communication strengths and weaknesses. This induces rhetorical self-awareness, a critical space for evaluating spontaneous communication skills. Many responses reflected awareness of the relationship between their communication and the company image. One telecommunications company CEO said, "I want to always convey confidence and strength because, you know, I'm the figurehead of that company." Therefore, these interviews offer the opportunity to explore the communication patterns of the most public business figures.

The article is structured as follows. We begin with a definition of impromptu communication skills. We then discuss our methods and results and end by exploring the ways in which this article contributes to theory and practice.

Defining Impromptu Communication Skills

Given the fluid nature of spontaneous communication, there is a range of skills associated with it. However, we focus on particular content and delivery strengths that impromptu communication shares with more formal oratory. Studies used to evaluate speakers' charisma have also identified specific factors of content and delivery, which have been problematized but still used by Clark and Greatbatch (2011). Other work has emphasized the role of self-awareness (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012; Sparrowe, 2005), particularly for business leaders (Tjan, Harrington, & Hsieh, 2012). While many other communication skills, such as listening, empathy, authenticity, and so forth exist, we focus on delivery and content characteristics and self-awareness in defining a particular type of skilled impromptu communication style because of the comparative value of these indicators and because numerous studies in various contexts have repeatedly emphasized the importance of these particular skills in audience persuasion.

Content and Delivery

Research on charismatic and related communication styles has universally emphasized that the key to effectiveness is the ability to produce strong emotional and motivational effects in followers (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; de Vries, Bakker-Pieper, & Oostenveld, 2010). To explain how these effects are produced, researchers have generally focused on content and/or delivery. Content is tied to the expression of vision, which depends on the use of rhetorical features like repetition, imagery, metaphors,

lists, contrasts, and position taking (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). Studies have found that these content factors increase perceptions of charisma (Naidoo & Lord, 2008). Most studies of content have focused on speeches by presidents, politicians, or management gurus (e.g., Clark & Greatbatch, 2011; Naidoo & Lord, 2008; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). While studies of content have increased in recent years, the majority of work has been done in regard to delivery.

Charismatic delivery factors include eye contact, fluid rate, gestures and nonverbal expressiveness, facial expressions, energy, eloquence, and vocal tone variety (Bass, 1988; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Friedman, Prince, Riggio, & DiMatteo, 1980; Frese et al., 2003; Holladay & Coombs, 1993; Howell & Frost, 1989; Towler, 2003). While not unanimous, most studies have concluded that while both content and delivery are important, delivery features are more important in perceptions of leader charisma (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Heinberg, 1963; Holladay & Coombs, 1993, 1994; Howell & Frost, 1989). Delivery may have more of an impact; however, a seminal study by Den Hartog and Verburg (1997) analyzing CEO speeches demonstrated that successful business communicators exhibit both rhetorical features associated with visionary content and delivery qualities connected to charismatic oratory.

Using the extensive research on charismatic and related communication styles, we developed a coding system for content and delivery factors to scrutinize CEO interview responses. While communication with an executive coach certainly is not the same as all other aspects of impromptu communication, which by its definition varies significantly from context to context, we present a model for analysis that assumes CEOs seek to exhibit characteristics of skilled oratory in both prepared and spontaneous communication settings. Particularly in the setting of an interview inducing reflections on speaking strengths and weaknesses, our analysis provides a window into what CEOs think they are doing well or poorly and what they are actually doing.

Self-Awareness

Ashley and Reiter-Palmon (2012) defined self-awareness as "an inwardly-focused evaluative process in which individuals make self/standard comparisons with the goal of better self-knowledge and improvement" (p. 2). This definition indicates that self-awareness requires constant modification, which makes self-awareness both difficult to measure and difficult to teach. However, the benefits of this process have spurred research on the relationship between self-awareness and leader communication (Sparrowe, 2005). For a leader to demonstrate authenticity, she must regulate herself so that her self-perception matches her behavior and others' perceptions of her. The recent book *Heart, Smarts, Guts, and Luck* by Tjan et al. (2012) sought to describe how leaders become self-aware and can use that awareness to succeed in business. Tjan et al.'s research fits in a tradition that connects self-awareness and self-monitoring to interpersonal communication skills. These skills are a key element in predicting who emerges as a leader and determining the effectiveness of leaders (Riggio, Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003). Self-aware leaders are more likely to be skilled at self-presentation and impression management (Chemers, 1997; Sosik, Avolio, & Jung,

2002). As a result of this ability, Sosik et al. (2002) found that these leaders can influence unit performance.

In spite of the importance of self-awareness, Goleman (1998) found that "senior executives don't often give self-awareness the credit it deserves" (p. 96). Learning how to become self-aware, particularly in regard to communication style, continues to present significant challenges. We will build on the research by focusing on one aspect of self-awareness: rhetorical self-awareness. Since our questions asked the CEOs to talk about their speaking strengths and weaknesses, we induced a self-aware state in which the CEOs evaluated themselves as speakers. This enabled us to examine CEOs' evaluations of communication strengths and weaknesses and determine whether their self-evaluations matched their actual behaviors, mimicking the evaluative process self-aware individuals use themselves. Identifying the communication features to consider in a self-analysis provided the first step for developing a model of *how* a leader can self-monitor her communication style to become a more skilled communicator in formal and impromptu speaking settings.

Data and Method

In this study we analyzed 40 recorded interviews with 24 individuals who were CEOs at the time of the visit and 16 in senior leadership positions who advanced to CEO subsequently. This sample was composed of a random selection from client lists. The businesses represented included private companies (13), nonprofit (1), Fortune 1000 (6), Fortune 500 (10), Fortune 100 (1), Fortune 50 (3), and public unranked (6) from a variety of industry types, including finance and banking (1); engineering, defense, and construction (5); media, advertising, and entertainment (3); computer and electronics technologies (4); food and beverage production and supply (5); medical technologies and pharmaceuticals (8); retail and consumer electronics (2); real estate (3); oil and gas (2); travel (1); auto manufacturing and transportation (3); telecommunications and public utilities (2); and human resources (1). Five individuals interviewed were female and 35 male. The 40 interviews ranged from 1995–1999 (7), 2000–2009 (19), and 2010–2012 (14) and came from initial interviews in private executive coaching sessions.

Prior to the interview, the client was told only that the purpose of the interview was to get a sample of how they naturally communicate. These unstructured interviews represented impromptu communication because they shared a key feature in common with chats around the water cooler, chance encounters with media, and unrehearsed debates: the demand for spontaneous responses. Only the executive coach and client were present during the interview. Names and identifying details have been omitted to protect privacy. The interview was unstructured, though there was an interview schedule. The first part of the interview included open-ended questions about business challenges and opportunities; the second part of the interview asked the client about their accomplishments as well as occasionally more questions about personality and interests; the third and final part of the interview covered the main questions posed in this study. Answers to the questions "What are your strengths as a communicator?" and

"What are your weaknesses as a communicator?" were transcribed verbatim. Clarifying information about what was meant by communication strengths or weaknesses was not provided. We divided the study into two areas. First, the transcribed responses were analyzed to identify categories of self-identified communication strengths and weaknesses. Second, the transcriptions and videos were analyzed to determine whether the CEOs demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses they identified.

Categorization of Types of Strengths and Weaknesses

We first transcribed all responses in order to examine similarities and differences in the ways the CEOs talked about their strengths and weaknesses. All responses were grouped into four categories: content, delivery, audience, and character. These categories were determined from the responses, though the categories for delivery and content were informed by previous research on charismatic oratory. This research provided a widely accepted baseline for delivery and content features consistently associated with skilled communication. Since so little research on spontaneous communication of business leaders exists, defining the attributes of skilled impromptu communication required a consideration of existing work that has identified specific aspects of skilled delivery. Given the potential stakes of CEOs' impromptu communication, CEOs need the ability to display the communication skills they think they possess in all settings.

The first category was content. In addition to the literature's definition of content that includes rhetorical formats and structural devices, this category also incorporates comments about subject matter. For the strengths question, the responses grouped under content included use of anecdotes or storytelling, concise content, command of subject material and strength in many topics, preparation, ability to break down complex ideas, and ability to communicate message. For example, one finance sector CEO stated, "I think I can portray complex ideas fairly simply, even though it's sometimes hard." Another CEO similarly explained, "I have an ability to explain complex things simply." Both of these responses were linked in their focus on breaking down complex ideas or concepts. Multiple CEOs also mentioned familiarity with or command over their subject material as a strength. One real estate company CEO put it this way: "I'm knowledgeable about the points that I want to get across," and his basic statement was echoed by several other CEOs. The above-listed areas—storytelling, concise content, subject material expertise, and so forth—represent all responses grouped under content. For weaknesses the number of areas decreased to subject matter discomfort, trouble with storytelling, problems with organization or structure, and issues with message clarity.

Delivery, the second category, included responses for strengths noting enthusiastic or energetic delivery, poised and confident appearance, clear delivery, voice projection, ability to manage questions or interruptions well, and ability to speak without relying heavily on notes. For weaknesses, responses dealt with delivery style, voice control, and use of notes, but there were also responses about gestures, delivery rate, stumbling while speaking, apparent discomfort or nervousness, and movement in a speaking space. The most common delivery strength noted was clarity of delivery. An

engineering sector CEO represented this group with his statement: "What people have told me are my strengths are my delivery, the clarity in which I speak." The most commonly cited delivery weakness related to smoothness of delivery, use of disfluencies, or stumbling over words. As a manufacturing company CEO put it, "I probably say 'um' too much, so I think it's probably some of the timing, the pause, the delivery."

Audience, the third category, specifically cited the ability to connect with, influence, or maintain the interest of an audience in the strengths responses, and trouble engaging with the audience or bringing the audience into problems in the weaknesses responses. By far the most often mentioned area for all responses to the strengths question included audience connection. These expressions ranged from simply stating, as one retail corporation CEO did, "I can usually connect with my audiences," to elaborating on how that connection is made, as a medical technology company CEO did: "I have pretty good skills in that sense of being aware of people that I'm discussing with, and so I tend to be interactive and ask them questions and try and confirm whether or not I'm getting through." While we could not analyze interactions between the CEOs and audiences to determine whether their self-reported strengths or weaknesses with audiences matched observer or audience perceptions, we used this category to determine if self-perception of audience impact matched observed communication strengths and weaknesses.

We called the fourth category character because these responses spoke to personality strengths or weaknesses. These referenced creativity, approachability, respect, candor or honesty, problem solving, dedication, authenticity or sincerity, and passion as strengths. For weaknesses, this included responses referring to difficulties with listening, pressure, overthinking, being too direct, and not being open. While many of these strengths and weaknesses certainly can be categorized as communication skills, we had no metric besides our own impressions to measure authenticity or honesty, for example. Since we could not measure or track these characteristics in short interview settings, this category was omitted from further analysis. We include it here to give a full account of all responses recorded in the interviews.

Differences Between Responses

Both the transcriptions and the recorded interviews were next subjected to a content analysis. The interviews totaled 360 sentences. Each sentence was coded in terms of variables for content and delivery identified in the literature. However, since the extant literature provides models based on prepared speeches delivered in public settings, we removed features not relevant to our setting of private interviews. Rhetorical formats and inclusiveness are content features as identified by the literature in contrast to the delivery features coded separately.

Rhetorical Formats

Each sentence was coded for the presence of rhetorical formats identified by Atkinson (1984), Heritage and Greatbatch (1986), and Clark and Greatbatch (2011).

(a)   Contrasts: This format is present when two sentences are opposed in words, sense, or both to emphasize messages by making the core assertion twice.

(b)   Lists: These occur when three or more items are repeated.

(c)   Repetition: A word or phrase is intentionally repeated for emphasis in a single sentence or across contiguous sentences.

(d)   Combinations: The above devices can be combined.

(e)   Position taking: A speaker states a position and then either supports or rejects it.

(f)   Pursuits: The speaker summarizes or completes a previous point.

(We omitted puzzle-solution and headline-punchlines because these features do not fit an unrehearsed interview in which a specific response to a question is requested rather than a prepared speech organized around a central message.) A sentence may contain a single rhetorical device or be a component of a combination. Where a rhetorical technique was present in whole or part, the sentence was coded as 1 and 0 where it was absent. In cases where a device spanned two sentences (such as a contrast), only one sentence was coded as 1 in the absence of other features in the connected sentence.

An example of how a response was coded is given with this quotation from an advertising company CEO: "I try to build on my strengths; I do not thrive on my weaknesses. So yeah, do I have faults? I'm sure. But when it comes to business I really think that I'm really—I live it, I love it, I know it." In the first sentence the speaker used contrast to distinguish between what she builds on and what she does not thrive on; this sentence was coded 1. In the next sentence comprised of a question and answer, none of the listed rhetorical formats was observed, so it was coded 0. In the last sentence she uses a list of three items, and this was coded 1.

Delivery Features

We modified coding schemes from studies that have focused primarily on charismatic oratory. We used these as references for two reasons: first, it is widely agreed in the literature that these delivery features are characteristic of skilled communication, and an existing coding system enables comparison across types of studies; second, given our focus on display of communication skills in spontaneous settings, using a system developed for prepared oratory provided a rigorous mechanism for analyzing unprepared communication. Following the coding scheme devised by Holladay and Coombs (1993, 1994) and used by Awamleh and Gardner (1999) and Clark and Greatbatch (2011), each sentence was coded on whether:

- It was delivered more loudly than surrounding sentences.
- It was delivered with greater pitch or stress variation than surrounding sentences.
- It was delivered with marked speeding up, slowing down, or some other rhythmic shift.
- It was delivered accompanied by the use of facial, hand, and/or body gestures.

Unlike the above-cited studies, we omitted direct eye contact even though it is likely that a self-aware interviewee would be more likely to make eye contact more often. Unfortunately, the vantage point of the recording did not include the interviewer, so it was impossible to discern exactly where the speaker was looking at all times. Further, the feature of a speaker walking around was omitted since all interviews were conducted while the speaker was sitting. Sentences with the absence of the above four features were coded 0 for no delivery stress, sentences with two features were coded 2 for intermediate stress, and sentences with three or more features were coded 3 for high stress.

The following example from the previously mentioned advertising company CEO demonstrates this coding system:

> I listen to people *(slows down to emphasize the word listen)* [1]. I value what they say, but I'm also darn honest with them, and I try to be honest with myself, and I think, I believe, just from the way people respond to me, that they feel that (*numerous facial expressions and gestures as well as rate variation*) [2]. They know that, and they know when it comes from me that I'm sincere about it (*gestures to self when saying "me" and increases pitch at the end of the sentence)* [2].

In addition to this tracking method, we recorded lag time between the end of the question and beginning a response. Long pauses before responding have been found to decrease a listener's confidence in the speaker's certainty or knowledge (Brennan & Williams, 1995). We also counted all disfluencies or fillers and noted when a CEO began a response with a disfluency. Disfluencies—words like "um," "er," and "ah"—contribute significantly to perceptions of the speaker as lacking confidence or lacking knowledge (Brennan & Williams, 1995; Clark & Fox Tree, 2002; Corley, MacGregor, & Donaldson, 2007). Studies have also found that fillers (uh, um, er) affect language comprehension and contribute to audiences losing attention or taking a speaker less seriously (Bortfeld, Leon, Bloom, Schober, & Brennan, 2001). By counting these disfluencies and measuring lag time, we targeted specific features associated with unprepared communication. This provided additional ways of assessing the strength of these CEOs' impromptu communication skills.

Results

In this section we will begin by looking at what the CEOs identified as their own strengths and weaknesses, and then we will examine the differences between their reported strengths and weaknesses and observed communication behaviors. We will also compare speakers who identified content and delivery as strengths and weaknesses to see if there are measurable differences in communication style when CEOs are induced to be rhetorically self-aware in an interview setting.

CEO Categories of Communication Strength and Weakness

As previously noted, the transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed to determine if the responses formed similar groups. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1. Categories of Communication Strengths and Weaknesses (CEOs *n* = 40).

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Delivery	27	51
Content	25	25
Audience	18	2
Character	24	8
Total	94	86

For the strengths stated by the 40 CEOs ($M = 2.35$, $n = 94$), all four categories were well represented, though delivery (27 or 28.7% of total strengths cited) and content (25 or 26.6% of total strengths cited) exceeded audience and character. For the weaknesses identified by the 40 CEOs ($M = 2.15$, $n = 86$), all four categories were again represented, but delivery (51 or 59.3% of total weaknesses cited) and content (25 or 29.1% of total weaknesses cited) decidedly outnumbered the categories for audience and character. When considering how CEOs described themselves, the majority of their responses focused on delivery and content for both strengths and weaknesses. While roughly 55% of responses dealt with delivery or content for strengths, 88% of responses fell into these two categories for weaknesses. This analysis indicates that while the majority of responses for both strengths and weaknesses concentrated on delivery or content, more CEO responses expressed concerns about delivery or content as weaknesses. Further, while the number of content responses was the same for strengths and weaknesses, there were nearly twice as many responses citing delivery as a weakness than those citing delivery as a strength. This suggests that the CEOs were even more aware of delivery weaknesses than content weaknesses in this setting inducing rhetorical self-awareness.

These results are striking in comparison to the precipitous decline in regard to the audience category. Whereas 45% of the CEOs (18 of the 40 CEOs and 18 of 94 or 19.1% of total strengths cited) identified strengths in terms of motivating, connecting with, or interesting an audience, only 5% (2 of the 40 CEOs and 2 of the 86 or 2.3% of total weaknesses cited) mentioned problems with audiences as a weakness. Given existing literature on the connection between content and delivery communication skills and audience persuasion, the inverse relationship between the audience category decline and content and delivery category increase suggests a disconnect between these CEOs' self-evaluations and actual demonstration of communication skills. To determine if the rhetorical self-awareness induced in this interview translated into measurable differences in content and delivery factors, we next analyzed speech differences using the procedure outlined above.

Measured Content and Delivery Factors

Each transcribed sentence was coded as previously explained for rhetorical features (1 = present, 0 = not present) and delivery features (0 = no delivery stress, 2 = intermediate

Table 2. Means for CEOs in Responses to Strengths (*n* = 40) in Comparison With Weaknesses (*n* = 40).

	Rhetorical format	Delivery	Filler/minute	Lag
Strengths	0.44 (0.23)	1.22 (0.41)	10.48* (15.23)	0.046** (0.51)
Weaknesses	0.47 (0.27)	1.41 (0.41)	6.37 (4.23)	0.058 (0.46)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$ (based on a Mann-Whitney Test).

stress, 3 = high stress). An average for each CEO response was calculated by taking the totals for each sentence and dividing by the total number of sentences in the response. These averages were used to compare groups to determine any significant differences in these categories, and the following tables use those averages. We also tracked fillers in the lag before responding (1 = present, 0 = not present) and calculated fillers per minute. We used the Mann-Whitney test to assess the null hypothesis that the groups compared were the same in terms of the measured communication factors (Mann & Whitney, 1947).

Table 2 shows the means for CEO responses to the strengths question in comparison to responses to the weaknesses question. All of the CEOs made extensive use of rhetorical devices, though they did so slightly more when talking about their weaknesses. When talking about weaknesses, 47% of their sentences contained a rhetorical format of some kind, but only 44% of sentences had a rhetorical format when the CEOs talked about their strengths. Interestingly, the CEOs engaged in more dynamic delivery features when talking about their weaknesses and spoke significantly more fluently in terms of the number of fillers in their responses. This finding was supported by the fact that 50% (20 of the 40) of the CEOs began their responses to the strengths question with a filler, but only 30% (12 of the 40) of the CEOs began their responses to the weaknesses question with a filler. However, since the weaknesses followed the strengths question and was a predictable follow-up, this may mitigate the difference in CEOs who stumbled before responding.

Table 3 shows the means for CEOs who self-identified both delivery and content strengths in comparison to CEOs who identified only either delivery or content as strengths or other categories. CEOs who identified delivery and content strengths used more rhetorical devices, with 50% of their sentences containing a rhetorical format; displayed more stress in delivery; and had fewer fillers while speaking both in comparison to the CEOs who did not identify content and delivery strengths and the CEOs as a group. The differences suggest that CEOs who are aware of their strengths in terms of content and delivery also use more rhetorical and inclusive language and have a more stressed delivery style.

Table 4 shows the means for CEOs who list delivery and content weaknesses in comparison to CEOs who identify either only content or only delivery weaknesses, or other categories of weakness. CEOs who cite both delivery and content weaknesses actually use significantly fewer rhetorical devices and have a much less dynamic

Table 3. Means for CEOs (*n* = 7) With Delivery and Content Strengths in Comparison to the Rest of the CEOs (*n* = 33) and the Total Group (*n* = 40).

	Rhetorical format	Delivery	Filler/minute	Lag
Delivery and content	0.50* (0.24)	1.33 (0.33)	9.66 (5.38)	0.073 (0.09)
Rest	0.42 (0.23)	1.20 (0.42)	10.65 (16.64)	0.055 (0.03)
Strengths group	0.44 (0.23)	1.22 (0.41)	10.48 (15.23)	0.046 (0.51)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
*$p \leq$ .05. (based on a Mann-Whitney Test).

Table 4. Means for CEOs (*n* = 11) With Delivery and Content Weaknesses in Comparison to the Rest of the CEOs (*n* = 29) and the Total Group (*n* = 40).

	Rhetorical format	Delivery	Filler/minute	Lag
Delivery and content	0.35* (0.15)	1.17* (0.35)	6.23 (3.88)	0.035 (0.02)
Rest	0.52 (0.30)	1.50 (0.39)	6.43 (4.42)	0.048 (0.08)
Weaknesses group	0.47 (0.27)	1.41 (0.41)	6.37 (4.23)	0.058 (0.46)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
*$p \leq$ .05. (based on a Mann-Whitney Test).

Table 5. Means for CEOs (*n* = 20) With Delivery Strength in Comparison With CEOs (*n* = 27) With Delivery Weakness.

	Rhetorical format	Delivery	Words/sentence	Lag
Strengths	0.44 (0.24)	1.25 (0.34)	29.24 (14.14)	0.066* (0.057)
Weaknesses	0.47	1.36	34.34 (14.59)	0.036 (0.026)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
*$p \leq$ .05. (based on a Mann-Whitney Test).

delivery style. While they also use fewer fillers and have a shorter lag before speaking than the rest of the CEOs and the total group of CEOs talking about weaknesses, the differences indicate that these CEOs' awareness of weakness translates into measurable differences in rhetorical format and delivery.

Table 5 shows the means for CEOs who identify delivery as a strength in comparison to CEOs who identify delivery as a weakness. CEOs who identify a delivery strength have many more fillers, display a longer lag before responding, use fewer rhetorical devices, and exhibit fewer features of stressed delivery than CEOs who cite delivery as a weakness.

In short, twice as many CEOs identified delivery skills as a weakness versus as a strength, yet eight times as many identified audience connection as a strength versus a weakness. Given the importance of delivery to audience impact, this contrast indicates that these CEOs are not as effective as they think they are at reaching audiences or listeners when communicating spontaneously. Ironically, CEOs who identified delivery as a strength demonstrated weaker delivery skills in these interviews; they had more fillers and less vocal stress variation. These findings signify the importance of both delivery and content self-awareness for CEOs to exhibit strong communication skills in impromptu settings.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article we have examined how CEOs in a state of induced rhetorical self-awareness talk about and display communication strengths and weaknesses. We found that CEOs who identified only delivery as a strength actually used fewer rhetorical features, had more fillers, and spoke with less stress. However, CEOs who identified both delivery and content as strengths or both as weaknesses exhibited significant differences both from each other and the other groups of CEOs as well as in the kinds of rhetorical features they demonstrated. This suggests that rhetorical self-awareness requires knowledge of both content and delivery factors for there to be measurable differences at the level of the sentence. Our findings have theoretical and practical implications for studying impromptu communication, rhetorical self-awareness, executive coaching, and business communication more generally. We will address some limitations and directions for future research before exploring those implications in more detail.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Studies of CEO communication are relatively rare, but to our knowledge, no other study exists of CEOs' spontaneous communication in the context of evaluating communication strengths and weaknesses. This is an area rich for investigation, and given the potential importance of these communication events, it is also an area of serious importance. However, particularly because there is not an existing base of research, there are several limitations and future research directions that emerge. First, our study does not account for gendered differences. Out of our 40 current or future CEOs, only 5 were women. Extensive research has demonstrated differences in communication between businessmen and businesswomen and has explored the implications of those differences for hiring, advancement, and leadership (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Furst & Reeves, 2008; Grant & Taylor, 2014; Tannen, 1994). Given these differences documented in numerous other settings, including at lower levels of management than the CEO, future research should not only seek to explore whether there are significant communication differences between male and female CEOs' unrehearsed communication, but also quantify what those differences are, if they exist. An additional direction for research would be the cultural perception of

communication strengths and weaknesses of male versus female CEOs and a comparison of those perceptions with the CEOs' self-assessment.

A second limitation of this study and future research direction arises from the size of the sample population. While access to CEOs for research purposes is difficult, a bigger sample—both in terms of the number of participating CEOs and in the number of sentences analyzed—would go far in confirming or disproving the significant findings in our study. Since impromptu communication of these public figures can be used for research purposes when it is in the public sphere, impromptu interviews, press statements, and recorded comments provide a rich field of research. This type of study would nicely complement additional studies on other types of CEO communication in settings ranging from executive coaching to internal memos, when possible.

An additional direction for future research would be to consider whether significant differences in CEOs' communication exist between time periods. In this study the time span of 17 years (1995–2012) does not account for changes in technology or economy over the years. A comparison of populations from the 1990s, early 2000s, and post-recession may reveal differences.

Finally, the CEOs in our study are not representative of all CEOs generally because they chose to participate in communication coaching and because only clients of one executive coaching company were included. This obviously limits the reach of the conclusions based on the previous statistical analysis. However, companies spend increasing sums on coaching. As greater numbers of CEOs and high-level executives seek out coaching, they begin to more closely resemble the types of CEOs in our study. Further, the practical implications discussed below shed light on how these CEOs conceptualized their communication strengths and weaknesses. Qualitatively, their observations and our coaching expertise identify strategies for inducing and making the most of rhetorical self-awareness to improve impromptu communication.

Theoretical Implications

As previously noted, research on spontaneous communication is sparse, particularly from the perspective of evaluating CEOs. Given that unplanned communication has high stakes, as the case of Abercrombie & Fitch's CEO Mike Jeffries indicates, a particular set of analytics needs to be developed that incorporates well-researched models from evaluation of oratory. Our study begins this process by considering work on evaluating delivery and content in formal settings. Our findings indicate, as perhaps would be expected, that unrehearsed communication displays similar content and delivery features but to a lesser extent than formal, prepared speech. By adding factors like disfluencies and lag before responding, we introduce measures more applicable to impromptu communication. The biggest theoretical implication of our work lies in charting new territory for the study of spontaneous business communication. However, given the situational nature of this type of communication, the setting of our study provides only a partial picture. Future studies can build on our evaluative mechanism and can introduce context-specific factors to enable us to develop a more effective and widely applicable way of evaluating impromptu communication by the most powerful business figures.

Practical Implications

Our findings have specific implications for executive coaching and research on self-awareness, as well as business communication more generally. Numerous CEOs expressed concern about unplanned communication. An engineering company CEO put it this way:

> Very rarely do you carry on a business conversation or a business speaking engagement where there's not at some point in the engagement a personal side to the communication, maybe not in the rehearsed, scripted speech, but prior to or after, you have a more relaxed environment where in some ways you're speaking. It may be to a smaller group or during a question and answer session, and the need for more personable speaking and talking about non-subject-related matter is probably a weakness for me.

The consequences of this discomfort can be personal, as a telecommunications company CEO noted about talking in uncomfortable situations when she is not prepared: "When I lose my confidence and my own sense of self, sometimes I don't say the things I want to say in the way that I want to say them." Expressing something similar, a technology company CEO pointed out how these speaking problems compound:

> Sometimes my thoughts are garbled up as I deliver the message, and I get upset if I don't get the articulation exactly as I want it to happen, and clearly that puts you in a spiral in which you kind of try to catch up and you don't get there. It makes things worse and worse.

As anyone who has been caught off guard or put on the spot can attest, these situations arise in impromptu communication with regularity. CEOs and business leaders often seek out coaching and training to learn how to better handle and even excel in these settings.

Our work builds on the numerous studies that have found that charismatic delivery and leadership are teachable (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Frese et al., 2003; Towler, 2003). Our findings suggest that translating teachability to all aspects of communication requires that the business leader be aware of a range of delivery and content strengths and weaknesses. Strong impromptu communication skills require attentiveness to disfluencies, avoiding extended lag times before responding, modulation of pitch and emphasis, use of rhetorical formats, and content knowledge. Executive coaches and educators teaching business communication can use these findings to help learners know first what they should be aware of and then how to improve in these areas.

Directly related to teaching and coaching, our findings bolster research on the importance of self-awareness (Goleman, 1998, 2000; Tjan et al., 2012). The significant differences in rhetorical format, delivery stress, and disfluency occurred for CEOs who were aware of their strength or weakness as communicators. Our research contributes by pointing out how this awareness impacts speaking spontaneously while also identifying specific areas that leaders can be taught to consider.

Tjan et al. (2012) provided several character and personality assessment tests, and while this is an important part of self-awareness, knowing how to assess one's speaking is another important part, especially for leaders seeking to cultivate strong delivery practices. Trainers should help clients learn to analyze their own speaking in terms of both content and delivery regularly because self-perception does not always match performance. Just as self-awareness is an ongoing and constantly modified process, rhetorical self-awareness develops from learning the vocabulary and criteria for how to effectively evaluate unrehearsed communication skills. Our study identifies many of the lexical entries in this vocabulary list for rhetorical self-awareness, and learning these terms can help reduce disconnections between self-perception and performance.

One printing and advertising company CEO described this potential mismatch:

> I was interviewed twice this week for articles, and the one article I felt that the interview was awesome, because I was on, and he wrote the piece, and he audio-taped the conversation, and he gave it word for word, and parts of it I was like, "Did I say that?" It was good, but it was like I was contradicting myself; I was all over the place.

This example backs up the recommendation to regularly induce rhetorical self-awareness to assess communication skills. The best way to do this is to watch or listen to recordings of one's self speaking or talking, especially spontaneously. The unique situation of inducing rhetorical self-awareness in the interview settings also contributes to research on self-awareness by finding that speakers need self-awareness of *both* delivery and content strengths and weaknesses to display significant differences in speaking style.

Finally, our findings have implications for studies of CEO communication and business communication more generally. CEO communication is an area rich for investigation, and given the potential importance of these communication events, it is also an area of serious importance. Cyphert (2010) pointed out that mundane discourse, which is how scholars of rhetoric have often classified business speech, has a rhetorical impact (pp. 351–353). As Cyphert noted, this is so if for no other reason than the economic clout of corporations, which comprise 51 of the 100 world's largest economies (p. 347). However, that economic clout is not possessed only by corporations; consumer boycotts, opinions, or protests can tank stock prices, scare investors, and even force closures. Jefferies of Abercrombie & Fitch is one example of why the so-called mundane communication of a CEO and other business leaders matters. The proliferation of technology means that CEOs must always be on-point, but the existing focus almost exclusively on formal communication means that the vast majority of communicative encounters receive little attention. Impromptu communication is more than "just talk"; it is potentially the most rhetorically impactful communication for high-profile business leaders.

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