

Examining the Importance of Developing Entrepreneurial Communication Skills in Accelerator Programs: A Focus Group Based Approach

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Abstract

Entrepreneurial accelerator programs have emerged within university settings as a solution to reduce the notably high failure rate of new ventures. Accelerators seek to support entrepreneurs by providing services and experiences that prepare participants to confront challenges that occur throughout the entrepreneurial journey and connect them to a broader business ecosystem. However, despite existing research that points to a correlation between an entrepreneur's communication skills and the firm's ability to achieve key business milestones, the existing literature does not identify which specific communication skills entrepreneurs need nor the situations/audiences in which these skills are most applicable. Therefore, this study conducted five focus group interviews with 14 established entrepreneurs from the United States who have participated in a university accelerator program in an effort to uncover the most valuable communication skills for entrepreneurs and the situations in which these skills

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apply. The findings illuminate how the development of specific communication factors such as confidence when presenting, flexibility, and empathetic listening are essential for entrepreneurs to engage with a wide range of audiences. This study also provides recommendations for university accelerators seeking to facilitate the development of these communication skills in their programming.

Keywords

entrepreneurial centers, university accelerators, entrepreneurial communication skills, entrepreneurial identity, training and development

Introduction

Entrepreneurship has emerged not only as a viable alternative career path for college graduates but also as a key stimulator of economic growth (Duval-Couetil, 2013; Hasan et al., 2017). As a result, there has been a significant increase in the number of colleges and universities offering entrepreneurial accelerator programs (Brennitz & Zhang, 2019; Duval-Couetil, 2013). These programs are typically characterized as an educational environment that not only encourages individuals to apply an entrepreneurial mindset to their ideas and innovations but also empowers them with the skills and resources needed to build and grow their start-up businesses in an effort to develop cohorts of “job creators, rather than job seekers” (Zamberi Ahmad, 2013, p. 197).

However, unlike more traditional courses of study with clear metrics to quantify success, the expected outcomes of entrepreneurial education are more difficult to define and often are not seen for several years after the education takes place, thus making it difficult to determine what elements of the programming are contributing (or not) to certain desirable outcomes (e.g., successfully pitching to investors, building a viable product/service, identifying ideal customers, recruiting employees, scaling business operations, etc.; Hernández-Sánchez et al., 2019). While conclusive evidence on which elements of university accelerator programs are having the greatest impact on successful outcomes is still lacking, entrepreneurship scholars widely agree that fine-tuned communication skills are a critical indicator of successful entrepreneurial management (Darling & Beebe, 2007; Men, 2021; Men et al., 2021). For example, a recent study by Dimitriadis and Koning (2022) highlights the predictive power of communication skills on future entrepreneurial firm performance. In their study, Dimitriadis and Koning (2022) found that entrepreneurs who participated in just a two-hour communication training session were 20% more profitable during the year following the intervention compared to a control group that received no formal communication skill training.

Effective communication skills for entrepreneurs may include active listening, using clear and concise language, and collaborative relationship building (Dimitriadis & Koning, 2022). Entrepreneurs must be able to communicate their vision for a possible

future in a way that is easily understood while also adapting their communication style to different audiences and situations (Manning & Bejarano, 2017). Research that has examined the role of communication in entrepreneurial ventures has found that entrepreneurs with developed communication skills are capable of facilitating more effective collaboration and interactions with both peers and prospects, which in turn, has a positive overall influence on their new venture performance (Dimitriadis & Koning, 2022). These findings underscore the influence that communication skills are likely to have on a broad range of entrepreneurial engagements (e.g., pitching, collaborative problem-solving, networking, sales, etc.; Hasan et al., 2017). Yet, despite this growing body of emerging research, it is not entirely clear in the current literature how accelerator programs are advancing the communication skills of their participants or which skills they glean the most value from as they grow their ventures and entrepreneurial mindsets (Ulvenblad et al., 2013; Waldeck et al., 2012; Wraae et al., 2022). Furthermore, despite the efforts of some accelerator programs to address the development of communication skills, the implementation of entrepreneurial communication training is far from universal across the field (Ulvenblad et al., 2013). In fact, research that has tracked the progress and skill development of entrepreneurs has found that most self-identified entrepreneurs still report a lack of fully developed communication skills in areas such as presenting, networking, negotiating, and organizational management (Perks & Struwig, 2005). As a result, there is agreement in the literature that entrepreneurs who lack effective communication skills are more susceptible to critical obstacles that have the power to make or break a fledgling venture and may never attain their business' true potential (Ji et al., 2022).

The existing literature surrounding entrepreneurial communication skills suggests that entrepreneurial accelerator programs would be well advised to include communication skill training in the broader pedagogy of their entrepreneurial education programs. Yet, how accelerator programs might best integrate communication skill training remains unclear. Given that accelerator programs provide a social cohort approach to learning, they are an ideal setting for entrepreneurs to learn, develop, and apply communication skills in an effort to enhance their business communication acumen and ability (Moritz et al., 2022; Politis et al., 2019). Accelerator programs have the potential to provide entrepreneurs with critical communication skills that are required for success in today's competitive entrepreneurial world.

Consistent with the premise of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), which posits the importance of observing and modeling behaviors in the process of developing and learning new behaviors, accelerator programs provide entrepreneurs with opportunities to observe and model essential communication skills in their developmental process. Through interactions with other entrepreneurs and opportunities for structured feedback, entrepreneurs can model effective communication skills to build the capacity for accomplishing a variety of business objectives, including pitching and empathetic listening, as well as decision-making, goal-setting, and leadership (McCormick, 2001; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Hence, to determine the contemporary needs of entrepreneurs in today's business marketplace, this study reports findings emerging from focus group

interviews with entrepreneurs who have completed formal entrepreneurial accelerator programs. This study aims to identify what communication skills, practices, and training entrepreneurs identify as critical for entrepreneurial success and how accelerator programs can model and facilitate the development of these communication skills.

Entrepreneurial Education within Accelerator Programs

Cohen et al. (2019) define an *accelerator* as a limited-duration program that acts as a source of mentorship and a launchpad for startup ventures by supplying cohort participants with access to various critical resources, including funding, workspace, resources, and coaching. In essence, entrepreneurship accelerators differentiate themselves from other forms of entrepreneurship education by emphasizing *entrepreneurship schooling*, which Gonzalez-Urbe and Leatherbee (2015) summarize as providing the skills needed to recognize opportunities, acquire key resources, and develop an entrepreneurial venture. Utilizing this intense form of entrepreneurship education, accelerator programs facilitate the learning of skills that are acquired through entrepreneurial experiences while also providing a safety net for experimentation, thus helping aspiring entrepreneurs avoid the detrimental consequences of complete financial failure (Metcalf et al., 2021).

Over the past decade, research related to accelerator programs has found that experiential learning can effectively increase the possibility of attaining entrepreneurial learning outcomes (Cope & Watts, 2000; Donnellon et al., 2014) and developing a more entrepreneurial mindset, defined here as “the constellation of motives, skills, and thought processes that distinguish entrepreneurs from non entrepreneurs and that contribute to entrepreneurial success” (Davis et al., 2016, p. 22). Studies of university-run accelerators have demonstrated that accelerated companies receive more funding, have higher survival rates, and generate more employment than their non-accelerated counterparts (Assenova, 2020). Previous scholarship investigated over 150 university-based entrepreneurial programs and more than 650 firms, demonstrating that firms who had gone through university-based programs created more jobs and had higher sales figures than their private or nonprofit counterparts (Lasrado et al., 2016). Cope and Watts (2000) emphasize the need for entrepreneurial education programs to initiate learning by exposing entrepreneurs to crises similar to what they would experience in a real-life environment. This further suggests that accelerators are the most effective method of cultivating entrepreneurial qualities and capabilities compared to other forms of entrepreneurial education because they expose entrepreneurs to crises similar to what they would experience outside the bounds of an education setting (Metcalf et al., 2021). However, communication skills, often recognized as critical indicators of an entrepreneur’s future success (Darling & Beebe, 2007; Ji et al., 2022; Men, 2021; Men et al., 2021), are not often fully integrated into the pedagogical curriculum of entrepreneurial accelerator programs (Ulvenblad et al., 2013).

Communication Training and Accelerator Programs

Communication and its value to individuals in business has typically been predominantly examined within large and well-established organizations. This leaves a significant gap in the body of knowledge that examines the role of communication in the individuals' entrepreneurial journey, as well as what communication skills entrepreneurs need to overcome the unique obstacles startups face. Unlike traditional, reputed businesses which have already established a brand identity and distinct core competencies, entrepreneurs face unique challenges due to the nature of the startup environment; an environment characterized by ambiguity, fierce competition, intense demands, and unanticipated challenges (Ji et al., 2022; Men, 2021; Men et al., 2021). Even with a stable foundation, poor CEO communication can be detrimental to a new venture (Saini & Plowman, 2007). Yet, despite the impact that communication skills have on one's ability to be successful in business, executive leaders in the private and entrepreneurial sectors still feel that the attention given to developing communication skills in higher education is lacking (Clokic & Fourie, 2016; Hart Research Associates, 2015). Furthermore, entrepreneurs have unique needs and demands that do not align with those that are based on management communication tropes from large and established business organizations. Entrepreneurs must be capable of delivering a compelling narrative that clearly depicts the brand's values, identity, and a picture of where the brand is going in a manner that resonates with various stakeholder audiences that are necessary for the new venture's growth and ultimate survival. As living catalysts for what the brand intends to communicate with audiences, if startup leaders do not express the brand's intentions and values, they will be left open to the assumptions and interpretations of others (Darling & Beebe, 2007).

Communication skills also play a pivotal role in internal relationship management, which is highly influential throughout the entrepreneurial journey because it overcomes unpredictability and fosters greater productivity and synergy within the workplace (Dimitriadis & Koning, 2022; Men, 2021; Men et al., 2021; Saini & Plowman, 2007). Startup leaders' relationships with their employees are especially vital to the new venture's survival not only because employees are a significant competitive advantage themselves, but also because talent acquisition and retention are especially difficult challenges to overcome given the nature of the uncertain startup environment (Men et al., 2021). Men (2021) suggests that due to the smaller size of most startups, CEOs have more intimate relationships with their employees than managers of large, well-established corporations. Therefore, the interpersonal communication between a startup leader and their employees holds much greater weight in maintaining the employee's loyalty to the organization and satisfaction within their role despite the stressful nature of the startup environment (Men, 2021).

Additionally, an entrepreneur's success is subject to the degree in which they can tailor their communication style to the needs of various audiences to convince others, who may otherwise be skeptical, to become active participants in the new venture's journey (Chapple et al., 2021; Manning & Bejarano, 2017). Unlike leaders of

established corporations who do not typically grapple with acquiring funding, entrepreneurs must communicate in a manner that appeals to investors, stakeholders, consumers, and other diverse audiences via traditional and internet-based media platforms (Chapple et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2016; Manning & Bejarano, 2017). Entrepreneurs' ability to engage in effective storytelling strategies is essential to convey value, set expectations, and acquire resources (Chapple et al., 2021; Manning & Bejarano, 2017). Within the entrepreneurial context, storytelling is defined as a form of engagement that provides meaning and structure to a situation or context, and has been extensively used in entrepreneurial education (Liu et al., 2019). Thus, if entrepreneurs are unable to make the unfamiliar more familiar through storytelling, entrepreneurs may fail to acquire resources that are critical to exploiting opportunities and growing their business (Fisher et al., 2016; Garud et al., 2014). Given that developing an investor pitch is often a central component of the services and education provided by accelerator programs, those responsible for training and developing the skills of entrepreneurs need to understand what communication skills are most critical and how entrepreneurs would best receive and develop these skills within an accelerator program.

Research by Ulvenblad and colleagues in 2013 sought to test the assumption that communication skills are capable of being developed through entrepreneurship education. They found that from a sample of 392 respondents, entrepreneurs who participated in accelerator programs reported more developed communication skills than entrepreneurs without formal entrepreneurship education or training and were better poised to manage interactions with various audiences under high-stakes circumstances. They also found that these entrepreneurs were better equipped to handle the *liability of newness*, a concept that heightens entrepreneurs' struggle to access key resources due to their lack of market history and legitimacy from a stakeholder perspective and that this relationship needs further development in accelerator programs (Fisher et al., 2016; Garud et al., 2014). Chapple et al. (2021) acknowledge the power of storytelling in helping entrepreneurs address the liability of newness that plagues new ventures by enabling audiences to absorb and interpret the business plan in a manner that they can understand based on their own varying needs and communication styles.

Current Study

Communication plays a vital role in the entrepreneurial journey, and entrepreneurs can develop their communication skills through entrepreneurial education. Therefore, it is critical to further our understanding of what specific communication concepts and skills and pedagogical techniques are viewed as most valuable to entrepreneurs who have participated in accelerator programs. This study utilizes a series of focus groups to help address these needs, specifically guided by the following research question:

RQ: What communication skills, practices, and training do entrepreneurs identify as critical for entrepreneurial success, and how might accelerator programs facilitate communication skills development?

Methods

Participants

Using purposive sampling, we recruited participants from the alumni of a long-standing (15 years of operation) startup accelerator program at a large, Northeastern U.S. university. To aid in recruitment, emails were sent to the accelerator program's alumni network, and social media posts on the program's Facebook and LinkedIn pages were shared. In all, we contacted 162 accelerator program alumni. A total of 15 participants responded to recruitment emails and/or posts, and we invited all 15 to participate in the focus group interviews. All participants were screened using preliminary questions about their start-up experience. Specifically, participants were deemed to be eligible if they identified as a founding entrepreneur and had participated in the programs multi-week university-sponsored accelerator program. Fifteen participants initially responded, 14 of whom participated in the focus group sessions (5). Regarding gender identity, 10 (71.4%) participants identified as male and 4 (28.6%) as female. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 57 years ($M = 32.6$, $SD = 10.7$) and identified as Caucasian/white ($n = 9$; 69.2%), Asian ($n = 1$; 7.7%), African American ($n = 1$; 7.7%), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 1$; 7.7%), and multiracial ($n = 1$; 7.7%). One participant chose not to disclose their ethnicity. Participants represented businesses from a range of industries, including health/medicine, science/engineering, business/sales, arts/culture, education, and technology. Participant demographics are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Though most participants were strangers, two were co-founders of businesses; however, those co-founders did not participate in the same focus group session. All participants were at different stages of the entrepreneurial process, and a few had been professionally acquainted with the lead author prior to the study. Participants were not compensated for their participation.

Data Collection

To investigate how entrepreneurial centers can support the communication needs of early-career entrepreneurs, we chose to conduct focus group interviews. Focus group interviews with groups of homophilous participants, when compared to individual interviews, reduce inhibition, promote self-disclosure, and generate insights that emerge from group-level interaction ([Tracy, 2019](#)). Five focus group interviews were conducted with 14 participants between October and December 2021. Each focus group consisted of two to three participants. A semi-structured interview guide ([Tracy, 2019](#)) was prepared to assist in the moderation of the focus group interviews (see [Supplemental Table 1](#)). To address our research question, the following focus group interview questions were posed to entrepreneurs: (1) What role has/does communication play in your personal entrepreneurial journey? (2) What skills have served you well as an entrepreneur? (3) What role does communication play with the key audiences you work/interact with? (4) What communication challenges do you face as an

Table I. Participant Demographics.

Demographic	Options	N (%)
Age	20–30	9 (64.3%)
	31–40	2 (14.3%)
	41–50	2 (14.3%)
	51–60	1 (7.1%)
Sex	Male	10 (71.4%)
	Female	4 (28.6%)
Education	Bachelor's degree	4 (28.6%)
	Master's degree	4 (28.6%)
	Doctoral degree	3 (21.4%)
	Did Not indicate	3 (21.4%)
Ethnicity	Caucasian/White	9 (64.3%)
	Asian/Pacific islander	1 (7.17%)
	African American	1 (7.1%)
	Hispanic/Latino	1 (7.1%)
	Multiracial/Biracial	1 (7.1%)
	Did Not indicate	1 (7.1%)
Current role	CEO/(Co)Founder	6 (42.9%)
	COO	1 (7.1%)
	Program manager	1 (7.1%)
	Professor and Chair	1 (7.1%)
	Principal investigator and entrepreneurial lead	1 (7.1%)
	Did not indicate	4 (28.6%)
Industry	Health/Medicine	5 (35.7%)
	Science/Engineering	2 (14.3%)
	Business/Sales	1 (7.1%)
	Arts, culture and entertainment	1 (7.1%)
	Education	1 (7.1%)
	Technology	1 (7.1%)
	Did not indicate	3 (21.4%)

entrepreneur? (5) What skills do you wish you had learned sooner in your journey? (6) What skills are critical for entrepreneurs to learn early in their career? and (7) How do you go about seeking communication-related feedback and/or best practices?

All focus group interviews were conducted virtually using WebEx. Focus group interviews ranged in length from 48.58 to 54.46 minutes ($M = 52.4$, $SD = 2.26$). All focus group sessions were moderated by the lead author, and each session also included two-to-three co-authors who focused on recording *analytic memos* which captured their immediate thoughts and impressions (Charmaz, 2020). All interview sessions were video recorded using WebEx's screen recording feature, and transcripts were created from the recorded sessions. A final transcript contained 156 pages of typed text. Exemplars presented in the findings below were verified against the audio recordings to

ensure their accuracy. To protect participants' privacy, participants were assigned pseudonyms to which they are referred in the findings below.

Data Analysis

The phronetic iterative approach was chosen to analyze the data (Tracy, 2019). *Phronesis*, an Aristotelian framework of knowledge (Ameriks & Clarke, 2000), refers to practical, experience-based wisdom and judgment, and is often mentioned in management and leadership literature (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014). The iterative approach to qualitative data analysis refers to the systematic, repetitive, and recursive process of moving abductively between inductive data analysis and deductive analysis informed by established theories (Tracy, 2019). The iterative approach allows researchers to (1) identify findings that are guided by existing theories, while also (2) identify new findings which emerge from the data (Huffman et al., 2019).

To accomplish this, initially, line-by-line *primary-cycle* coding was conducted for each focus group interview transcript to obtain *first-order* descriptive codes (i.e., the “who, what, when, where” of the data; Tracy, 2019, p. 74). This consisted of examining “the data and assigning words or phrases that capture their essence” (Tracy, 2019, p. 189). For example, instances of participants mentioning “listening to people talk” and “communicating... is more about listening” were coded as “listening.” Similarly, instances of participants talking about communicating while “understanding the other [person]’s perspective” and “understanding where they’re coming from” were coded as “understanding.”

Then, in the *secondary-cycle* coding, the data were iteratively reviewed to create higher, second-order codes/sub-themes. Using hierarchical coding, which consists of “identifying patterns or groupings of codes within the data” (Tracy, 2019, p. 195), the first-level codes that alluded to aspects of entrepreneurial communication other than speaking or presenting such as “listening” and “understanding” *the audience* were grouped together as the communication skill of “empathetic listening” (Rogers, 1951). Initially, six categories were identified. Upon revisiting the data multiple times, the data were collapsed into two main themes: (1) communication concepts and (2) communication practices. Communication concepts comprised three subthemes: (1) face management, (2) credibility, and (3) flexibility. Communication practices comprised two subthemes: (1) pitch presentation and (2) empathetic listening. Further, the two main themes were identified as components of communication skill development (Table 2).

Findings

Our research question asked what communication skills, practices, and training do entrepreneurs identify as critical for entrepreneurial success and how might accelerator programs facilitate communication skills development?

Table 2. Summary of Findings.

Themes	Sub-theme	Description	Exemplars	Accelerator Areas of Focus
Communication concepts	Face management	Concern about maintaining/saving face (image) for both the speaker and the audience	<p>"We also have to think about, like, our chemists have their own sort of culture and concerns about what we're doing and how it relates to what they're doing. In fact, we've gotten a lot of push back from our clients who are not happy about the idea of Uber for archives invading their nice space. —Brian, a 45-year-old Caucasian man</p> <p>"So, a lot of the time I have to think about... how are we communicating in a way that isn't threatening those people and helping them understand what we do?" —Maya, a 29-year-old, Caucasian woman</p> <p>"Everything comes down to being able to communicate with a multi stakeholder audience.... You're still dealing with customers and need to figure out what they want.... You're also probably dealing with funders. Whether it's venture capital or angel investors or stockholders." —Chris, a 32-year-old Caucasian man</p> <p>"It's easy for me to talk about it to anyone, whether it's on my team, whether it's a donor or a sponsor or a random teacher". — Michael, a 29-year-old African American man</p> <p>"Be flexible and be willing and ready to change directions or shift gears when necessary." —Brian, a 45-year-old Caucasian man</p>	Engagement with a diverse range of audiences Modules on principles of persuasion and influence Audience analysis approaches and techniques
		Awareness of potentially offensive or impolite communication such as imposing views, giving orders, or being intrusive Need for being strategic to avoid miscommunication	<p>Expressing the need to communicate to diverse audiences</p> <p>Being prepared to interact with a variety of audiences</p>	<p>Opportunities to field questions and feedback from audiences with different interests (eg, investors vs. customers)</p> <p>Understanding individual entrepreneurial traits and characteristics</p>
	Credibility	Need for displaying competence and confidence Establishing trust and buy-in with the audience	<p>"The first thing that comes to mind on the vendor side of the equation is the trust that I'm able to build given that I'm the new kid on the block and they don't have to work with me, but they do." —Dan, a 36-year-old Caucasian man</p> <p>"I can definitely hold my ground...as an entrepreneur when dealing with contractors...standing firm in what you want is how you start. Knowing how I want to show up and not waffling on that." —Rebecca, a 26-year-old Caucasian woman</p>	Developing introductory statements that demonstrate credibility Expanding professional network Activities and events that build confidence in relevant expertise

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Themes	Sub-theme	Description	Exemplars	Accelerator Areas of Focus
Communication practices	Pitch presentation	Being confident of speaking in public Being effective at storytelling and connecting with investors Expressing the need for concise and clear communication	<p>“When I brought that excitement and enthusiasm and confidence, and I saw the flip get switched, and my partners, the person who I’m communicating with, I see their demeanor change and they’re excited.” –Matt, a 28-year-old Caucasian man</p> <p>“It was hard for me to really understand how to deliver a nice pitch and kind of communicate what I want to say under a time crunch and under the eyes of so many people.” –Dev, a 22-year-old Indian American man</p> <p>“It’s important to cherry pick the most critical parts and then have to communicate that very succinctly.” – Henry, a 23-year-old Caucasian man</p> <p>“So, communicating with those folks [desk-level archivists] is more about listening and making it clear that we’re listening and managing that sort of discontent” –Brian, a 45-year-old Caucasian man</p> <p>“It’s all just people at the end of the day, right? It goes back to that empathy that we all have our own lives. We all have our struggles during the day.” –Chris, a 32-year-old Caucasian man</p>	<p>Pitch presentation skills; delivery, organization, visual design, storytelling, and vocal delivery</p> <p>Delivering pitches in different formats and modalities</p> <p>Understanding storytelling principles for organized presentations</p>
	Empathetic listening	Understanding communication is not only about the speaker, but the listener Emotionally connect with the audience	<p>Engaging with principles of active listening to develop empathy with audiences</p> <p>Creating an environment for open and consistent feedback</p> <p>Guidance on how to create a positive and secure work environment</p>	

Note. All participant names included in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

Communication Skill Development

When addressing our research question, participants referred to various communication-related skills, acts, needs, and practices such as listening and speaking, alongside cognitive processes required for communication, which was identified as communication skill development (O'Rourke, 2013) and further categorized into communication concepts and communication skills. These expressed needs for communication skill development illustrate training opportunities for accelerator programs, which play a pivotal role in the development of entrepreneurial communication skills.

Communication Concepts. The data revealed three communication concepts essential for entrepreneurial communication skill development: (a) face management, (b) credibility, and (c) flexibility.

Face Management. The process and outcome of communication is dependent on the audience, and face management is a communicative act that is aimed at shaping one's image in other people's eyes (Goffman, 1967). Communication behaviors related to face management help an individual's audience see them as they wish to be perceived (Gotzner & Mazzeella, 2021). Participant responses identified an exhaustive list of audiences, including the internal team, co-founders, venture capitalists, vendors, customers, and subject matter experts. Communication with different audiences was found to have different goals, and the need to gauge the audience and be more nuanced in their communication was identified. Participant responses alluded to the need to respond in a manner that will help them influence how others view them and gain audience approval (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). As Maya, a 29-year-old white female explained:

Our potential partners are typically highly educated, somewhat defensive with a little bit of a chip on the shoulder because they're very overworked and understaffed...they're change averse, so you need to make sure that you're communicating in a way that shows them that we know what we're talking about and that we understand their issues but without belittling the work that they're already doing. And that is a really hard line to toe.

Maya found it challenging to communicate with an audience that is experiencing a lot of stress at work. Similarly, Chris, a 32-year-old white male, described interactions with stakeholders, customers, and funders:

(You) need to be able to relate to each of them and communicate with each of them on their own terms. You need to be able to translate whatever you're doing to each of these different sets of people. Being able to structure your communication to each group is important, to clearly communicate your message and not waste too much time.

On the other hand, Brian, a 45-year-old white male recalled communicating about his product with service desk personnel as being “Fraught. Arduous. They are really worried that the technology we’re putting together will invade their space and disrupt their workflow.” These examples illustrate the importance of audience analysis and entrepreneurial training regarding maintaining and saving face for both parties (the entrepreneur and the audience) to achieve communication goals. Even if an entrepreneurial venture seeks to provide greater efficiency/performance or address a long-existing need, it may not receive the warm welcome entrepreneurs hope for. Therefore, university accelerator programs are a good place for budding entrepreneurs to prepare for such interactions given the opportunity for feedback and reflection to be included as part of the learning and growth process.

Credibility. Credibility is a multi-dimensional communication concept, where an individual is perceived by their audience as competent and trustworthy (Neuliep et al., 2005). Entrepreneurs often struggle to overcome the challenge of appearing “credible” to various key audiences, especially given the lack of market experience and reputation in comparison to well-established ventures. Participant responses revealed that, oftentimes, the purpose of communication with various audiences was to establish credibility, usually by way of appearing confident in their messaging and convincing the audience that they know what they are talking about, in other words, communicating competence. This was particularly true when participants spoke about presenting to investors, who are likely to scrutinize all aspects of the business plan for points of weakness.

This sentiment was expressed by Dan, a 36-year-old white entrepreneur who noted, “The first thing that comes to mind on the vendor side of the equation is the trust that I’m able to build given that I’m the new kid on the block and they don’t have to work with me but they do.” Dan recognizes that through his communication, he needs to earn the investors’ trust and goodwill so that they are willing to spend money on what the project needs. This was also the case for Dev, a 22-year-old Indian American, who expressed concern over his experience and age and not wanting to appear immature. The accelerators help young entrepreneurs with developing and owning their identities as communicators which in turn allows them to portray confidence when interacting with different audiences. The training settings are capable of creating settings for individuals like Dan to practice making critical decisions in high-stakes situations on behalf of their business and its constituents.

Communication Flexibility. Communication flexibility was identified as a key ingredient for successful entrepreneurial communication. Communication flexibility can be defined as adapting one’s behavior to different situations to communicate more effectively (Anderson, 1998). This skill requires cognitively assessing a situation and choosing the best option available so that they can be effective within the constraints of that situation (Martin & Rubin, 1994). On being asked about skills required for successful communication, Brian said “this doesn’t relate to communications

necessarily, but it might, is to be flexible and be willing and ready to change directions or shift gears.” Chris further explained:

Flexibility is important.... [there are] different stakeholders and you need to be able to relate to each of them and communicate with each of them on their own terms. So, you need to be able to translate whatever you're doing to each of these different sets of people who have their own language.

Through the program, Chris learned that entrepreneurs often have to wear many hats and switch roles frequently; they need to be able to adapt their communicative behaviors to meet the demands of different situations. The program introduced Chris to a range of different audiences which helped to make this easy for him to appreciate. Thus, in order to recruit a diverse network of stakeholders and access resources that allow for the exploitation of opportunities and reduce the threat of early failure, entrepreneurs must have the ability to engage and persuade a multitude of audiences with different agendas, professional backgrounds, and values that influence what style of communication they are most receptive to.

Chris also highlighted the role of adaptability in enabling entrepreneurs to navigate the communication needs of various audiences with whom they frequently interact, “They have a different set of incentives, motivations, and empathy... you need to be able to relate to and communicate with each of them on their own terms. You need to be able to translate whatever you're doing to each of these different sets of people.” This underscores the need for a multifaceted training approach that introduces entrepreneurs to the variety of audiences in which they will pitch their business; whether it be a formal investor pitch or an appeal to manufacturers and technicians who may be critical of a new process or approach.

Communication Practices. Two communication practices also emerged from the analysis as being vital to entrepreneurial success: (a) pitching (presenting) and (b) empathetic listening.

Pitch Presentation. The predominant entrepreneurial communication skill mentioned across all focus group interviews was pitch presentation. As Michael described, “a one-size-fits-all approach just doesn't work, and we've had to figure out how to communicate with each of our stakeholders (in a way) that was effective and where they got a benefit from it right away.” According to participant responses, key components of pitch presentation include public speaking, preparing slides, storytelling, and pitching under time limits. While most responses lamented on the role of public speaking, they also mentioned the importance of preparing a slide deck and using both to tell a story. As Faizal, a 30-year-old multiracial male said: “I'm able to pitch well to decision makers like investors because I try to craft the presentations...[and] my pitch decks to be very attractive to those with shorter attention spans.” Participants also recognized

the role university acceleration centers play in improving pitch presentations and providing feedback. According to Henry, a 23-year-old white male:

I would use complex words and I would assume that the person I'm speaking to knows more about the product. So, I would be inclined to use more difficult words or more niche words to describe something. Whereas I should make it more digestible and bite size.

For Henry, the program provided critical feedback on how others were receiving his content. Their inability to understand his complex phrases and ideas made it difficult for them to appreciate the innovation and ultimately made it difficult for Henry to build momentum and create investor interest. The program helped him to recognize that his vocabulary needed to meet the needs and abilities of his audience.

Rebecca felt that her pitching skills improved as a result of her training at the acceleration program because the feedback provided her with unique insights that helped her understand her strengths. The feedback that Rebecca received was critical to her ability to see herself as an entrepreneur and overcome feelings of being an imposter. The feedback that aligned with her self-concept was important in bringing out her most authentic pitch style which helped to propel and motivate her to stick with her business plan. One participant, Dev, also lamented:

Public speaking It was hard for me to really understand how to deliver a nice pitch and kind of communicate what I want to say under a time crunch and under the eyes of so many people and just practicing going through that at a young age has helped me.

Dev felt that in order to deliver a great pitch, he had to be good at public speaking while being timed. He emphasized the sentiment shared by numerous participants that the art of pitching is a skill that requires the ability to distill key points in a precise manner and extreme attention to detail as well as a keen awareness of who is in the room, which shapes the way the entrepreneur delivers the pitch and what information they include. Along with this, entrepreneurs must be prepared to pitch under a firm time constraint amidst the pressure of what can seem like a make-or-break opportunity, further underscoring the need for entrepreneurs to recognize their roles as communicators in many different important contexts.

Empathetic Listening. Despite the important status given to pitch presentations, participants also revealed that listening to understand and empathize is an important component of effective communication, especially with a multi-stakeholder audience. The data revealed the use of nonverbals, such as "using body language" and "reading the energy," to acknowledge the audience's feelings and understand their pain points. Chris explained:

You're dealing with so many different stakeholders, even if it's a solo company, a solo venture that you have, you're dealing with customers. You're dealing with suppliers,

you're dealing, you could be dealing with investors...It's all just people at the end of the day, right? It goes back to empathy, you know, we all have our own home lives. We all have our struggles during the day.

Michael also described the difficulties he faces, "taking what somebody is saying, comprehending it and being on the same page is a challenge for our team today." Contrary to pitch presentations, which were associated with getting a message across, empathetic listening was emphasized as a prerequisite to resonate with the audience and establish a shared understanding, as expressed in Dev's response:

I can understand where they're coming from, what the pain points are, and that's the one thing I take from a response, understanding. When you're delivering sales pitches, understand where the person is lacking and their point. Empathize with them. Connect with them. And just try and deliver a solution. I've kind of used that in large facets of my life.... Even if you can't deliver a solution...just understand and empathize with them. And it's going to go a long way.

Dev shared that being empathetic toward the audience will help provide a solution that is more aligned with the audience needs. He also felt that empathetic listening is more important than getting one's point across and that it is beneficial in the long term. A 36-year-old white male, Dan, also addressed the value of empathy in communicating with audiences:

I think what has been critical is that the stories that I tell, the personal stories that I'm sharing in different contexts are the ones that resonate with them.... Tap in, in an empathetic way, to those groups and resonate with them. But also say 'I have a solution for you' and make sure the solution is consistent with the story.

These data imply that entrepreneurs, who tend to spend a significant amount of time talking during interactions with others, whether it be pitching to venture capitalists to acquire funding or explaining the technology behind their product to manufacturers, must be cognizant of how their communication is being received on the other end. Accelerator programs would be well advised to stress the importance of active listening and knowing when to step back and create room for others to voice concerns or feedback.

Discussion and Implications

This study investigated the significance of communication in entrepreneurial training and identified how university accelerator programs can incorporate communication into their curricula to guide early-stage entrepreneurs. Overall, study participants revealed that practicing, developing, and implementing effective communication skills is a way of entrepreneurial life. Communication was critically present in three key

aspects of the entrepreneur's life: the individual self, social interactions, and communal experiences. These findings point to the importance of university accelerator programs to provide emerging entrepreneurs with opportunities to observe, practice, and model effective entrepreneurial communication skills. The findings also suggested that the development of these skills is vital for entrepreneurial success, as they are necessary for the acquisition of funding, identifying customers, and building new business relationships.

Participants began by highlighting the importance of establishing confidence and building credibility through communication, which in turn influences their ability to present themselves and their business with poise and conviction across a range of audiences (e.g., investors, customers, community partners). Though the positive implications of entrepreneurship can be rewarding, setbacks and failure are unavoidable and not every decision will achieve intended outcomes. Therefore, entrepreneurs who step into the role of the primary decision maker (e.g., CEO) for a new venture must have confidence in their communication given its implication on their ability to lead the internal team and address issues with audiences as they arise. Dabo (2019) posits that self-confidence enables entrepreneurs to take action and be assertive, when necessary, in an environment where risk-taking, external judgment, and the internal fear of failure are the norm. Accelerator programs develop self-confidence by providing entrepreneurs with opportunities to take risks and learn from failures. The findings from this study suggested that entrepreneurs can utilize their time in university accelerators to test out different strategies for pitch presentations, incorporate critical feedback, and make improvements to their delivery and content. The university accelerator provides a safe environment for these trial-and-error approaches and offers entrepreneurs a chance to develop their self-awareness through self-reflection and consistent feedback. Therefore, it's important that accelerator programs are providing events and opportunities for entrepreneurs to engage with different audiences that will help provide feedback that builds up the confidence of the entrepreneur through thoughtful feedback. Further, accelerators would likely best provide cohort experiences that allow for peer-to-peer feedback and the opportunity to provide insights into how they are perceiving one another's content and style to help develop a deeper sense of entrepreneurial self-awareness. A cohort experience allows the entrepreneur to compare and contrast themselves with other entrepreneurs who are working through similar challenges and having relatable experiences.

Next, participants noted that as the face of their brand/business, entrepreneurs must develop how they want to be perceived in investor pitches, negotiations, and other key engagements. Again, participants felt that confidence was key in being able to present themselves effectively and communicate their vision for the business in a manner that resonates with their audience. Thompson-Whiteside et al. (2018) argued that communicating an authentic personal brand allows entrepreneurs to control the narrative by creating a positive impression in the minds of their audience. Further, an entrepreneur's ability to tailor their message and be flexible in adapting their behavior to different situations and audiences is essential to their success (Chapple et al., 2021; Manning &

Bejarano, 2017). Specifically, they must be able to engage across various mediums in order to address potential stakeholders, investors, partners, and consumers (Manning & Bejarano, 2017). This kind of communicative flexibility is essential and can be developed via educational programs alongside many cognitive skills such as confidence, self-awareness, and self-regulatory strategies (Mitsea et al., 2021). As a result, accelerators need to offer an opportunity for entrepreneurs to develop their communication skills across a range of modalities, including across multiple platforms, with various constraints and characteristics (e.g., time limitations, absence of supplemental aids, dynamic question and answer formats, etc.). Accelerators have the ability to create hypothetical scenarios for entrepreneurs to engage and overcome challenges that they are likely to face in their real-world engagements. These scenarios provide an opportunity to build skill and therefore, confidence in their ability to present in a manner that represents their brand/business consistently despite the audience or platform. Additionally, program facilitators should seek to include communication professionals who are apt to counsel entrepreneurs and work with them to recognize their weaknesses and finetune their strengths as communicators. Accelerators would be advised to ensure that program facilitators are keenly aware of how their feedback may be impacting the entrepreneur and work towards always creating a constructive and empowering environment. Rather than focusing only on scrutiny of pitches or business model elements, accelerator program facilitators should approach the dissemination of feedback from a coach or mentoring perspective, which further instills a sense of confidence in entrepreneurs while also encouraging accountability and personal growth. Facilitators should also note that all participants will have varying reactions to how feedback is communicated, so developing a personal mentoring relationship with participants allows facilitators to understand the communication needs of the participants.

Research has shown that entrepreneurial education programs have played a pivotal role in developing the entrepreneurial mindset for many individuals that go through programs (Mathews et al., 2021). This theme was apparent in this study as entrepreneurs noted the importance of having credibility when engaging with different audiences. While credibility may be bestowed upon an individual by the audience, the entrepreneur still needs to have confidence in their ability as well as their identity as an entrepreneur. Given the findings around a need for increased feelings of credibility, accelerators should be seeking to empower entrepreneurs with the tools needed to become self-aware, forge their own identities, and conduct themselves with confidence in the face of the daily obstacles and setbacks unique to the entrepreneurial journey. More specifically entrepreneurship training in accelerators may be capable of stimulating entrepreneurial self-efficacy, one's own confidence in their ability to achieve desired outcomes. Therefore, accelerator programs might work to integrate training and individual coaching to facilitate self-awareness. For example, accelerators might consider integrating assessments such as the Entrepreneurial Mindset Profile that can help individuals understand how their traits and skills compare to other self-identifying entrepreneurs (Davis et al., 2016). By focusing on self-awareness, it will empower entrepreneurs to shift from just focusing on the logistics of launching a business, to

learning how to support their entrepreneurial journey in a more holistic and individually rewarding manner.

The findings also revealed that entrepreneurs consider pitch presentations to be a critical entrepreneurial communication practice. Pitch presentations, competitions, and funding events help to connect entrepreneurs to key stakeholders and expose them to valuable external resources (Woolley & MacGregor, 2022). The ability to filter through a multitude of ideas and distill the key points in a sharp, concise manner was identified as a vital skill for entrepreneurs. More specifically, entrepreneurs noted that they will often deliver a pitch or present to an audience amid a high-stakes environment and with a limited amount of time. Recently, Chen and Goldstein (2022) explored how colleges train student entrepreneurs and found that pitching may affirm one's entrepreneurial mindset and its applicability to their everyday life. Each audience will have varying priorities when evaluating a pitch, so entrepreneurs must be able to select the key details that will be most relevant to the audience and stay on point throughout the entire conversation. Considering the variety of audiences entrepreneurs interact with, it is reasonable to infer that accelerators should expose participants to a more diverse range of audiences beyond the investor, which is typically the focus of accelerators, thereby allowing them to acquire a greater sense of adaptability in the early stages of business development. For example, entrepreneurs will need to effectively communicate with early adopters and initial customers which will require a different approach compared to the needs of a community or potential business partner. Accelerator programs should consider including a variety of guests that may represent different audiences, such as consumers, community members, or potential manufacturing partners to provide feedback at given times throughout the program. In doing so, it may expose the entrepreneur to differing perspectives that could be conflicting. This provides an opportunity to coach the entrepreneur on managing and integrating feedback into their pitches all while helping to build their confidence in their delivery and content (Ebbbers, 2014; Woolley & MacGregor, 2022). It also helps to expand the network of the accelerator itself and inherently increases the accelerator's value to current and future entrepreneurs. Additionally, an extended network also allows for greater mentoring engagement. Laukhuf and Malone (2015) attest to the transformative power of mentorship in providing unparalleled levels of personal and professional support to entrepreneurs, stating that successful mentorship expands the entrepreneur's skills, network, and provides them with the confidence to envision their goals as realistic and attainable. Considering the value of mentors in forging entrepreneurial identities and capabilities in less experienced entrepreneurs, accelerators should work to ensure there is an appropriate amount of time and resources dedicated to connecting entrepreneurs with appropriate mentors.

Finally, empathetic listening was also identified as an important entrepreneurial communication skill. Empathetic listening is a multidimensional concept that helps build trust and respect (Zenger et al., 2019). In addition, empathetic listening serves as an important prerequisite for design thinking and leadership development (Glen et al., 2015; Tzouramani, 2017). In fact, empathy is arguably the most important leadership

trait for business leaders who are engaging with a wide range of audiences, which is a key task for today's entrepreneurs. The ability to empathize with employees, vendors, investors, and customers alike allows entrepreneurs to reduce misunderstanding and increase their likelihood of long-term business success (Humphrey, 2013). The findings also noted the importance of having strong listening skills as they related to internal relationships and team management. The ability to have empathy and understand the perspectives of those on your team was deemed to be critical to an entrepreneur's ability to manage the business. An entrepreneur's relationship with their employees is especially vital to a new venture's survival not only because employees are a significant competitive advantage themselves, but also because talent acquisition and retention are especially difficult challenges in today's marketplace (Men et al., 2021). Several participants described a sense of responsibility to provide a degree of security and emotional support to employees to ensure they were secure in their roles. On the other hand, internal team members must perceive the founding entrepreneur to be a competent leader who can make decisions on behalf of the team and portrays a composed persona under pressure. They also want to have a secure work environment and that begins with leadership that listens and appreciates their perspectives. Given the need for entrepreneurial leadership to have empathetic listening skills, accelerators should make an effort to support the development of team management skills that focus on active and engaged listening. An accelerator holds the ability to help the entrepreneur recognize their bias and overcome barriers to listening that might impact their ability to lead and manage the team in the very early stages of the business.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the strengths of the preceding analysis, this study has several limitations that could be addressed in future research. First and foremost, this study is limited in its scope, as it only includes participants from one university accelerator program, albeit participation in that program spanned across 5 years. Additionally, the current study did not specifically examine the entrepreneur's experience with a particular accelerator program, however, future research should consider including questions that will help to evaluate how accelerator programs can best develop the identified areas of focus. In future studies, entrepreneurs who have participated in a broader range of university accelerators would help to provide additional perspectives regarding the outcomes of startup accelerators and their role in facilitating the development of communication skills. Future research can also explore specific pedagogical skills and approaches to entrepreneurial training that foster entrepreneurial learning. By taking a needs-based approach to entrepreneurial instruction, accelerator programs can compare different strategies for specific subsets of entrepreneurship (e.g. commercial vs. social entrepreneurship). Furthermore, we would advocate that future research look to take an interdisciplinary approach to examining the opportunity for collaborating and utilizing existing university resources in which communication skills may be further developed from alternative perspectives. For example,

contemporary universities are likely to offer support services or supplemental learning opportunities through writing centers, digital media and design programs, business courses, and student-led programs that may help to enhance or supplement the accelerator program's developmental material. Thus, future research might consider examining the value and/or impact of utilizing such resources in conjunction with the accelerator program itself.

We also acknowledge that selection bias may be evident in our participant pool and would advise future studies to be more cognizant of including entrepreneurs who could offer insights from more culturally diverse backgrounds. More specifically, it would be beneficial to investigate how communication skills have enabled different racial and ethnic identities to (potentially) overcome any barriers they face within their entrepreneurial journeys, as well as the unique challenges minority entrepreneurs experience. For instance, do members of certain racial or ethnic groups rely on communication skills to grapple with the unique challenges they face (e.g., perceptions of credibility) more so than others, and what communication competencies might they have developed to overcome certain challenges? Furthermore, gender differences are likely to exist across a myriad of entrepreneurial and business environments. Future research should explore whether gender differences have any influence on the development and/or application of communication skills in the entrepreneurial process.

Finally, accelerator programs and the study of entrepreneurial education would benefit from future research exploring the immediate impacts of communication training when integrated into accelerator programming. Entrepreneurial capabilities such as communication skills are thought to be acquired over time, however, interviews prior to and immediately following the intervention of an accelerator might provide meaningful insight into the effectiveness of accelerators as vehicles for the facilitation of communication identities in participants. Specifically, entrepreneurial identity and its link to entrepreneurial self-efficacy would be salient points of research that could help to further our understanding of the transfer of skills highlighted here. Furthermore, it would be important for future research to determine which types of training and development mechanisms are capable of having the desired impact on the development of certain communication skills from both a short- and long-term perspective. Thus, future research should attempt to evaluate the communication skills transfer of accelerator programs to determine the degree to which a program's training is having the intended influence on an entrepreneur's ability to apply and demonstrate relative communication skills. Individual measures of self-report along with objective measures of skill application would provide insight into the methods that may help produce more fruitful outcomes for skill development.

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Ethical Approval

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Supplemental Material

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