# The Call Center Agent’s Performance Paradox: A Mixed-methods Study of Discourse Strategies and Paradox Resolution

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ABSTRACT

Call center agents face the performance paradox of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness. To understand how agents resolve the performance paradox, we conducted a mixed-methods study with call center agents in a large financial services organization. In Study 1, we examined agents’ moves using a discourse analysis of calls. We discovered ten discourse moves that reflect two novel strategies for call center customer service: solidarity-building and conversation-control. In Study 2, we assessed the effects of the two discourse strategies on agents’ paradox resolution. Configurational analyses show that agents who resolved the paradox synthesized solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies effectively. Conversely, agents who emphasized only on solidarity-building or conversation-control experienced performance trade-offs. Our findings suggest that to overcome the triple trade-offs between courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness, call center agents must execute a complex dance of moves to build solidarity with callers while controlling the conversation. We discuss implications of our findings for research and practice on customer service and performance paradoxes.

Keywords:
performance management; interpersonal communication; virtual work; qualitative orientation; multilevel
Caller: I was asking … [sigh] … I don’t know why I have to ask so many people. Can you email me the [name of a policy] surrendering form?

Agent: I [will] send it [by post] to you. You give me your policy number?

Caller: No, no. Email me the surrendering form.

Agent: I cannot email, sir. If you want us to email, you’ve got to email to us. If you want, I can send the form [by post] to you.

Caller: How come you … [cannot] email to me, ah?

Agent: No, for [the] surrender [form], I think you’ve got to request. If you want I can send the form to you.

Caller: Yah, I’m requesting whether you can just email to me and I can just print [it] out.

Agent: But I cannot email from here. Email will be done by backroom.

Caller: Then, … you will ask the backroom guy to email to me.

Agent: You email to them to email to you … I can’t ask them to email because they need the policy holder to, to request.

Caller: Yah, which I’m requesting right now.

Agent: Okay, I’ll send it [by post] to you if you want.

Caller: [Sigh] … you don’t understand English or what? I said you email to me…

Since the early 1990s, call centers have “become the most important single source of customer contact” in developed information economies (Russell, 2008: 195). Besides granting customers convenient access to sales and after-sales support, call centers also enhance firms’ operational efficiencies by converting high-contact services to low-contact services through technology.
Despite these strategic benefits, call centers have posed significant challenges to both customers and call center employees, as illustrated in the above discourse. Hoffbrand (2007), for instance, found that less than two-thirds of customer service requests at call centers were successfully resolved. Research also shows that customers tend to express greater dissatisfaction with call center agents than with service agents they meet face-to-face (Bennington, Cummane, & Conn, 2000).

In addition, call centers are notoriously known as “white-collar sweatshops” where employees receive low pay and work under stressful conditions (Fernie & Metcalf, 1998). Apart from the high volume of calls and the repetitive and emotionally-demanding nature of work (Callaghan & Thompson, 2001), call center agents constantly have to grapple with competing demands in performing their jobs. On the one hand, call center agents are expected to be courteous and to spend time understanding customers’ needs, which may necessitate lengthy calls (Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Clark, Murfett, Rogers, & Ang, 2013; de Ruyter, Wetzels, & Feinberg, 2001). On the other hand, they are expected to resolve customers’ issues efficiently (i.e., end the call in the shortest time possible). Underlying these competing demands is a performance paradox between a focus on the customer (i.e., a relational focus on customer satisfaction), quantity (i.e., a transactional focus on call efficiency), and quality (i.e., a focus on the effectiveness of the resolution) (Ellway, 2014; Strandberg & Dalin, 2010). Dealing with these competing imperatives is a source of burnout and high turnover rates amongst call center agents, as well as customer dissatisfaction (Houlihan, 2002; Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986; Knights & McCabe, 1998; Sawyerr, Srinivas, & Wang, 2009).

Ultimately, the strategic value of call centers to firms hinges on the effectiveness of call center agents, since they are the ones who manage the boundary between firms and customers (Echchakoui & Baakil, 2018; Mills, Chase, & Marguiles, 1983). Hence, it is imperative that call
center agents know how to resolve the performance paradox of ensuring high-quality customer service while managing a high volume of calls effectively. However, our current understanding of call center agent performance has centered on the what – factors that affect call center agent effectiveness. Specifically, prior research has examined three major categories of antecedents: (1) individual differences such as conscientiousness (Witt, Andrews, & Carlson, 2004), emotional intelligence (Higgs, 2004), job resourcefulness (Ashill, Rod, Thirkell, & Carruthers, 2009), customer orientation (T. J. Brown, Mowen, Donavan, & Licata, 2002), and perspective-taking (Axtell, Parker, Holman, & Totterdell, 2007); (2) work design factors, including display autonomy (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007), time autonomy (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003), use of service scripts (Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Houlihan, 2002), feedback (Bakker et al., 2003; Ellway, 2013; Rod & Ashill, 2013), team-based designs (Valsecchi, Wise, Mueller, & Smith, 2012), supportive leadership (Bakker et al., 2003; Singh, 2000), electronic monitoring (Bain, Watson, Mulvey, Taylor, & Gall, 2002; Batt, 1999); and (3) organizational design, such as information technology, structure, and coordination processes (Rowe, Marciniak, & Clergeau, 2011). While these studies shed light on what factors affect call center agent performance, we know very little of how effective call center agents resolve the performance paradox of providing courteous and high-quality service while ensuring efficient calls (Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Ellway, 2014).

To complement existing research at the individual, work, and organizational levels of analysis, our research seeks to discover the discourse moves that effective call center agents use to address the performance paradox. A move is a “full stretch of talk or of its substitutes which has a distinctive unitary bearing on some set or other of the circumstances in which participants find themselves” (Goffman, 1981: 24). Moves are used widely in discourse analysis because they “have the desirable properties of being meaningful to interactants, related to the structural
properties of the situation” (Pentland, 1992: 530). Studying moves enables us to systematically analyze the “in-situ” behaviors of call center agents, that is, their actions situated in the context of handling a call. In doing so, moves “express practical knowledge” (Pentland, 1992: 530) that could help call center agents manage the performance paradox inherent in their job.

We discover the moves of effective agents by using call discourse analysis. This involves examining the fundamental building block of agent performance: the discourse between agent and caller in each call. Specifically, we unpack the actual speech acts—utterances that carry out actions (Austin, 2005)—to understand the moves that are instrumental for resolving the performance paradox within each call episode (Rafaeli, Ziklik, & Doucet, 2008).

Few studies have used discourse analyses in the context of call centers. For instance, through analyses of call center agents’ speech acts, Rafaeli et al. (2008) identified five key behaviors that are associated with helping customers. They include anticipating customer requests, offering explanations, educating the customer, providing emotional support, and offering personalized information. In a study on offshored agents, Forey and Lockwood (2007) found that inadequate language fluency and limited linguistic choices negatively affected call center agent performance. In another study comparing Chinese and English call center interactions, Xu, Wang, Forey, and Li (2010) highlighted etic and emic structural features of call center discourse. Taken together, these studies have provided an in-depth understanding of the specific behaviors associated with service quality at the call discourse level (Rafaeli et al., 2008), as well as the linguistic challenges in offshore call centers (Forey & Lockwood, 2007; Xu et al., 2010). However, they do not address our question of how call center agents resolve the performance paradox of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness in their work.

Using a sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2003), we first conducted a qualitative study (Patton, 1990) using discourse analyses to uncover a more comprehensive range
of discourse strategies to resolve the performance paradox (Study 1). Second, we conducted a quantitative study to assess the effects of the discourse strategies in resolving the performance paradox of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness (Study 2).

Both studies were conducted in a call center of a large financial services company in Singapore (henceforth called “XYZ”). This call center was an ideal research site, as it handled a wide range of customer calls, from simple information requests to complex and sometimes tense discussions about the yield of financial products, the coverage provided by insurance policies, or the results of service failures. The call center operates with 26 agents and one manager and handles approximately 500 calls each day.

**STUDY 1: GROUNDED DISCOVERY OF DISCOURSE MOVES**

**Methods**

**Sampling.** We adopted a two-stage sampling procedure. In the first stage, we purposefully sampled our calls from three agents from XYZ with varying performance levels (Patton, 1990). This sampling strategy enables us to code and to compare the discourse moves of successful call resolutions versus less successful ones. The call center manager selected a total of 75 calls from three agents—25 calls each from the best, the worst, and an average performer. Agent performance was based on supervisor ratings. The calls were collected over a typical week. Each call averaged 2.62 minutes in length ($SD = 1.62$ minutes). We coded calls from this sample to arrive at our first set of discourse moves.

In the second stage, we sampled calls from each of the 26 agents as part of the member check procedure (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This allows us to assess the generalizability of the discourse moves discovered in the initial sample to the population of agents in the call center.
Coding and analysis. Prior to coding, we immersed ourselves in the call center so that we could code the calls in contextually-informed ways (Creswell, 2003). For six weeks, we observed the agents, listened to recorded calls, and discussed them with the agents. We also clarified their observations with the call center manager. In addition, we also read the code-of-conduct manual for the agents to understand the financial products and the common questions raised by customers.

Subsequently, two authors analyzed the call discourse using 75 calls from the three agents. They independently listened to the calls and read the transcripts, move by move, noting the apparent contribution of each move to call resolution. As described earlier, a conversation “move” is defined as “any full stretch of talk or its substitutes which has a distinct unitary bearing on some set or other of the circumstances in which participants find themselves” (Goffman, 1981: 24). Specifically, the coding of the initial sample of calls involved two steps:

1. Open coding of discourse moves to identify first-order concepts. The two authors independently identified descriptive phrases that capture discourse moves of the agents that assisted call resolution. They then met to review their coding and arrived at a preliminary list of first-order concepts (Corley & Gioia, 2004) through an iterative process of standardizing descriptions and resolving all discrepancies in their coding.

2. Axial coding to convert first-order concepts to abstract, second-order constructs. The two authors grouped similar first-order concepts into more abstract categories. They then developed theoretical labels for these second-order constructs (Pratt, 2009) by listening to the calls again. They iterated between independent and consultative axial coding until they reached theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
Discourse analyses of the initial sampling of 75 calls yielded 19 second-order constructs (i.e., discourse moves). To validate and refine these initial results, the two authors selected and coded a sample of calls from the 26 agents using the 19 discourse moves. They found the 19 moves comprehensive and relevant to calls from all agents. Subsequently, the authors met with the 26 agents individually (for 20 to 30 minutes) to review the 19 discourse moves and to understand the intent of the agents when applying these moves in a sample of their calls. Based on insights from the agents, the two authors combined overlapping constructs to achieve greater parsimony in their list of discourse moves. For instance, “give a relevant explanation,” “suggest/guide,” “clarify/explain,” and “correct misunderstandings” were combined into “educate the caller.” The final list consisted of ten discourse moves.

Finally, the authors performed a Q-sort (Block, 1961) to clarify the conceptual distinctiveness of the ten discourse moves. They grouped the ten second-order constructs by considering the relationships and common elements among them. They reviewed and discussed the sorting until they unanimously agreed on two aggregate discourse strategies—solidarity-building and conversation-control.

Results

Figure 1 depicts the final data structure consisting of representative first-order concepts, the ten second-order constructs, and the two aggregate themes (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Table 1 shows representative actions (first-order concepts) that substantiate the discourse moves (second-order constructs) for building solidarity and controlling conversations (aggregate strategies). Note the use of Singlish—a local version of English influenced by the Malay language and Chinese dialects—in many of the conversations.
Solidarity-building is the first aggregate strategy; it describes agents’ moves to convey a sense of partnership with the caller to address the caller’s concerns. Agents’ solidarity-building moves are egalitarian in nature, inviting mutuality in addressing the task. Solidarity-building moves recast the agent-caller relationship by highlighting that neither the agent nor the caller is subservient; both possess critical knowledge that must be unearthed to address the problem at hand.

Solidarity-building goes beyond customer orientation strategies (e.g., treat “the customer as the king”) identified in prior call center research (Rafaeli et al., 2008) and involves discourse moves to invite collaboration from the caller to solve the problem. These include soliciting the customer’s collaboration, identifying their preferences, emphasizing positive views, and showing attentiveness to the caller. This finding suggests that besides proactivity in serving callers, agents need to enact influence behaviors (Falbe & Yukl, 1992; Yukl, Seifert, & Chavez, 2008) to secure callers’ participation in the search for a solution. The seven distinct solidarity-building moves we identified can be combined in various ways to forge a partnership with the caller to resolve the issue at hand.

Conversation-control is the second aggregate strategy; it describes moves to speed up the pace of calls and expedite resolution. These include accelerating turn-taking, paraphrasing the caller’s statements, and summarizing the conversation. As with solidarity-building strategies, conversation-control strategies challenge the prevailing notion that agents should behave as subservient service workers. Instead, they suggest a more assertive role for agents, who invite and acknowledge caller input while hastening the progression of the call. Agents enacting
conversation-control moves expedite call resolution by reducing miscommunication and irrelevant exchanges.

**Discussion: Study 1**

Our discourse analyses in Study 1 yielded ten discourse moves reflecting the two aggregate strategies of solidarity-building and conversation-control. These conversation moves enable agents to resolve calls effectively. It is interesting to note that three of our seven solidarity-building moves—anticipate the caller’s needs, educate the caller, and offer emotional support— overlap with the customer orientation behaviors previously identified in Rafaeli et al. (2008).

While Rafaeli et al.’s focus was to uncover “employee behaviors that indicate an interest in serving customers but are not a part of the employee’s formal job description” (Rafaeli et al., 2008: 241), our focus was on the strategies that facilitate call resolution. This perspective has yielded seven new discourse moves that were not in Rafaeli et al.’s (2008) study. They include moves to create mutual partnerships with the caller (through soliciting caller’s collaboration, identifying caller preferences, emphasizing a positive viewpoint, and showing attentiveness), as well as moves to adopt a more assertive role in directing and checking callers’ contributions (through accelerating turn-taking, paraphrasing customers’ statements, and summarizing the conversation).

**STUDY 2: EXAMINING THE CONCURRENT VALIDITY OF SOLIDARITY-BUILDING AND CONVERSATION-CONTROL STRATEGIES**

Building on Study 1, Study 2 assesses the effects of solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies on call agents’ performance outcomes. In XYZ, call center agents were evaluated on three primary outcomes: courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Courtesy refers to the display of politeness, deference, and emotional regulation. Efficiency refers to the completion of the call in the shortest possible time while effectiveness refers to the
resolution of the caller’s inquiry or problem (Helms & Mayo, 2008; Robinson & Morley, 2006; Taylor & Bain, 1999).

These outcomes reflect the performance paradox frequently documented in the call center literature (Ellway, 2014). For instance, being courteous usually requires the agent to be patient and to spend time building rapport with the caller. Similarly, to resolve calls effectively and avoid repeat calls, the agent usually needs to spend more time getting details to understand the caller’s needs. At the call level, achieving courtesy and effectiveness could potentially come at the expense of call efficiency.

We assess the effects of solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies on the performance outcomes using both dimensional and configurational analyses (Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993). The dimensional analysis adopts a more reductionistic approach and tests the effects of solidarity-building and conversational-control strategies on courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness separately. Configurational analysis, on the other hand, is a more holistic approach and recognizes that while courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness are distinct outcomes, they occur together and cannot be examined in isolation (Meyer et al., 1993). Configurational analysis allows us to identify the different constellations of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness outcomes that are commonly found in the calls, and how solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies contribute to these constellations of outcomes. Below, we describe our methods and results of Study 2.

**Methods**

**Sampling.** We sampled calls gathered over one year for 26 call center agents in XYZ. Five calls were collected from each agent for each month, yielding a total of 1,560 calls. From this sample, we eliminated 973 calls that were incomplete, inaudible, or irrelevant. These include
calls that are purely concerned with routine transactions or where the agent said little more than “Yes, that’s correct.”

From the remaining 587 calls, we selected calls that agents perceived as stressful due to customer aggression or ambiguity (Dorman & Zapf, 2004). We focused on stressful calls because such calls increase the likelihood of task errors (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007), yield greater performance variation, and require more skill to resolve. To do so, one author and a research assistant evaluated all calls based on an eight-item social stressor scale (Dormann & Zapf, 2004) using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not true at all to 7 = absolutely true). Each person listened independently to these calls and rated them on the level of social stress. Calls with a total score of eight and above were selected since at least one of the eight social stressors was present in these calls. The two researchers discussed all discrepancies until they reached a consensus on the final sample of calls to be included in Study 2. A total of 289 calls met the criteria of social stress.

**Independent variables.** The two independent variables in this study are solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies, consisting of the ten discourse moves. Another author and a different research assistant coded the 289 calls for their use of the ten discourse moves on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not used and 7 = extensive use). ICC(2,2) values for all discourse moves exceed 0.70, indicating acceptable inter-rater agreement (LeBreton & Senter, 2008).

Solidarity-building was measured with seven items, corresponding to the seven discourse moves shown in Table 1: solicit the caller’s collaboration (ICC(2,2) = 0.93), identify the caller’s preferences (ICC(2,2) = 0.96), anticipate the caller’s needs (ICC(2,2) = 0.90), show attentiveness (ICC(2,2) = 0.81), educate the caller (ICC(2,2) = 0.91), emphasize a positive viewpoint (ICC(2,2) = 0.81), and offer emotional support (ICC(2,2) = 0.98). Cronbach’s α for this measure is 0.93.

Conversation-control strategies was measured with three items, corresponding to the three discourse strategies shown in Table 1: accelerate turn taking (ICC(2,2) = 0.88), paraphrase the
caller’s statements (ICC(2,2) = 0.91), and summarize the conversation (ICC(2,2) = 0.93).

Cronbach’s α is 0.73.

**Dependent variables.** The three dependent variables are courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Courtesy and effectiveness were coded by listening to the 289 calls. To minimize common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), these variables were coded by a third author and a trained research assistant. Neither one was involved in the coding of the independent variables (i.e., discourse moves). Both listened to a selection of calls and discussed the level of courtesy and effectiveness. They then scored a series of calls independently, compared their ratings, and discussed the discrepancies. This process was repeated for 30 calls until high reliability and agreement (ICC(2,2) > 0.80) was achieved. After this, the two coders independently scored courtesy and effectiveness in the remaining calls. All ICC(2,2) values exceeded 0.70, indicating acceptable inter-rater agreement (LeBreton & Senter, 2008).

Consistent with the literature on courtesy in service interactions, we measured courtesy with three indicators: politeness and deference to the caller (e.g., Grandey, Dieter, & Sin, 2004; Wilk & Moynihan, 2005; ICC(2,2) = 0.90), respect for the caller (e.g., P. Brown & Levinson, 1987; ICC(2,2) = 0.87), and emotional regulation in the face of provocation (Hochschild, 2003; ICC(2,2) = 0.89). Cronbach’s α for courtesy is 0.88.

Efficiency refers to the speed of call resolution. We measured using call duration—or handling time—which is a common metric for the evaluation of agent efficiency in call centers (Feinberg, Kim, Hokama, de Ruyter, & Keen, 2000). A higher value for call duration represents lower efficiency. The average duration of calls in the final sample is 5.50 minutes ($SD = 4.18$ minutes).
Effectiveness refers to goal accomplishment from the caller’s perspective (Spitzberg, 2003). This includes high-quality resolution of the caller’s problem or obtaining correct and concise information (Conrad & Haynes, 2001). We measured effectiveness with two items that assessed the extent to which the agent addressed and answered caller’s requests ($ICC(2,2) = 0.89$); and provided relevant information ($ICC(2,2) = 0.87$). Cronbach’s $\alpha$ is 0.88.

**Control variables.** To assess the incremental concurrent validity of the discourse moves on the dependent variables, we controlled for agents’ individual differences and call characteristics. At the agent level, we controlled for emotional intelligence, which prior research has related to call center performance (e.g., Higgs, 2004). We measured emotional intelligence with 16 items ($\alpha = 0.87$) from Wong and Law (2002). We also controlled for low- and high-context communication, as this is one of the most relevant cultural value orientations for interpersonal communication (Cardon & Okoro, 2010; Hall, 1959; Okabe, 1983) that can influence agents’ handling of calls (Das, Dharwadkar, & Brandes, 2008; Pal & Buzzanell, 2008). Specifically, agents with low-context communication orientation tend to convey their meaning more directly and explicitly in their spoken messages than those with high-context communication orientation. We assessed this value orientation with four items from Van Dyne (2010) (low-context communication: $\alpha = 0.95$; high-context communication: $\alpha = 0.78$).

In addition, we controlled for age (in years), sex (0 = female; 1 = male), and education (1 = junior high school; 2 = senior high school; 3 = community college degree; 4 = Bachelor’s degree; 5 = Master’s degree). All individual-level data were collected from the call center agents using a paper-based survey before the calls were sampled.

At the call level, we controlled for the level of social stress in each call. As described earlier, social stress was assessed by two researchers using an eight-item measure (Dormann & Zapf, 2004) on a seven-point Likert scale ($1 = not true at all$ to $7 = absolutely true$).
We conducted confirmatory factor analyses to establish the discriminant validity of the independent and dependent variables at the call level, using the Lavaan program in R (Rosseel, 2012) with maximum-likelihood estimation procedures. The hypothesized six-factor model—solidarity-building strategies, conversation-control strategies, courtesy, efficiency, effectiveness, and social stress—indicated good fit to the data ($\chi^2 [52df] = 146.27, p < .001$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .03).

In addition, this hypothesized six-factor model was superior to six other plausible models, including: (a) a four-factor model that combined solidarity-building strategies and conversation-control strategies as one factor and efficiency and effectiveness as one factor ($\Delta \chi^2 [8df] = 158.31, p < .001$), (b) a four-factor model that combined solidarity-building strategies and conversation-control strategies as one factor and courtesy and effectiveness as one factor ($\Delta \chi^2 [9df] = 364.44, p < .001$), (c) a four-factor model that combined solidarity-building strategies and conversation-control strategies as one factor and courtesy and efficiency as one factor ($\Delta \chi^2 [8df] = 174.52, p < .001$), (d) a four-factor model that combined courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness as one factor ($\Delta \chi^2 [8df] = 346.13, p < .001$), (e) a two-factor model that combined all independent and control variables (solidarity-building strategies, conversation-control strategies, and social stress) as one factor and all dependent variables (courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness) as one factor ($\Delta \chi^2 [12df] = 428.74, p < .001$), and (f) a one-factor model ($\Delta \chi^2 [13df] = 879.36, p < .001$).

Tables 2 and 3 present the descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and scale reliabilities for all call-level (level-1) and agent-level (level-2) variables respectively.

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Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

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**Dimensional analysis.** We conducted random coefficient modeling to account for the
multilevel structure of our data, where calls (level-1) were nested within individual agents (level-2). For each performance outcomes (i.e., courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness), we estimated four random coefficient models. Model 1 includes level-2 (agent-level) control variables, namely sex, age, education, emotional intelligence, low-context communication, and high-context communication. In Model 2, we added level-1 (call-level) control variable of social stress. In Model 3, we added solidarity-building strategies and conversation-control strategies as independent variables. In Model 4, we added the interaction term between solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies to examine whether the two strategies had interactive effects on the outcome.

We ran all analyses using version 3.0 of the Nonlinear and Linear Mixed Effects (NLME) program in S-Plus and R (Pinheiro & Bates, 2000). We computed $R^2$ (level-1) using the approach recommended by Snijders and Bosker (1994), which estimates the call-level variance explained by predictors in the model. Table 4 presents random coefficient modeling results for performance outcomes of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Insert Table 4 about here

For courtesy, effects for both solidarity-building strategies ($b = 0.38$, s.e. = 0.05, $p < .001$) and conversation-control strategies ($b = -0.18$, s.e. = 0.06, $p < .01$) were significant, albeit in opposite directions (Table 4, Model 3a). Solidarity-building was positively related to courtesy while conversation-control was negatively related to courtesy.

We further examined the relative importance of solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies for courtesy using dominance analysis (Luo & Azen, 2013). We compared the relative importance of the two strategies over subsets of level-1 variables (i.e., social stress,
solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies) while including level-2 controls. Results showed that the average incremental variance explained by solidarity-building strategies across subset models was 19.2% while that of conversation-control strategies was 2.6%. This suggests that solidarity-building strategies are more important for courtesy than are conversation-control strategies. Although conversation-control has a negative effect on courtesy, its magnitude is relatively small compared to the positive impact of solidarity-building strategies.

The interaction between solidarity-building and conversation-control was not significant \((b = 0.04, \text{s.e.} = 0.03, ns)\) (Table 4, Model 4a), indicating that they have additive effects, rather than an interactive effect, on courtesy.

For efficiency, effects for both solidarity-building strategies \((b = 0.46, \text{s.e.} = 0.20, p < .05)\) and conversation-control strategies \((b = –0.92, \text{s.e.} = 0.24, p < .001)\) were also significant and in opposite directions (Table 4, Model 3b).

Dominance analysis showed that the average incremental variance explained by solidarity building across subset models was 0.7%. By contrast, the average incremental variance explained by conversation-control strategies was 4.6%. These results show that conversation-control strategies are more important for efficiency. Although solidarity-building has a negative effect on efficiency, its impact is relatively small compared to the positive impact of conversation-control strategies on call efficiency. It is also worth noting that the duration of calls is significantly driven by social stress, which explained an average of 19.4% of variance across subset models. This suggests that evaluating agents’ performance based on call duration may unfairly penalize them for factors beyond their control (e.g., customer aggression and ambiguity).

The interaction between solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies was not significant \((b = –0.09, \text{s.e.} = 0.14, ns)\) (Table 4, Model 4b), indicating the presence of additive effects only.
For effectiveness, effects for both solidarity-building strategies ($b = 0.16, \text{s.e.} = 0.05, p < .01$) and conversation-control strategies ($b = 0.14, \text{s.e.} = 0.06, p < .05$) were positively significant (Table 4, Model 3c). Dominance analysis shows that both solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies are equally important for predicting effectiveness. The average incremental variance explained by solidarity-building was 7.4%, and 7.3% for conversation-control.

The interaction term was also significant ($b = -0.09, \text{s.e.} = 0.04, p < .05$) (Table 4, Model 4c). Simple slopes analysis (Bauer & Curran, 2005) shows that the relationship between solidarity-building and effectiveness is positive under low levels of conversation-control strategy, but is non-significant under high levels of conversation-control strategies (Figure 2). The pattern of interaction suggests that either solidarity-building or conversation-control is sufficient to ensure call effectiveness.

insert Figure 2 about here

**Configurational analysis.** We first conducted a cluster analysis on the outcome variables to determine the constellations of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness. We used a two-step procedure: pre-clusters are created in the first step and then clustered through a hierarchical agglomerative procedure in the second step. The final cluster solution is determined based on Schwarz’s Bayesian information criterion (BIC) (Schwarz, 1978).

Results yielded three performance clusters with different constellations of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness ratings (see Table 5). Univariate analyses of covariance based on random coefficient modeling (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002) and with Bonferroni corrections (Cabin & Mitchell, 2000) indicated significant differences across clusters, both in terms of the
discourse strategies and performance outcomes (solidarity-building strategies: $F(2, 260) = 24.87, p < .001$; conversation-control strategies: $F(2, 260) = 10.60, p < .001$; courtesy: $F(2, 260) = 181.94, p < .001$; efficiency: $F(2, 260) = 117.02, p < .001$; effectiveness: $F(2, 260) = 85.69, p < .001$). Table 5 shows the patterns of discourse strategies and performance outcomes for the three empirically-derived clusters of calls.

Cluster 1 ($n = 189$) represents calls in which agents successfully resolve the performance paradox. That is, calls in Cluster 1 rate higher on all three performance outcomes: courtesy ($M = 5.92; SD = 0.52$), efficiency ($M = 4.58; SD = 2.33$), and effectiveness ($M = 6.36; SD = 0.55$). Notably higher levels of solidarity-building strategies ($M = 3.95; SD = 1.39$) and conversation-control strategies ($M = 2.96; SD = 1.14$) are demonstrated in these calls compared to those in Clusters 2 and 3. These findings support the importance of both solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies for resolving the performance paradox in call centers.

Cluster 2 ($n = 31$) represents calls in which agents achieve courtesy at the expense of efficiency and effectiveness. That is, calls in Cluster 2 rate higher on courtesy ($M = 5.56; SD = 0.81$), but lower on efficiency ($M = 13.76; SD = 6.71$) and effectiveness ($M = 4.65; SD = 1.13$). Interestingly, these calls demonstrate moderate levels of solidarity-building strategies ($M = 3.21; SD = 1.16$) and relatively low levels of conversation-control strategies ($M = 2.00; SD = 1.06$). These findings reinforce that the lack of conversation-control strategies can negatively affect efficiency and effectiveness.

Finally, Cluster 3 ($n = 69$) represents calls in which agents achieve efficiency at the expense of courtesy and effectiveness. That is, calls in Cluster 3 rate higher on efficiency ($M =
4.33; \( SD = 2.07 \), but lower on courtesy \( (M = 4.15; SD = 0.68) \) and effectiveness \( (M = 5.14; SD = 1.19) \). Consistent with this emphasis on efficiency, these calls exhibit moderate levels of conversation-control strategies \( (M = 2.51; SD = 1.23) \) and lower levels of solidarity-building strategies \( (M = 2.58; SD = 1.11) \). These findings reinforce that lack of solidarity-building strategies can negatively affect courtesy and effectiveness.

**Discussion: Study 2**

Results of the dimensional and configurational analyses address different puzzles in our understanding of how solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies affect call agent’s courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness in handling calls. For instance, dimensional analyses demonstrate the importance of solidarity-building strategies for courtesy and conversation-control for efficiency. At the same time, they also suggest that solidarity-building strategies can negatively affect efficiency and conversation-control strategies can hurt courtesy, although these negative effects are smaller in magnitude compared to their positive effects. These results validate the importance of the discourse moves that we discovered in Study, but also reinforce the performance paradox of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Results of the configurational analyses address the performance paradox more directly by examining the three performance outcomes simultaneously in commonly-occurring constellations. Specifically, we found that agents who achieved courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the calls used a configuration of both solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies. Conversely, agents who used either of the two strategies tended to have performance trade-offs (e.g., those who used primarily solidarity-building tend to have poorer call efficiency).

**DISCUSSION**
Call center agents are often the first line of contact with customers and hence play an instrumental role in firms’ customer relationship management strategy. At the same time, the call center job is extremely challenging. Firms expect agents to manage a high volume of calls without sacrificing quality customer service. As a result, a daily challenge that call center agents grapple with is the performance paradox of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

To date, our understanding of call center agent performance has centered on the what – factors that affect call center agent effectiveness, rather than the how – how do call center agents simultaneously ensure courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness? To address this puzzle, we adopt a discourse level of analysis to examine the moves of call center agents in a qualitative study (Study 1), and how these moves contribute to resolving the performance paradox in a quantitative study (Study 2). We discuss our discoveries below and their implications for research and practice.

**Discovery #1: From Serving to Solidarity-building**

Our first discovery is the construct of solidarity-building, which shifts the call center agent’s role from one of “service to the caller” to one of “solidarity-building and partnering with the caller.” Solidarity-building strategies include seven discourse strategies that may be combined in different ways to forge a working agent-caller partnership: solicit the caller’s collaboration, identify the caller’s preferences, anticipate the caller’s needs, show attentiveness, educate the caller, emphasize a positive viewpoint, and offer emotional support.

The notion of solidarity-building challenges traditional models of customer service as “docile service workers offering depersonalized care to sometimes aggressive but not much more agential customers” (Bolton & Houlihan, 2005: 686). Instead, solidarity-building promotes the view that the agent can initiate and sustain an interaction where both the agent and the caller are educating, assisting, and advising each other throughout the call. It is a strategy where neither
party acquiesces to the other’s requests or demands, but where both parties contribute what they
know to get the problem resolved. Solidarity-building transforms a “you” mentality to a “we”
mentality where the agent and the caller work together as a team to solve the problem.

Solidarity-building moves are distinct from the use of polite scripts. Our research revealed
that while an agent may follow the greeting script (“Good morning, XYZ, XXX speaking, how
can I help you?”) and use words such as “Please,” “Thank you,” “Sir/Madam,” these are generic
givens for calls rather than discourse moves that invite and engage the caller to solve the
problem.

Solidarity-building moves are also distinct from customer orientation behaviors, defined as
a keen “interest in serving customers” (Rafaeli et al., 2008: 241). Call center agents may be
highly motivated to serve callers’ needs, but they may not be able to do so without securing
callers’ collaboration. Callers’ collaboration is essential for various reasons. For instance, as
callers have different needs, agents need to actively involve callers to identify their needs.
Moreover, callers often lack a clear understanding of the products or services they have
purchased or find it hard to articulate their needs. As such, agents must work with callers to guide
and actively shape their perceptions, such as through educating the callers and emphasizing
positive viewpoints to ascertain and meet the real needs of the callers.

**Discovery #2: From Acquiescence to Assertiveness**

Our second discovery is the construct of conversation-control, which shifts the traditional
customer service notion from being acquiescent to being assertive. This strategy is crucial for
expediting calls to save time for both the agent and the caller. Conversation-control includes three
strategies: *accelerate turn taking*, *paraphrase the caller’s statements*, and *summarize the
collection*. 
Not surprisingly, conversation-control strategies have rarely been suggested as an important discourse strategy for call center agents (for an exception, see Eveleth & Morris, 2002). This is because the notion of taking control of the conversation runs counter to the longstanding view of the customer as a “mythical sovereign” (Bolton & Houlihan, 2005: 685) and traditional customer orientation concepts that emphasize perspective-taking of (Axtell et al., 2007) and accommodation to customers’ needs (Dean, 2007; Helms & Mayo, 2008; McNally, 2007).

However, a measure of assertiveness is critical to managing calls. Call center conversations are in some respects one-sided in terms of responsibility because agents are held accountable by both their organization and callers for wasted time. To reduce call duration, agents are sometimes asked to restrict the range of topics, to shorten pauses between verbal exchanges, and to exit the call as soon as possible. Even agents perceive some of these tactics as discourteous, including accelerating turn taking as it has been traditionally understood: “You can’t let [callers] think you’re trying to get rid of them, or they’ll get annoyed” (agent 1012). Thus, while conversation-control strategies may appear discourteous, failure to use them hinders speedy resolution and creates inefficiency.

**Discovery #3: From Trade-off to Synthesis**

Our third discovery is to understand how a configuration of solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies can be applied to achieve courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness simultaneously. Intuitively, we expect solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies to lead to trade-offs in different performance outcomes. For instance, agents who display high solidarity-building should take longer to resolve the call while agents who display high conversation-control should be less courteous. This logic was supported in the dimensional analyses in Study 2, although results of the dominance analyses suggest that the positive effects outweigh the negative effects.
Configurational analyses, however, show that it is possible to manage the performance paradox of courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Results of cluster analyses demonstrate that 65% of the calls in our sample achieved courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness simultaneously, compared to 35% of the calls that were low in at least one of the three performance outcomes. The difference between calls that achieved all three outcomes versus those that did not hinge on whether agents used both solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies to resolve the calls.

These findings provide empirical proof that it is possible for agents to expedite call resolution without sacrificing courtesy or effectiveness. More importantly, our results showed how agents resolved the paradox effectively. Calls that met all three performance criteria demonstrated higher levels of solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies. This suggests that effective call center agents need to interweave discourse moves for solidarity-building with discourse moves for conversation-control. Much as this may seem obvious, the ability required to execute such a complex dance of moves should not be underestimated. For agents to consciously alternate between inviting collaboration and asserting control in a single call episode is a daunting task. This is not even taking into account the domain expertise that they need to have to provide the right solutions.

To determine the practical significance of our discoveries, we presented our research findings to the call center manager and agents. A key insight for them was the discourse moves that explained performance outcomes in courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Although the manager and agents were aware of differences in agents’ ability to manage the performance paradox, they had attributed the performance variation to agents’ domain knowledge (e.g., knowledge of products, regulations, and procedures), years of call center experience, and personality. By making explicit the types of discourse moves that contributed to effective calls,
our findings provided practical knowledge to the call center agents in our study and enhanced their level of agency in handling stressful calls.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Our findings have several implications for service employee performance research in general. First, our discovery of solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies, together with their specific discourse moves, offer a revised view of customer orientation behaviors. The prevailing notion of customer orientation, as suggested by Rafaeli et al. (2008), has centered on the agent’s proactivity in serving the customer. Indeed, our research validates these behaviors. Amongst the seven discourse moves under solidarity-building, three (anticipate the caller’s needs, educate the caller, and offer emotional support) are similar to Rafaeli et al.’s dimensions.

Importantly, our research uncovers seven new discourse moves that suggest a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of customer orientation. These moves are: soliciting the caller’s collaboration, identifying the caller’s preferences, showing attentiveness, emphasizing a positive viewpoint, accelerating turn-taking, paraphrasing the caller’s statements, and summarizing the conversation. Collectively, these new discourse moves highlight a shift from the prevailing view of the “customer as king,” to a more egalitarian view of the “customer as a partner.” Casting the customer as a partner implies that service agents need to have skills to actively engage and influence customers as equals and to create a sense of working together as a team to address the customers’ needs.

Second, our focus on the discourse level of analysis opens up new avenues for theory-building and future research on customer service. Existing research on service employee performance has predominantly focused on the individual (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Frei & McDaniel, 1998) or the organizational (e.g. Borucki & Burke, 1999; Johnson, 1996; Schneider, 1990; Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998) level of analyses. More recent studies have also adopted a
multilevel perspective, typically integrating team or organizational factors with individual differences (e.g., Liao & Chuang, 2004).

We suggest that a neglected and promising level of analysis is at the discourse level. Studying customer service interactions at the micro-level of discourse moves in a service agent-customer interaction offers deep insights into the “how” question, as moves express practical knowledge meaningful to the interactants in the situation (Pentland, 1992). Given that discourse moves cannot be isolated from the context in which they occur, research in other customer service contexts should validate our findings and also seek to discover new moves that contribute to service performance as required in those contexts. These findings on discourse moves can be applied to multilevel models of service employee performance as behavioral mediators of individual-level factors (e.g., personality) and customer service effectiveness. This line of inquiry helps to open up the black box of the distal relationship between personality traits and service performance.

Third, our current findings also shed light on how to advance research on performance paradox resolution beyond service contexts. Organizations are rife with performance paradoxes (Cameron, 1986; Smith & Lewis, 2011), from the organization level—as in the case of efficiency versus flexibility (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) or productivity versus innovation (He & Wong, 2004; Naveh & Erez, 2004; Smith, 2014)—to the call discourse level, as in this study. While scholars agree that meeting paradoxical performance demands is mutually enforcing and more adaptive in the long-term than is focusing on any single performance dimension (Cameron, 1986; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Wicks & St. Clair, 2007), relatively few studies describe specific, evidence-based practices for meeting divergent performance demands simultaneously (Smith, 2014).
Our study offers some ideas and general propositions on how paradoxes may be examined and resolved in organizations. The use of moves to analyze how interactants “transform one situation into a new situation,” given the context that they are in (Pentland, 1992: 530) offers a powerful approach to unpack the process of resolving paradox. Our research suggests that managing seemingly competing demands can be achieved through an interweaving of moves. In our case, these moves served to achieve solidarity-building (from “you” to “us”) as well as control to ensure efficient knowledge sharing. Future research can extend our findings by uncovering new moves and patterns of move-switching that are most effective in meeting the paradoxical performance demands in question.

In addition, we propose that configurational inquiry and analyses might be more suited to the study of paradoxes, than the traditional linear and reductionistic approach. As Meyer et al. (1993) suggest, reductionism assumes that organizations consist of loosely coupled parts that can be understood in isolation, while configurational inquiry views organizations as “tightly coupled amalgams entangled in bidirectional causal loops” (p. 1177). Paradoxes, by their nature, are tightly coupled and hence, lend themselves to a configurational approach to theory-building and theory-testing.

In terms of resolving organizational paradoxes, organizations must first acknowledge that competing goals are jointly critical to their long-term success and viability (see also Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). This may require adopting different time frames for assessing the accomplishment of different goals, perhaps for example, in the case of productivity and innovation (e.g., He & Wong, 2004; Naveh & Erez, 2004; Smith, 2014) or social and commercial demands (Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012; Smith, Gonin, & Besharov, 2013). Further, organizations should allocate resources for fulfilling competing goals, recognizing that the ultimate aim is not
to attain maximal levels of any single outcome—at the expense of others—but to achieve an optimal mix that best serves their long-time interests.

Finally, our findings have important implications for customer service employees training. First, we suggest that service employees receive training on the discourse moves for meeting customers’ requests in a courteous, efficient, and effective manner. Past research demonstrates that discourse strategies can be trained (e.g., Dickson, Markova, & Bohn, 2010; Fallowfield, Jenkins, Farewell, & Solis-Trapala, 2003; Hahn et al., 2010). For example, in a study by Hahn et al. (2010), community physicians underwent an intervention that taught them discourse strategies to convey collaboration—rather than interrogation—in their encounters with patients with non-adherence issues, to increase patient adherence. After a three-hour training, physicians significantly improved their discourse strategies, based on discourse analysis of videotaped physicians’ encounters with patients before and after training.

A similar approach could be adopted to train customer service providers—like those in the call center we studied—on how to diagnose customer needs and combine solidarity-building and conversation-control strategies to build relationships that expedite work. Discourse strategies can be taught through response and role plays based on video-simulated customer encounters. The role plays could simulate stressful service encounters and introduce creative solutions that bridge the seemingly paradoxical performance demands on the service agent. We also suggest that service agents receive frequent feedback on their discourse moves and how they contribute to courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness. This could be achieved through self-reflection as well as observations from peers and supervisors.

Limitations

We believe that this research—which combines a qualitative, inductive approach, with a quantitative approach—offers rare and valuable insights into dynamics in call center
discourse. As our data came from one call center in Singapore, future research should examine the generalizability of our findings to other organizational and national contexts. Our discovery of solidarity-building as an effective discourse strategy in call centers could arise from the relatively collectivistic culture of Singapore, where working collaboratively is highly valued (Hofstede, 1984). It will be interesting to examine whether such a strategy will be effective in more individualistic cultures such as the United States.

CONCLUSION

A major challenge faced by call center agents is the performance paradox of ensuring courtesy, efficiency, and effectiveness in handling calls. Failure to manage this performance paradox has been a key source of customer dissatisfaction as well as service agent burnout and turnover. Our research offers a fresh perspective on the literature by taking a deep look into how call center agents manage their discourse with the caller. By discovering the discourse moves that resolve the performance paradox, we hope to empower call center agents (and service agents in others contexts) in their role and improve their well-being. We also hope this research excites scholars to discover new discourse strategies to resolve performance paradoxes, not only in call centers but also in other work contexts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solidarity-building Strategies:</th>
<th>Example of Call Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner with the caller to address the caller’s concern.</td>
<td>(Agent): “How about I send you the form, you submit it and when it comes back ‘denied’ you can use the denial as evidence for your argument.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Solicit the caller’s collaboration.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Approach the caller as a teammate to identify and resolve a shared issue or problem.</td>
<td>(Agent): “Would you consider changing your payments from monthly to annually?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Identify the caller’s preferences.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Ask the caller what action is desired or whether a particular approach is acceptable.</td>
<td>(Agent): “Yes, that’s true. In addition, you need to call your bank. Their customer service number is…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Anticipate the caller’s needs.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Perceive unstated needs or concerns and offer help or information without being asked or pushed by the caller.</td>
<td>(Caller): [If the deduction is not successful] will you terminate the policy?”&lt;br&gt;(Agent): “No, we won’t terminate the policy, we’ll…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Show attentiveness.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Acknowledge verbally the caller’s comments to demonstrate engagement and listening throughout the call.</td>
<td>(Agent): “Compare the interest rate now with what it was in the 80s, it’s different, right?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Educate the caller.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Give information to the caller, often interpreted and elaborated with examples, comparisons, statistics, and data analysis.</td>
<td>(Agent): “It’s quite attractive, $80,000 [if you keep the policy] compared to $50,000 [if you cash it in now].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. Emphasize a positive viewpoint.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Promote to the caller positive aspects, opportunities, benefits, and what can be done.</td>
<td>(Agent): “I understand what you mean, so what I’ll do is…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. Offer emotional support.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Show understanding of the caller’s predicament, point of view, or feelings.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 1 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation-control Strategies:</th>
<th>Example of Call Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expedite the call and its resolution.</td>
<td>(Agent): “You just let me explain first ma’am. Because … if later on you feel like you don’t want to continue the policy you can still cancel this policy, you will still have some money back.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. Accelerate turn taking.</strong> Speed up the call by disallowing gaps, interrupting, changing topics, and finishing caller sentences or thoughts.</td>
<td>(Caller): “So it will be credited tomorrow, right?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9. Paraphrase the caller’s statements.</strong> Rephrase the caller’s words or phrases to ensure understanding as a listening or summary technique.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10. Summarize the conversation.</strong> Organize the content by juxtaposing, listing, and reviewing the information received.</td>
<td>(Agent): “Let me list the steps for you again…First you…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 2

Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Scale Reliabilities for Call-level (Level-1) Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Solidarity-building strategies</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conversation-control strategies</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.64**</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Courtesy</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Efficiency (call duration in minutes)(^1)</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.22**</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Effectiveness</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>-0.22**</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Social stress</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.16**</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>-0.25**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. N = 289. Values on the diagonal in parentheses are scale reliabilities.
\(^1\)A longer call duration represents lower efficiency.
** p < .01
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sex (0 = female; 1 = male)</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>30.81</td>
<td>7.91</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Education</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.40*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Emotional intelligence</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Low-context communication</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. High-context communication</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. *N* = 26. Values on the diagonal in parentheses are scale reliabilities.

* *p* < 0.5
### TABLE 4

Random Coefficient Modeling Results for Performance Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level-2 Variables</th>
<th>Courtesy</th>
<th>Efficiency (call duration in minutes)</th>
<th>Effectiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1a</td>
<td>Model 2a</td>
<td>Model 3a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (0 = female; 1 = male)</td>
<td>0.30 (0.19)</td>
<td>0.32 (0.20)</td>
<td>0.23 (0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.08 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional intelligence</td>
<td>0.19 (0.18)</td>
<td>0.22 (0.18)</td>
<td>0.15 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-context communication</td>
<td>-0.03 (0.12)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.13)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-context communication</td>
<td>-0.21 (0.14)</td>
<td>-0.20 (0.15)</td>
<td>-0.09 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level-1 Variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social stress</td>
<td>-0.16* (0.08)</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity-building strategies</td>
<td>0.38*** (0.05)</td>
<td>0.37*** (0.05)</td>
<td>0.46* (0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation-control strategies</td>
<td>-0.18** (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.19*** (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.92*** (0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level-1 Interaction Effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity-building strategies x Conversation-control strategies</td>
<td>0.04 (0.03)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.09 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation-control strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ (Level-1)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.22 (0.22)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Notes. N (Level-1) = 289 calls; N (Level-2) = 26 call agents. Parameter estimates are unstandardized. Standard errors are in parentheses.
# TABLE 5

Mean Comparisons of Discourse Strategies and Performance Outcomes for Three Empirically-Derived Performance Clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clusters</th>
<th>Discourse Strategies</th>
<th>Performance Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 1:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Solidarity-Building Strategies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cluster 2:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High courtesy, efficiency, &amp; effectiveness</td>
<td>Mean 3.95&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Mean 3.21&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(n = 189)</em></td>
<td>SD 1.39</td>
<td>SD 1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 2:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conversation-Control Strategies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cluster 3:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High courtesy; Low efficiency &amp; effectiveness</td>
<td>Mean 2.96&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Mean 2.00&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(n = 31)</em></td>
<td>SD 1.14</td>
<td>SD 1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 3:</strong></td>
<td><strong>High efficiency; Low courtesy &amp; effectiveness</strong></td>
<td><strong>High courtesy; Low efficiency &amp; effectiveness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(n = 69)</em></td>
<td><strong>Mean 6.36&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mean 4.65&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SD 0.55</strong></td>
<td><strong>SD 1.13</strong></td>
<td><strong>SD 1.19</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes.** 1 Mean comparisons are based on analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with random coefficient modeling: sex, age, education, emotional intelligence, low-context communication, high-context communication, and social stress are covariates and dummy-coded cluster membership is the independent variable. Means with different superscripts are significantly different from each other (*p* < .05; Bonferroni-corrected).

2 A longer call duration represents lower efficiency.
FIGURE 1
Data Structure

Representative First-Order Concepts

Refer to the caller as a teammate (e.g., say “We” to refer to agent and caller).
Propose an action that the caller can take to resolve his/her issue.

Ask what action is desired.
Ask whether a particular approach is acceptable.

Perceive unstated needs or concerns.
Offer help or information without being asked or pushed by the caller.

Interject with “Yes”, “OK”, “Mmm”.
Mirror keywords to demonstrate engagement and listening throughout the call.

Explain policies to the caller.
Interpret information for the caller, often elaborated by examples, comparisons, statistics, and data analysis.

Promote positive aspects, opportunities, benefits and what can be done.

Show understanding of the caller’s predicament.
Acknowledge the caller’s point of view or feelings.

Interrupting, disallowing gaps of silence, and finishing caller sentences or thoughts.
Switch topics when callers digress from the need problem at hand.

Rephrase the caller’s words or phrases to ensure understanding as a listening or summary technique.

Organize the call’s content by juxtaposing, listing, and reviewing the information received.

Second-Order Constructs

Solicit the caller’s collaboration

Identify the caller’s preferences

Anticipate the caller’s needs

Show attentiveness

Educate the caller

Emphasize a positive viewpoint

Offer emotional support

Accelerate turn taking

Paraphrase the caller’s statements

Summarize the conversation

Aggregate Themes

Solidarity-building strategies

Conversation-control strategies
FIGURE 2

Interaction between Solidarity-building Strategies and Conversation-control Strategies on Effectiveness
REFERENCES


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