



Communication and Entrepreneurship: Influence Tactics in Business Support Situations

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Abstract. Securing and improving the start-up process requires matching communicational strategies with business support objectives and situations. Over a period of five years, we did field research in a business incubator in the Paris area to identify the communicational strategies that business support professionals use in order to influence nascent entrepreneurs' attitudes and behaviors. We categorized these strategies as persuasion, engagement, criticism, and provocation. We assessed their impact in terms of commitment, compliance, and resistance.

Keywords: entrepreneurial coaching, incubation, communicational strategies, performative communication.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

1. Introduction

The focus of this article is on entrepreneurial business support dyads conceived as purposeful interpersonal relationships. There are patterns of communication that facilitate or impede entrepreneurial behavior (West and Meyer, 1998). Securing and improving the start-up process thus require matching communicational strategies with business support objectives and situations. For the last twenty years, public and private resources were invested in entrepreneurship support programs and organizations, with coaches and mentors enrolled in dyadic relationships whose main objective was to guide and counsel entrepreneurs, so as to foster business launching and/or development (Hackett and Dilts, 2004; Rice, 2002). Still, little is known about the impact and outcomes of business support relationships at the individual level (Jaouen et al., 2006; Perren, 2003; Tötterman

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and Sten, 2005). Storey (1993) compared the provision of start-up support to a “lottery in which the odds of winning are not good (*ibid.*, p.6)”. However, evidence exists that coaching and mentoring interventions at the start-up and early development phases are beneficial to the survival and growth of young enterprises (Deakins et al., 1998; Sullivan, 2000), through increasing self-confidence, managerial skills (St-Jean and Audet, 2010; Wikholm et al., 2005), as well as the “ability to act as an entrepreneur” (Kent et al., 2003, p.11). No research has yet examined the impact of business support communication strategies in triggering attitude and/or behavioral change in nascent entrepreneurs.

The seminal work of Austin (1962) put forward a theory of interpersonal communication as a specific form of human action, with action characterized as intentional behavior (von Wright, 1971). Because intention is what gives behavior a purpose and directs it towards an end, communicative activities emerge and organize as strategic intention-based behaviors of language-in-use (Allwood, 1977). The pragmatic philosophical and linguistic tradition distinguishes among the *intended effects* (“illocutionary acts” in Austin’s terms) and the *achieved effects* (“perlocutionary acts”, *ibid.*) of communicative actions. Achieved effects correspond to the impact and outcomes of communication at the receiver level, in terms of cognitions, emotions, and subsequent actions. Drawing on speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), dialogue theories (Buber, 1958; Bakhtin, 1981), and theories of social interaction (Goffman, 1970), Clark (1996) emphasized that communicative actions rarely occur in isolation, but rather sequentially in interaction since language use is a form of “joint action”, with individuals acting in coordination with one another. From a social constructivist perspective, “the primary human reality is persons in conversation” (Harré, 1983, p. 58). Interpersonal communication is thus emphasized as a major means of structuring and organizing social reality, that Gergen (1994) chose to illustrate by a symbolic replacement of the Cartesian “*cogito ergo sum*” with the dialogical “*communicamus ergo sum*” (p. viii).

If interpersonal communication is a specific form of human action, thereby communication theories may be an interesting asset to the study of entrepreneurial behavior, along with the socio-constructivist existing approaches (Bird and West, 1998) or the substantive approaches (Dimov 2011). The epistemological standpoint of this article is that interpersonal communication can be studied as an explanatory factor in its own right (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2008). A better understanding of the “language games” (Wittgenstein, 1965) that business support professionals play with entrepreneurs throughout the process of business launching and early business development could be of use in developing a theory of entrepreneurship as purposeful/substantive behavior, with interpersonal communication conceived as primarily a way of “doing something”, *i.e.*, of accomplishing such goals as convincing, alarming, edifying, inspiring, etc., which are all perlocutionary acts (Searle, 1969, p. 25).

This article aims to cast more light on the two pragmatic levels of intended vs. achieved effects of business support professionals' communicative actions. Our main objective is to measure the impact of communicative actions on entrepreneurs' decisions and actions leading to business launching. In order to assess the outcomes of business support communications, we first identify and characterize the main interpersonal communicational strategies that business support professionals use in order to influence their clients' behavior in dyadic relationships. This comprehensive model of communicational strategies in entrepreneurial support situations is the result of a three-year field-research in a business incubator for start-ups from Paris area, France. These strategies are categorized as persuasion, engagement, criticism, and provocation. Our taxonomy of communicational strategies highlights the *intended effects* of business support communications targeting nascent entrepreneurs. In order to measure *achieved effects*, we conducted additional one-year field research whereby assessing the impact of these communicational strategies in terms of commitment, compliance, and resistance. This article has both theoretical and practical implications for measuring the impact of entrepreneurial support and assistance programs on entrepreneurial performance.

Our intention is to build an integrative approach of entrepreneurial business support, aiming to bring together the three levels of interpersonal communication encounters - individuals, discourse, and relation. Business support dyads encompass particular patterns of relationships among individuals that initiate and monitor together genuinely purposive communicative practices. These communicative practices are realized through a range of discourse-based influence tactics, in a particular mission-driven institutional context. We will first provide a theoretical background on interpersonal communication theories and dyadic influence, and stress the characteristics of counseling relationships in entrepreneurial support contexts. Next, we will present our research design and methodology, followed by our main findings. Implications for entrepreneurship research and practice will be presented in the final discussion section.

2. Business Support Dyads: Purposeful Interpersonal Communication Relationships

As social activity, business support is a counseling relationship, that is a "directive" practice primarily associated with "advice giving" or "providing guidance" (Gaik, 1992, p. 276). As discursive practice, business support is realized through a range of communicative interactions that are institutional talk, in contrast with ordinary conversation, in the sense that they orient towards "specialized institutional goals and identities" (Muntigl, 2010). As institutional talk, business support emerges and develops in particular situational contexts, thus evolving according to particular forms of constraints and objectives. The

institutional context shapes interpersonal roles and tends to orient communications towards a stabilized yet flexible social purpose, here business creation.

We need several key concepts in order to analyze business support communications, such as the notions of context, influence, discourse, relationship, goal, and constraint, which have all been put forward in interpersonal communication theories.

2.1. Interpersonal Communication Theories, From Individual to Relation-Based Research

Interpersonal communication is currently conceptualized as person-to-person communication allowing individuals to negotiate meaning, identity, and relationship. Interpersonal communication is an interactional process involving a dyad or a small number of individuals, enacted through verbal and nonverbal message behavior, and occurring in a particular social, cultural, and historical context (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2008). There are three main approaches in interpersonal communication literature: individual-centered theories, discourse- or interaction-centered theories, and relation-centered theories. Individual-centered theories focus on how individuals plan, produce, and process interpersonal messages; discourse- or interaction-centered theories focus on content, forms, and functions of interpersonal messages; relation-centered theories focus on the role of communication in developing, sustaining, and terminating social and personal relationships.

Individual-centered theories of interpersonal communication, such as the Action assembly theory (Greene, 2008), stress that interactions are characterized by mutual influence among protagonists, with individuals conceptualized as “physical, psychological and social beings” (*ibid.*, p. 32). Another individual-centered theory, Constructivism theory, emphasizes the genuine strategic dimension of interpersonal communications: communicative action is a means through which individuals try to achieve their goals (Burlinson and Rack, 2008). Constructivist researchers elaborated several person-centered communication models, designed to help individuals to attain particular goals, such as persuading, managing conflicts, regulating activities, and providing support and assistance. According to the Goals-Plans-Action theory, individuals use communication in order to change others’ attitudes and behaviors in ways they think to be “desirable” (Dillard, 2008, p. 65). From the point of view of the message producer, influence goals motivate the elaboration of cognitive plans which determine in turn specific communicative actions enacted in an effort to realize them. A similar position is defended by the Planning theory of communication

(Berger, 2008): “interpersonal communication is purposive and “people use language to achieve goals” (*ibid.*, p. 90).

Discourse- or interaction-centered theories of interpersonal communication move beyond the individual level in order to examine “communicative practices” (Tracy, 2008). According to AIDA (Action-Implicative discourse analysis theory), conceiving communication as practice means analyzing social interactions as meaningful activities set up in particular cultural and/or institutional contexts, “site-based and nameable” (*ibid.*, p. 158). Grounded in Goffman’s theory of social interaction (1983) and Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology (1967), Conversation analysis theory analyses interpersonal communication as a constitutive process of personal and social identities and roles, that is a central resource “for the enactment of all aspects of social life” (*ibid.*, p. 182). Also in this category, narrative theories are concerned with understanding the function of autobiographical stories in the construction and revision of identities and relationships through dialogue (Koenig, 2008).

Relation-centered theories of interpersonal communication underline the role of communication in developing, sustaining, and terminating relationships. Relational communication theory views relationships as generated through communication processes among protagonists: “we do not relate and then talk, but we relate in talk” (Duncan, 1967, p. 249). Drawing on Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967), this theory puts emphasis on interaction patterns and circular influencing processes, with special attention to the temporal dimension of communication. This perspective is close to the Stage theories of relationship development, which examine how and why interpersonal communications evolve as the relationships develop through different phases, from beginning to extinction (Mongeau and Henningsen, 2008).

2.2. Dyadic Interpersonal Communication: Dyadic Influence

Dyadic communication is a distinct category of interpersonal communication which focuses on the dynamic interplay between two individuals in relationship (Pitts and Giles, 2010). There is a substantial body of research on strategies and processes of dyadic influence from the perspectives of social psychology, communication, and organizational behavior (Barry and Fulmer, 2004). In order to study business support communications, dyadic influence research is helpful. Dyadic influence is a concept used to depict situations where an individual holding an influence goal uses strategies “intended to alter the cognitions and/or behaviors” of another individual (*ibid.*, p. 273). Consistent research has been carried out on dyadic influence emphasized as strategic interaction.

A central topic of empirical research on dyadic influence is the elaboration of classifications of influence tactics. Yukl and Falbe (1990) suggested a model of nine influence tactics used by managers to change attitudes and behaviors: rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, consultation, ingratiation, exchange, personal appeal, coalition, legitimating, and pressure. They hypothesized that individuals are likely to use tactics that are socially acceptable, feasible, and effective with regard to a given objective. Barry and Shapiro (1992) explored how different influence strategies are used in combination with one another, whereas Yukl and Tracey (1992) assessed their impact in terms of compliance, commitment, and resistance, with compliance occurring when an individual accepts to do a requested action without modifying her/his underlying attitudes and beliefs, whereas commitment occurs when an individual agrees internally with the reasons of carrying on a requested action, because of a change in underlying attitudes and beliefs (Falbe and Yukl, *ibid.*). Resistance occurs when an individual rejects a requested action (Knowles and Linn, 2004).

Yukl and Falbe (1992) stress that the impact of an influence tactic depends on both the type of tactic and its particular influence objective, along with several mediational variables: the relative power of the two protagonists of dyadic communication, their relationship, and the target's prior attitudes towards the requested action. The dyadic influence model developed by Yukl, Kim and Falbe (1996) puts forward two mediational variables, the agent's power and the content of the request. Their main finding is that the target commitment is more likely to occur when the requested action is important and enjoyable, the agent has strong referent power, and she/he uses tactics such as consultation, inspirational appeal, or rational persuasion.

Relationship issues remain however somewhat underexplored in this type of research. Barry and Crant (2000) hence developed a model of determinants of interactional richness that emphasizes the contribution of several additional variables to the dyadic communication dynamics and outcomes. According to them, the relational content of messages, the relational perceptions, and the temporal patterns of messages (their frequency, diversity, and symmetry) are the main determinants of interactional richness, a construct assessing the extent to which "communication within the dyad is high in shared meaning" (*ibid.*, p. 648). Another key variable that was showed to play an important role in communication dyads is interpersonal trust. Evidence exists that individuals are likely to artificially distort attitudes and behaviors when interacting with people they distrust (Mellinger, 1956; Giffin, 1967).

To sum up, dyadic communication brings together two individuals who jointly engage in communication and pursue action goals that they attempt to realize through influence or rhetorical goals. Individuals bring personal traits, attitudes, experiences, and objectives to communication encounters. Communication contents and relational patterns are therefore embedded and

function as discrete systems through which social actors actualize their strategic intents.

2.3. The Dynamics of Social Influence in Business Support Dyads

Coaching and mentoring have been acknowledged as primary modes of knowledge transmission and acquisition (Johnson, 2002; Merriam and Mohamad, 2000). Traditionally depicted as structured and trust dyadic relationships, business support relationships are about providing guidance and support to a less-experienced individual, so as to significantly impact her/his development and performances (Kombakaran *et al.*, 2008). According to Kram (1983; 1985), coaches and mentors help their clients by offering career-related advice, exposure, and protection, as well as acceptance, confirmation, and encouragement; career-related functions emerge first, whereas psychosociological functions progressively become more important in the later phases of the relationship (Chao *et al.* 1992). Strong (1968) characterized counseling relationships as interpersonal influence processes. He suggested a two-stage model of counseling influence: first, counselors increase the clients' involvement in the counseling relationship through enhancing perceived personal expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Then at a second stage, they use influence strategies in order to change clients' attitudes and behaviors. The importance of Strong's influence tactics model is still noticeable within counseling psychology (McNeill and Stolterberg, 1989).

Coaching, assistance, mentoring, and tutoring, the "constellation of practices" (Paul, 2004) associated with entrepreneurship support situations aims at entrepreneurs' autonomy-building by means of a professional relationship articulating aid, advice, and training (*cf.* *idem*). But the act of rendering autonomous an entrepreneur nevertheless pre-supposes the deployment of *strategies* which are at once discursive and behavioral, strategies from which it would be difficult to abstract attempts to persuade or exert influence, that is the desire to "make someone do something", "make someone believe something", or to "make someone know something".

A structured relationship. In business support dyads, the patterns of interaction and communication are shaped by the institutional context and the particular entrepreneurship support organizations' public or private missions. The outcomes of business support differ according to the context in which the relationship occurs, the way in which the relationship is initiated, as well as its structure and functioning (Bisk, 2002). In natural settings, or ordinary life, informal coaching and mentoring relationships may be spontaneously initiated, with goals and mutual expectations evolving and adapting over time to the needs of both individuals (Allen *et al.*, 2006). At the opposite, formal coaching and mentoring

occurring in entrepreneurship support organizations are structured relationships, organized and planned by a third institutional actor. For instance, business incubators and mentoring institutes define relational objectives, facilitate candidate selection processes, establish eligibility requirements, and predefine roles and responsibilities. Managed as public relationships, formal entrepreneurial coaching and mentoring develop on a quasi-programmatic basis; milestones are defined for each phase of the relationship, goals are regularly evaluated, and the relationship usually has a predefined beginning and ending point (Higgins and Kram, 2001).

Informal and formal counseling relationships differ on four main dimensions: intensity, visibility, focus, and duration (Baugh and Fagenson-Eland, 2007). Individuals experience greater *intensity* in informal settings, because they are both intrinsically motivated in the relationship, and this often extends across many life domains. On the other hand, individuals gain larger *visibility* in formal relationships, recognized and articulated in the public space. The *focus* of formal coaching and mentoring is on clients' needs and development, whereas the focus of informal coaching and mentoring relationships is on mutual needs and development; in addition, professional objectives are explicitly put forward in formal settings, whereas informal relationships are organized around broad goals, and focus on personal development of both protagonists. Finally, the *duration* of informal coaching and mentoring is between 3 and 6 years (Kram, 1985), whereas formal counseling relationships last between 6 months and one year (Murray, 1991).

A four-factor relationship. Business support interactions were emphasized as ternary relationships among an entrepreneur, a startup project and a coach/mentor (Sammut, 2003). A fourth factor, however, remains rather unspoken – *i.e.*, the “environment”, which both encompasses and regulates entrepreneurial support processes and intended outcomes. The “environment” is an overarching category that designates the larger social and economic context of the entrepreneurial project: the market, the sector or industry, potential and actual clients, suppliers and partners, funding actors (banks, business angels), etc. The “environment”, the consistence of which is as both cognitive and material in a social constructivist perspective (Berger and Luckman, 1966), is the horizon within which entrepreneurship support objectives are institutionally defined and entrepreneurial actions carried out; this already existing exteriority, with its norms and constraints, is the system that allows coaches, mentors, and entrepreneurs to evaluate the appropriateness, desirability, and feasibility of entrepreneurial projects.

These premises lead us to a four-factor framework – the business support professional, the project, the entrepreneur, and the environment. If these factors are arranged in pairs, business support relationships may be analyzed as complex

articulations of four fundamental binary relations which either succeed each other or are concomitant from a phenomenological standpoint:

1. The relation with oneself (of the entrepreneur and, respectively, the business support professional),
2. The relation with the entrepreneurial project (of the entrepreneur and, respectively, the business support professional),
3. The relation between the entrepreneur and the business support professional,
4. The relation with the environment (of the entrepreneur and, respectively, the business support professional).

A double counseling mission. In order to be “creatively destructive”, entrepreneurs have to jointly meet the norms of conformity and those of differentiation, which constitutes the ontological structuring ambivalence of entrepreneurial actors in economy (Schumpeter, 1939). Right from the beginning of their activity, entrepreneurs have to adjust to the market expectations, to meet formal demands of project presentation – business plan, to bring evidence about a pre-existing social demand for their products or services, and to display creativity and innovation so as to improve or radically transform current processes, products, or services. Business support professional therefore embrace a double mission, helping entrepreneurs to regulate their decisions and behaviors according to *both* social conformity and social differentiation imperatives.

Business support professionals organize their activity so as to reach two objectives: building the entrepreneur’s autonomy and environment control capacity (for an extensive taxonomy of counseling goals and methods, see Frey and Raming, 1979). In order to support autonomy, counselors need to focus on the feelings, perceptions, and evaluation of their clients, which is acting on entrepreneurs’ differentiation ability (Rogers, 1951). In order to increase environmental control capacity, they need to help their clients to meet the demands of the society or market, which is acting on entrepreneurs’ social conformity ability (Dreickurs, 1967).

As the support relationship progresses, business support professionals make use of various communication strategies, which either emphasize existing norms or promote a transformation of the entrepreneur and her/his entrepreneurial project. Throughout their daily practices, business support professionals evaluate the viability (Loucks, 1988), the feasibility (Wyckham and Wedley, 1990), and the value creation of new businesses (McMullan et al. 1986). These are the main criteria they use in order to help entrepreneurs advance towards better conformity and enhanced differentiation (Chrisman, 1989). While entrepreneurship support organizations take these criteria into account by encouraging practices designed

to meet them both, they often encounter difficulties along the way (Sammut, 2003). Indeed, as there is no common instrument or procedure to assess the viability, the feasibility and the added value of a start-up project, business support professionals tend to rely on their own business experience to assess them, and then to heavily rely on communicational strategies so as to convey evaluations and guidance to their clients.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The dialectical relationship between entrepreneurs, their business project and their environment triggers various entrepreneurial outcomes that business support professionals try to reinforce through their capacity to influence entrepreneurs' cognitions and emotions (Redien-Collot, 2009). However, the impact of mentoring relationships and business support interactions was only recently acknowledged as significant (St Jean and Audet, 2010). Business support interactions may play a major role in entrepreneurs' success as these interactions have the potential to help entrepreneurs to understand and transform their relationship with their environment, while also helping them to adapt their business project so as to better match market expectations. This can't be done without verbal interaction, with language triggering both beneficial and negative outcomes, according to the business support situations (Radu and Redien-Collot, 2013).

The main objective of this research is to identify and characterize the main interpersonal communicational strategies that business support professionals use in order to influence novice entrepreneurs' behavior in dyadic communication relationships. As Knowles and Linn (2004), and West and Meyer (1998) point it out, in mentoring interactions, individuals develop several types of attitudes to welcome their mentors' influence tactics. Therefore, our objective is to assess the impact of these communicational strategies at the individual level in terms of entrepreneurs' commitment, compliance and resistance.

Our research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main communicational strategies that business support professionals use so as to effectively pursue conformity and differentiation objectives?
2. When and where do they use these communicational strategies (specific business support situations)?

3. Which communicational strategies produce commitment, compliance, and resistance?

3.2. Hypotheses

H1: Intended effects of communicative actions

Business support professionals use specific communicational strategies to enhance the business projects' viability and feasibility (social conformity), and added value creation (social differentiation).

H2: Frequency of communicative actions

Communicational strategies are more frequently used in particular business support situations.

H3: Achieved effects of communicative actions at the individual level

Communicational strategies produce commitment, compliance or resistance.

3.3. Method

Data collection procedure: sequential implementation in a major Paris area business incubator. During the first research phase, we did three-year field research (2005-2008) in a business incubator for start-ups of the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry. We did participant observation and semi-structured interviews with coaches, mentors, and entrepreneurs to identify communicational strategies in business support situations. During the second research phase, we conducted additional one-year field research (2008-2009) in the same business support organization. We did quantitative survey (self-administered questionnaires) to assess the impact of communicational strategies at the individual level in terms of commitment, compliance, and resistance.

The business incubator we researched is one of the five most important incubators in France. It offers a 6 months support program designed to increase the number of start-ups in the Paris region, as well as to contribute to their early-phase development. Several experienced entrepreneurs do coaching activities throughout the incubation period, within coaching dyads relying on mutual selection at the beginning of the program. An additional service is provided at the end of the incubation period for those entrepreneurs who launched their businesses: a "Business angels' tour" program of 2 months, with extra coaching designed to increase fundraising.

Sample. 50 dyads of business support professionals and entrepreneurs participated in the research, which represents a total number of 50 coaches and 50 nascent entrepreneurs². The entrepreneurs were between 30 and 55 years old whereas the business support professionals were between 35 and 55 years old. In both samples, there was an equal number of men and women. All of them had third-level education (BA and more) and had been employees before launching their ventures. All of them were Paris-based professionals. Twenty percent of the interviewees were not born in France and thirty percent have had significant international experiences.

Table 1. Data collection: timetable and sample

PHASE 1	2005-2008	Participant observation of business support dyads	50 dyads
	2008	20 semi-structured interviews with <i>business support professionals</i>	20 business support professionals
PHASE 2	2008-2009	Survey (self-administrated questionnaires for nascent entrepreneurs)	50 nascent entrepreneurs

Data coding and analysis. Participant observation was designed to allow identification of the communicational strategies used by business support professionals in entrepreneurial counseling dyads. According to Friedlander (1982), the counseling discourse is to be studied not only as structure (or form and content), but also as it reflects “intended functions of counselors’ messages in performing actions” (*ibid.*, p. 425). Therefore, one may decide to analyze three distinct types of categories – content-based, intersubjective or relational, and extralinguistic. Each of these categories can be analyzed through two different coding strategies, “classical” and “pragmatic”. Classical coding refers to the internal characteristics of the discourse, whereas pragmatic coding included the characteristics of the speaker, her/his intentions or internal states. Pragmatic coding therefore relies on the “principle of unequivocal recognizability of communicative intention” (Dore, 1977, p. 230), with inferences being based on social context. We built an observational analysis grid with 12 intersubjective categories, as our research level is dyadic communication: encouragement/approval/reassurance, providing information, reflection/restatement, evaluation/interpretation, direct guidance/advice, confrontation/provocation, legitimating/appeal to authority, personal appeal/proposal, demand/reminding, warning, illustration/exemplifying, humor/irony. The choice of these 12 intersubjective categories is based on Friedlander’s (1982) work on counseling discourse as speech event, on Yukl’s (1992; 1996) taxonomy of influence tactics in

2. A nascent entrepreneur is defined as “an individual who is in the process of starting a business, has committed resources to do it and expects to own at least part of it” (Langowitz and Minniti, 2007, p. 346).

organizations, and on Brock's (2010) contribution on humor, jokes, and irony as communicative activities.

Participant observation data was pragmatically coded. Three PhD students were involved in data collection and coding. They were instructed to use all available linguistic and social cues in order to interpret the *intended effects* of business support communications. The coding scheme comprised two main categories: communicative actions' interaction influence objectives or goals, and discourse topics or targets. The goals were social conformity and social differentiation. The targets were: the project, the entrepreneur, the business support professional, and the environment. For each business situation, we identified the most recurrent speech acts and communicational strategies. We did a binomial test to assess the prevalence of each communicational strategy used by business support professionals in the different business support situations we observed. We also conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with business support professionals to identify the intended effects of their communications that we categorized as indicated below (Friedlander, 1982; Yukl, 1992, 1996; Brock, 2010).

We then further conducted a quantitative survey in order to assess the *achieved effects* of communicational strategies at the individual level. Fifty nascent entrepreneurs (who had experienced a long-term coaching process) filled in a 16-item questionnaire to indicate the impact of the communicational strategies that we have previously identified through the 20 semi-structured interviews. The entrepreneurs were invited to indicate the perceived effectiveness and relevance of the various communicational strategies used by their coaches thus allowing us to assess the effective impact of business support professionals' communication in terms of commitment, compliance and resistance. Measures were 5-points Likert scales for all items. Survey data was then analyzed with STATA software. Additionally, we conducted univariate F tests to identify the major situational variables mediating the impact of communication strategies on commitment, compliance, and resistance responses.

4. Findings

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, we identified several communicational strategies that business support professionals were using so as to enhance the feasibility, viability, and the added value creation of business projects. Business support dyads articulated their daily interactions according to social conformity and social differentiation objectives. The targets, or the referential objects, of their dialogues were the business project, the entrepreneur, the environment, and the business support professional. We systematically observed dyadic interpersonal communications in eight business support situations, whereby business support

professionals were pursuing two main enterprise outcomes: business launching and fundraising.

In order to test Hypothesis 1, we examined the articulation of goals and targets of the communicational strategies, according to concrete business support situations reported by 20 dyads. We discovered that business launching was prepared mainly in three specific business support situations: business concept elaboration, business model elaboration, and business meeting simulations. Fundraising was set up in two specific contexts: business plan elaboration and fundraising training sessions. As they stressed the importance of the articulation of social conformity and social differentiation goals according to the situation and the discursive target under examination, business support professionals seemed to organize their discourse according to particular business support situations (see Table 2). For instance, through the counseling interaction aiming to positively impact business launching behaviours, business support professionals tried to enhance the feasibility and viability of business projects during the business model elaboration, whereas they rather tended to increase the added value of business projects during the business concept elaboration. At the same time, business support professionals confessed that they interpreted the entrepreneurs' compliance and resistance responses as inherent to the reflexive process enhanced by the business support relationship. This enhanced reflexivity was thought as potentially beneficial for entrepreneurs' self-confidence and assertiveness. To sum up, the business support professionals we interrogated declared a certain degree of understanding and control of their personal communication strategies and they systematically attempt to modify their communication so as to match business support situations and individuals. They also systematically anticipated the entrepreneurs' reactions to communication strategies and they learned to improve their personal style through the interaction with new entrepreneurs.

Table 2. Communicative goals and targets in entrepreneurial support situations

ENTERPRISE OUTCOMES	BUSINESS SUPPORT SITUATIONS	TARGETS	GOALS	
			Social Conformity (Feasibility and Viability)	Social Differentiation (Added Value)
Business Launching	Business concept	Project		X
		Environment	X	
		Entrepreneur	X	
		Business support professional		X
	Business model	Project	X	X
		Environment	X	X
		Entrepreneur		X
		Business support professional	X	
	Business Meeting Simulation	Project	X	
		Environment	X	
		Entrepreneur	X	
		Business support professional	X	
	Fundraising	Business Plan	Project	X
Environment				X
Entrepreneur			X	
Business support professional				X
Fundraising Training		Project		X
		Environment	X	
		Entrepreneur		X
		Business support professional	X	

Then, in order to test our second hypothesis, we examined if entrepreneurial support situations were matched with particular speech acts. We had observed the entire sample of 50 dyads during 5 counseling sessions for each entrepreneurial support situation previously identified. According to Bateson (1968), one may expect an average of 10 changes of major linguistic postures during an interpersonal interaction in a training context. Therefore, for each dyad, we collected 10 speech acts data during five counseling sessions in 5 entrepreneurial support situations. Table 3 indicates that the total number of occurrences of speech acts in business support dyads interactions varies with entrepreneurial support situations. For instance, encouragement and approval speech acts are mostly used in business concept elaboration sessions, along with demand and reminding speech-acts.

Table 3. Number of occurrences of speech acts in business support situations

		Total Speech Acts x Sessions x Dyads	PROV/ INFO	REF/ REST	EVAL/ INT	DG/ ADV	LEG/ AUTH	ILL/ EX	CONF/ PROV	WAR N	I/ HUM	PA/ PROP	DEM/ REM	ENC/ APP/ REAS
Business Launching	Business concept	10x5x50 = 2500	152	192	209	54	55	80	99	80	87	305	423	764
	Business model	2500	248	413	289	347	451	262	65	92	93	71	29	140
	Business Meeting Simulation	2500	132	125	107	95	108	107	426	278	177	254	241	250
Fundraisin g	Business Plan	2500	316	279	276	229	317	338	116	121	120	127	131	130
	Fundraising Training	2500	281	325	291	308	309	250	109	134	99	136	127	131

Note:

PROV/INFO: providing information

REF/REST: reflection/restatement

EVAL/INT: evaluation/interpretation

DG/ADV: direct guidance/advice

LEG/AUTH: legitimating/appeal to authority

ILL/EX: illustration/exemplifying

CONF/PROV: confrontation/provocation

WARN: warning

I/HUM: humor/irony

PA/PROP: personal appeal/proposal

DEM/REM: demand/reminding

ENC/APP/REAS: encouragement/approval/reassurance

In order to elaborate a taxonomy of communicational strategies in entrepreneurial support situations, we divided speech acts into four categories, as suggested by prior research on influence tactics (Yukl and Tracy, 1992) and influence goals (Dillard, 2008). We labelled these communicational strategies as persuasion, commitment, criticism, and provocation. Persuasion is a communicational strategy that focuses on changing business project's form and content so as to enhance its perceived coherence with commonly shared norms and social expectations (Joule et al. 2007). While using persuasion, business support professionals aim to increase the nascent entrepreneur's ability to adjust to social expectations concerning business viability, feasibility, and business added value. Engagement is a communicational strategy that focuses on increasing the nascent entrepreneur's involvement in her/his business project and contributes to the construction of entrepreneurial social identity (Gaillard-Giordani, 2005). While using engagement, business support professionals aim to increase the entrepreneur's ability to demonstrate willingness to take responsibility for her/his business, and to carry on requested actions in order to launch, and finance it further. Criticism is a communicational strategy that focuses on screening and explaining business project's errors and omissions, and advising about alternative solutions (Cornelissens et al., 2012). While using criticism, business support professionals aim to increase the nascent

entrepreneur's ability to assess the viability, feasibility, and added value of her/his business project. Provocation is a communicational strategy that focuses on challenging the taken-for-granted nascent entrepreneur's personal and professional objectives, and self-image (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995; Brock, 2010; Redien-Collot, 2009). While using provocation, business support professionals aim to increase the nascent entrepreneur's ability to question personal beliefs, representations, and self-image.

Table 4. Communicational strategies in business support dyads

Strategy	Definition	Goal
PERSUASION	Communication that focuses on changing business project's form and content so as to enhance its perceived coherence with commonly shared norms and social expectations.	To increase the nascent entrepreneur's ability to adjust to social expectations concerning business viability, feasibility, and added value.
ENGAGEMENT	Communication that focuses on increasing the entrepreneur's involvement in her/his business project and contributes to the construction of entrepreneurial social identity.	To increase the nascent entrepreneur's ability to demonstrate willingness in taking responsibility for her/his business, and to carry on requested actions in order to launch, finance, and develop it further.
CRITICISM	Communication that focuses on screening and explaining business project's errors and omissions, and advising about alternative solutions.	To increase the nascent entrepreneur's ability to assess the viability, feasibility, and added value of her/his business project.
PROVOCATION	Communication that focuses on challenging the taken-for-granted entrepreneur's personal and professional objectives, and self-image.	To increase the nascent entrepreneur's ability to question personal beliefs, representations, and self-image.

The 50 entrepreneurs we interrogated indicated their perception of the most salient speech acts and communicational strategies used by their coaches in the five aforementioned business support situations. In order to assess the prevalence of each communicational strategy in business support situations, in a first phase, we calculated the total number of occurrence of speech acts, as presented in Table 5. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the frequency of communicational strategies varies according to business support situations. Engagement is prevalent in business concept elaboration sessions, as well as in business meetings simulations. Persuasion is mostly used in business model elaboration sessions, and in fundraising training. Criticism occurs mainly in business model and business plan elaboration meetings, and in fundraising training sessions. Provocation is primarily employed in business meeting simulations.

Table 5. Number of occurrences of communicational strategies in business support situations

		Total Speech Acts x Sessions x Dyads	PROV/ INFO	REF/ REST	EVAL/ INT	DG/ ADV	LEG/ AUTH	ILL/ EX	CONF/ PROV	WAR N	I/ HUM	PA/ PROP	DEM/ REM	ENC/ APP/ REAS
			CRITICISM			PERSUASION		PROVOCATION			ENGAGEMENT			
Business Launching	Business concept	10x5x50 = 2500	553			189		266			1492			
	Business model	2500	950			1060		250			240			
	Business Meeting Simulation	2500	364			310		881			745			
Fundraising	Business Plan	2500	871			884		357			388			
	Fundraising Training	2500	897			867		252			394			

Note:

PROV/INFO: providing information

REF/REST: reflection/restatement

EVAL/INT: evaluation/interpretation

DG/ADV: direct guidance/advice

LEG/AUTH: legitimating/appeal to authority

ILL/EX: illustration/exemplifying

CONF/PROV: confrontation/provocation

WARN: warning

I/HUM: humor/irony

PA/PROP: personal appeal/proposal

DEM/REM: demand/reminding

ENC/APP/REAS: encouragement/approval/reassurance

We then applied a binomial test to the highest results in Table 5 (i.e. Engagement in business concept = 1492/2500) in order to confirm whether the most frequent use of certain speech acts was significant and impactful compared with others speech acts in each of the business support situations we studied.

Table 6. Prevalence of the most frequent used communicational strategies: Application of the binomial test

		CRITICISM	PERSUASION	PROVOCATION	ENGAGEMENT
Business Launching	Business concept	553	189	266	1492 p-value <2.2e-16
	Business model	950 p-value <2.2e-16	1060 p-value <2.2e-16	250	240
	Business Meeting Simulation	364	310	881 p-value <2.2e-16	745 p-value = 5.528e-08
Fundraising	Business Plan	871 p-value <2.2e-16	884 p-value <2.2e-16	357	388
	Fundraising Training	897 p-value <2.2e-16	867 p-value <2.2e-16	252	394

According to our entrepreneurs, during *business concept* elaboration sessions *engagement* was the most influential communication strategy (p-value <2.2e-16). In this context, business support professionals should promote learning by doing approaches: entrepreneurs need to change their behaviors and challenge their practices before changing their attitudes and perceptions. In the other business support situations, entrepreneurial coaches and mentors combined two communicational strategies that were (almost) equally influential. When entrepreneurs elaborated their *Business plan* (p-value = 0.7745) and developed their *fundraising* strategy (p-value = 0.4899), business support professionals concurrently used criticism and persuasion to trigger positive responses. However, when entrepreneurs elaborated their *Business models*, business support professionals should prioritize persuasion (5% difference between persuasion and criticism with p-value = 0.01503 < 5%). Similarly, when business support professionals coach entrepreneurs who are preparing *Business meetings*, they may prioritize the use of provocation over the use of engagement (1% difference between provocation and engagement with p-value = 0.0008091).

These findings indicate that communication strategies can be (partially) paired. We observed two types of pairs: there is a prevalent pair that is criticism/persuasion, and a less prevalent pair, provocation/engagement. Sammut (2003) and Radu and Redien-Collot (2012) previously stressed that criticism and persuasion present a similar focus in business support situations. When using criticism, business support professionals address the importance of environment issues, whereas when using persuasion, they address the importance of start-up projects. In both cases, they encourage entrepreneurs to focus on the external components of the entrepreneurial process (the environment and the project). At the opposite, during the elaboration of business concept and the preparation of business meetings, entrepreneurs are encouraged to focus of the subjective components of the entrepreneurial trajectory (the perception of oneself and that of the business support professional).

We also aimed to identify the moderating variables that mediate the impact of communicational strategies. Audet and Couteret (2005) had previously put emphasis on the following individual and relational variables of business support process: involvement, trust, gender, age, education, and professional experience. Entrepreneurs have completed a 16-item questionnaire; five items measured their perception of their coaches' roles and intentions. Among the six factors aforementioned (Audet and Couteret, 2005), respondents mostly stressed the importance of personal involvement. A participant observed that "*being respectful and serious is a source of mutual confidence*"; a respondent noticed that "*both entrepreneurs and coaches have to believe that their consulting sessions are of the utmost importance; if only one session is missed or treated superficially, one cannot fully benefit of the coaching assistance*". Participants also emphasized the importance of trust: "*trust is the basis of being able to ask the good questions*". A business support professional noticed that trust

strengthens the learning outcomes for nascent entrepreneurs. Several respondents, mainly female professionals also observed that gender was a significant variable in their counseling practice. One female stated that “*same-sex interactions are easier to manage in a mentoring relationship; it is a challenge to a female mentor to become the mentor of a male entrepreneur*”.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, communication strategies used by business support professionals differed in their effective impact at the individual level in terms of commitment, compliance, or resistance. The means and standard deviations for the four strategies (persuasion, engagement, criticism, and provocation) are shown in Table 7, along with the results of the univariate F tests. Significant differences were identified among the four communicational strategies in terms of attitudinal responses. Nascent entrepreneurs declared compliance responses to persuasive attempts (mean=4,7; $p<.04$). Engagement speech acts were successful in producing commitment in nascent entrepreneurs (mean=4,1; $p<0.3$). As for criticism and provocation, they generated mixed results, with both strategies uniformly producing compliance, commitment, and resistance.

Table 7. The impact of communicational strategies at the individual level

	COMPLIANCE	COMMITMENT	RESISTANCE	p
PERSUASION				
M	4.7	4.2	2.8	.05
SD	0.96	0.82	1.03	
ENGAGEMENT				
M	3.6	4.5	2.9	.03
SD	0.87	0.62	0.91	
CRITICISM				
M	3.7	2.9	3.9	ns
SD	0.66	0.54	0.78	
PROVOCATION				
M	4.0	3.9	4.3	ns
SD	0.75	0.76	0.83	

Note: *ns* means “non significant”

4.1. A Dialectical Use of Communicational Strategies

Business support professionals employ four main communicational strategies - *i.e.*, persuasion, engagement, criticism, and provocation, in order to impact the nascent entrepreneurs’ ability to conform to social expectations and to build an original business project. The choice of a particular communicational strategy depends on two factors: the goal that mentors and coaches pursue in the business support situation (social conformity or social differentiation) and the targets or the referential objectives they bring into discussion with the entrepreneurs. These

targets are either external to the counseling relationship, *i.e.*, the project and the environment, or internal to the relationship, *i.e.*, the counselor and the entrepreneur. In business support dyads, coaches and mentors use these communicational strategies distinctively in order to impact the entrepreneurs' attitudes and subsequent behaviors. Thus, when the focus of the interpersonal interaction is on the business project and the environment, coaches and mentors tend to use persuasion in order to encourage entrepreneurs to advance towards enhanced conformity with market expectations. Conversely, in this business support context, they also use criticism in order to help entrepreneurs to progress towards increased business differentiation. On the other side, when the focus of the interpersonal interaction is on the business professional or the entrepreneur themselves, coaches and mentors tend to use engagement in order to encourage entrepreneurs to advance towards enhanced conformity in terms of acquiring and securing an entrepreneurial social identity. Conversely, in this business support context, they also use provocation in order to prompt entrepreneurs to progress towards increased personal differentiation or distinctiveness.

Results indicate that persuasion and engagement have a positive impact on entrepreneurs' attitudes, with persuasion mainly generating compliance responses, and engagement mainly commitment responses. Criticism and provocation produced mixed results at the individual level.

4.2. "Communication for Action" vs. "Performative Communication"

The underlying intention of business support relationships is to influence both the actions of the entrepreneur and her/his capacity to take responsibility for what Iek (1992) terms an "*act*". Searle defined action as a "causal and intentional transaction between the individual and the world" (1983, p. 88) guided by the goals of the individual. Action is based on repetition and, thus, it may promote behavioural conformity. In contrast, the act designates actions whose consequence is to challenge habitual ways of acting while also literally transforming the person who carries them out – "after an act, an individual is no longer the same" (Iek, 1992, p. 51). In addressing the question of risk-taking and its consequences on the entrepreneur's self-concept (Ogbor, 2000), entrepreneurial literature distinguishes between act and action, without however analyzing the degree to which entrepreneurial acts transform individuals (Mitchell, 2007). Compared to the vast number of actions carried out with specific objectives in mind, entrepreneurial acts remain rare, or even exceptional. For example, Gartner (1989) defined the precise moment of the setting up of a new firm as the prototype of the entrepreneurial act. According to Radu and Redien-Collot (2013), entrepreneurial acts are "key moments" delimited in time, while entrepreneurial actions are characterized by a variable temporality, depending on the degree of ambition with which objectives are pursued. Yet, Dyer and Handler (1994) underlined the fact that an entrepreneurial act triggering

a rupture, a profound mutation of the individual, can occur more than once in an entrepreneur's life.

Business support dyads use communicational strategies in order to impact entrepreneurial actions and acts that are respectively correlated with the perception of business conformity and differentiation. Still, little is known about the characteristics of these communicational strategies and their effective impact at the individual and enterprise levels. The vast majority of theories relative to the outcomes of interpersonal communicational strategies developed in the field of entrepreneurship are either about persuasion or about engagement strategies (see for instance Intention models: Shapero, 1982; Krueger, 2000 - which are persuasive theoretical models). The impact of criticism or provocation has not yet been examined in the context of entrepreneurial coaching and mentoring relationships, although some well-known European scholars did theorize on critical communication (Habermas, 1987; Maeschalk, 1994) and provocation strategies (Bakhtin, 1982; Ducrot and Carel, 1999; Jankélévitch, 1964) in the fields of sociology and linguistic studies.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Yale School of communication psychology made a clear distinction between persuasion and engagement. For Hovland and his colleagues, persuasion was a communicational strategy characterized by the use of semiotic vehicles – discourses, texts, images, sounds – in an attempt to change the receiver's pre-existing attitudes. The core premise of persuasion research is that cognitive change can prompt a convergent modification in behavior (Radu and Redien-Collot, 2008). In the entrepreneurship literature, many theories and models of entrepreneurial intention were built on persuasion hypotheses (Dronovsek and Erikson, 2005). Engagement is a form of social influence, the core premise of social influence research being that change in behavior may generate a convergent cognitive change (Joule, Girandola, and Bernard, 2007). In entrepreneurial settings, business support programs and organizations, such as networks and clubs of entrepreneurs, incubators and business nurseries, use influence strategies in order to trigger engagement and persistence (Gaillard and Giordani, 2005). In entrepreneurial support situations, one can draw alternatively on persuasion and engagement so as to produce specific outcomes. When the primary objective of business support professionals is to change the entrepreneurs' attitudes in order to increase the performance of business projects, actors deploy a persuasion strategy designed to modify entrepreneurs' *behavioral intentions*. In other circumstances, business support professionals move beyond dialogue and instigate entrepreneurs to carry out actions which display engagement with the entrepreneurial social identity. Persuasion and engagement are thus distinct communicational strategies which function differently, and whose premises are divergent in terms of what can be called a theory of action. However, both aim at an optimal adjustment of the entrepreneur to the economic, cultural, and social environment. Persuasion and engagement thus aim to generate an impact on entrepreneurial *actions*. What

about entrepreneurial *acts*, which, despite their rarity, are nevertheless crucial in the genesis of a new firm? What do business support professionals do when they want to push entrepreneurs to transform themselves or to reappraise their business projects? In our view, there are two other strategies they can use, namely *criticism*, whose aim is to change the way entrepreneurs see the world and the market (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995), and *provocation*, whose aim is to change the entrepreneurs' self-representation (Brock, 2010).

The pragmatic tradition, which is so deeply rooted in today social sciences, has encouraged entrepreneurship scholars to focus on the impact of what could be termed "communication for action", or, in other words, persuasion and engagement. It is only recently, thanks to Butler (2004) and her iconoclastic approach of communication and identity that a new field of study – "performative communication" – has begun to emerge in social sciences. We think that criticism and provocation are two kinds of performative communication that business support professionals use in order to encourage entrepreneurs to carry out an entrepreneurial *act*. Criticism and provocation call into question the pre-defined objectives of entrepreneurial action and encourage entrepreneurs to reinterpret and negotiate shared norms in their attempt to develop an original offer. In sum, while communications for action picture entrepreneurs in their adaptive relation with the world, performative communications aim at reinforcing the nascent entrepreneurs' motivation to act in a critical manner vis-à-vis commonplace norms, beliefs, and values, so as to innovate.

5. Conclusion

This research indicates that persuasion and engagement are employed in order to encourage entrepreneurs to develop a coherent and predictable business project, and to build or strengthen the entrepreneurial social identity. The focus of persuasion is first and foremost the relation of entrepreneurs to their business projects; the focus of engagement is first and foremost the relationship between the business support professional and the nascent entrepreneur as members of the same social category, thus sharing similar social identities, constraints, and opportunities. Communication for action thus aims to increase the entrepreneurs' ability to demonstrate the validity and feasibility of business projects, along with demonstrating their personal credibility as reliable and consistent entrepreneurs. On the contrary, criticism and provocation are employed in order to convince nascent entrepreneurs to step back from, and reassess, their business projects. Entrepreneurs are thus encouraged to take a fresh look at their previous views of their projects and themselves as social and economic actors. In such cases, performative communication can produce a momentary rupture of meaning for the entrepreneur, therefore creating opportunities for improvisation and intuition, and fostering the habit of deconstructing and reconstructing business models and

plans. The focus of criticism is first and foremost on the relation of entrepreneurs to the environment, while the focus of provocation is first and foremost on the relation of entrepreneurs to themselves. Entrepreneurs in business support dyads need all these four communication strategies in order to invent, launch, and finance a new venture.

This study reveals how business support professionals involved in different business support situations can rely on four discursive techniques that articulate two major psychosocial dynamics, that is, conformity and differentiation. When they rely on discursive strategies such as persuasion and engagement, business support professionals can encourage entrepreneurs to reinforce their entrepreneurial motivation and enhance their business project's appropriateness as regards social expectations. When they use discursive strategies such as criticism and provocation, business support professionals may stimulate the entrepreneurs' willingness to transform various aspects of their business projects, along with encouraging them to reflect on their personal motives and positioning as regards the entrepreneurial career. Criticism and provocation help entrepreneurs to accept change as an inherent component of their business project. In many cases, the progressive implementation of a set of incremental changes at the level of the business project may be more important than the initial search for radical change of many entrepreneurs (Sullivan, 2000).

The research has several limitations. We have identified only the four discursive techniques and their impact at the individual level. However, even though we know, for example, that there may be important tensions in simultaneously using persuasion and engagement tactics (Joule et al., 2007), or critical and provocative techniques (Gaillard-Jordani, 2005), we have not studied the interaction effects of the four communicational strategies. Similarly, we have not tested the cumulative effects of discursive tactics that are not in competition, such as engagement and provocation. Our intention is to further develop more research to study the interplay of these four communicational strategies in business support dyads.

Our contribution concerns a specific area of the study of entrepreneurial discourse that has not yet been very much explored. However, recently, scholars focused on the building of entrepreneurial identity through narratives embedded in self-fiction and self-analysis (Hjorth and Steyaert, 2004; Gartner, 2007; Hjorth, 2007). According to Gartner (2007), entrepreneurship is not only the place where language meets action in order to question reality and produce a new one. It is also a place where individuals learn how to use *their* action and language in a subversive way, as a means to implement and consolidate an emerging entrepreneurial reality. Entrepreneurs' narratives are important techniques that reveal their ability in facing long transitional periods. We have examined here the influence of business support professionals' communication strategies on individual entrepreneurs in terms of helping them deal with project and identity issues while starting up their businesses. Additionally, these communicational

strategies may also shape the entrepreneurs' narratives about the project, the environment and themselves. It would very interesting to study how persuasion, engagement, criticism and provocation influence the entrepreneurs' narratives generation thus sustaining their long-term road towards implementing and growing their business (Bird and West, 1997). The articulation of entrepreneurial narratives and discourse may be one of the key ingredients of entrepreneurial persistence and optimism.

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