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Employee Satisfaction: An Examination of Supervisors' Communication Competence

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Abstractt

The current study examined supervisors' displays of communicator competence and nonverbal immediacy as they relate to their subordinates' job and communication satisfaction. Further, the current study sought to reveal which communicative behavior displayed by supervisors had the greatest impact on subordinates' job and communication satisfaction. Participants were 275 working adults ( $n = 132$ , 48% male) and ( $n = 143$ , 52% female) working for a variety of companies in the Midwest. The findings indicated that supervisors' communication competence was found to be a greater predictor of their subordinates' job and communication satisfaction than was nonverbal immediacy. Additional findings demonstrated that supervisors' nonverbal immediacy served as a mediating variable between communicator competence and subordinates' job and communication satisfaction. The study concludes by offering insight into the implications of these findings and future research directions.

*Key words:* Supervisor, Subordinate, Communication Competence, Nonverbal Immediacy, Job Satisfaction, and Communication Satisfaction.

## Introduction

Research examining the effects supervisors have on their subordinates' has received of a great deal of attention from early studies (Falcione, McCroskey, & Daly, 1977; Goldhaber, Porter, Yates, & Lesniak, 1978; Richmond & McCroskey, 1979) to more recent studies examining variables such as humor (Avtgis, & Taber, 2006), Machiavellianism (Teven, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006), and tardiness (Iverson & Deery, 2001). Yet, extent research in the area of organizational communication has not fully explored the influence of supervisors' communication competence and nonverbal immediacy on subordinates' job and communication satisfaction.

Prior research examining employee outcomes as a result of their supervisors' communication competence has revealed positive findings. For example, according to the research of Madlock (in press), a supervisor's communication competence was found to be a stronger predictor of employee job and communication satisfaction than was the supervisor's leadership style. Similarly, Berman and Hellweg's (1989) findings indicated that the communicator competence of a supervisor was related to their subordinate's satisfaction with that supervisor. The work of Sharbrough, Simmons, and Cantrill (2006) revealed similar results in that positive relationships were indicated between a supervisor's use of motivational language and their perceived effectiveness, communication competence, and their subordinates' job and communication satisfaction.

In addition to the positive outcomes as a result of a supervisor's communication competence, studies examining a supervisor's nonverbal immediacy has yielded similar results; with nonverbal immediacy indicated by such behaviors as looking, leaning towards, touching, sitting near, and smiling at someone Richmond and McCroskey (2000b). As with communication competence the effect of nonverbal immediacy in the organizational setting involving the relationship between superiors and subordinates has received limited attention, with the exceptions of Richmond and McCroskey (2000a) and Koermer, Goldstein, and Fortson (1993)

According to Richmond and McCroskey (2000a), immediacy behaviors stimulate reciprocity of immediacy; therefore, subordinates report more satisfaction with superiors who exhibit nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Additionally, Koermer et al. (1993) suggested that superiors who use immediacy behaviors make subordinates feel more valued, respected, and relationally attractive.

Based on the prior research findings, communication competence and nonverbal immediacy of supervisors appears to have a positive influence on subordinates' satisfaction. However, there appears to be an unanswered question as to which communicative behavior enacted by a supervisor, communication competence or nonverbal immediacy has a greater influence on subordinates' job and communication satisfaction. The current study is important in that it identified the specific communicative behavior that yielded the greatest positive results. By indicating which communicative behavior accounts for the greatest positive outcomes, management training programs can be refined to emphasize those behaviors that yield the greatest positive results.

Critical to the current study is the notion forwarded by Stohl (1984) who argued that a communicatively competent individual possesses the ability to employ communicative resources such as language, gestures, and voice effectively in the pursuit of goals. Based on this conceptualization of communication competence it would appear that nonverbal behaviors such

as nonverbal immediacy may mediate the relationship between communication competence and subsequent positive outcomes.

The purpose of the current study was to expand our understanding of supervisor subordinate relationships by examining the influence of communication competence and nonverbal immediacy enacted by a supervisor on their subordinates' satisfaction. Specifically, this study hypothesized that a supervisor's communication competence would have a greater influence on subordinates' job and communication satisfaction than nonverbal immediacy. The current study also predicted that nonverbal immediacy would serve as a mediating variable between communication competence and a subordinate's job and communication satisfaction. The following literature review offers support for the inclusion of the variables examined in the current study.

### Review of Related Literature

#### Communication Competence

Communication competence has been conceptualized to encompass elements of knowledge, language skills, nonverbal behaviors, and effectiveness (Spitzberg, 1983). Such that Spitzberg and Cupach (1981) stated, "Competent interaction can be viewed as a form of interpersonal influence, in which an individual is faced with the task of fulfilling communicative functions and goals (effectiveness) while maintaining conversational and interpersonal norms (appropriateness)" (p. 1).

Cushman and Craig (1976) argued that communicator competence involves the ability of individuals to display competencies in areas such as listening and negotiating. In that, competent communicators must employ communicative resources such as language, gestures, and voice (Stohl, 1984), and in order for supervisors to be perceived as competent communicators, they must share and respond to information in a timely manner, actively listen to other points of view, communicate clearly and succinctly to all levels of the organization, and utilize differing communication channels (Shaw, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, limited research has examined the relationship between the communication competence of a supervisor and their subordinates satisfaction (see Berman & Hellweg, 1989; Madlock, in press; Sharbrough et al., 2006). Given that communication competence has a nonverbal component; it is surprising that organizational communication researchers have not fully examined the dynamics between communication competence and nonverbal immediacy. Thus the following section highlights the importance of nonverbal immediacy to this dynamic and offers support for its inclusion in the current study.

#### *Nonverbal Immediacy*

The concept of immediacy stems from the work of Mehrabian (1969, 1971) and refers to communication that enhances either the physiological or psychological closeness to another. Mehrabian (1969) introduced the construct of immediacy and used the term to refer to those communication behaviors that "enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another" (p. 213). According to Mehrabian's (1971) work, "People are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer" (p. 1). Richmond and McCroskey (2000b) suggested that nonverbal immediacy is indicated by such behaviors directed towards someone as; looking, leaning towards, touching (in a non-threatening manner), sitting near, speaking in an animated way, and smiling at someone.

During the past two decades, teacher immediacy has received a great deal of attention in the communication literature (Andersen, 1979, 1985; Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985; McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995; Neuliep, 1995; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990). However, the effect of nonverbal immediacy in the organizational setting involving the relationship between superiors and subordinates has received considerably less attention, with the notable exceptions of Richmond and McCroskey (2000a) and Koermer, Goldstein, and Fortson (1993) highlighted earlier.

Based on the literature reviewed, it would appear that both communication competence and nonverbal immediacy displayed by supervisors have an influence on subordinates' satisfaction. Specifically the influence of supervisors' communicative behaviors on their subordinate's job satisfaction was examined in the current study. The following literature offers support for the inclusion of job satisfaction in the current study.

### **Job Satisfaction**

The most common factors leading to worker stress and dissatisfaction are those emanating from the nature of the job itself, within which interpersonal relationships between employees and supervision take place (Barnett & Brennan, 1997; Kenny & Cooper, 2003; Rodwell, Kienzle, & Shadur 1998). According to Korte and Wynne (1996), a deterioration of relationships in organizational settings resulting from reduced interpersonal communication between workers, and supervision negatively influences job satisfaction, and sometimes leads to employees leaving their jobs.

Early work by Taylor (1970) suggested that worker satisfaction could be attributed to the highest possible earnings with the least amount of fatigue. Taylor's classical theory prompted a number of studies that revealed differing factors behind job satisfaction. Some of these factors found to mediate job satisfaction include studies examining supervisors' displays of nonverbal immediacy (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000a), humor (Avtgis, & Taber, 2006), communication satisfaction (Hilgerman, 1998), effects of gender, (Madlock, 2006), and supervisors' communication style (Richmond, McCroskey, Davis, & Koontz, 1980).

The relationship between job satisfaction and outcomes has also received a great deal of attention and has been positively associated with job performance, (Gruneberg, 1979), organizational commitment, (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979), organizational citizenship (Hulin & Judge, 2003), and loyalty (Trombetta & Rogers, 1988), and negatively related to absenteeism (Sagie, 1998), tardiness (Iverson & Deery, 2001), and employee turnover (Johns, 2002).

Given the positive outcomes that result from job satisfaction, it becomes clear as to why job satisfaction was included in the current study. Similarly, communication satisfaction has received considerable attention in prior research with findings indicating relationships between communication satisfaction and productivity (Clampitt & Downs, 1993), job performance (Pincus, 1986), and organizational commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Varona, 1996). Therefore, communication satisfaction was also included in the current study.

### **Communication Satisfaction**

Crino and White (1981) argued that organizational communication satisfaction involves an individual's satisfaction with various aspects of the communication occurring in the

organization, whereas, Putti, Aryee, and Phua (1990) demonstrated that organizational members' communication satisfaction is associated with the amount of information available to them, which may enhance their commitment to an organization. Thus, the communication satisfaction of employees is important because it appears to be a key issue for employees in determining their organizational effectiveness. For example, outcomes where employee communication satisfaction is low include reduced employee commitment, greater absenteeism, higher employee turnover, and reduced productivity (Hargie, Tourish, & Wilson, 2002). At an individual level, poor communication can result in increased uncertainty about situations, the self, others, or relationships, increased occupational stress, and burnout (Ray, 1993).

In addition to the positive outcomes mentioned earlier related to communication satisfaction additional research such as those by Madlock (2006), Madlock (in press), Pettit, Goris, and Vaught (1997), and Wheelless, Wheelless, & Howard (1984) found strong positive relationships between communication satisfaction and job satisfaction.

### *Rationale*

Prior research examining the communication competence and nonverbal immediacy of supervisors indicates that these communicative behaviors have a positive influence on subordinates' satisfaction. However, prior research has not identified which communicative behavior enacted by a supervisor, communication competence or nonverbal immediacy serves as a greater predictor of subordinate job and communication satisfaction. Thus, the following hypotheses were advanced:

- H1: Communication competence of a supervisor will serve as a greater predictor of their subordinate's job satisfaction than will the supervisor's nonverbal immediacy.
- H2: Communication competence of a supervisor will serve as a greater predictor of their subordinate's communication satisfaction than will the supervisor's nonverbal immediacy.

Based on this conceptualization of communication competence forwarded by Stohl (1984) who argued that a communicatively competent individual possesses the ability to employ communicative resources such as language, gestures, and voice effectively in the pursuit of goals, it would appear that nonverbal behaviors such as nonverbal immediacy may mediate the relationship between communication competence and the outcomes of job and communication satisfaction. As such, the following hypotheses were advanced:

- H3: Supervisors' nonverbal immediacy will mediate the relationship between communicator competence and subordinates' job satisfaction.
- H4: Supervisors' nonverbal immediacy will mediate the relationship between communicator competence and subordinates' communication satisfaction.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were 275 working adults ( $n = 132$ , 48% male) and ( $n = 143$ , 52% female) with a range in tenure from 1-32 years ( $M = 6.7$ ,  $SD = 8.2$ ). Participants included ( $n = 129$ ) who reported working for a female supervisor and ( $n = 146$ ) who reported working for a male supervisor. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 ( $M = 28.27$ ,  $SD = 9.54$ ).

### *Procedures*

A network sample was obtained for the current study in which students enrolled in a communication course at a large Midwest university contacted employees to participate in the study. The students were instructed to deliver the questionnaire to full-time working adults. Participants were approached in non-work settings so as to preserve the anonymity of both the participant and their organization. The questionnaire utilized for the study was comprised of a variety of instruments, including scales measuring subordinates' perceptions of their supervisors' communication behaviors. One important note is that all the responses to the survey questions were based on the perceptions of the subordinate. A quantitative methodological approach was utilized for the current study in an effort to maximize the generalizability of the findings based on the size and diversity of the sample. IRB granted exempt status due to the limited risk involved with the study and the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity for the participants because a self addressed stamped envelope was provided by the author as a means for the participants to return the completed questionnaire.

## Measures

*Job satisfaction* will be measured by the eight item Abridged Job In General Scale (AJIG) Russell, Spitzmüller, Lin, Stanton, Smith, and Ironson (2004). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was used in the current study instead of the original scale formatting (i.e., using 0 for “no,” 1 for “?” and 3 for “yes) to insure overall consistency throughout the questionnaire. The AJIG Scale was found to have strong reliability with a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .87 (Russell et al.). Coefficient alpha for the current study was .88 ( $M = 29.29$ ,  $SD = 6.91$ ).

*Communication Satisfaction* was measured by the Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory (ICSI) developed by Hecht (1978). A 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) was used. A slight modification was made to the original scale with a lead in sentence (When communicating with my supervisor I feel...) preceding each statement. Prior studies reported reliabilities ranging from .72 to .93 and strong validity (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .91 ( $M = 70.75$ ,  $SD = 14.13$ ).

Nonverbal Immediacy was measured by the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale-Observer Report (NIS-O) by Richmond, McCroskey, and Johnson (2003). A 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was used in the study. Richmond et al. (2003) reported scale reliability of .90. The coefficient alpha for the current study was .92 ( $M = 91.13$ ,  $SD = 16.79$ ).

Communicator Competence was measured by utilizing the 12-item Communicator Competence instrument developed by Monge, Backman, Dillard, and Eisenburg, (1982). The items were measured on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The instrument has proven reliability ranging from .81 to .93 and validity ranging from .66 to .86 (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). Coefficient alpha for the current study was .92 ( $M = 44.63$ ,  $SD = 9.35$ ).

## Results

Hypothesis one predicted that supervisors' communication competence would serve as a greater predictor of subordinate job satisfaction than would supervisors' nonverbal immediacy. Regression analysis supported this hypothesis. Job satisfaction was regressed on a linear

combination of the two predictor variables. The results indicated that communicator competence accounted for 37.5% of the variance in subordinate job satisfaction and the equation containing both communicator competence and nonverbal immediacy accounted for 38% of the variance in subordinate job satisfaction,  $F(2, 272) = 84.91, p < .001$ . A closer examination of the standardized coefficients indicated that communicator competence was a greater predictor of subordinate job satisfaction ( $\beta = .56$ ), than was nonverbal immediacy ( $\beta = .11$ ).

Hypothesis two predicted that supervisors' communication competence would serve as a greater predictor of subordinate communication satisfaction than would supervisors' nonverbal immediacy. Regression analysis supported this hypothesis. Communication satisfaction was regressed on a linear combination of the two predictor variables. The results indicated that communicator competence accounted for 60% of the variance in subordinate communication satisfaction and the equation containing both communicator competence and nonverbal immediacy accounted for 64% of the variance in subordinate communication satisfaction,  $F(2, 272) = 242.74, p < .001$ . A closer examination of the standardized coefficients indicated that communicator competence was a greater predictor of subordinate communication satisfaction ( $\beta = .64$ ), than was nonverbal immediacy ( $\beta = .24$ ).

Hypothesis three forwarded that supervisors' nonverbal immediacy would mediate the relationship between communicator competence and subordinate job satisfaction. A series of regressions were conducted indicating positive relationships between communicator competence and nonverbal immediacy ( $\beta = .56, p < .001$ ), communicator competence and job satisfaction ( $\beta = .61, p < .001$ ), and nonverbal immediacy and job satisfaction ( $\beta = .11, p < .001$ ). When nonverbal immediacy was entered as a mediator into the model, the relationship between communicator competence and job satisfaction was reduced ( $\beta = .56, p < .001$ ), while the relationship between nonverbal immediacy and job satisfaction remained significant ( $\beta = .11, p < .001$ ). Taken together, the results suggest that the relationship between a supervisor's communicator competence and their employees' job satisfaction are mediated by the supervisor's nonverbal immediacy (see Fig. 1).

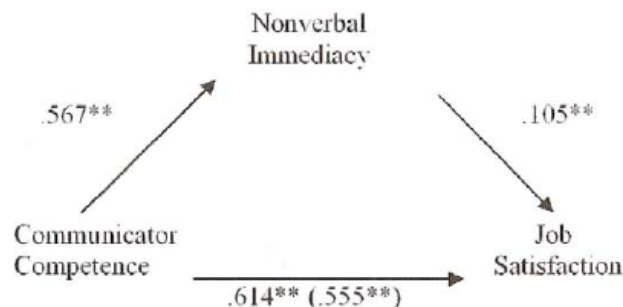


Fig. 1. Mediation model relating communicator competence, nonverbal immediacy, and job satisfaction. Values represent standardized regression coefficients. The value inside the square brackets denotes the effect of communicator competence on job satisfaction, with nonverbal immediacy as mediator.  $**P < .001$ .

Hypothesis four forwarded that supervisors' nonverbal immediacy would mediate the relationship between communicator competence and subordinate communication satisfaction. A series of regressions were conducted indicating positive relationships between communicator competence and nonverbal immediacy ( $\beta = .56, p < .001$ ), communicator competence and communication satisfaction ( $\beta = .78, p < .001$ ), and nonverbal immediacy and communication satisfaction ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ). When nonverbal immediacy was entered as a mediator into the model, the relationship between communicator competence and job satisfaction was reduced ( $\beta = .64, p < .001$ ), while the relationship between nonverbal immediacy and communication satisfaction remained significant ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ). Taken together, the results suggest that the relationship between a supervisor's communicator competence and their employees' communication satisfaction are mediated by the supervisor's nonverbal immediacy (see Fig. 2).

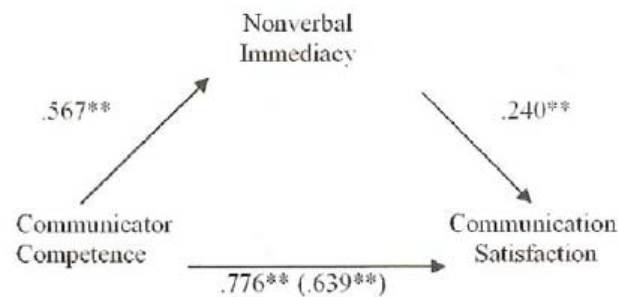


Fig. 2. Mediation model relating communicator competence, nonverbal immediacy, and communication satisfaction. Values represent standardized regression coefficients. The value inside the square brackets denotes the effect of communicator competence on communication satisfaction, with nonverbal immediacy as mediator. \*\* $P < .001$ .

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to expand our understanding of supervisor subordinate relationships by examining the influence of communication competence and nonverbal immediacy enacted by a supervisor on their subordinates' satisfaction. Specifically, this study hypothesized that a supervisor's communication competence would have a greater influence on subordinates' job and communication satisfaction than nonverbal immediacy. The current study also predicted that nonverbal immediacy would serve as a mediating variable between communication competence and a subordinate's job and communication satisfaction.

The present study validated prior communication competence and nonverbal immediacy research in that it found that both communicative behaviors displayed by a supervisor had a positive influence on their subordinates' job and communication satisfaction. This finding is important based on prior findings indicating that job satisfaction is positively related to job performance, (Gruneberg, 1979), in that it supports the notion that communication in the workplace may actually have a direct effect on the bottom line of the organization.

A second area of interest was found in the notion that nonverbal immediacy mediated the relationships between a supervisor's communication competence and their subordinates' job and communication satisfaction. The major implication of this finding is based on the conceptualization of communication competence in that a nonverbal component such as nonverbal immediacy is relevant. Specifically, this finding appears to extend the conceptualization of communication competence forwarded by Stohl (1984) in that nonverbal behaviors such as gestures and voice may be extended to include nonverbal immediacy. This finding also allows for a fuller and perhaps more accurate conceptualization as to what is to be a competent communicator.

A final area of interest relative to the current study involves its possible contributions to industry. Given the negative outcomes that result from low levels of employee job and communication such as absenteeism (Alder & Golan, 1981; Blau 1985; Iverson & Deery, 2001) and turnover (Porter & Steers, 1973), the findings of the current study indicated that a supervisor's communication competence appeared to be a strong predictor of their subordinates' job and communication satisfaction. With that, organizations may want to develop supervisory training programs in order to enhance the communication competence of supervisors, which in turn may result in greater employee satisfaction and increased performance.

### *Future Direction and Limitations*

While supervisors' communication competence accounted for the greatest variance and was found to be the greatest predictors of employee job and communication satisfaction, future researchers may want to provide further support for this association between communication competence and nonverbal immediacy. Further, researchers may also want to include a qualitative component to provide a richer understanding as to the actual reasons employees attribute to perceiving their supervisor as a competent communicator. Another recommendation for future research involves the investigation of additional variables that may mediate the relationship between communication competence and employee satisfaction such as personality traits, communication traits, age, tenure, or gender.

Although the present study demonstrated significant results with respect to superior and subordinate communicative behaviors, it is not without limitations. One possible limitation can be found in the sample. Although the sample size itself was adequate, the network sample was obtained from working professionals working within a 30 mile radius. Future research may expand the sample to a larger geographic region for a greater level of generalizability.

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