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**Perceived Differences in Instructional Communication Behaviors Between Effective and Ineffective Corporate Trainers**

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**Abstract**

Research has documented positive relationships between instructor nonverbal immediacy, verbal effectiveness, clarity, and student perceptions of learning. The research has been somewhat limited, however, to samples of students in university classrooms. This study examined perceived differences in instructional communication behaviors between effective and ineffective corporate trainers using a sample of 106 corporate employees from a U.S. pharmacy benefits company who were involved in a company training program. Participants completed measures of nonverbal immediacy, verbal effectiveness, teacher clarity, and affective learning. Results indicated effective trainers were perceived to use more nonverbal immediacy and clarity behaviors that resulted in perceptions of greater affective learning than ineffective trainers. Results found no differences in trainers' use of verbal effectiveness behaviors. Of the variables studied, trainer clarity was the primary predictor of affective learning for trainees.

**Keywords:** Training, adult learning, instructor immediacy, verbal effectiveness, instructor clarity, affective learning.

Organizations make a major investment in the training, education, and development of employees (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Rivera & Paradise, 2007). Despite increases in the use of e-learning training methods, the trainer remains a central figure in the face-to-face training process (Analoui, 1994; Compeau, 2002; Darling, 1993; Mitchell, 1998). Although the instructional communication literature provides insight about relationships between teacher communication behaviors and learning outcomes, relatively few studies have investigated whether instructor classroom communication behaviors are generalizable to corporate training (Compeau, 2002; Kontoghiorghes, 2001; Koval, 1999; Wexley, 1984).

Teaching and training share many characteristics. Yet despite the similarities, there are also differences between traditional teaching and training contexts. Differences include the duration and frequency of interaction between instructors and learners (Compeau, 2002). There are also likely to be differences in learner expectations of what will be taught and the methods used to teach the material (Compeau, 2002; Houser, 2004). Training is usually more applied whereas classroom instruction is typically more theoretical (Knowles, 1990; Rogers, 2002). Given the differences between the training context and the traditional classroom, research is needed to determine whether such instructional communication behaviors as instructor nonverbal immediacy, verbal effectiveness, and clarity are applicable to the training context (Houser, 2004, 2005, 2006; Knowles, 1990).

The purpose of this study is to assess the application of four instructional communication variables—nonverbal immediacy, verbal effectiveness, clarity, and affective learning—to the training context. Specifically, this study seeks to identify perceived differences in instructional communication behaviors between effective and ineffective corporate trainers, as well as the impact of trainer communication upon affective learning.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Several researchers have proposed differences between how adults and non-adults learn (Knowles, 1990; Rogers, 2002; Tight, 1996). One of the theorized differences between traditional student and adult learners is the basis for learning motivation. Research has found that learner motivation has a significant impact upon both affective and cognitive learning (Christophel, 1990; Houser, 2006). As theorized by Knowles (1990), adult learners tend to be more intrinsically motivated and traditional students tend to be more extrinsically motivated. In traditional classroom settings, students may be more motivated by teacher-directed pedagogical methods than student-directed andragogical methods. Because of differences in the training context (e.g., frequency and duration of learning) as well as underlying learner needs and motivations (Knowles, 1990; Houser, 2006), adult learners may harbor different expectations for trainer behavior than students in a traditional classroom setting. Differences in learner motivation between adult learners and non-adult learners may influence their respective expectations as to how instructors should communicate with them.

#### **Nonverbal Immediacy and Verbal Effectiveness**

According to Mehrabian (1969), immediacy consists of nonverbal and verbal communication behaviors that “enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another” (p. 213). A meta-analysis of more than 80 studies has documented the positive relationships between instructor nonverbal immediacy and student cognitive and affective learning (Witt, Wheelless, & Allen, 2004). Verbal immediacy, which has been recast as verbal effectiveness behaviors by Mottet and Richmond (1998), has also shown to be related to enhanced cognitive and affective learning (Witt, Wheelless, & Allen, 2004).

Based on previous research findings related to teacher nonverbal immediacy and verbal effectiveness behaviors (also known as verbal immediacy), and the assumption that trainees who perceive themselves as learning more will consider the trainer to be more effective than trainees who perceive themselves as learning less, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- H1: Trainees perceive effective trainers as using significantly more nonverbally immediate behaviors than ineffective trainers.
- H2: Trainees perceive effective trainers as using significantly more verbal effectiveness behaviors than ineffective trainers.

### **Clarity**

Research suggests that when instructors are clear, students are more likely to comprehend their instructors' intended meaning (Chesebro, 2003; Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998, 2001; Civikly, 1992; Powell & Harville, 1990). Research on instructor clarity has focused both on the structure of presentations and on the verbal characteristics of classroom instruction (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998). To be perceived as clear, research suggests that instructors should speak in an articulate and audible manner, stay on task without introducing unrelated new topics, and use a commonly understood vocabulary (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998, 2001; Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986; Hartley, 1976; Land & Smith, 1979).

Based on the research literature related to instructor clarity discussed here, and the assumption that adult learners would similarly expect clear instruction, the following hypothesis was posited:

- H3: Trainees perceive effective trainers as using significantly more instructor clarity behaviors than ineffective trainers.

### **Affective Learning**

Affective learning involves the development of positive or negative attitudes toward the subject matter. Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964) described affective learning as "the objectives that emphasize a feeling or tone, an emotion or degree of acceptance or rejection" (p. 7). Increased affective learning has been consistently associated with such teacher communication behaviors as nonverbal immediacy, verbal effectiveness, and clarity (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Johnson & Miller, 2002; Rodriguez, Plax, and Kearney 1996; Witt & Wheelless, 2001).

The first three hypotheses predict that effective trainers will use more nonverbally immediate and verbal effectiveness behaviors, as well as a greater number of verbal clarity behaviors than ineffective trainees. If each hypothesis is correct, then trainees should self-report more affective learning with effective trainers than ineffective trainers. This predicted difference leads to the final hypothesis:

- H4: Trainees perceive effective trainers as generating significantly greater amounts of affective learning than ineffective trainers.

This study should increase understanding about how instructional communication variables influence learning outcomes in an environment other than the university classroom. With the little research that has been done in training contexts, and the expected differences in learning characteristics between traditional students and adult learners, it was not possible to predict how each of these variables would contribute to affective learning in a training context. Hence, the following research question was posed:

RQ: To what extent does a trainer's use of nonverbal immediacy, verbal effectiveness, and clarity behaviors predict trainees' affective learning?

### Method

#### Sample

The convenience sample for this study included 106 employees of a Fortune 100 pharmacy benefits company. The company provides prescription drug coverage to members of corporations, local and state government entities, and other large trade organizations. This study was conducted in conjunction with a communication skills training program. The 106 surveys were completed by 46 (43%) pharmacy technicians, 40 (38%) pharmacists, 12 (11%) customer service representatives, and 8 (8%) individuals in other assorted jobs. Thirty-four percent ( $n = 36$ ) of the respondents were male and 63% ( $n = 67$ ) were female. Two percent ( $n = 3$ ) of the sample did not indicate sex.

The mean age of survey respondents was 35 years (Range = 20-65). Thirty-two percent ( $n = 33$ ) of the respondents noted they had completed a college degree, while an additional 42% ( $n = 44$ ) had attended some college. The remaining 26% ( $n = 27$ ) indicated that they had completed high school or earned a GED.

#### Procedures

Participants were asked to complete one of two questionnaires. Both questionnaires contained the same survey items but had different instructions. Half of the sample (Group A) was asked to think of an effective trainer from whom they had received training in the past. Participants in Group A then completed the survey while considering the instructional communication behaviors performed by that effective trainer. Conversely, Group B participants were asked to think of an ineffective trainer and then completed the survey while considering the instructional communication behaviors performed by that ineffective trainer.

During a dedicated twenty-minute period of time at the beginning of the training course, trainers unaffiliated with the study randomly distributed and collected questionnaires. Doing so at the beginning of class avoided any tendency of a respondent to confuse the survey with an end-of-class evaluation of the current trainer or to be influenced by skills taught during the class. This procedure also helped to increase the number of potential trainers that could be rated by the study participants. Completed surveys indicated that respondents considered twenty separate trainers. Respondents were instructed to return the survey unanswered if they could not think of an effective or ineffective trainer or could not remember the behaviors exhibited by the trainer. All participants completed the questionnaire document as instructed.

#### Instrumentation

The questionnaire included 96 survey items. Participants provided basic demographic information, including their age, sex, date, and the sex of the trainer they were rating. They were also asked three questions to help describe the training class they had attended with the trainer they were rating. Respondents then completed established instruments designed to measure the instructional communication variables examined in this study. Items in each scale were slightly modified to accommodate the training context and to fit the methodology with which the study was conducted. Unless otherwise noted below, changes were limited to modifying the word "teacher" wherever used to "trainer" and changing present tense verbs to their past tense equivalents.

**Trainer clarity.** Trainers' use of clarity behaviors was measured using Chesebro and McCroskey's (1998) Teacher Clarity Short Inventory (TCSI) instrument. The TCSI instrument asks participants to indicate their level of agreement on ten clarity items using a seven-point

scale, with 1 representing “completely disagree” and 7 representing “completely agree.” Scores for the measure can range between 10 and 70. Reliability has been found to be .92 in previous studies (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998, 2001). In the current study, the TCSI had a range from 11-70, a mean of 51.88,  $SD = 14.14$ , and a Cronbach alpha of .94.

**Trainer nonverbal immediacy.** Trainer nonverbal immediacy was measured using Richmond, Gorham, and McCroskey's (1987) Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors (NIB) Instrument. The NIB instrument asks participants to indicate the frequency of 14 nonverbal behaviors using a five-point scale, with 0 representing “never” and 4 representing “very often.” One item assessing touch was removed from the instrument, since touch is generally discouraged in the workplace. The final NIB instrument contained 13 items with a possible range from 0-52. Reliability has been found to range from .73 to .89 (Kearney, 2004a). The current study yielded a range from 9-43, a mean of 32.46,  $SD = 6.94$ , and a Cronbach alpha of .78.

**Trainer verbal effectiveness.** Trainer verbal effectiveness was measured using Gorham's (1988) Verbal Immediacy Scale. Although Robinson and Richmond (1995) and Mottet and Richmond (1998) have challenged the validity of the verbal immediacy construct, the items comprising this measure were important to this study examining effective instructional communication behaviors used by trainers. Rather than referring to the items as verbal immediacy behaviors, this study refers to them as verbal effectiveness behaviors. (Mottet & Richmond, 1998). The Verbal Effectiveness Scale (VES) asked participants to indicate the frequency of 17 verbal behaviors using a five-point scale, with 0 representing “never” and 4 representing “very often.” The items comprising this measure have a possible range from 0-68. Reliability has consistently ranged from .83 to .94 (Kearney, 2004b). In the current study, the VES had a range from 8 to 61, a mean of 41.00,  $SD = 10.88$ , and a Cronbach alpha of .84.

**Affective learning.** Affective learning was measured using McCroskey's (1994) affective learning scale. Although the instrument consists of four sub-scales, McCroskey cautions researchers to use only two of the four sub-scales when assessing affective learning. The other two sub-scales are measures of instructor evaluation and should not be used in an overall measurement of affective learning. Each of the two sub-scales used in this study asked survey respondents to rate their attitudes about the training class using four, seven-step bipolar scales.

The first scale asked respondents to assign a rating reflecting their feeling toward the training class content using the following bipolar adjectives: good/bad, valuable/worthless, fair/unfair, and positive/negative. The second sub-scale asked the respondent to rate their likelihood of taking similar training classes in the future, using the following bipolar adjectives: likely/unlikely, possible/impossible, probable/improbable, and would/would not. The items comprising the Affective Learning Measure (ALM) have a possible range from 8-56. McCroskey (1994) reported reliabilities for the combined two subscales to be at or above .90. The current study reported a range from 11-56, a mean of 40.28,  $SD = 11.98$ , and a Cronbach alpha of .89.

### **Data Analysis**

The four hypotheses were tested using independent-samples *t*-tests. Perceived trainer effectiveness or ineffectiveness served as the independent or grouping variable for each test. Trainee ratings of trainer instructional communication behaviors (nonverbal immediacy, verbal effectiveness, clarity) served as dependent variables for the first three hypotheses, while affective learning was the dependent variable for the fourth hypothesis. To answer the research question, multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine how each set of trainer communication

behaviors contributed to trainees' affective learning. Trainer communication behaviors served as predictor variables, while trainees' affective learning served as the criterion variable.

### Results

H1 predicted that trainees perceive effective trainers as using significantly more nonverbal immediacy behaviors than ineffective trainers. This hypothesis was supported. An independent-samples *t*-test comparing the mean scores of the effective and ineffective groups found a significant difference in trainers' use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors  $t(102) = 3.28, p < .01$ . The mean for nonverbal immediacy for the effective trainer group was 34.60 ( $SD = 5.21$ ) while the mean for the ineffective trainer group was 30.33 ( $SD = 7.80$ ). Table 1 summarizes means, standard deviations, and tests of significant difference.

**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Tests of Significant Difference for Effective and Ineffective Trainers**

Measures	<i>N</i>	<u>Effective</u>		<u>Ineffective</u>		<i>t</i>	Sig.
		Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>		
1. Trainer clarity	104	59.53	9.83	44.40	13.91	6.33	.05
2. Verbal effectiveness	104	43.00	10.62	39.00	10.87	1.90	--
3. Nonverbal immediacy	104	34.60	5.21	30.33	7.80	3.28	.01
4. Affective learning	102	44.73	10.22	35.84	12.06	4.01	.001

H2 predicted that trainees perceive effective trainers as using significantly more verbally effective behaviors than ineffective trainers. This hypothesis was not supported. An independent-samples *t*-test comparing the mean scores of the effective and ineffective groups did not find a significant difference in trainers' use of verbally effective behaviors  $t(102) = 1.90, p > .05$ . The mean for verbal effectiveness for the effective trainer group was 43.00 ( $SD = 10.62$ ) while the mean for the ineffective trainer group was 39.00 ( $SD = 10.87$ ).

H3 predicted that trainees perceive effective trainers as using significantly more trainer clarity behaviors than ineffective trainers. This hypothesis was supported. An independent-samples *t*-test comparing the mean scores of the effective and ineffective groups found a significant difference in trainers' use of clarity behaviors  $t(102) = 6.33, p < .001$ . The mean for trainer clarity for the effective trainer group was 59.35 ( $SD = 9.83$ ), while the mean for the ineffective trainer group was 44.40 ( $SD = 13.91$ ).

H4 predicted that trainees perceive effective trainers as generating significantly greater amounts of affective learning than ineffective trainers. This hypothesis was supported. An independent-samples *t*-test comparing the mean scores of the effective and ineffective survey groups found a significant difference in trainers' abilities to generate affective learning  $t(100) = 4.01, p < .001$ . The affective learning mean for the effective trainer group was 44.73 ( $SD = 10.22$ ) while the affective learning mean for of the ineffective trainer group was 35.84 ( $SD = 12.06$ ).

The research question asked to what extent a trainer's use of nonverbal immediacy, verbally effective, and clarity behaviors impact trainees' affective learning. A multiple linear regression was used to examine the predictive power of a trainer's use of nonverbal immediacy, verbally effective, and clarity behaviors on trainees' affective learning. With the three predictor variables included, the model reported a significant regression equation  $F(3, 98) = 18.76, p <$

.001 with an  $R^2$  of .35. Additional analyses revealed, however, that a trainer's use of clarity behaviors was the only predictor of trainees' affective learning ( $p < .001$ ). Table 2 shows beta weights and significance levels for each predictor variable included in the regression model.

**Table 2: Beta Weights for Affective Learning Regression Coefficients**

Predictor Variable*	$\beta$	Sig.
Trainer clarity	.453	.000
Verbal effectiveness	.171	.108
Nonverbal immediacy	.071	.557

\*Criterion variable: Affective learning

### Discussion

The data from this study suggests that trainees perceive effective trainers as using more nonverbal immediacy and clarity behaviors than do ineffective trainers. The data also allows researchers to generalize effective instructional communication behaviors to another instructional context. These findings have important implications for both training managers and trainees. Trainers should use nonverbal immediacy and clarity behaviors, as both were associated with perceptions of effectiveness as defined by increased affective learning.

Results, however, did not support the hypothesis predicting differences in verbal effectiveness behaviors. Research participants rated effective and ineffective trainers' use of verbal effectiveness behaviors equally. There are three possible reasons for this finding. First, it is possible that verbal effectiveness behaviors may be similar for effective and ineffective trainers alike. Second, it may be that adult trainees do not perceive verbal effectiveness behaviors as an expected determinant of trainer effectiveness. This is in line with Houser's (2006) finding that adult learners in the college classroom did not expect their instructors to use verbally effective behaviors. A third possibility might be the aforementioned concerns regarding the validity of the instrument and its particular behaviors (Mottet & Richmond, 1998; Robinson & Richmond, 1995). The Verbal Effectiveness Scale, although believed to assess verbal immediacy, may be conceptually weak.

Overall, participants in the study perceived greater amounts of affective learning with an effective rather than an ineffective trainer. This result is consistent with previous instructional communication findings; the variables tested in this study influenced affective learning (Allen & Shaw, 1990; Sprinkle, Hunt, Simonds, & Comadena, 2006). Hypotheses one and three linked effective trainers with their use of nonverbal immediacy and clarity behaviors. It seems likely, then, that trainers using more nonverbal immediacy and clarity behaviors would be associated with increased affective learning for trainees.

Consistent with previous findings (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Christophel, 1990; Johnson & Miller, 2002; Witt & Wheelless, 2001), results indicated that participants had higher levels of self-reported affective learning when their trainers used higher levels of nonverbal immediacy, verbally effective, and clear instructional behaviors. These results remind trainers that they have the ability to influence trainees' affective learning by increasing their use of these key instructional communication behaviors.

An even more important finding of this study is the impact trainer clarity had on affective learning. While nonverbal immediacy and verbally effective behaviors were both positively

correlated with affective learning (see Table 2), neither variable significantly contributed to a predictive model of affective learning.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

As with any research study, the results need to be interpreted while keeping in mind the limitations of the research design. Below are several recommendations to correct limitations in the current study and extend instructional communication research to the training context.

Methodologically, it would be more desirable to use a research design in which trainees directly observe trainers and their communicative behaviors. This would restrict any recall issues due to the time lapse between training and survey completion.

Although this study has confirmed that perceived differences exist between effective and ineffective trainers, future research should examine additional learning outcomes with affective learning. While affective learning is a critical indicator of a student's willingness to engage with the information presented, it is not indicative of his or her knowledge of the material or ability to perform related skills. Future research could also experimentally manipulate effective and ineffective trainers so that clearer relationships between instructional communication variables and trainer effectiveness may be documented.

This study has validated the assumption that instructional communication variables can be applied to the corporate training context. Significant work is needed to empirically examine and theoretically test instructional communication variables in the training context. Based upon these preliminary findings, however, it may be wise for industry trainers to recognize the role that instructional communication behaviors have on trainee learning.

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