

DO BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS AFFECT JOB SATISFACTION AND SATISFACTION WITH THE SUPERVISOR?

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between basic communication skills, job satisfaction, and satisfaction with my supervisor for a sample of 360 employees. Results indicated that perceptions regarding managers' encoding ability account for significant variance in job satisfaction and approached significance for satisfaction with the supervisor. Perceptions of managers' decoding ability accounted for significant variance in satisfaction with the supervisor, but not job satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Job descriptions for managers usually list good communication skills as a job qualification. Managers and scholars have long assumed that communication skill (competence) is an important indicator of success for managers. This assumption is entirely logical since the nature of managerial work requires communication skill to perform the most basic functions associated with the job. Possibly because the link between communication competence and managerial performance is believed to be basic in nature, there have been relatively few efforts to identify or to understand the relationship between the components of communication competence and the outcomes desired by both the manager and the organization. Organizations spend large amounts of money and time attempting to improve the "communication skills" of their current and future managers. Understanding which basic communications abilities are most important to managerial success could make training more meaningful.

Job satisfaction represents an expression of one's overall sense of satisfaction – or dissatisfaction – with a job. Job satisfaction is one of the most studied variables in the behavioral management literature. Job satisfaction has been defined as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences (Locke, 1976, p. 1300)." Job satisfaction is considered to be a more global attitude than satisfaction with the supervisor. However, satisfaction with the supervisor is a much less studied attitude. Satisfaction with my supervisor denotes the degree to which an employee is satisfied with the immediate supervisor rather than other conditions or agents in the work situation (Scarpello and Vandenberg, 1987). If individuals in an organization are satisfied with the behaviors of their immediate supervisor, the following question arises: Is there a relationship between that satisfaction and other attitudes? The general question addressed by this research is the extent to which differences in satisfaction with the supervisor and/or with the job can be explained by examining variations in the managers' basic communication skills. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the relationships between basic components of communication competence and satisfaction with the supervisor and job satisfaction.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

McCroskey (1984) observed that "communication competence means different things to different scholars" (p. 261). Many researchers have conceptualized communication competence from either a behavioral skill or a social cognitive perspective (e.g., Weimann, 1977; Brandt, 1979; Cooley & Roach, 1984; Sypher, 1984; Sypher & Zorn, 1986) and have defined the concept accordingly. The social cognitive perspective argues for a link between one's social skill and one's communication competence. The key determinant of success from the social cognitive perspective is the match between the communication behavior used by a person and the social situation. The behavioral skills point of view suggests that there are universal communication skills or characteristics which provide a basis for differentiating effective from ineffective managers. For this perspective, the key to success is the skill with which the manager engages in behaviors associated with goal attainment. Monge, Bachman, Dillard, and Eisenberg (1982), Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, and Henwood (1991), and Alexander, Penley, and Jernigan (1991, 1992) are representative of the behavioral skills perspective. This paper will use a skills perspective of communication competence. Consistent with Lustig and King (1980), the competent communicator is defined as "... one who possesses a broad communication repertoire, the requisite skills to choose among the available communication options in a particular situation, and the ability to implement selected behaviors effectively (p. 75)."

Scarpello and Vandenberg (1987) rely on a definition of supervision proposed by Mann. That is, "supervision is an organizational role whose effective enactment entails ability to reconcile and coordinate the needs and goals of the work group's members with organizational requirements (p. 450)." He defines supervisor effectiveness as a function of three interrelated skills: "technical (dealing knowledgeably with task issues), human relations (getting work done with and through people), and administrative (coordinating activities and acting in terms of the system within which one operates) (p. 450)." Scarpello and Vandenberg (1987) developed the Satisfaction with My Supervisor Scale (SWMSS) to measure the effectiveness of supervisor behaviors.

Research using the SWMSS provides support for both the construct and the scale. Individuals whose specific turnover motive was dissatisfaction with the supervisor showed a decline in turnover intentions and improvements in their evaluation of and satisfaction with their managers after they requested and received an internal transfer (Vandenberg & Nelson, 1999). Jeanquart-Barone (1996) finds that supervisor support, resources, participation in decision-making and procedural justice accounts for 74 percent of variance in satisfaction with male supervisors. However, supervisory support, resources, and procedural justice accounts for 86 percent of variance in satisfaction with female supervisors.

Others have researched subordinate satisfaction with the supervisor using different measures, frameworks, and methodologies. In a study of counselor trainees, Ladany, Ellis, and Friedlander (1999) report increases in emotional bond scores (a component of working alliance) were directly related to satisfaction with supervision. Ladany et al. (1999) appear to partially confirm work on charismatic leadership by Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993). Shamir et al. (1993) propose that charismatic leaders are exceptional leaders who have a major impact on their followers and on social systems. The effects of charismatic leadership on commitment to the mission and on the transformation from self-interests to collective interests appear to be most relevant to this research project. Shamir et al. (1993) describe the behavioral characteristics of followers committed to the leader's mission as similar to those of employees who are morally committed. Charismatic leadership leads to greater emotional attachment, along with increased follower motivation, trust, and confidence in the leader (Shamir et al., 1993).

In a study of self-directed teams, Butler, Cantrell, and Flick (1999) find upward trust and transformational leadership behaviors were powerful predictors of satisfaction with supervision. In a study of hierarchical decision-making teams, Phillips, Douthitt, and Hyland (2001) find that team decision accuracy, leader

consideration behavior, and decision influence predict satisfaction with the leader. Moreover, the effect of leader consideration behavior was completely mediated by team-member perceptions of procedural and interactional justice. Subordinates' perceptions of fairness in their relationship with the supervisor partially mediated the relationship between both team decision accuracy and decision influence and satisfaction with the leader. According to Phillips et al. (2001), "satisfaction with the leader is likely to depend heavily on the leader's ability to secure positive outcomes for the team." Team performance accounts for almost half the between-team variance in member satisfaction with the leader. In other words, satisfaction with the leader is a function of team performance.

METHOD

The sample for this study consisted of 360 employees working in a large southern city. Respondents included the following groups: employees of the headquarters staff of a division of a multinational company, employees of regional production plants from two national consumer products corporations, employees of a multinational chemical firm, and employees of a regional financial services company. Questionnaires along with cover letters and addressed, postage-paid return envelopes were distributed through company mail to 640 potential study participants. Completed questionnaires were mailed directly to the researchers. Usable responses were received from 360 individuals for an overall 56 percent response rate. Response rates for the individual samples ranged from 20 to 50 percent.

Personal characteristics of the research subjects are summarized in Table 1. The mean age for the sample was 35 years, with more than 60 percent being male, 77 percent being White, and 15 percent being African American. The education levels were as follows: (38.6 percent) college graduates, (7.6 percent) graduate degrees, (31.5 percent) completed some college, (20.7 percent) high school graduates, and (1.6 percent) high school dropouts. The mean tenure with the current employer was eight years, in the current job was five years, and with the supervisor was two years.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Total number of usable responses	360
Non-managers	252
Managers	102
Gender:	
Male	234
Female	117
Education:	
High School or less	69
Some College	104
College Graduate	141
Graduate Degree	40
Race/Ethnicity	
Non-white	79
White	272
Mean Age	36
Mean Job Tenure (years)	4.5
Mean Length of Employment (years)	8
Mean Tenure with Supervisor (years)	2.3

Note: Because of missing responses, categories may not total to 360 or 100 percent

Measures

Job satisfaction was measured using the Index of Job Satisfaction developed by Brayfield and Rothe (1951). The index consists of eighteen items half of which are reverse scored. Originally formulated with a 5 point agree-disagree scale, the index was modified to a 7-point very strongly agree to very strongly disagree scale in order to make it consistent with the other measures employed in this study. Sample items from the index include: "My job is like a hobby to me," "I am often bored with my job (R)," and "I find real enjoyment in my work."

The Satisfaction with My Supervisor Scale (SWMSS) developed by Scarpello and Vandenberg (1987) was used to gauge subordinate satisfaction with the manager. The SWMSS is an eighteen-item seven-point scale (the anchors ranged from 1 very dissatisfied to 7 very satisfied) that assesses three categories of skills (technical, human relations, and administrative) associated with effective supervision. The following are sample items from the SWMSS: "the way my supervisor understands the problems I might run into doing the job," "the way my supervisor listens when I have something important to say," and "the way my supervisor follows through to get problems solved." For this study, the coefficient alpha for the SWMSS scale was .96. Scarpello and Vandenberg (1987) report coefficient alphas ranging from .95 to .96. Vandenberg and Scarpello (1991) report internal-consistency coefficients of .95.

Perceptions of managerial communication competence were measured using the Communicator Competence Questionnaire (CCQ) developed by Monge, Bachman, Dillard, and Eisenberg (1982). The CCQ is a perceptually oriented 12-item questionnaire designed to assess communication competence in an organizational setting. The encoding subscale assesses communication competence along seven dimensions of perceived encoding skill: (1) command of the language; (2) gets to the point; (3) deals effectively with others; (4) the degree to which writing is difficult to understand; (5) ability to express ideas clearly; (6) the degree to which speaking is difficult to understand; and (7) the extent to which the manager says the right thing at the right time. The decoding subscale assesses communication competence along five dimensions of perceived decoding skill: (1) good listener; (2) easy to talk to; (3) responsive; (4) attentive; and (5) sensitive to the needs of others.

Using a multiple analysis of variance design, the effectiveness of managerial communication behavior was assessed. This paper evaluated the significance of variance in the relationship between basic managerial communication skills and two outcomes: job satisfaction and satisfaction with the manager.

The following research hypotheses will be tested:

1. Perceptions of managers' basic communication competence (encoding and decoding) will account for significant variance in job satisfaction.
2. Perceptions of managers' basic communication competence (encoding and decoding) will account for significant variance in satisfaction with the supervisor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multiple analysis of variance results are presented in Table 2. The results indicate that perceptions regarding managers encoding ability accounts for significant variance in job satisfaction ($F = 2.297$, $p .000$) and approached significance for satisfaction with the supervisor ($F = 1.492$, $p .056$). Perceptions of managers decoding ability accounted for significant variance in satisfaction with the supervisor ($F = 6.191$, $p .000$), but not job satisfaction.

Table 2
Multivariate Analysis of Variance

Variable	Job Satisfaction			Satisfaction with Supervisor		
	DF	F	p	DF	F	p
Encode	34	2.297	.000	34	1.494	.056
Decode	28	.662	.898	28	6.191	.000
Encode x Decode	135	1.120	.256	135	.934	.653

The results of this study provide some encouraging support for our position that components of a manager's basic communication competence (encoding and decoding skills) are significantly associated with outcomes desired by the manager and the organization. The results indicate that what Jablin and his colleagues (1989) referred to as threshold communication skills (encoding and decoding) were positively associated with satisfaction with supervision and partially associated with job satisfaction. For this study, encoding ability was of particular importance.

Our analysis highlights the importance of basic articulation and listening skills to satisfaction with supervision by work group members. In a 1990 study, Keys and Case also highlights the importance of basic communication competence skills for successful managers. Keys and Case report that managers who cast their ideas in the language of the person they were attempting to influence were more likely to be successful in achieving their objective than managers who did not (p. 48). The results of this study also support the Keys and Case suggestion that listening (decoding) skill is an important aspect of encouraging subordinates attempts to influence their manager. Subordinates of the manager high in decoding skill will be encouraged to communicate their ideas while subordinates of the less skillful manager will not. In addition, a high degree of managerial decoding skill is probably important for reading behavioral cues.

The limitations of these results and need for additional research should be recognized. This study looked at only broad perceptions of communication competence. It has not examined either specific communication skills or specific communication behaviors that might provide a better understanding of the relationship of managerial communication competence to outcomes. Research into the relationship of specific aspects of decoding skill to performance and satisfaction with supervision appear justified. In addition, differences among managers based on level of management, sex, or sub-sample were not considered due to sub-sample limitations. Future investigations should examine such differences. To conclude, this study partially confirms the conventional view of the importance of the basic components of communication competence (general encoding and decoding skill) to perceptions of job satisfaction and satisfaction with supervision.

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