

# **MENTORING COMMUNICATION STYLE: IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS**

Michael Willemyns  
University of Wollongong in Dubai

## **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to identify employees' perceptions of their managers' mentoring-style communication. It examined employees' descriptions of interactions with their managers, using content-coding and statistical analyses. The literature on mentoring, including gender differences in mentoring was also used. Drawing upon the conceptual frameworks of Communication Accommodation Theory and Social Identity Theory, the findings supported the hypotheses that managers who providing task, career and psychosocial support for their employees are considered more effective as mentors. Further, it was found that early-stage employees felt they gain more benefits from psychosocial mentoring than instrumental career assistance. It was also found that female managers were perceived to be more dominating and controlling by female employees than male employees. Theoretical and applied implications for communication in mentoring relationships are discussed.

Please address correspondence to:

Michael Willemyns  
University of Wollongong in Dubai  
PO Box 20183  
DUBAI, UAE  
Ph +9714 3672474  
Email [MichaelWillemyns@uowdubai.ac.ae](mailto:MichaelWillemyns@uowdubai.ac.ae)

## INTRODUCTION

Not all mentors are managers. However, it has been argued that all effective managers should be mentors (Bell, 1985). While there has been a plethora of research into workplace mentoring relationships, little research has examined factors that may be related to employees' satisfaction with the mentoring experience (Allen, Russell & Maetzke, 1997). This study aims to identify the characteristics of the managers' communication style and the level to which the manager identifies with his/her role, and the effect this has upon the employees' perceptions of the manager as a mentor. On an applied level, exploring the factors associated with a satisfactory mentoring style is essential to providing data necessary for improving mentoring programs.

The first major research into mentoring was conducted by Kram in the early 1980s (e.g., Kram, 1983; Kram 1985), and there has been a rapid rise in the research into mentoring over the last two decades (e.g., Russell, 1991; Russell & Adams, 1997; Scandura, 1990). However, more research into the communication and social psychology of the mentor-protégé relationship is needed to further understand the dynamics of the mentoring relationship.

There has been an increase in the number of women in management positions over the last two decades. Mentoring relationships (1991) are particularly important for women, since women are more likely than men to face gender-related obstacles to advancement (Ragins & Cotton, 1991). McIlhone (1984) found that females who had mentors advanced more quickly than those who lacked mentors. Burke and McKeen (1997) conducted a study involving male and female protégés and found that female protégés reported receiving more psychosocial support than their male counterparts. Reich (1986) also found that the affective and emotional aspects of a mentoring friendship were more important for female versus male protégés. It was also found that female mentors were more likely to stress caring, nurturing and teaching. No previous studies have explicitly examined gender differences in communication and mentoring style, so the present study aimed to address this limitation.

Kram (1985) identified two major functions served by mentors: a "career-related function" (which includes providing feedback and challenging assignments, and the facilitation and development of new skills), and a "psychosocial" function (which includes providing support, role modeling and encouragement). House (1981) concluded that social support refers to beneficial interpersonal relationships that aid in preventing or reducing stress. The four types of social support identified by House are emotional support (e.g., esteem, trust, concern), appraisal support (e.g. affirmation, feedback), informational support (e.g., advice, suggestions, directives and information), and instrumental support (e.g., money, labor and time). McManus and Russell (1997) argued that the most positive effects of mentoring and social support occur in informal mentoring relationships. The manager-employee mentoring relationships investigated in this study are considered informal, as the mentoring relationship was not assigned by the organization involved.

Social identity, according to Tajfel (1974, p 31), is an "individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership" (*sic*). The more a person identifies with his or her ingroup (e.g., manager), the more he or she will feel distinct from outgroup members (e.g.,

employees; see Willemyns, Gallois and Callan, 1997). McManus and Russell (1997) argued that “obtaining ingroup status may be a pre-requisite for employees to receive mentoring from their supervisors” (p 147). It has been found that ingroup members receive more attention, sensitivity and support from their supervisor than outgroup members (Dienesch & Liden, 1986), while outgroup members tend to experience a more formal relationship with their supervisor (Zalensy & Graen, 1987). Thus, a mentoring relationship is less likely to develop when the relationship is a more formal, outgroup one than when it is an ingroup one.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is a theoretical framework for analyzing adaptations in communication style that people make during interactions. It also examines the underlying motivations and consequences of such adaptations, such as seeking approval or affinity, creating social distance and signaling ingroup or outgroup membership (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991). In manager/mentoring relationships, ingroup and outgroup dynamics are simultaneously salient, due to both the affiliative nature of the mentoring relationship, as well as the inherent power and status differences in the manager-employee relationship. Thus, understanding how accommodative communication behaviors contribute to ingroup perceptions is important to an understanding of effective mentoring relationships.

Drawing upon CAT, a number of broad communication accommodation strategies can be used by managers and employees to indicate a mentoring relationship. The main strategies of relevance here are labelled *discourse management* and *interpersonal control* (for discussion of other Communication Accommodation strategies, see Giles et al, 1991). Discourse management is a diverse set of communication behaviours whereby a speaker may facilitate a partner’s contribution to an interaction; for example, by offering turns, eliciting self-disclosure, facilitating a positive tone, etc. It is proposed that positively-perceived manager-mentors would exhibit such accommodative communication when interacting with their employees. The strategy of interpersonal control focuses on the importance of role relationships between interactants. Interactants may signal, and indeed influence, power distance, or role relationship *vis a vis* other interactants, through various verbal or non-verbal behaviors. These include the use of interruptions, honorifics, topic control, etc (Gallois and Giles, in press; Willemyns et al, 2000). In relation to the present study, a manager may minimize social distance from the employee by, for example, referring to the employee as part of the team, or as a fellow engineer, teacher, etc. Conversely, a manager may maintain or even increase social distance from the employee by continually referring to his or her own positional status.

Based on the research outlined above, three main hypotheses were derived for the present study, which used both a qualitative, content-analysis methodology, and quantitative analyses. Firstly, it was hypothesized that female managers would be more sensitive to their employees’ mentoring needs than male managers. Secondly, it was predicted that regardless of gender, employees’ most positive evaluations of their managers would relate to positive “psychosocial” functions such as support, role modeling and encouragement. Finally, it was hypothesized that managers who were perceived as identifying highly with their role would be positively evaluated if they were seen to accommodate their employees in terms of social role. That is, even if they maintained their role as manager, managers would be positively evaluated by their employees as long as they were perceived as communicating mentoring behaviours such as trust, praise and recognition. Conversely, it was expected that managers in the unsatisfactory interactions would be characterized as

threatening the employee's sense of worth, through status-marked, distancing, negative communication behaviors.

## METHOD

The participants in the study were 157 psychology students who had been in full-time employment for at least six months or part-time for at least twelve months. There were 90 women (mean age 21.08 years) and 67 men (mean age 21.34 years). Their occupations and places of work covered a wide spectrum, from the service sector, education, to the health sector. Each participant collected a set of questionnaires from the researcher, took it away to complete and returned it within a week in a sealed envelope. Each questionnaire consisted of a page obtaining demographic data (employee sex, age, occupation, managers' sex, estimated age, etc.) and two sections in which the participants were asked to separately describe a satisfactory and an unsatisfactory interaction with a manager. The presentation order of the questionnaires was counterbalanced, so that half of the participants described a satisfactory interaction first, whilst the other half described an unsatisfactory interaction first.

The open-ended question was "*Describe the conversation in as much detail as you can remember. Try to include any specific statements that were made by you or the other person. Describe as many features of the conversation as you can, to help us understand*". Participants wrote up to one page describing the conversation in as much detail as they could recall. The questionnaires also obtained quantitative data. The subjects were asked to rate several items on 6-point Likert-type scales (For example, "*How much did your manager's status influence his/her behaviour in the interaction?*" 1="not at all"; 6 = "very much").

A sub-sample of 42 of the 157 employees' questionnaires was content-analyzed, in order to include only those questionnaires that provided over 100 words of open-ended response. Details of the full coding scheme and the 6053 coded text units are available from the authors upon request. The "satisfactory" condition responses were coded using the two major mentoring functions identified by Kram (1985): the "career-related" function (which includes providing feedback, providing challenging assignments and the development of new skills, etc), and the "psychosocial" function (which includes support, role-modeling and encouragement, etc). The "unsatisfactory" condition responses were coded using categories derived from Willemyns et al (2000) who used a grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1997) to develop their categories. This approach involved conducting several readings and iterative categorizations, which resulted in a number of salient categories emerging from the responses. Only one meaningful text unit (e.g., "... she was very supportive") per description was coded for a particular category, even if it had been mentioned more than once by the subject. This was to control for those subjects who wrote in a repetitive or verbose style, as opposed to those who wrote more succinctly. A minimum of ten text units per category was used as a minimum cut-off point for determining a salient category.

## RESULTS

In the satisfactory condition, the highest frequencies in the content-analysis (with 10 or more exemplars) emerged as the categories "acceptance/confirmation" (34) "role modeling" (20), "coaching" (17), "protection" (16), "friendship" (13) and "counseling" (10). In

the unsatisfactory interaction condition, the most salient categories were “conflict unresolved” (23), “unjustified blame/criticism” (17), “unwilling to listen” (14), “aggression/rudeness” (11), “unreasonable expectations” (10), and “lack of support” (10).

The unequal number of subjects in the four dyad-types (male-male, male-female, female-male and female-female) did not make it possible to statistically analyze sex differences for the content analyses of mentoring communication. However, each category did yield similar patterns. For example, “acceptance/confirmation” and “coaching” were most salient in the satisfactory condition, while “conflict unresolved” and “unjustified blame, criticism” were most salient in the unsatisfactory condition.

Six communication accommodation variables relating to the way the manager was perceived by the subjects during the interactions were measured on Likert-type scales. These were “easy to understand”, “controlling of the conversation”, “dominant”, “communicated in a similar manner to you”, “considerate of your needs” and “polite”. In the satisfactory interactions, analyses involving these six variables and the variable “role identity” (“*How much does your manager identify with his or her role at work?*”) indicated a significant correlation between role identity and the variables “controlling of the conversation” ( $r=.205, p<.01$ ), and “dominant” ( $r=.15, p<.05$ ). In the unsatisfactory condition, significant correlations were revealed between “role identity” and the items “easy to understand” ( $r=.18, p<.05$ ), “controlling of the conversation” ( $r=.22, p<.01$ ), “dominant” ( $r=.21, p = .01$ ), “communicated in a similar way to you” ( $r=.18, p<.05$ ), “considerate of your needs” ( $r=.17, p<.05$ ), and “polite” ( $r=.20, p<.01$ ).

As sex-composition of manager-employee dyads is an important issue in mentoring relationships, dyad-type effects were also examined. Table 1 shows the frequency of each dyad-type.

**Table 1: Dyad-type frequencies**

Dyad Type	Satisfactory Conversations	Unsatisfactory Conversations
Male manager - Male employee	50	53
Male manager - Female employee	36	38
Female manager - Male employee	17	14
Female manager - Female employee	54	52
TOTAL	157	157

To examine the dyad-type effects upon each of the six “communication accommodation” items (i.e., *easy to understand, controlling of the conversation, dominant, communicated in a similar way to you, considerate of your needs, polite*), a MANOVA was conducted. The independent variable was “dyad type” and the dependent variables were the six communication items. In the satisfactory condition, there was a significant result for the item “polite” ( $F(3,153)=5.312, p=.002$ ). Tukey’s HSD post hoc tests indicated that male managers in the male-male dyad were rated as less polite than female managers in the female-male dyads (4.94 vs. 5.56), and that male managers in the male-male dyad were rated as significantly less polite than female managers in the female-female dyads (4.94 vs.

5.39). In the unsatisfactory condition, the MANOVA found a significant effect only for the variable "control" ( $F(3,153)=3.465, p=.018$ ). Tukey's HSD post hoc test indicated that female managers in the female-female dyads were rated as more controlling than male managers in the male-male dyads (5.02 vs. 4.21).

## DISCUSSION

The content-coding analysis of the "satisfactory" conversations indicated that Kram's (1985) psychosocial functions "role modeling" and "acceptance/confirmation" were the most important factors for the employees. As expected, the other psychosocial functions, counseling and friendship were also salient. The career-related functions of coaching and protection were also salient, but to a lesser degree. As most of the employees in this study were young, these findings were consistent with the findings of Allen et al (1997), who found that psychosocial mentoring functions were the most important for employees at the early stages of their careers, as opposed to the career-related functions which were more important later. The most salient categories in the unsatisfactory condition were "conflict unresolved", "unjustified blame/criticism", "unwillingness to listen", "aggression/rudeness/insults" "unreasonable expectations", and "lack of support". Interestingly, these were almost the antithesis of Kram's psychosocial roles. Clearly the employees felt unsupported by their managers in the unsatisfactory condition.

The behavior of the managers in the satisfactory condition was reflected by the positive perceptions of their communication by their employees. Effective communication is characterized by CAT as speakers taking into account each other's group memberships and conversational needs (see Gallois and Giles, in press). Significant relationships were found between managers' perceived role identity and how controlling and dominant managers were perceived to be. These results indicated that although managers were seen as identifying highly with their role and they controlled and dominated the conversation, they were nonetheless perceived as doing so in a positive manner. This is an example of a complementary relationship, where one participant is acknowledged to have a functional superordinate role to the other (Giles et al, 1988). Thus, manager-employee relationships do not have to be classified only in terms of power being utilized in a negative manner. They can also be mentoring relationships in which managers utilize their positional power to guide, direct and assist their employees.

Conversely, in the unsatisfactory condition, the finding that managers who were perceived to identify with their role also tended to control and dominate the conversation, provides a clear indicator regarding the use of negatively perceived interpersonal control and discourse management strategies to maintain a higher status outgroup membership. That is, these managers were more likely to communicate with the employee as a member of the lower status outgroup. McManus and Russell (1997) found that obtaining ingroup membership may be a pre-requisite for employees to gain mentoring from their managers. Thus, when a manager uses communication strategies to maintain distance, the employee is most clearly one-down in the conversation.

Comprehensibility, as measured via the item "easy to understand", was another factor which significantly correlated with "role identity". It is hypothesized this was a positive correlation because managers, whilst identifying with their role, were clear in the information they discussed with their employees, regardless of the condition type. This could also be

concluded from the significance of communication similarity in the results, as measured by the variable. The manager ensured the message would be understood by using language that suited the employee, and by using clear directives.

As noted, sex combination in the mentor-protégé relationship is an important factor to consider when studying mentoring dynamics. Effective types of communication used in such a relationship may vary, depending on the dyad type. The results in the satisfactory condition identified a significant dyad-type effect for politeness. It was found the male managers in the male-male dyads were rated as less polite than the female managers in the female-manager/male employee dyads, and that male managers in the male-male dyads were also perceived to be less polite than the female managers in the female-female dyads. These results provide support for the hypothesis that female managers may be more sensitive to their employees' communication and relationship needs than male managers. Similarly, Dreher and Ash (1990) found that female mentors were more likely than male mentors to stress caring, nurturing and teaching. Unexpectedly, in the unsatisfactory interactions, female managers in female-female dyads were rated as more controlling than male managers in male-male dyads. It could be surmised that the female managers had more confidence to control a negative conversation with a female employee than they would with a male employee.

The findings of this study can have practical applications use when designing mentoring programs. The results provide useful guidelines for managers regarding how to interact with their employees if they wish to achieve positive outcomes in conversation, and, in the longer term, in the mentoring relationship. For example, it is clear that mentor-managers should constructively provide negative feedback to employees without unduly criticizing them for their actions. If done in a constructive manner the manager can still maintain a "role-modeling" experience for their employee by performing such actions as providing feedback privately versus publicly; listening for facts rather than placing unjustified blame, and using positive non-verbal behaviors rather than negative ordering.

## **Limitations and future directions**

A limitation of the study is that the subjects were university students, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Thus, the ability to apply these findings to employees later in their careers may be limited. Future studies would benefit from examining mentoring communication dynamics in work-based and later-career samples. Finally, with the increasing cultural diversity of the workforce in organizations, cross-cultural differences in preferred mentoring and communication styles should also be examined in future studies. To this end, the authors of the present study are currently examining management communication between Anglo-Australian and Chinese managers and employees, in a controlled video-vignette experiment. Despite the need for more research using a wider age-range and cultural diversity, it is hoped that the results of the present study will be beneficial for organizations in identifying communication strategies which can maximize the benefits of mentoring in the workplace.

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