The Impact of Supervisor and Subordinate Immediacy on Relational and Organizational Outcomes

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Hypotheses were advanced based on the immediacy principle, accommodation theory, reciprocity theory, and previous research in another applied context which argue that increased nonverbal immediacy behaviors of supervisors have the potential to enhance subordinates' perceptions of that supervisor, increase subordinate satisfaction with the supervisor and communication with the supervisor, and increase motivation and job satisfaction on the part of the subordinate. All of the hypotheses were supported by the results. The "principle of immediate communication" received strong support. It is concluded that increased immediacy on the part of either the supervisor or the subordinate is likely to generate reciprocity and accommodation leading to a more positive work environment and more desirable outcomes.
Key words: Immediacy, Supervisor-Subordinate Communication, Organizational Outcomes

Research has established that supervisors may employ a variety of communication strategies that impact their subordinates perceptions of them, the subordinates' satisfaction with supervision, and the subordinates' job satisfaction (Daly, McCroskey, & Falcione, 1976; Falcione, McCroskey, & Daly, 1977; Richmond & McCroskey, 1979; Richmond, McCroskey, & Davis, 1982, 1986; Richmond, Wagner, & McCroskey, 1983). One group of these, known as "affinity-seeking strategies," have been found to be helpful to supervisors (Richmond, et al., 1986).

One affinity-seeking strategy, use of nonverbal immediacy, has been widely researched within the instructional context. The results of this research show that increases in a teacher's nonverbal immediacy can result in greatly increased student learning and more positive student evaluations of the teacher (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). The corollaries between the instructional context and the supervisor-subordinate context are far from perfect. However, positive student evaluations of teachers are not wholly unlike positive reports of subordinates on their supervisors. Nor are positive student reports on their affect for the course content wholly unlike positive subordinate reports on their affect for the jobs they perform. The similarities are at least sufficient to justify hypothesizing that outcomes resulting from increased immediacy in the organizational context would parallel those observed in the instructional context. The present research was designed to test such hypotheses.

Rationale and Hypotheses

The concept of nonverbal immediacy was introduced by social psychologist Albert Mehrabian (1971) to describe behavior patterns of people who like someone or something. He noted that consistently people move toward the person or thing they like. Mehrabian (1971) advanced an explanatory principle, called the "immediacy principle," to account for the consistent observation of these behaviors:

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"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). Immediacy is indicated by such behaviors as looking at someone, leaning toward someone, touching someone (in a non-threatening manner), sitting near someone, speaking in an animated way toward someone, and smiling at someone. While each of these behaviors can be observed in isolation, in normal interaction they are responded to collectively. Hence, people receive impressions of immediate behavior holistically, although it is possible for them to be aware of each component in the larger pattern.

The nonverbal immediacy construct was not initially proposed as a communication construct, but rather as a social psychological explanation of human nonverbal behavior. Then, as now, psychological and communication scholars approached nonverbal behavior in very different ways. While the disciplines overlap occasionally, generally under the psychological approach nonverbal behavior serves as a means for understanding the motivations and internal states of the individuals engaging in those behaviors. Communication scholars, in contrast, view nonverbal behaviors as potential messages which humans can use to communicate with and influence each other. However, because Mehrabian's work had obvious implications for interpersonal communication behaviors, it drew attention from communication researchers. Within the communication discipline the construct was reformulated to describe behaviors which could be used to communicate liking to others. The term "nonverbal immediacy" was adopted to describe many teaching behaviors which previously had been found (in isolation) to be associated with effective teaching (Andersen, 1978). The stream of research on nonverbal immediacy within the instructional context over the past two decades produced such convincing results that Richmond and McCroskey (2000) have proposed what they call the "principle of immediate communication" which they argue will apply in any interpersonal communication context. The principle they proposed is:

> The more communicators employ immediate behaviors, the more others will like, evaluate highly, and prefer such communicators, and the less communicators employ immediate behaviors the more others will dislike, evaluate negatively, and reject such communicators. (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000, Chapter 11).

Within the organizational context, nonverbal immediacy, from a communication perspective, is a repertoire of nonverbal behaviors which supervisors may or may not use as messages to signal liking, positive evaluation, and positive affect (or their opposites) for their subordinates. Such behavior may or may not be within the conscious control of the supervisor. That is, the supervisors may be unaware that such messages are being sent, they may simply be responding to subordinates' actions. However, a particular supervisor may also be fully aware of her/his behavior and be consciously manipulating the nonverbal (as well as verbal) behavior in order to produce a desired image in the minds of the subordinates. Instruction in communication, for example, may enable previously naive supervisors to gain more control over their nonverbal behavior in order to generate more positive images and become more effective supervisors. If, indeed, the principle of immediate communication applies within this context, we should expect more immediate supervisors to be perceived more positively. Consequently, we advanced the following four hypotheses:

H_1: *Supervisors perceived as exhibiting higher immediacy will be perceived as more credible.*
H_2: *Supervisors perceived as exhibiting higher immediacy will be perceived as more interpersonally attractive.*

H_3: *Supervisors perceived as exhibiting higher immediacy will be evaluated more positively.*
H_4: *Subordinates of supervisors perceived as exhibiting higher immediacy will evaluate the supervisors' communication more positively.*

Another principle may also be applicable here—the principle of reciprocity. It has long been known that in interpersonal interaction people tend to reciprocate positive (and negative) behaviors directed to them (Gouldner, 1960). That is, when someone smiles at us, we are likely to smile back; when they look at us, we tend to look back at them. Whether emotion precedes nonverbal expression, or the reverse, is an unresolved issue. But what is not at issue is that they tend to go together. Hence, we should expect that if a subordinate (or supervisor) engages in nonverbal immediacy behaviors with the supervisor (or subordinate), it is likely that the partner in the interaction will reciprocate. In short, if positive or negative affect is communicated via nonverbal immediacy behaviors, it will be reciprocated. This same pattern of behavior is predicted on the basis of speech accommodation theory (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987), which suggests that people adjust their style of speech to their communication partners in order to gain approval and maintain positive social identity with the person to whom they are talking. In the present context, therefore it would be expected that supervisors and subordinates desiring to gain approval and maintain a positive image with the other person would accommodate by adjusting their immediacy behaviors to those of the other person. On the other hand, there is substantial evidence that an individual's general communication style is genetically based (Horvath, 1998), hence it may not be subject to the reciprocity process to the extent that a supervisor and subordinate can modify their immediacy behaviors sufficiently to accommodate reciprocation with each other. The available data indicate, however, that some flexibility in communication style is still possible for most people (Beatty, McCroskey & Heisel, 1998). Consequently we advanced the following hypotheses:

H_5: *Supervisor and subordinate immediacy will be positively correlated.*

Research in organizational communication has confronted a major problem in terms of defining outcome variables which are both amenable to investigation and socially relevant to people in real organizations. Clearly, increasing productivity and/or profit are important, even critical concerns. Yet, many organizations do not operate on a profit motive and productivity in many organizations is extremely difficult to measure, or even in some cases to define. Furthermore, conducting research across both different organizations and different types of organization is critical to generalizing about the role and impact of communication in organizations.

Research conducted outside the communication discipline has determined that 1) employees who are highly motivated generally are more productive than those that are not, and 2) employees who are satisfied with their jobs are both more motivated to do high quality work and less likely to leave their jobs (Baum & Youngblood, 1975; Day & Hamblin, 1964; Student, 1968). The latter is increasingly important to organizations as work becomes more technologically dependent. For many organizations turnover is extremely expensive due to the increased costs of training new workers. Consequently, increasing motivation and job satisfaction have become critical concerns for almost all organizations in today's economy. For these reasons, and the fact that these two concerns are amenable to cross-organizational research,

we chose subordinate motivation and job satisfaction as the outcome variables in the current research.

While generating more positive subordinate perceptions of supervisors and interactions with supervisors are desirable outcomes, at the bottom line is the question of whether all of this produces results that are positive for the organization as a whole. The first proposition of communication-centered nonverbal immediacy theory argues that exhibiting nonverbal immediacy behaviors generates positive affect in others. In the context of the current concern this means that supervisors who are nonverbally immediate with their subordinates will create positive affect toward themselves (as indicated in hypotheses 1–4 above). The second proposition of this theory is that positive affect generated within a relationship will generalize to the function of that relationship. This has been demonstrated to occur in the instructional context. Not only do students like immediate teachers more, but they also learn more from them and have more positive affect for what they learn. The corollary in the present context is that subordinates will like immediate supervisors more, and they will have more positive affect (motivation) toward their work and more satisfaction with that work. Hence, we advanced two final hypotheses:

H_6: *Perceived supervisor immediacy will be positively correlated with subordinate motivation.*
H_7: *Perceived supervisor immediacy will be positively correlated with subordinate job satisfaction.*

While the theory leading to the hypotheses above is mostly straight-forward, there is one ambiguity that we set out to explore in the current research. Clearly, the causal factor which presumably is operating in this theory is nonverbal immediacy. Also it is clear that immediacy is proposed as the factor leading to the formation or change of certain perceptions of the supervisor in the subordinates' minds. At this point it is unclear whether we should expect immediacy to be the direct cause of outcomes like motivation and job satisfaction or we should expect that the impact passes through (is mediated by) the perceptions of the supervisor that the subordinates have and thus is an indirect causal agent.

Since the design of the current study is correlational, direct assessment of causation is not possible. However, it was believed that it might be possible to rule out one of the possible causal paths, and thus give us insight into the probable causal process in operation. Hence we posed the following research question:

RQ_1: What is the most likely causal path between supervisor immediacy and subordinate motivation and job satisfaction?

Methods and Procedures

Participants

There were 224 participants in this study (106 identified as male, 105 as female, the remaining participants did not report their gender). Of those indicating their gender, 129 worked for male supervisors and 62 worked for female supervisors. Sixty female participants reported working for male supervisors and 46 reported working for female supervisors. Eighty-nine male participants reported working for male supervisors but only 16 reported working for female supervisors. This pattern reflects the reality of the general society where the "glass ceiling" for potential female supervisors continues to exist in many organizations. Because of the observed gender disproportionality, preliminary analyses were conducted to determine whether

gender interacted with any of the hypothesized relationships in this study. No such interactions were observed. Consequently, since no gender-based hypotheses were advanced, no additional references to gender are included in this report.

Adult volunteers in a wide variety of organizations, including corporate for-profit, non-profit service, state government, private small business, and federal government (military, IRS, Bureau of Public Debt) recruited participants for this study. The adult volunteers (N = 60) were recruited from students enrolled in extended learning classes in three different areas. Each volunteer was given 4 questionnaires with instructions to give them to people at very different levels of the organization. The volunteers were associated with 46 different organizations. No one type of organization accounted for as much as 20 percent of the total sample. The participants' length-of-service to their current employer ranged from one month to 32.5 years (M = 3 years, 8 months). The distribution was skewed, indicating that most of the participants had been with their current employer less than 3 years. All of the volunteers were employees in the organization in which they distributed questionnaires. They distributed a total of 240 questionnaires. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a postage-paid return envelope addressed to the researchers.

Measurement

Nonverbal immediacy. The Self-Report of Immediacy Behavior (SRIB: Richmond & McCroskey, 1995, p. 216) instrument was employed to measure participants' perceptions of their own nonverbal immediacy. A modified version of the instrument was used for participants to report their perceptions of supervisors' immediacy. The two versions of the instrument were separated by two pages in the four-page questionnaire to minimize measurement effects. In previous research, this procedure produced nonsignificant correlations between the scores on the two instruments when substantial correlations should not have been observed. Hence, any correlation between the scores found in the current research should be a function of the hypothesized relationship rather than an artifact of data collection. The Alpha reliability of the instrument in the current research was .81 as a self-report and .87 as a report of supervisors' immediacy. The scores on the report of supervisor immediacy were used to test all of the hypotheses. The self-report instrument was employed to test hypothesis 5.

Source credibility. Three dimensions of source credibility (competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness) were measured by instruments developed by McCroskey (1966) and McCroskey and Teven (1999). The alpha reliabilities obtained for the three dimensions of credibility were: competence, .90; goodwill, .95; and trustworthiness, .95. The scores on these instruments were employed to test hypothesis 1.

Interpersonal attraction. Two dimensions of interpersonal attraction (social and task) were measured by use of measures developed by McCroskey and McCain (1974). Four items were used for each of the two attraction dimensions (alpha reliabilities were .87 for social attraction and .77 for task attraction). The scores on these instruments were employed to test hypothesis 2.

Affect toward supervisor. The Generalized Attitude Scale developed by McCroskey (McCroskey & Richmond, 1989) was employed to measure participants' attitudes toward communication with their supervisors and their general attitude toward their supervisors. This instrument is composed of six bipolar, seven-step scales (good-bad,

TABLE 1

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS WITH SUPERVISOR IMMEDIACY

Measure	Mean	S.D.	Range	Correlation with Supervisor Immediacy*
Supervisor immediacy	51.5	8.9	25–72	1.00
Credibility				
Competence	34.0	6.5	12–42	.51
Goodwill	28.9	9.4	6–42	.63
Trustworthiness	33.6	8.6	6–42	.59
Interpersonal attraction				
Social	14.4	4.1	4–20	.64
Task	16.1	3.3	7–20	.40
Affect toward supervisor				
Attitude/supervisor	32.1	8.6	6–42	.66
Attitude/supervisor communication	32.6	7.7	6–42	.61
Affect toward job				
Attitude/job	28.1	6.8	5–35	.24
Motivation	26.2	6.4	5–35	.34
Subordinate immediacy	54.9	6.4	33–73	.31

*All correlations statistically significant, $p < .001$.

wrong-right, harmful-beneficial, fair-unfair, wise-foolish, negative-positive). It has been found to have high reliability and validity across a wide variety of attitude targets across over 30 years of use (alpha reliabilities were .96 for both attitude toward supervisor and toward supervisor's communication). These instruments were employed to test hypotheses 3 and 4.

Subordinate motivation. Subordinate motivation was measured employing five bipolar, seven-step scales modeled on the instrument previously employed by Richmond (1990). The scales employed were motivated-unmotivated, excited-bored, uninterested-interested, involved-uninvolved, and dreading it-looking forward to it (alpha reliability obtained in the present study was .92). This instrument was employed to test hypothesis 6.

Job satisfaction. The Generalized Belief Scale developed by McCroskey (McCroskey & Richmond, 1989) was employed to measure participants' job satisfaction. This instrument is composed of five bipolar, seven-step scales (true-false, right-wrong, no-yes, disagree-agree, correct-incorrect). It has been found to have high reliability and validity across a wide variety of belief targets across over 30 years of use. The instrument targets a specific belief. In the current implementation the belief was "I have a very good job" (alpha reliability was .97). This instrument was employed to test hypothesis 7.

Data Analyses

The hypotheses were all tested with simple Pearson correlations. The research question was addressed through path analyses employing the CALIS procedure available in the SAS statistical package.

Results

Correlations obtained between perceived supervisor immediacy and the other variables in this investigation are reported in Table 1. As noted in the table, all of the observed correlations were statistically significant.

Hypothesis 1 suggested that supervisors who are perceived as more immediate will be seen as more credible. This hypothesis was confirmed for each of the three dimensions. The correlation between supervisor immediacy and supervisor competence was .51, indicating 26 percent of the variance in supervisor competence is predictable by perceived immediacy. The correlation with trustworthiness was higher ($r = .59$, $z = 12.78$, $p < .01$) indicating 35 percent predictable variance on this dimension. The highest correlation, however, was with goodwill ($r = .63$, $z = 7.0$, $p < .01$), indicating that immediacy could predict 40 percent of the variance on perceived goodwill.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that supervisors who are more immediate will be perceived as more interpersonally attractive by their subordinates. This hypothesis was confirmed on both dimensions of attraction measured in this study. The correlation between supervisor immediacy and social attractiveness was considerably higher ($r = .64$) than that for task attraction ($r = .40$, $z = 37.11$, $p < .01$). These results indicate that supervisor immediacy could predict 16 percent of the variance in task attraction, but it could predict 41 percent of the variance in social attraction.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that subordinates who perceived their supervisors as more immediate would express more positive attitudes toward both their supervisors and communication with their supervisors. Both of these hypotheses were confirmed. The correlation between immediacy and subordinate attitude toward the supervisor was a strong one ($r = .66$) which indicated that immediacy could predict 44 percent of the variance in subordinate attitude. The similarly high ($r = .61$) correlation between immediacy and attitude toward communication with the supervisor indicates 37 percent predictable variance.

Based on reciprocity and accommodation theories, hypothesis 5 predicted a positive relationship between supervisor and subordinate immediacy. This hypothesis also was confirmed. The obtained correlation ($r = .31$) indicates knowledge of either supervisor or subordinate immediacy will permit prediction of about 10 percent of the variance in the other.

The final two hypotheses predicted that supervisor immediacy would be positively related to motivation and job satisfaction. The observed correlation ($r = .34$) indicated that supervisor immediacy was positively related with subordinate motivation and could predict approximately 12 percent of the variance in motivation, confirming hypothesis 6. Similarly, Hypothesis 7 was confirmed. The correlation between immediacy and job satisfaction ($r = .24$) was lower than the other correlations observed, but it indicated that immediacy could predict about 6 percent of job satisfaction.

Table 2 reports the correlations between mediator variables (credibility, and attraction) and job satisfaction and motivation. As noted in the table, all of the correlations are statistically significant and moderate. In order to determine the extent to which supervisor immediacy may have a direct, as opposed to a mediated, impact on job satisfaction and/or motivation, path analyses were conducted. The first model (testing separately for subordinate motivation and subordinate job satisfaction) employed a direct causal path sequence: subordinate immediacy to supervisor immediacy to attitude toward supervisor to the outcome variable (subordinate motivation or subordinate satisfaction). Attitude toward supervisor was used because it was believed to be the most global of the possible mediating variables.

TABLE 2

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN MEDIATOR AND OUTCOME VARIABLES

Mediator Variables	Outcome Variables*	
	Motivation	Job Satisfaction
Credibility		
Competence	.36	.27
Goodwill	.32	.32
Trustworthiness	.34	.31
Interpersonal attraction		
Social	.36	.28
Task	.32	.27

*All correlations are statistically significant, $p < .001$.

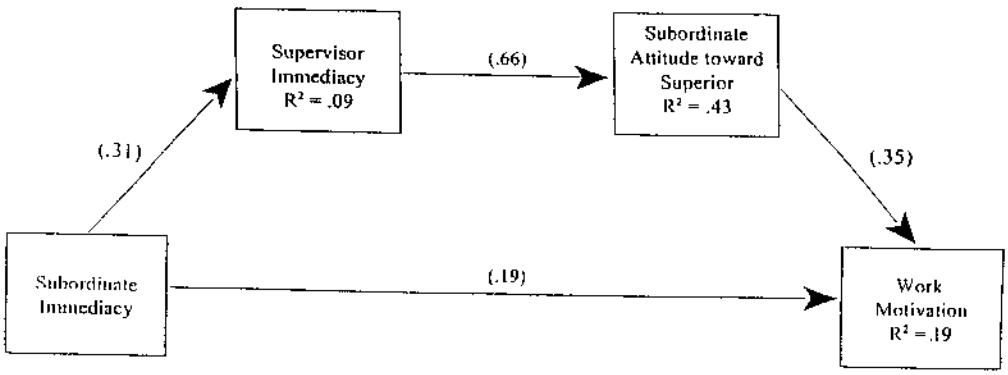

FIGURE 1

PATH MODEL FOR SUBORDINATE WORK MOTIVATION (NUMBERS IN PARENS ARE STANDARDIZED PATH COEFFICIENTS)

The characteristics of an ideal fit for causal models suggested by Hatcher (1994) were employed as decision criteria in this investigation. The five characteristics of concern were: (1) No absolute values of entries in the normalized residual matrix should exceed 2.0; (2) The chi-square test of the model should be non-significant ($p < .05$); (3) The comparative fit index (CFI: Bentler, 1989) and non-normed fit index (NNFI: Bentler & Bonnett, 1980) should both exceed .90; (4) The R^2 for every predicted variable should be relatively large, compared to what has been observed in the past; and (5) All path coefficients should be statistically significant ($p < .05$) and nontrivial in magnitude (absolute values above .05).

Figure 1 reports the components and links of the best interpretable model obtained for subordinate work motivation. The most direct model (subordinate immediacy to supervisor immediacy to subordinate attitude toward supervisor to subordinate work motivation) was rejected because of a significant chi-square (12.35, $p < .01$). Entries in the normalized residual matrix indicated that addition of a link with supervisor immediacy directly predicting subordinate work motivation would not improve the model. However, an entry in that matrix indicated including a direct link between subordinate immediacy and subordinate work motivation would improve the model. Since there is a theoretical rationale for the existence of this link, both are affective orientations and may be produced at least in part by the same causal element(s), it was added and the resulting model appears in Figure 1.

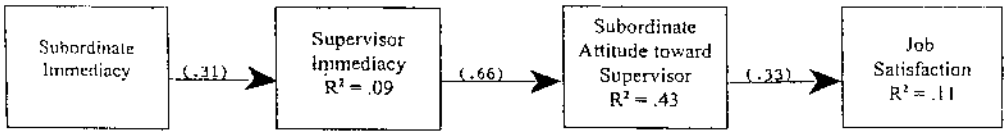

FIGURE 2

PATH MODEL FOR JOB SATISFACTION (NUMBERS IN PARENS ARE STANDARDIZED PATH COEFFICIENTS)

The model in Figure 1 has all of the characteristics of a model with an ideal fit. After inclusion of the new link, the absolute values of entries in the normalized residual matrix were all below 2.0. The chi-square obtained for the model (3.58) was not significant ($p < .17$). The CFI was .97 and the NNFI was .99. All of the R^2 results (see Figure 1) were substantial. The t statistics for the path coefficients all exceeded the 1.96 cut-off for significance at the .05 level (attitude toward supervisor predicting motivation, $t = 5.59$, subordinate immediacy predicting motivation, $t = 2.95$, supervisor immediacy predicting attitude toward supervisor, $t = 12.76$, and subordinate immediacy predicting supervisor immediacy, $t = 4.70$). Finally, all of the standardized path coefficients were not only non-trivial, all were substantial.

Figure 2 reports the components and links of the best interpretable model obtained for subordinate job satisfaction. This model is the direct model which was the first model tested. This model has all of the characteristics of a model with an ideal fit. The absolute values of entries in the normalized residual matrix were all below 2.0, which means adding or subtracting any link would not meaningfully improve the model, but could substantially degrade the model. The chi-square obtained for the model (3.47) was not significant ($p < .32$). The CFI was .997 and the NNFI was .994. All of the R^2 results (see Figure 2) were substantial. The t statistics for the path coefficients all exceeded the 1.96 cut-off for significance at the .05 level (attitude toward supervisor predicting job satisfaction, $t = 5.16$, supervisor immediacy predicting attitude toward supervisor, $t = 12.76$, and subordinate immediacy predicting supervisor immediacy, $t = 4.70$. As in the previous model, all of the standardized path coefficients we far beyond trivial in size.

Discussion

All of the hypotheses advanced in this study were confirmed. Supervisor immediacy has substantial positive relationships with perceived credibility and interpersonal attraction. Supervisors who were perceived as high in nonverbal immediacy were also perceived as credible and attractive. Increased credibility and attractiveness, in turn, are substantially associated with subordinate motivation and job satisfaction.

These results support the general theory that exhibiting nonverbal immediacy enhances positive affect from others. Our finding that subordinates' perceptions of supervisor immediacy were significantly correlated with subordinates' self-perceived immediacy, in the light of the lack of such observed correlations within other contexts in previous research, suggests an opportunity for both supervisors and subordinates within the organizational context. Exhibiting nonverbal immediacy, whether one is supervisor or a subordinate, appears to facilitate reciprocity and accommodation forces which generate more positive affect within the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

Although there is strong evidence that subordinates' and supervisors' communication style is impacted by genetic factors, the results of this study indicate that there remains sufficient flexibility in the communicative style of many (if not most) people in organizations to be able to accommodate to the positive (or negative) immediacy behaviors of others around them. Both supervisors and subordinates have the potential for strategic use of these nonverbal behaviors to build better relationships within the working environment.

The results of this study suggest a very positive outlook for enhancement of relationships within organizations. Three conclusions may be drawn:

1) The principle of immediate communication has strong application in the organizational context. The results of this research indicate a direct impact of subordinate immediacy on the immediacy of their supervisors, which in turn impacts subordinates attitudes toward their supervisors.
2) A more nonverbally immediate supervisor is likely to be perceived by subordinates as higher in competence, goodwill, trustworthiness, and social and task attractiveness. When supervisors are perceived by their subordinates as more credible and attractive, employees may perform more positively for the supervisor and demonstrate more willingness to work with and for that supervisor.
3) A more nonverbally immediate supervisor will produce more positive subordinate affect toward her/himself, affect toward communication with her/himself, attitude toward job, and motivation.

The results of the path analyses suggest that organizations can justify spending more time and other resources on training supervisors (particularly new managers) to engage in the positive, immediate nonverbal communication behaviors. Organizations can be expected to benefit long-term from better management. There should be more motivation and increased job satisfaction on the part of subordinates. While lower absenteeism, decreased complaining, and reduced turnover probably are not perfectly correlated with increased motivation and job satisfaction, they certainly can not be expected to be negatively related. Future research needs to examine these increasingly important outcome variables directly. Adding these variables into our current causal model should provide us with an even clearer picture of the role of immediacy in organizations.

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