

## Predicting Difficult Employees: The Relationship between Vocational Interests, Self-esteem, and Problem Communication Styles

Bobbie L. Raynes  
New River Community College

*The relationship between vocational interest, self-esteem, and communication styles used by “difficult” employees was investigated. To test this relationship, 169 employees from three separate law enforcement agencies completed a self-esteem and a vocational interest survey. Supervisors then rated each of their employees on how often they used difficult communication styles (e.g., whining, gossiping). As predicted, significant correlations were found between work interest and being superagreeable ( $r = .22$ ) and complaining ( $r = -.17$ ). Of the three dimensions of self-esteem, only one dimension, that of confidence, significantly correlated with any of the problem communication styles. Those dimensions were disagreeing ( $r = .22$ ), knowing-it-all ( $r = .19$ ), and superagreeability ( $r = -.16$ ). Multivariate analyses testing for combinations of variables which predict difficult communication patterns was also performed. For yelling, social consciousness and confidence accounted for 6.3% of the variance; for apathy, social consciousness and confidence accounted for 4.5%; for disagreeing, self-worth and confidence accounted for 7.2%; for know-it-all, social consciousness and confidence accounted for 9%; and for superagreeable, interest and confidence accounted for 9.1%. None of the interactions or any of the tests for curvilinearity significantly entered into any one of the regression equations. An unexpected finding was that none of the communication styles significantly correlated with the self-worth dimension of self-esteem which is contrary to other research suggesting that certain problem communication styles are related to self-worth.*

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A number of books have been written about difficult employees and their impact on organizations. Difficult employees, also labeled “Jerks” (Meier, 1993) and “Toxic” (Glass, 1995), are those who chronically use such problem communication styles as yelling, whining, and/or sarcasm to express how they feel or what they think, to manipulate others' behaviors and attitudes, and/or to make others feel inferior (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992; Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirshner, 1994; Keating, 1984; Meier, 1993). Although their performance on specific tasks may be satisfactory or above (Finley, 1988; Zemke 1987), they nevertheless negatively impact organizations by creating fear, confusion, and intimidation in others, thereby lowering morale, job satisfaction, and team productivity (Alessandra & Hunsaker, 1993; Bernstein & Rozen, 1992; Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirshner, 1994; Fisher, 1996; Keating, 1984; Meier, 1993). They can potentially be a cause of turnover as long-time employees begin to leave the organization in response to difficult employees.

Books on difficult employees focus on how non-problematic employees should deal or cope with their difficult peers and/or co-workers. But it takes great effort to deal with such people, and no evidence exists that these recommendations actually work. Consequently, an alternative to training good employees how to deal with difficult employees is to screen out the difficult ones before they are even hired. Reference checks are one way to screen for difficult employees. However, the problem with

reference checks is that most organizations seldom release information other than the employee's position, salary, and job duties for fear of being sued for defamation (Kleiman & White, 1991; Paetzold & Willburn, 1984; Ryan & Lasek, 1991; Stier, 1990).

Consequently, a second screening method would be to use some type of employment test to determine an individual's tendency to use problem communication or behaviors. To ascertain which test(s) best predicts these problematic styles, it is first necessary to understand the constructs which might influence such styles.

Therefore, one purpose of this study was to identify potential predictors of problematic communication styles. To do this, the literature was reviewed on difficult employees to better understand them. The second goal of this study was to determine the significance of the relationship between those predictors and problematic communication styles of difficult employees.

### **Conceptualizing Communication Styles and Types of Difficult Employees**

Knapp, Cody, and Reardon (1987) suggest that communication styles require a consideration of both verbal messages and overt (nonverbal) behaviors. Norton (1978) suggests that communication styles include such symbolic communication behavior as animation, attentiveness, friendliness, and dominance. Alessandra and Hunsaker (1993) call communication style the combination of verbal, vocal, and visual communication elements that form different language patterns. Verbal messages are the language or actual words an individual uses to communicate, as well as the tone, volume, and speech rate used with those messages (Cappella, 1987; Forgas, 1985). An example of tone might be a verbal message that is complaining in nature and delivered with a whine. An individual who whines is usually communicating unhappiness or displeasure. Another example would be individuals who yell or sarcastically deliver their messages.

Nonverbal communication includes written messages and such behaviors as eye contact, facial expressions, the use of space, head nodding, gestures, and posture (Cappella, 1987; Forgas, 1985; Knapp, Cody, & Reardon, 1987). According to Forgas, emotions like fear, anxiety, and disgust can be communicated through nonverbal behaviors. Other behaviors that are used to convey messages include being impatient, violating organizational rules, or overextending oneself at work. Mehrabian (1969) believes that nonverbal communication behaviors are used to communicate liking and evaluation (e.g., touching and use of space), status differences and control differences (e.g., eye gaze), and alertness and responsiveness (e.g., head nodding). The inappropriate use of verbal and nonverbal messages, or an incongruence between the two, can lead to problem communication styles.

Currently, there is no *empirical* research that identifies problem communication styles at work. However, Bramson (1981) appears to be the first to qualitatively define and write about difficult people and their communication styles. He spent over 25 years observing, questioning, and listening to executives and other individuals employed in over 200 organizations describe the most difficult people in their lives. From that information, Bramson identified and categorized 10 problem communication styles into seven types: hostile/aggressive, complaining, unresponsive, superagreeable, negative, know-it-all, and indecisive. His descriptions implicitly identify these styles as being more trait-based than state-based. That is, the styles are relatively enduring, occurring

across all types of situations, and used in different types of interactions with people. In other words, it is not a particular situation or a particular person that prompt these problem communication styles. According to Nicotera (1995), individuals have a predisposition for communicating in a consistent manner.

Since Bramson's book, others have been written on this topic. The most popular and most referred to in workshops and seminars were written by Keating (1984), Bernstein and Rozen (1992), and Brinkman and Kirschner (1994). These later books basically reiterate Bramson's definition of difficult people and their communication styles and do not provide any new insight into the area of difficult employees. As can be seen in Table 1, the only area where these authors appear to significantly differ from Bramson is in the *names* they give individuals who have problem communication styles (Keating does not give specific names to his difficult employees).

**Table 1**  
**Types of difficult people and problem communication styles**

<u>Difficult Communication Style</u>	<u>Author</u>		
	<u>Bramson (1981)</u>	<u>Bernstein and Rozen (1992)</u>	<u>Brinkman and Kirschner (1994)</u>
Hostile/ aggressive	Sherman Tank	Competitor	Tank
	Sniper		Sniper
	Exploder		Grenade
Complaining	Complainer	Believer	Whiner
Unresponsive/ silence	Clam		Nothing person
Super-Agreeable (overly-agreeable)	Super-agreeable	Believer	Yes person
Negative	Negativist		No person
Know-it-All (superiority)	Bull-dozer	Rebel	Know-it-all
	Balloon		Think-they-know it-All
Indecisiveness	Indecisive Staller		Maybe person

A less commonly quoted author, Meier (1993), defines difficult employees as “Jerks.” Specifically, Meier refers to those people who use the seven communication

styles originally described by Bramson as Second Degree Jerks. First Degree Jerks, according to Meier, are what most people are at one time or another. These Jerks may infrequently use aggressive communication styles without malicious intent and are willing to change such destructive behavior once it has been brought to their attention. Third Degree Jerks have sociopathic personality disorders. First and Third Degree Jerks are outside the scope of this paper.

And finally, Alessandra and Hunsaker (1993) classify difficult people and their communication styles under two dimensions of behavior: indirect versus direct, which is observable behavior, and supporting versus controlling, which explains the goal behind one's particular communication behavior.

According to all of the above authors, difficult employees and their subsequent chronic problem communication styles fall into the following categories.

### Sherman Tanks, Competitors, and Tanks

Sherman Tanks (Bramson, 1981), Competitors (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992), and Tanks (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1992) are confrontational, pushy, aggressive, hostile, bullying, arrogant, and intimidating. They rarely, through words or actions, acknowledge that other people have any skills. They intimidate other employees by yelling, maintaining strong eye contact, or using minimal body space. They often criticize others. Alessandra and Hunsaker (1993) would identify these individuals' communication style as directive and controlling. An example of such a person would be one who walks into a meeting, throws a report on the middle of the desk, and begins to yell about the inadequacy of the report. Mehrabian (1969) would say that these individuals are using nonverbal behaviors to convey status and control differences.

These individuals are frequently impatient with others (Keating, 1984). Other employees tend to go the opposite direction when they see this type of person walking down the hall. Or, they drop out of teams or refuse to participate in team meetings when such a person is involved. Meier (1993) believes the actions of these individuals are purposeful and that they feel no guilt about the negative impact they have on the feelings of others. According to Meier, they very rarely give in because they believe "they are always right" (p. 46). In today's management world, organizations are increasingly relying on teams to make and enact decisions. Consequently, all team members must be working well together in order for the organization to be successful.

### Snipers

Snipers (Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirschner, 1992) also use some form of hostile or aggressive communication style. Unlike Tanks and Competitors, however, Snipers do not use yelling techniques: biting sarcasm and rudeness is their strategy to make others look foolish and inferior. Comments such as "I can see you were 'out to lunch' when you did this report" are typical of Snipers. They use innuendo to make their point. Because their facial expressions are usually pleasant (e.g., they smile when they make their snide comments), others are not sure if Snipers are being hostile or not. This type of controlling communication style eventually causes others to stop giving feedback or sharing ideas in groups for fear of being made to look foolish or inferior by Snipers.

In other words, Snipers can reduce others to inaction. Their nonverbals appear to be communicating control and status differences.

### Exploders and Grenades

Exploders (Bramson, 1981) and Grenades (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994) are the third type of hostile/aggressive employees. They throw temper tantrums to respond in situations where they perceive their ideas are being challenged. These tantrums usually involve yelling, although not always. Unlike the others that fall under this communication style, Exploders' and Grenades' behavior can happen suddenly and at times when situations or meetings are otherwise going well. It is when Exploders and Grenades perceive suggestions or input by others as criticism or threatening that they become hostile. According to Meier (1993), these types of people may feel some guilt about their communication styles. However, they do not feel guilty enough to change their styles.

### Complainers, Believers, and Whiners

Complainers (Bramson, 1981), Believers (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992), and Whiners (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994) blame others for what is happening in the difficult employees' personal or professional lives. Very rarely do they apologize or admit they are wrong (Meier, 1993). And although they have many complaints against various real and/or fictitious problems, seldom do they offer solutions. Their constant complaining and whining can be de-moralizing to other coworkers, and their seemingly bad moods can affect the moods of others.

Believers start out as Super-agreeables (explained further below). But when their efforts to help out and abide by the rules go unnoticed (e.g., they are passed over for promotion), they become Complainers.

Complainers, Believers, and Whiners are likely to be the backstabbers or gossipers in the organization. Whoever isn't part of their conversation at the time will usually be the person the Complainer, Believer, or Whiner blames for a particular problem. In other words, according to Bramson (1981), some individuals do not whine or complain *directly to* a person; they complain or whine *about* the person. According to Meier (1993), these people enjoy spreading gossip while pretending to show real concern for the person who is the target of the gossip. According to Alessandra and Hunsaker (1995), these are indirect/controlling communication styles. Their whining may be an attempt to communicate their dislike or evaluation of a particular situation.

### Clams and Nothing Persons

Clams (Bramson, 1981) and Nothing Persons (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994) are the non-communicators in an organization. Basically, they are apathetic. Their usual response to questions or request for feedback is a shrug. When they do speak-up, they frequently use such statements as "I don't care," "Whatever," or "It doesn't matter to me." They rarely give verbal feedback or offer any input. Keating (1994) classifies these people as non-feeling. According to him, they appear not to have any opinions. The

result is that others, such as team members, do not know what these people are thinking or if they approve of a particular idea. When people don't participate in discussions, it causes others discomfort. Because some nonverbal behaviors such as unresponsiveness to comments or ideas are interpreted by others as judgmental, people do not want to stay in the same room or be in the same meeting with Clams or Nothing persons for a long period of time.

#### Super-Agreeables, Believers, and Yes People

Super-Agreeables (Bramson, 1981), Believers (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992), and Yes People (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994) are usually smiling and friendly. Out of all the described problem communication styles of difficult employees, Super-Agreeables, Believers, and Yes people fall on the more positive side. They are basically very responsible and are eager to volunteer their time to help others. They use humor to send negative messages because they dislike conflict and attempt to avoid confrontation whenever possible. According to Keating (1994), they do a lot of head nodding or eyebrow lifting to indicate agreement with what others are saying, to communicate liking, or merely to show that they are listening. Many take on additional work because they believe it is the right thing to do to get ahead. Others take on additional work because they just think it is the right thing to do. And still some take on additional duties just because they enjoy the work. Their promise to get the job done is genuine. Unfortunately, they tend to over-commit themselves which results in uncompleted or late work.

#### Negativists and No People

Negativists (Bramson, 1981) and No People (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994) are similar to Complainers and Whiners in that their pessimistic attitudes can lower the morale and attitudes of others. But Negativists and No People are usually mild-mannered and relatively quiet. They just do not believe any idea—old or new—will work. They use negative statements such as "We tried that before--it didn't work then, so it won't work now." In fact, almost every idea is met with a stern "it won't work" even before careful analysis of the idea. These individuals can very quickly and easily deflate the eagerness of creative employees who have many workable and feasible ideas to offer.

#### Bulldozers, Rebels, and Know-it-Alls

Bulldozers (Bramson, 1981), Rebels (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992), and Know-It-Alls (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994) are bright and usually know a great deal about many things. And they do not mind letting others know that they know a lot. They communicate through story-telling, usually starting a conversation with "I remember a similar situation which I handled this way . . ." Their intelligence and creativity reinforce their belief that they really do have all the answers. And they have a general disdain for authority because authority represents ignorance (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992). This disdain for authority is usually communicated nonverbally: they tend to ignore rules they consider stupid. In addition, they have a low tolerance for correction and contradiction.

Consequently, they are unlikely to ask for feedback from others. If their suggestion is wrong, they are quick to blame others.

### Balloons and Think-They-Know-it-Alls

Balloons (Bramson, 1981) and Think-They-Know-It-Alls (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994) usually know a lot less than they profess to know. They speak with great authority about subjects they actually know little or nothing about. As with Know-it-Alls, they may even brag through storytelling. In fact, according to Keating (1994), they appear to know the answer before someone even explains the problem. Other than their incessant bragging, they are usually very agreeable and pleasant people. Their communication style would fall under Alessandra and Hunsaker's (1993) indirect/controlling type. They just do not allow others to present ideas or provide feedback.

### Indecisive Stallers and Maybe People

Indecisive Stallers (Bramson, 1981) and Maybe People (Brinkman and Kirschner, 1994) have difficulty making decisions, which is communicated nonverbally by procrastination. The greater the likelihood their decision will cause conflict, the more they procrastinate. If and when they do make a decision, it is generally too late. Unfortunately, decisions that go unmade can be just as bad as wrong decisions and can affect everyone in an organization. These individuals are usually supportive of and pleasant about others' decisions. Alessandra and Hunsaker (1993) would classify the communication styles of these people as indirect/supporting. They tend to speak slowly and cautiously. For example, they may preface their comments or ideas with communication fillers such as "I'm not sure . . ." or "This may not be the right decision, but . . ."

As previously stated, difficult employees may perform very well on their actual job tasks. But organizations need more than highly educated or technically skilled people. They need individuals with the ability to effectively interact with others, whether it be peers, coworkers, or customers. Dysfunctional or problem communication styles can make a difference between the success or failure of an organization.

## **Constructs Driving Difficult Communication Styles**

The literature considered above offers several reasons for difficult employees' inappropriate communication styles. For example, researchers argue that the super-agreeable types have a high need to prove themselves and be liked by others. To do this, they overextend themselves by volunteering to help others with their work, never delegating, and never saying "no." The result is that they soon become overwhelmed and non-productive. Indecisive Stallers and Maybe Persons, too, may have a fear of being disliked by others. And they fear conflict. Consequently, they delay making decisions that might cause others to dislike them or cause conflict (Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994).

Like the super-agreeable and indecisive types, unresponsive, apathetic employees (e.g., Clams and Nothing Persons) may use certain behaviors and communication styles because of their fear of rejection (Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994). If these people say nothing, they cannot risk ridicule or the anger of others. They, too, fear conflict and have an overwhelming desire to be liked.

Other types of employees (Sherman Tanks, Snipers, Exploders, Competitors, and Grenades) believe strongly that only they hold all the answers (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992; Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994). They feel superior to others and have a strong opinion about how others should act. Because they value aggressiveness, they tend to devalue those who do not behave or communicate aggressively. Yet, an alternative reason for their behavior may be that they actually feel inferior to others. In order to appear smarter and better, they must make others look inferior. This is often the reason given for why bullies, such as those in school playgrounds, act the way they do.

Meier (1993) theorizes that some individuals use hostile and aggressive communication styles because they feel entitled to something: a job, a promotion, or more attention. Because they deserve that "something," they believe their bad behavior is justified.

Complainers, Whiners, and Believers, according to Bramson (1981), Bernstein (1992), and Brinkman and Kirschner (1994) feel powerless about their work. They feel they do not have the ability to change their personal or professional situations or themselves. Their answer is to continue complaining, perhaps in the hope that someone else can solve all their problems. Meier (1993) believes these people remember everything bad that has happened to them and are waiting to "get even" (p. 45).

Brinkman and Kirschner (1994) also believe that difficult employees engage in certain communication styles depending on whether they are attempting to 1) get a job done; 2) get along with other employees; 3) get a task done right; or 4) get appreciation from others. For example, Tanks use pushy and aggressive communication styles because their intent is to get the job done. Therefore, Tanks "roll" over those whom they consider to be getting in the way. And Yes Persons are so agreeable because they are interested, at the time, in either getting along with others or being appreciated by them.

Keating (1984) believes difficult employees take on certain behaviors to "fit in." If they see others being successful with certain behaviors, they are likely to "copy" those behaviors. The need to copy others' stems from one's poor self-image and the belief that no matter what they do, they will never succeed on their own.

Finally, Meier (1993) believes that some difficult people are actually reacting to other difficult employees. This can be interpreted to mean that already-difficult employees are turning others into difficult employees: yet another result of screening out an unsuitable candidate.

The above cited reasons for problematic communications styles appear to have a common thread: self-esteem (the positive or negative feeling people have about themselves). And according to research, there is a strong negative correlation between self-esteem and problem communication styles or behavior (Baumeister & Schier, 1988; Branden, 1988; Brown, 1991; Cheek & Watson, 1989; Grasha, 1987; Reece & Brandt, 1993; Smith, 1993). In fact, Branden believes there are no behaviors (other than those biological in nature) that can't be traced to poor self-esteem. In other words, self-esteem

can be a potential predictor of work performance (Branden, 1988; Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1990).

### **The Role of Self Esteem**

Counselors agree that self-esteem plays an important role in successfully treating their clients' problems (Coopersmith, 1967). But increasing an individual's self-esteem has been problematic due to the inability to concretely define or operationalize self-esteem. Operationalization problems may be due to an apparent lack of unidimensionality in the construct. Although some researchers report only one dimension of overall self-esteem (Shevlin, Bunting, & Lewis, 1995), results of various factor analytic studies indicate more (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991; Carmines & Zeller, 1974).

One definition of self-esteem generally agreed upon is that it is an overall affective evaluation of one's own worth (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). This self-worth dimension has also been called self-acceptance or self-regard by Rogers (1957). Hamachek (1987) defines self-worth as the private self only the individual can see and evaluate. Rosenberg (1965) defines that dimension as "self-image" and suggests two other dimensions of self-esteem: self-confidence (what and how well people feel they can accomplish or contribute to goals) and social self-consciousness (how they feel others evaluate or feel about them).

Like Rosenberg (1965), Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) also believe self-esteem contains the dimension of social self-consciousness. They identify three aspects of social self-consciousness—public self-consciousness, private self-consciousness, and social anxiety. Public self-consciousness reflects "a general awareness of the self as a social object being perceived as having an effect on others" (Betz, Wohlgemuth, Serling, Harshbarger, & Klein, 1995, p. 79). An example of this would be "I think I make a good friend." Private self-consciousness relates to "attentiveness to self: for example, I reflect about myself a lot" (Betz, et. al., 1975, p. 79). Social anxiety seems to be related to self-confidence and how they feel about their interactions with others (e.g., "I am not afraid to speak up and tell people how I feel.").

Arbetter's 1996 review of the self-esteem literature summarizes Rosenberg's and others' definitions as follows:

Self-esteem is based on how much individuals respect themselves:

- physically (how happy they are with the way they look);
- intellectually (how well they feel they can accomplish their goals);
- emotionally (how much they feel loved or love themselves); and
- morally (how they think of themselves as a good person) (pg. 23)

Arbetter concludes that how individuals rate themselves in each of the above categories affects how they perform at work. Specifically, according to Branden (1993), low self-esteem will cause people to be less creative in their work, less ambitious, and less likely to treat others respectfully. These feelings of inferiority and low self-image are communicated through verbal messages and nonverbal behaviors such as yelling, whining, or intimidation through steady eye contact. Further, individuals with low self-esteem are insecure and find it difficult to change their position for fear others will see it

as weakness or inferiority, are less willing to assume responsibility, and look for others to blame (Hamachek, 1987).

Rosenberg's 1965 research on how self-esteem might impact on occupational aspirations was conducted using adolescents and college students as subjects. His results indicated that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to reject and be overly sensitive to criticism, avoid making decisions, and resent being told what to do. These feelings can result in a number of inappropriate communication styles or behaviors in the workplace.

For example, employees low in self-esteem may explode and use a yelling communication style because of their sensitivity to criticism. This may explain the behaviors or communication styles of Tanks and Competitors. Individuals who are hostile and aggressive report that they put on a "facade" to hide their true feelings (Rosenberg, 1965). They cover up for their perceived inadequacies by being argumentative or bullying. These individuals internalize others' suggestions or feedback to mean that they are not as good as other people. In addition to yelling, employees with low self-esteem may use other behaviors like sarcasm, boasting, arrogance, and over-estimating their abilities to make themselves appear superior over others. Difficult employees who may fall in this category are Know-it-Alls and Snipers.

Others with low self-esteem are fearful of being wrong or disliked, and they communicate this fear nonverbally by delaying decisions or not offering any input into ideas (such as the Indecisive Stallers, Clams, May-be Persons, and Nothing Persons.) To do otherwise, in their minds, might invoke criticism from others, making some difficult employees feel even more inferior. They may be negative and unwilling to take risks (such as Negativists). To the observer, it appears that this person doesn't think any idea will work. But to the difficult employee, taking risks, speaking up, and offering ideas means risking being disliked or unaccepted.

Rosenberg's later studies (e.g., Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1990), distinguished between two types of self-esteem: *specific* self-esteem which is relevant to behavior in particular situations (e.g., work) and *global* self-esteem which is related to overall psychological well-being or how much an individual feels good about themselves as a person. Rosenberg, et. al concluded that an individual's global self-esteem may not necessarily predict how they will perform at work. People may have high global self-esteem but still perform poorly at work. This may be because they feel they cannot perform a specific work task, therefore they either procrastinate (like the Indecisive Staller), avoid doing the task at all, overcompensate for their feelings of inadequacies (such as the Know-it-All or Bulldozer), or fail at doing the task. In other words, their specific self-esteem is low.

According to Rosenberg, et al., it is possible for people with low specific self-esteem at work to have high specific self-esteem at home. So, a person who does not feel he/she can make good decisions at work (again, such as the Indecisive Staller), may feel very comfortable making decisions about his or her own personal life. Specific self-esteem may be the self-confidence dimension earlier considered by Rosenberg (1965) and others as a contributing factor to global self-esteem. This attempt to differentiate between global and specific self-esteem may have implications for organizations seeking to determine what, if any, training can be done for problem employees to correct their dysfunctional behaviors and communication styles.

Guindon (1994) believes self-esteem plays a big role in how we interpret each others' communication. For example, a person with high self-esteem is more likely to interpret feedback as constructive rather than threatening because they perceive themselves as competent rather than inferior. Consequently, high self-esteem individuals will be less likely to engage in the problem communication styles of difficult employees because of their sense of identity and well-being.

On the other hand, additional research indicates that there are times when high self-esteem can actually lead to problematic communication styles. According to Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice (1993), people with high self-esteem whose egos are threatened can engage in aggressive communication styles. This is because high self-esteem individuals have a "tendency to make unrealistically positive claims about the self " (p. 143). This causes them to set unrealistic and unobtainable goals, which can lead to failure. To some, failure is a threat to their egos. To compensate for their deflated egos, high self-esteem individuals use negative communication styles such as sarcasm to intimidate others and make others look inferior. This, in turn, restores the difficult individual's feelings of superiority.

In some instances, high self-esteem has also been positively correlated bullying and hostility (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1991; Rosenberg, 1965). Baumeister, et al. (1991) note that prison youths incarcerated for violent crimes really do believe they are better than other people, do not feel insecure, and do not have self-doubts. But although Baumeister, et al. found that violent people all had extremely high global self-esteem, Branden (1993) believes otherwise. According to Branden, communication styles that are usually associated with high self-esteem, such as yelling, steady eye contact, boastfulness, and arrogance, actually reflect inadequate self-esteem.

These seemingly contradictory explanations of self-esteem (high vs. low) and its relationship with certain problematic communication styles make it more difficult to study and understand difficult employees. However, because it seems more logical that people who use yelling, unresponsiveness, super-agreeableness to make themselves either feel superior, look smart, or be better liked, have low rather than high self-esteem and because Bramson's (1981) theory takes a low self-esteem perspective, this study explores these communication styles from the view that it is low rather than high-self-esteem that causes difficult employees.

Whatever the reason for the communication styles used by difficult employees, it is important that employees with the potential for using problematic styles or inappropriate behavior be identified early, either pre-employment or shortly thereafter, so that they are handled in an appropriate manner. The following recommendations have been made for handling the difficult employee.

### **Dealing with Difficult Employees**

Table 2 shows the variety of strategies offered in the aforementioned "how-to" books for handling difficult employees and their dysfunctional communication styles. These strategies reflect the general belief that it is important for non-difficult employees to understand the communication and behavior patterns of their difficult co-worker so they can cope better with their difficult peers. For these authors, termination of difficult employees does not seem like a real option because most difficult employees

**Table 2**  
**Dealing with Difficult Employees and Problem Communication Styles**

	<b>Author</b>		
<b>Difficult Communication Style</b>	<b><u>Bernstein and Bramson (1981)</u></b>	<b><u>Brinkman and Rozen (1992)</u></b>	<b><u>Kirschner (1994)</u></b>
Hostile/Aggressive	<b>Sherman Tank</b> - stand up to them - let them vent  <b>Sniper</b> - get group cooperation - ask them if their comment was meant to be rude  <b>Exploder</b> - let vent - let them know you take their concern seriously	<b>Competitor</b> - maneuver them into team playing	<b>Tank</b> - demand respect - interrupt their attack - be firm  <b>Sniper</b> - draw them out - be honest - tell them their comment was unkind  <b>Grenade</b> - let vent - let them know you take their concern seriously
Complaining	<b>Complainer</b> - listen; don't agree - switch to problem solving	<b>Believer</b> - listen; focus on problem solving	<b>Whiner</b> - listen, but shift to problem solving
Unresponsive	<b>Clam</b> - use open-ended questions to draw them out - use friendly, silent stare until they talk		<b>Nothing Person</b> - use open-ended questions to draw them out
Super-Agreeable	<b>Super-Agreeable</b> - assume behavior is attempt to win approval - let them know you respect their honesty	<b>Believer</b> - give honest feedback - be clear on priorities be honest - be clear with goals	<b>Yes Person</b> - make it safe to - help them learn plan
Negative	<b>Negativists</b> - don't get drawn in - state your optimism - don't say their wrong		<b>No Person</b> - don't get drawn - use them as a resource
Know-it-all (superiority)	<b>Bulldozer</b> - don't challenge their expertise - acknowledge their competence	<b>Rebel</b> - put them where they can do best	<b>Know-it-All</b> - be prepared and patient - present your views indirectly
Think-they-know-it All (bogus experts)	<b>Balloon</b> - state the facts and alternatives - give them a way to save face		<b>Pretend Know-it-Alls</b> - give them a little attention - clarify - help them save face
Indecisive	<b>Indecisive Staller</b> - state the issue - make it safe to make mistakes or decisions		<b>Maybe Person</b> - clarify options - make it safe to make mistakes or decisions

can still seem to make a contribution to the organization. Therefore, understanding and learning to cope with difficult people should make the workplace more functional. In other words, according to the above authors, it is up to the "good" employees to change their own attitudes and communication styles so they can effectively deal with their difficult co-workers. Those authors who write on this topic do not recommend that significant amounts of time be spent on changing the communication styles or behaviors of difficult employees. Their assumption seems to be that, through the positive communication styles of others, a positive change may take place in the difficult employee.

For example, Bramson (1981) believes that other employees should allow Sherman Tanks and Exploders to vent until they "run down." Others should not get into a confrontation with them about who is right or wrong. Anger should not be met with anger. When the venting is over, Bramson believes that is the time for other employees to stand up for themselves and gain respect. Individuals should not allow themselves to be pushed around by hostile/aggressive people. If a Sherman Tank or Exploder shoots down an idea as "stupid," another employee should stand firm. Making comments such as "I can see you are feeling angry" may help to reduce the aggressiveness being displayed by Sherman Tanks, Exploders, or other hostile/aggressive people.

Brinkman and Kirschner (1994) also believe employees need to command respect from hostile and aggressive people. However, unlike Bramson (1981), Brinkman and Kirschner believe that employees should interrupt the attack instead of allowing difficult employees to vent until they run out of steam. And Bernstein and Rozen (1992) believe that other employees should maneuver the hostile and aggressive employee into team playing. Other co-workers need to keep stressing that all decisions are a group decision and not made just by one person.

Bramson (1981) and Brinkman and Kirschner (1994) recommend that employees confront Snipers and directly ask them if the comment made by the Sniper was intended to be rude or sarcastic. When Snipers are confronted in this manner, they usually back down. However, if they are allowed to continue their behavior, they will persist in using it over time. Brinkman and Kirschner (1994) believe that some Snipers may actually be using sarcasm in a joking manner and don't necessarily intend criticism by it. Consequently, it is important to first determine exactly what is meant by certain comments. If the comment was made in fun, Brinkman and Kirschner recommend that coworkers tell Snipers they don't like that type of humor.

The best way to deal with Complainers, Believers and Whiners is to listen to them and acknowledge their complaints (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992; Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994). But this advice doesn't mean employees should be drawn into the difficult employees' complaining behaviors. It is important to shift the focus to problem-solving and finding solutions rather than remain centered on the problem.

Clams and Nothing Persons should be directly asked open-ended questions such as "What do you think of that idea?" (Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994). It is harder for individuals to remain unresponsive or silent when all eyes are focused on them. If these people choose to remain silent, however, they should be allowed to do so. It is better to let them remain silent than put them in a situation where they may lash out at others due to feeling pressured.

Assuming that overly-agreeable people are behaving in that manner to gain approval and to be liked, the following advice is given: make it safe for these people to say no by asking them to state whether they honestly think they can handle a particular task (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992; Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994) . Believers who want to get ahead should be given honest feedback about their work and clear priorities about how to succeed in the organization (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992). Overly-agreeable people need to know they will still be liked and respected if they cannot help others with their work.

People dealing with Negativists and No Persons should not get pulled into their negativity. Instead, these people should be used as resources (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994). Their reasons why something won't work can actually be useful. And it may help and motivate others to come up with better ways of initiating an otherwise unsuccessful solution. In addition, according to Bramson (1981) and Brinkman and Kirschner (1994), co-workers should continuously show their optimism about an idea.

Bulldozers, Rebels, and Know-it-alls should not be directly challenged about their expertise (Bernstein & Rozen, 1992; Bramson, 1981; Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994). Their many ideas and solutions to problems are usually appropriate. These types of people are usually very knowledgeable and competent people, which should be acknowledged. Others' views and ideas should be presented indirectly. They should be drawn into a brainstorming process where all of their ideas can be debated, along with the ideas of others. If they see they are being listened to, they may accept using someone else's' solution over theirs.

Keating (1983) and Meier (1993) believe the place to start is for other employees to think about their own behaviors and responses to difficult employees. Keating suggests that difficult people not be judged too quickly. He believes that people judge others based on misperceptions. People should assume the best about other people. Keating also believes that people choose how they are going to feel. Consequently, difficult people cannot affect others negatively unless those others choose to feel a certain way.

According to Meier (1993), other employees should work on their responses to difficult people and question why they allow difficult people to make them feel intimidated, angry, or hurt. He believes there are steps that others can take that will protect them from Jerks. These steps include not letting comments, opinions, or behaviors of Second Degree Jerks affect their self- concept . He suggests that people who learn to think positively about their own strengths will be less affected by the behaviors of Jerks. Meier appears to be recommending that the best way to handle difficult employees is to improve one's own self-esteem.

### **Identifying and Screening Out Difficult Employees**

The goal of the authors mentioned in this research is to improve the workplace without sanctioning difficult employees. However, the suggestions provided by the authors are not always practical. The number of good employees usually outnumber difficult ones. Consequently, it does not appear fair, ethical, or even feasible at all times to ask good employees to change their communication styles in order to cope with their difficult co-workers or peers. In addition, there does appear to be any qualitative or

quantitative proof that these authors' recommendations on how to handle difficult employees actually work.

Therefore, an alternative strategy for making the workplace more functional is to "screen-out" difficult employees before they are hired. One reason in support of screening out is that it will reduce the likelihood of having to terminate the difficult employee later which has certain organizational implications associated with that termination (such as incurring additional recruiting and training costs for replacements). But more important, screening out potentially difficult employees will protect current good employees from having to deal with such people and their dysfunctional behaviors and communication styles.

The question then becomes how to screen for potential problematic communication styles. The most logical way is to look at previous communication styles of applicants through employer references. Unfortunately, as previously stated, today's employers are reluctant to give out any information other than a person's title, job duties, and salary (Kleiman & White, 1991; Paetzold & Willburn, 1984; Ryan & Lasek, 1991; Stier, 1990). Consequently, a better way to screen for difficult employees is through testing.

It is widely believed that employment tests are predictive of future performance (Cronbach, 1984; Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Schneider & Schmitt, 1992). The goal of selection tests is to close the gap between a worker's skill and his or her fit for the job. Some tests attempt to predict a person's cognitive or physical ability, because many jobs (e.g., law enforcement) demand high levels of both. Other tests, such as personality tests, tap certain traits that identify an applicant's leadership, communication, and interpersonal styles. Because an individual's ability to perform a job cannot be confined to one area (e.g., physical ability), many organizations use a battery of tests to evaluate many areas.

Courts have found such tests legal as long as they are job related, even if they have adverse impact on members of a protected class (Warren, Gorham, & Lamont, 1993). From an ethical perspective, pre-employment tests are important because an organization has the responsibility of not only ensuring the physical safety of its employees, but the emotional safety, as well. Knowing whether an applicant has a predisposition for a particular dysfunctional behavior that could negatively impact on others is an important ethical duty all organizations should take seriously.

The types of tests used to screen for certain traits such as problematic communication styles depend on the constructs driving those styles. That is, some relationship needs to have been developed through research between the problematic communication style being tested and the cause of that style. In short, a test that predicts difficult employees and their problematic communication styles must provide both a theoretic and observational or empirical link between the behavior and its causes.

There are two types of tests that may be good predictors of difficult employees. The first is a self-esteem inventory because the popular hypothesis in most of the literature is that people with problem behaviors (e.g., yelling) have low self-esteem. Unfortunately, most of the research done on self-esteem has been with adolescents or college students. Although little research has been done linking a full-time working adult's self-esteem to problem communication styles at work, Rosenberg (1965) speculated that how adolescents with varying levels of self-esteem act in school can be generalized to working adults who have comparable levels of self-esteem.. And yet,

despite a theoretic link, the observational or empirical link bears consideration. Although Bramson (1981) implies that a relationship exists between low self-esteem and difficult employees, he does not provide that empirical link. He conceptualized difficult employees as those who frequently use problem communication styles such as yelling, sarcasm, or negativity. He then attempted to draw a relationship between these communication styles and self-esteem. It is unclear how he operationalized problem communication styles, but he did conclude that difficult employees with these problem styles have lower self-esteem than do other employees. Further search of the literature was done to determine if Bramson used any form of empirical measurement to determine if employees' level of self-esteem negatively correlated with problem communication styles. No additional literature was found in this area.

One goal of this study was to statistically examine the relationship between self-esteem and difficult employees and their communication styles. This was accomplished by developing a rating form for supervisors that measured how often (if ever) their employee(s) used one of the difficult communication styles described by Bramson.

Building on past self-esteem research, Bramson's qualitative analysis and conceptualization of difficult esteem, and using the ratings from supervisors, it was expected that self-esteem would be related to problematic employee communication styles.

H1: There will be a negative correlation between an employee's self-esteem and supervisor ratings of the employee's tendency to use yelling, sarcasm, complaining, unresponsive, disagreeing, know-it-all, gossiping, and indecisive communication styles.

This study also posits that a second predictor of difficult employees is overall work interest. There is little research linking work interest and certain communication behaviors. However, from her career assessment experience with employees, the author of this study has observed that people with a high work interest profile use a superagreeable communication style while those with a lower work interest profile use apathetic, unresponsive, and indecisive styles.

What research has been done on work interest and behaviors has mostly been in the area of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation and affectivity. According to those who espouse the notion of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, some people are "driven by a passionate interest in their work, a deep level of enjoyment and involvement in what they do" (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994, p. 950). Amabile et al. and Deci and Ryan (1985) suggest that intrinsically motivated people are more assertive and more likely to seek additional work assignments because they are rewarded by the enjoyment and challenge they receive from their work. Further, the research of Amabile et al. that uses college students and working adults shows that intrinsically motivated people are more interested in a variety of work activities.

Consequently, Super-Agreeables may volunteer to take on more work than they can handle because they have a high interest in a variety of vocational areas. Contrary to the self-esteem research, their overly-agreeable communication behavior may have less to do with a need to be liked than with communicating a strong interest in and enthusiasm for learning new tasks and trying all available opportunities. On the other hand, extrinsically motivated individuals (those who work for rewards such as compensation or prestige) show impatience (Garbarino, 1975) and poor problem-solving skills

(Glucksberg, 1962). They are satisfied with doing just the minimum amount of work required unless enticed by external rewards to do more.

Affectivity involves an employee's predisposition to feel good or bad at work. According to research in this area, people experiencing positive affectivity have an overall sense of well-being and show more interest in and seek challenging work variety such as the Superagreeable person). People experiencing negative affectivity are more subdued and depressed, showing less interest in work (Greenberg & Baron, 1995). They may be less likely to participate in discussions or provide feedback (such as the Unresponsive), or be more complaining (such as the Whiner), which is a form of negativism.

The drawback to tests on intrinsic/extrinsic motivation or affectivity is their intrusiveness. In fact, most tests are considered intrusive by people who don't wish to self-disclose (Cronbach, 1984). Furthermore, these tests are easy to fake, making them less useful as employee selection tools. A vocational interest survey is a less intrusive way of measuring work interests (Cronbach, 1984).

Interest inventories are primarily used in career assessment to show individuals' preferences for or interest in particular work activities (e.g., nursing, law enforcement), but they have occasionally been used in employee selection. They are a valuable tool in ensuring that people are placed in jobs that are congruent with their interests (Cronbach, 1984). Research shows that the more individuals' work interests or preferences match their chosen careers, the more likely they will be satisfied at work (Fricko & Beehr, 1992; Pickman, 1994).

Building on the research of Amabile, et al (1994) on intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, as well as on the research on affectivity which implicitly link certain communication styles with work interests, it was expected that vocational interest can predict certain communication styles in employees. Consequently, two hypotheses are posited.

H2: There will be a positive correlation between an employee's overall work interest and supervisor ratings of the employee's tendency to be "superagreeable."

H3: There will be a negative correlation between an employee's overall work interest and supervisor ratings of an employee's tendency to use complaining, yelling, sarcastic, disagreeing, apathetic, unresponsive, gossiping, indecisive, and know-it-all communication styles.

Because human behavior cannot always be explained by just one factor, there could yet be another reason for the communication styles of difficult employees. A person's self-esteem may affect how he or she feels about work. Guidon (1994) suggests that people with low self-esteem "submerge themselves in what is routine and undemanding" (p. 23). In other words, people with low work interests may have low self-esteem which in turn affects how they interact with others. Consequently, a fourth hypothesis was developed.

H4: There will be a positive correlation between overall work interest and self-esteem.

If, in fact, self-esteem and overall work interest are negatively related to ratings of problem communication styles, it is possible that individuals who score high in both will be less likely to engage in problem communication styles than individuals who score high in only one. It is for this reason that two other hypotheses are posited:

H5: Employees with both low self-esteem and high work interest will be rated as using the communication style of Superagreeability more often.

H6: Employees with both low self-esteem and low work interest will be rated as using the following communication styles more frequently: complaining, apathetic, unresponsiveness, disagreeing, and indecisive.

How organizations continue to deal with difficult employees in the future will continue to have significant implications. Most of all involuntary terminations can be linked to unsuitable employees such as the difficult one. For each terminated employee, as previously stated, the organization must bear additional costs to recruit and train new people. In addition, good people will often leave because of difficult people. Again, this means additional costs to the organization. It makes sense, then, from a financial perspective, that candidates who might potentially become difficult employees be identified before they are hired. Even if an organization decides to hire them, at least that organization will be aware of future potential problems.

More important, this manner of dealing with difficult people shifts the focus from expecting good employees to “cope” with difficult employee to holding the difficult employee responsible for changing his or her behavior, where the focus should be. And finally, this study does not suggest that such tests should be used to terminate difficult employee who are already on the job. But the information from the research provided in this study can certainly help supervisors and others better understand the training needs of these types of employees so that those needs can be met early in an employee’s career.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 169 sworn personnel from three separate law enforcement agencies (54 from a sheriff’s department; 41 from a small town police department; and 74 from a county police department). Law enforcement personnel were selected largely because of the extent to which they communicate and interact with each other and their communities and because of the different communication styles they bring to their departments. The average age was 35.81 years (range = 22-65), 86.1% were males, and 93.7% were white. Participants represent 100% of the potential participants from the sheriff’s department, 100% of the town police department, and 90% of the mid-size county police department. Most of the participants were law enforcement officers (n=163). The others included 1 librarian, 3 paramedics, and 2 clerical staff. All of the participants were sworn personnel.

### **Procedure**

The author met with representatives from each law enforcement agency to explain the purpose of the study and obtain their agreement to allow their employees to participate. It was explained to the departments’ representatives, as well as the officers, that participation must be on a voluntary basis and that it would take approximately 30

minutes for each participant to complete the three instruments and 10 minutes for each supervisor to complete the rating form.

Supervisors distributed the packets containing the instruments to each employee who agreed to participate in the study. Employees were asked to put their badge/identification number in the place on the forms that asked for "name" as well as on the envelope provided. Other information they provided on the form included age, sex, race, and position. After the participants completed all three instruments, they put them in and sealed the envelope and returned the envelope to their supervisor. Supervisors were not permitted to see the completed forms.

Supervisors completed a rating form on each of their participating employees. Supervisors also used badge/identification numbers to identify the participants. Participants were not permitted to see the supervisor's ratings. All of the packets and the rating forms were picked up by or delivered to the experimenter. The instruments were scored by the author and then correlated with the supervisor rating forms.

## **Instruments**

### Aamodt Vocational Interest Survey (AVIS)

The AVIS was used to tap the vocational interests of the participants and asks individuals to rate, on a five-point scale, the extent to which they might enjoy performing a particular work activity often or for long periods of time. A rating of "1" indicates the individual would absolutely hate doing an activity whereas a rating of "5" indicates the individual would very much enjoy doing this activity.

There are 130 activities that fall under one of 13 occupational clusters. Items are summed under each occupational cluster. The AVIS has been used over the last five years in career assessments and to help displaced workers determine career choices. The inventory is self-administered, untimed, and takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. Once the inventory is scored, it shows a profile indicating vocational areas in which individuals show high interest and areas in which they show low interest.

The AVIS was selected because of its ease of administration, correlation with other interest inventories, and less intrusive nature than other tests tapping work interests, (e.g., negative affectivity tests and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation instruments), and its specific focus on adult workers.

*Construct Validity:* Construct validity was established by correlating the AVIS with the Career Occupational Preference Survey (COPS; Knapp & Knapp, 1982), a well-established test measuring similar constructs. The COPS Interest Inventory was designed to assist individuals in their career decision-making process. It was established and refined through an extensive series of theoretical research studies begun over two decades ago. The median coefficient alpha is .90. The median test/retest reliability on a sample of 97 students administered the COPS one week apart was .87. It has shown strong convergent validity with a number of other well known interest inventories such as the Strong Interest Inventory and the Vocational Preference Inventory. Statistical results based on a factor analysis yielded 8 broad interpretable factors (Knapp & Knapp, 1990). The COPS has been used as a career awareness unit at the junior high and high school levels, as well as with freshman college students.

The correlations between the AVIS and its counterparts on the COPS range from a low of .53 for the job category of "protecting" (e.g., law enforcement) to a high of .84 for the job category of "helping" (e.g., nursing).

*Reliability:* The test-retest reliability for the AVIS was established by correlating scores from one test administration to 55 undergraduate psychology students with scores from a second test administration to the same subjects held one week later. The median reliability for the 13 dimensions on AVIS is .87 with a range of .75 to .90. The median coefficient alpha is .87.

### Radford Inventory

The Radford Inventory was designed to measure feelings of self-esteem as research suggests that problem communication styles are related to low self-esteem. The Radford Inventory (Raynes & Aamodt, 1996) is a self-report test comprised of 12 statements. Items were written based on the various definitions of self-esteem that have been used by other theorists and previously explained in this study. Items are written in the first person, and individuals use a three-point scale to rate how they feel about themselves. "1" means the individual does not feel like that at all; "2" means the individual feels somewhat like that statement; and "3" means that the individual feels very much like that statement. Six of the items are positively worded. An example of a positively worded item is "I make a good friend." Seven are negatively worded (e.g., "I have a low opinion of myself"). Negative items are reversed scored such that higher overall scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. Scores on the scale can range from 12 to 36.

*Convergent Validity:* The Radford Inventory was correlated with the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory (1976) and the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (1965), two of the longest established and most widely used instruments for the measurement of global self-esteem (Francis & Wilcox, 1995; Shevlin, Bunting, & Lewis, 1995). The Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory has primarily been used extensively in research with adolescents, although the inventory was revised in 1975 to be used with adults. The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale has primarily been used with adolescents. Francis and Wilcox's (1995) exploration of the relationship between scores on these two measures showed a correlation of -.47 among 16-year old boys who took the tests and -.54 among 16-year old girls ( $p < .001$ ), showing that the two instruments measure similar constructs.

The Radford Inventory correlates .76 with the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory and .64 with the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale.

*Factorial Validity:* A factor analysis tested for the dimensionality of the measure of self-esteem. Typically, the closer an item loads to 1.00, the more highly it is considered as loading on a factor. According to Grimm & Yarnold (1995), items with factor loading coefficients of at least .30 are considered of significant value and consequently worthy of consideration in the interpretation of the eigenvector. For this study, items that loaded at least .50 on one factor and no higher than .50 on any other factor were considered worthy of interpretation. Items that fell below the .50 criterion were discarded. A factor analysis of the instrument revealed that the 12 items from the inventory fall under 3 main factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (Raynes, 1996). The

results of the factor analysis seem to generally support other researchers who believe that self-esteem is multidimensional.

Eight items on the Radford Inventory fell under Factor 1 one (self-worth); two fell under Factor 2 (social consciousness); and two items fell under Factor 3 (confidence). Identification, or labeling, of these factors is consistent with the literature on self-esteem and dimensions considered to be included in overall self-esteem. The overall score had an alpha of .75

*Reliability:* The Radford Inventory has a test-retest reliability of .82 which was obtained after two administrations of the test to 46 undergraduate psychology students done one week apart

### Supervisor Rating Form

The problem communication styles measured in this study were those identified by Bramson (1981) and others as used by difficult employees. At the time of this study, there was actually no scale measuring these problem communication styles. Consequently, in order to test the styles and quantify Bramson's theory, an instrument was developed by the researcher. This instrument was constructed using those problem communication styles qualitatively identified by Bramson and the other authors cited in this research.

The rating form has 16 statements indicating a certain communication style such as complaining, yelling, indecisiveness, or super-agreeability. Ten of the statements were relevant to this particular study. Six statements are for use in future validation studies. Statements were designed based on what Bramson and other authors determined are chronic problem communication styles. Supervisors were asked to indicate, on a five-point scale, how often their employee(s) use a particular communication style. Examples of statements on which supervisors had to rate their employee was: "This individual whines and complains about professional and personal situations;" "This individual yells at others and uses aggressive words to get others to agree with him/her."

*Factorial Validity:* A factor analysis using a varimax rotation was performed and revealed that the 10 statements used for this study fell into two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (see Table 3). All items loaded at least .50 or more under one of the two factors. Seven items on this scale significantly loaded under Factor 1. Three items loaded under Factor 2. Factor 1 communication styles were identified by the author as aggressive; Factor 2 as passive.

*Reliability:* A Cronbach's Alpha was completed and indicated a coefficient alpha of .85 on Factor 1 and .54 for Factor 2.

**Table 3**  
**Factor Loadings of Rating Form**

Problem Communication Style	Factor I* Aggressiveness	Factor II* Passiveness
Gossiping	<b>.819</b>	.113
Disagreeing	<b>.810</b>	.111
Complaining	<b>.759</b>	.066
Knows it all	<b>.750</b>	-.035
Yelling	<b>.735</b>	-.021
Apathetic	<b>.623</b>	.460
Sarcastic	<b>.521</b>	-.125
Unresponsive	-.016	<b>.801</b>
Indecisive	.365	<b>.720</b>
Agreeing	-.186	<b>.569</b>

\* coefficient alpha = .85

\*\* coefficient alpha = .54

### Data Analysis

Correlations between the test scores on the Radford Inventory and AVIS and relevant supervisor ratings were used to test all six hypotheses. In addition, a regression analysis was conducted on the data to determine the extent to which combinations of the independent variables correlated with the dependent variables. The dependent variables in this test were the different types of communication styles identified by Bramson (1981) and discussed in this study. The independent variables were self-esteem and vocational interests. A  $p < .05$  significance level was used as the criterion to reject the null hypothesis for all statistical tests.

Regression analysis was also performed to examine the relationship between problem communication styles and vocational interest scores, scores from each of the individual dimensions of self-esteem, squares of each of the standardized tests scores (used to test for curvilinearity), and the interactions between vocational interest and each of the self-esteem dimensions.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 4 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the three dimensions of self-esteem with vocational interest. Interestingly enough, vocational interest correlates differently with the individual dimensions of self-esteem. It correlates significantly with the dimensions of self-worth ( $r = .22$ ) and confidence ( $r = .16$ ) but not with social consciousness. This indicates that, although the constructs are slightly related, they are measuring different things.

**Table 4**  
**Intercorrelations of Independent Variables**

Independent Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
Interest (1)	406.30	57.50	(.90)	.22**	.10	.16*
Self-esteem						
Self-worth (2)	17.70	2.46		(.90)	.20**	.41**
Social Consciousness (3)	5.23	.79			(.54)	.30**
Confidence (4)	4.75	.93				(.17)

Coefficient alphas are in the diagonals

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

Table 5 shows the means, standard deviations, minimum scores, and maximum scores of supervisors' ratings on problem communication styles, and Table 6 shows the intercorrelations of the problem communication styles. As expected, many communication styles significantly correlated with others. For example, yelling correlated .47 with disagreeing, which means that people who tend to frequently yell also tend to frequently disagree. Both of these are aggressive styles of communicating; consequently, it makes sense that there would be that positive relationship. Unresponsive correlated .41 with indecisive. This would appear to show that people who are unable or unwilling to make decisions also tend to be unresponsive communicators. According to the literature, unresponsiveness and indecisiveness are signs of people with low self-esteem unwilling to take risks.

**Table 5**  
**Descriptive Statistics for Supervisor's Ratings**

Problem Communication Styles	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Whining	2.18	1.20	1.0	5.0
Yelling	1.63	.86	1.0	5.0
Agreeing	2.67	.86	1.0	5.0
Unresponsive	2.3	1.07	1.0	5.0
Apathetic	2.01	1.02	1.0	5.0
Gossiping	1.91	.95	1.0	4.0
Sarcastic	2.19	1.00	1.0	5.0
Indecisive	2.07	.99	1.0	5.0
Disagreeing	1.92	.99	1.0	5.0
Know-it-All	1.80	.94	1.0	5.0

**Table 6**  
**Intercorrelations of Problem Communication Styles**

Problem Communication Style	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Whining (1)	x									
Yelling (2)	<b>.54</b>	x								
Agreeing (3)	-.04	-.06	x							
Unresponsive (4)	.04	.01	<b>.22</b>	x						
Apathetic (5)	<b>.41</b>	<b>.47</b>	.00	<b>.31</b>	x					
Gossiping (6)	<b>.60</b>	<b>.48</b>	-.07	.06	<b>.55</b>	x				
Sarcastic (7)	<b>.25</b>	<b>.33</b>	-.11	-.04	.24	<b>.44</b>	x			
Indecisive(8)	<b>.27</b>	.17	<b>.21</b>	<b>.41</b>	<b>.47</b>	<b>.35</b>	.12	x		
Disagreeing (9)	<b>.57</b>	<b>.47</b>	-.08	<b>.34</b>	<b>.45</b>	<b>.61</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>.42</b>	x	
Know-it-All (10)	<b>.46</b>	<b>.50</b>	-.05	-.05	<b>.38</b>	<b>.52</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>.22</b>	<b>.65</b>	x

Note: Items in bold are significant at the .01 level or better

### Test of Hypothesis One

Hypothesis One predicted that there would be a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and supervisor ratings of the tendency for employees to use the problem communication styles cited by Bramson (1981) and others. Because results of a factor analysis performed on the Radford Self-esteem Inventory at an earlier time revealed three dimensions of self-esteem (Raynes, 1996), ratings of problem communication styles were correlated with each dimension: self-worth, social consciousness, and confidence. There was only one communication style (agreeing) in which the frequency with which an employee used that style increased as self-esteem decreased. Other than that one area, this study did not support the existence of other significant negative relationships between any other dimensions of self-esteem and problem communication styles.

Rather, self-esteem seems to be more *positively* related to an individual's tendency to use certain communication styles. As depicted in Table 7, one dimension of self-esteem (confidence) positively correlated with the use of the communication styles of disagreeing ( $r = .22$ ) and know-it-all ( $r = .19$ ). So, individuals who tend to engage in those two communication styles report a high level of confidence in themselves and their abilities. There is no significant indication that as self-esteem goes down, the frequency

with which people use problem communication styles goes up. Neither the self-worth nor social consciousness dimensions of self-esteem significantly correlated with the supervisors ratings. The results of this study seemed to support other research claiming (e.g. Baumeister, et al., 1996) that some behaviors (e.g., aggressiveness) are positively related to self-esteem.

**Table 7**  
**Correlation Matrix**

Problem Communication Style	Self-Esteem Dimension			
	Interest	Self-worth	Social Consciousness	Confidence
Factor I: Aggressive	-.13	-.02	-.09	.22**
Complaining	-.17*	.02	-.06	.09
Yelling	-.12	.04	-.15	.15
Apathetic	-.05	.00	-.15	-.02
Gossiping	.00	.00	-.06	.15
Sarcastic	.01	.10	.06	.15
Disagreeing	-.06	-.06	-.02	.22**
Know-it-all	-.04	-.09	-.10	.19**
Factor II: Passive	.04	-.04	.00	.06
Agreeing	.22**	.04	.00	-.16*
Unresponsive	.01	-.04	.00	-.04
Indecisive	.13	-.06	.00	.08

\* p < .05

\*\* p ≤ .01

Although scatterplots did not provide evidence of curvilinearity, a test for curvilinearity was performed to determine if it were those people at either extremes of self-esteem (low and high) who frequently used problem communication styles. The possibility that the relationship wasn't linear was tested by standardizing the self-esteem scores, squaring these standard scores, and then correlating the products with communication style ratings. None of the correlations fell at or below the .05 significance level which was used as the criterion for rejecting the null hypothesis for all statistical tests.

### **Test of Hypothesis Two**

Hypothesis Two postulated that there would be a significant positive correlation between an employee's overall work interest and supervisor ratings of the employee's tendency to be "superagreeable." Previous research states that people who overextend themselves, always say "yes," and take on more work are low in self-esteem. However, this study hypothesized that over agreeableness has more to do with a high interest in a

variety of work areas than with low self-esteem. This hypothesis was supported as depicted in Table 7 which shows a significant correlation ( $r = .22$ ) between agreeing and work interest.

### **Test of Hypothesis Three**

Hypothesis Three predicted that there will be a negative correlation between an employee's overall work interest and supervisor ratings of an employee's tendency to use a complaining, yelling, sarcastic, disagreeing, apathetic, unresponsive, gossiping, indecisive, and know-it-all style of communicating. This hypothesis was only partially supported. Only one communication style—complaining—significantly correlated with work interest ( $-.17$ ). Otherwise, there was no support that people who tend to frequently use these negative styles of communicating are less interested in work than other employees (see Table 7).

### **Test of Hypothesis Four**

Hypothesis Four predicted a positive correlation between work interest and self-esteem. As depicted back on Table 4, there were small, but significant, correlations between work interest and self-worth ( $r = .22$ ) and work interest and confidence ( $r = .16$ ).

### **Test for Hypothesis Five and Six**

Hypothesis Five and Six which predicted a significant interaction between self-esteem and overall work interest such that employees with both high self-esteem and high work interest will be rated as using these communication styles less frequently than others do, three new variables were created by multiplying the interest scores with the scores from each of the three self-esteem factors which were all entered into a hierarchical regression. None of the interactions entered at or below the .05 significance level which was selected as the criterion for rejecting the null hypothesis of all statistical results.

### **Multivariate Analysis**

To further investigate the relationship between self-esteem and work interests and the problematic communication styles identified by Bramson (1981) and others, multiple regressions were performed. For each of the major factors and each of the individual communication styles, the scores from the interest and three self-esteem dimensions were entered, as were the interactions between interest and each of the self-esteem variables. To test for a curvilinear relationship between interest and self esteem, the interest and self-esteem scores were standardized and then squared and the resulting products were entered into a stepwise regression.

Table 8 shows the results of the multiple regressions, which were as follows:

- For the overall Aggressive Factor of communication styles, social consciousness and confidence together accounted for 6.2% of the variance.

- For yelling, social consciousness and confidence accounted for 6.3% of the variance.
- For apathetic, social consciousness and confidence accounted for 4.5% of the variance.
- For disagreeing, self worth and confidence accounted for 7.2% of the variance.
- For know-it-all, social consciousness and confidence accounted for 9% of the variance.
- For agreeing, interest and confidence accounted for 9.1% of the variance.

**Table 8**  
**Regression Results**

Problem Communication Behavior	r <sup>2</sup>			R <sup>2</sup>	F	P<
	Self-Esteem					
	Interest	Self-Worth Consciousness	Social Confidence			
Factor I: Aggressive		.024	.038	.062	5.22	.002
Complaining	.029			.029	4.82	.03
Yelling		.024	.039	.063	5.37	.006
Apathetic		.023	.022	.045	3.73	.026
Gossiping						
Sarcastic						
Disagreeing		.025	.048	.072	6.10	.003
Know-it-All	.033	.022	.035	.090	5.15	.002
Factor II: Passive	.028			.028	4.60	.03
Agreeing	.049		.042	.091	7.94	.005
Unresponsive						
Indecisive						

## Discussion and Conclusions

### Overall Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the constructs driving the frequent use of problem communication styles by people defined by Bramson (1981) and others as

difficult. As predicted, work interest and self-esteem appear to explain some of why people use certain communication styles. However, significant relationships were found for only some, but not all, of the communication styles. For example, the construct that appears to be driving the superagreeable and complaining communication styles is work interest. This supports the research detailed earlier in this study which states that people who show higher interest in a variety of work areas are more likely to seek out more work. On the other hand, those with lower work interest and who feel they are not being properly rewarded, may resort to complaining to communicate their feelings.

Self-esteem is most significantly related to the disagreeing and know-it-all types of communication styles. What was unexpected was that the positive relationship is contrary to the literature which argues that the relationships should be negative. Yet, the positive relationship between self-esteem and the know-it-all and disagreeing communication styles makes sense when one considers that these styles correlate with the *confidence* dimension of self-esteem. People with more confidence in their work abilities and expertise would tend to disagree more with others and show more signs of knowing-it-all.

A second result of this study as evidenced by the factor analysis of the supervisors' ratings on problematic communication styles was that supervisors appeared to be rating employees on two distinct types of communication styles (aggressive and passive). Bramson's (1981) styles fall under one or the other of these two types. This is important because Bramson's original conceptualization of these 10 styles were as "types" and does not permit the overlapping of some of the styles. In other words, this study shows that individuals might use more than one style of communicating (e.g., complaining and yelling) which can be either aggressive or passive. The manner in which Bramson discusses these styles seems to imply that a difficult employee uses either one style or another, but not a combination of them.

The results also support the concept that self-esteem is multidimensional, with three conceptually distinct components. This is illustrated in this study by the differential patterns of correlations between each component showing only moderate relationships. This is important because it has implications for future research, as well as organizational training. In the past, studies have been concerned with viewing self-esteem as a unitary component, because it is generally believed that measures are more reliable when testing for only one dimension. However, it is unwise to view self-esteem as a unitary construct, because an overall measure of self-esteem results in loss of information. The intervention strategies, either from a communication, organizational, or psychological perspective, will be different depending in which area of self-esteem a person is low. For example, a person who does not like him/herself and who feels worthless (the *self-worth* dimension) may have very different intervention needs than one whose confidence merely needs to be boosted.

The most interesting result of this study was that none of the styles significantly correlated with the *self-worth* dimension of self-esteem. This is surprising considering that most of the literature attributes problem behaviors such as negative communication styles, lying, and bullying to this area. The question then becomes why didn't self-worth correlate? This is explored further in the next section.

## Explanation of Findings

The results of the first hypothesis differs from previous works on self-esteem in that it explored the relationship between each dimension of overall self-esteem and individual problem communication styles. The assumption was that a person could be high in one area (e.g., self-worth) and low in another. Bramson (1981) and others attribute problem communication styles to people who do not like themselves or feel that they do not measure up to others. The results of this study did not support that claim. The relationships which were found between disagreeing, knowing-it-all, and agreeing were between an individual's self confidence and the communication style. Three reasons explain this finding.

**Self-Esteem Test:** First, it might be argued that the instrument used to measure self-esteem (the Radford Inventory) may not have been a good measure of self-esteem, or more specifically, self-worth. However, since the test has good reliability and construct validity, it is unlikely the instrument is to blame. A second reason could be that participants did not accurately rate themselves or did not take the test seriously. One problem with most self-report tests, of which the Radford Inventory is one, is that people don't often accurately report how they feel. However, there was no evidence that participants did not complete the test accurately or did not take it seriously.

**Supervisor's Ratings:** The rating form may not have tapped the communication styles under study. The statements may have needed to be more specific. It would have been desirable to have more questions, but this would not have been feasible. The purpose of fewer items is to reduce the amount of time it takes participants to complete the test.

Another question that arises with supervisors' rating is just how well the supervisors know their employees? It is probable that most people, when interacting with their supervisors, will act differently and put "their best face on." However, once they are away from their supervisors and with co-workers and peers, they may be less controlled in their communication styles. Originally, for this study, the thought was to get co-workers and peers to rate each other. However, agency representatives would not give permission for the study to be conducted in this manner.

Because there was not a great amount of variability in the scores supervisors gave each employee, it could be speculated that supervisors were "lenient" in their ratings of how often they thought an employee used a particular communication style. In two of the agencies, the representatives with whom the researcher met verbally stated that they thought they had a lot of "whiners" in their departments. However, the supervisor ratings did not reflect this. This could have been because supervisors feared giving any employee higher than a 3 rating because it would appear that the supervisor was not dealing with problem employees. In other words, that fact that there was an individual with a 3 or higher on a problem area could reflect negatively on the supervisor. And although no one but the researcher saw those scores, the intimidation may still have been there. A second reason may simply be that supervisors don't see those communication styles as problems and, therefore, refused to accurately report how often their employees use that style of communication.

**Theory:** Finally, another reason that self-worth did not appear to predict might be that the theory is wrong. Contrary to what Bramson (1981) and others say, these difficult communication styles may have nothing to do with self-worth. Perhaps these styles have more to do with an individual's self-confidence than how worthy he or she feels. If this is the case, it leads to some areas that need to be explored in future research.

## **Conclusion and Future Research**

There are three primary purposes behind understanding what construct drives particular problem behaviors and communications styles. One is to determine how to deal with problem employees already on the job. The second is, to know what, if any, training might help employees change their problem styles. Yet, a third reason, as was suggested earlier in this study, is to develop tests that would screen out applicants who show the potential for using problem communication styles.

Prior to this study, an extensive body of literature existed which posited a negative relationship between problem behaviors and low self-esteem. This research did not provide evidence of this claim or that studies attempted to correlate communication styles with any other dimension other than the self-worth dimension. The fact that this study shows different relationships with different dimensions of self-esteem indicates that there needs to be more research on the individual areas, specifically confidence. Future studies should concentrate on tapping the confidence dimension to better measure it to see if a stronger relationship exists between it and certain problem communication styles. No studies exist that provide the information needed for planning appropriate interventions.

Another area for future research is statistically determining if these communication styles are actually perceived as problematic. Bramson (1981) determined that they were problems based on his hundreds of interviews with employees. This study focused only on whether there was a relationship between how often someone uses a certain communication style and their self-esteem or work interest. In future studies the supervisors' ratings on how often employees use a particular communication style should be correlated with such measurements as employee's performance scores. Based on what Bramson says, it would be expected that people rated "frequent" in their use of such communication styles as yelling will have lower performance evaluation scores.

And finally, because work interest and self-esteem explain only a small, yet significant, portion of variability, future research needs to look at other constructs driving such communication styles. Such constructs as personality, learned behavior, and/or communication skills need to be examined in future studies. It is from understanding these constructs that organizations can determine whether to focus their attention on changing the difficult employee or seeking other alternatives to deal with the employee.

This study is important in that it begins to lay an empirical foundation on which to understand people with problem communication styles and the impact those styles have in an organizational setting. With this foundation, further research can then provide a better definition of difficult people, and, consequently, strategies for the most appropriate way to deal with them.

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2. Questions or comments regarding this article should be addressed to: Bobbie Raynes, 2213 Lee Hwy, Pulaski, VA 24301. (540) 994-0845, [PRABobbie@hotmail.com](mailto:PRABobbie@hotmail.com)