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# COMMUNICATION OF TRAINERS AS ONE OF THE MEANS FOR CUSTOMER RETENTION IN FITNESS CLUBS

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**Abstract:** *Acquiring the adequate communication style is a vital element in trainers' profession. This research aims to reveal the effects generated via the communicative style by trainers of fitness club customers. It also intends to explore whether communication style has any relation to the regularity of class attendance as well as to the length of training periods which is conceptualised in this paper as trainers' economic efficiency. Data collection was carried out by structured interviews in a country-side large sport centre. Trainers with at least three training sessions per week (N=20) and their groups (N=160) were interviewed using Rudas (1994) communication style survey and additional self-developed interview protocols. The results revealed that the examined trainers were distributed in all four communications styles, but showing dominance in aggressive and passive styles. The classes of trainers with aggressive and assertive communication style were those that showed the highest and maintained attendance rates. It seems, that classes held by trainers who communicate in a deliberate way and convey positive messages are attended more and in a sustained way. Accordingly, their precisely set targets and explanation of training sessions content correlated with repeated attendance and customer retention. It seems that groups with extended scope of communication are characterised by stronger group cohesion where social relationships could develop easier, which have relations to perseverance and commitment. Therefore development of trainers' communication skills may be considered as an effective tool for fitness clubs for customer retention.*

**Keywords:** *quality of Nigeria, Economic reform, Agricultural development, food security (JEL code: Z20)*

## INTRODUCTION

The significance of both the communication style and communication skills is indisputable in business life. Previous research carried out in this field indicate that businessmen who either consciously develop their communication style and/or intentionally chose their communication style were more efficient in their work in comparison with others who do not develop their skills (Conrad - Newberry, 2011). Communication skills are also determining factors from the organisational performance perspective (Duke, 2011; Bowers – Seashore, 1996) In order to succeed, one of the most vital skill for a manager or leader is the communication skill (Markaki et al, 2013). If a manager or leader discovers how to communicate with subordinates and surroundings properly, the performance together with the achieved results will consequently be better (Raducan – Raducan, 2014).

Smith (1985) based on fundamental behavioural schemes categorized communication styles into four types, as follows: passive, aggressive, assertive and manipulative. The characteristic features of these communication styles could be

defined in relation to the individual's attitude towards himself or herself and his or her surroundings. In the background of passive communication both the acceptance of surroundings and refusal of the self can be found. Individuals who behave and exhibit passive communication are characterized by low self-esteem, distress, negative feelings toward their own selves, and the lack of motivation. Individuals with aggressive communication style accept themselves, but are unable to accept their surroundings. The lack of self-confidence is also a characteristic feature of this communication style; however the subject of negative feelings and anger is not reflected back on the individuals self, but strongly demands to keep control. The assertive communicators are able to accept both themselves and their surroundings, they have healthy self-esteem and their communication is open and direct. In the background of the manipulative style stand a non-acceptance for surrounding, others and the self. It is characterised by continuous distrust, disingenuousness and lack of motivation (Smith, 1985). Communication styles involve certain functions of communication process and also reflect on particular features of sending and receiving messages as well as the

individual communication skills and certain aspects of feedback. Besides the personality, communication is also influenced by several other factors, for instance the level of education, literacy level and furthermore the relation between the subjects participating in the interpersonal communication (Buda, 1994). One of the most popular means of assessing communication style is the so-called Rudas-test (1990).

The communication skills also have significant roles in sport, in which human interaction has a critical role from many aspects, but gaining special attention in the athlete-coach relation. The professionalization of the coach's occupation is dating back to the 1930s when it became distinguished from the active athlete and started its specialisation in competencies and professional preparation of knowledge (Bodnár – Perényi, 2012). Numerous experts elaborated on the topic since then how competitive athletes react upon their trainers' instructions from several angles including for example the content of messages being sent, the means of message transmission (Lénárt, 2002; Sullivan – Feltz, 2006; Khalaj et al, 2011). As in this profession, coaches send and receive many messages, they have to be effective communicators to clarify the expectations, to encourage and give feedback to their athletes (Burton – Raedeke, 2008). Therefore, acquiring the adequate communication style is an essential element of the professional coach's job. A special unequal power relation is characterising the communication space between the coaches and their athletes both in the field of team sports and individual sports. Due to this kind of relation the decisions made by trainers are enough to have an impact on the motivational environment (Ames, 1992). According to Theeboom et al. (1995), the role of the training environment also emphasized in developing and maintaining the athletes' performance and motivation in competition sports. Cote (2002) highlighted the role of fellow trainers in establishing motivation. Toropainen and Rinne (1998) during their investigations concluded that physical activity interventions based on group dynamics foster the development of group cohesion, the reduction of dropouts and the enhancement of participation. Most of these studies, however, remain within the performance oriented dimensions of competitive sports.

Sport is fundamental also in a nation's life from several perspectives and has particular significance in the fields of general public health, potential savings of the national economy, and sport-related expenditures of citizens (Perényi, 2014 ; Ács, et al., 2014; Paár, 2014; Földesiné et al., 2008; András, 2002). Sport, at the same time, has grown into an industry with increasing economic potential and significance, therefore, it is, equally significant to emphasise the expansion of recreational sports and their advance in the business sector (Sárközy, 2002). The communication style of trainers is not an area satisfactorily investigated in the field of recreational sport, despite the fact that its various fields of activity can be characterized by permanent trainer-trainee relations. This is particularly valid for the fitness industry, where, apart from the personal trainers, trainers holding group classes also have personal relations with the members. As stated by Bauer (2009) the trainers should make efforts at the level

of recreational sports, competitive sports and elite sports to develop the motivational atmosphere as it contributes to the successful implementation of the results and objectives. However recreational sport, to a certain extent, bears different system of relations in comparison with competitive sport. In the fitness sector the product of business exchange is the sport service provided by the trainer and paid by the sport participant. Recreational sport assumes voluntary participation, swaps as well as dependence-free relation between trainer and customer. This kind of system relation is typical for the service industry, where personal value, due to both the intangibility of the product to be exchanged and its volatility together with the individually added one, is high. Therefore, unlike in performance sports the leader-follower relation is not hierarchical and clear among trainers and customers in the fitness sector. Nevertheless, the trainer considered to be a leader in the process of transmission of values and have impact on customers in recreational sport. The statement of Makszin (2002) in connection to value-transfer-environment aspect of sport can also be applied to a exercise group in fitness clubs, specifically, if trainers are able to provide precise target setting and to communicate in an adequate way then consequently they will foster the development of long-term habits. In the area of recreational sport, the trainer's behaviour shows a strong correlation with the dropout of the customers (Chatzisarantis et al., 2003). The trainers should make efforts at the level of recreational sports, competitive sports and elite sports to develop the motivational atmosphere as it contributes to the successful implementation of the results and objectives (Bauer, 2009).

This present study is designed to target this less studied sector of sport, specifically recreational sporting trainers<sup>1</sup> working in the fitness industry and their communication style together with customers' attendance habits in their classes. The question arises whether the communication style of trainers shows relations with the following factors: the customers' loyalty towards the trainer, the group cohesion developed in the group during the training sessions and the trainer's professional qualification. Specifically the communication style of trainers has relations to the training session attendance namely the economic efficiency of trainers.

## OBJECTIVES

This research aims to reveal the effects generated by communication style of trainers in recreational sport specifically in fitness sector. Our objective is to analyse the similarities and differences of the training sessions, and the groups of trainers applying different communication styles. It also intends to explore the communication style's influence on developing group cohesion, class attendance and length of training periods which is conceptualised as the

<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian linguistic practice makes no differentiation between the concepts of trainer and coach in the field of competitive sport and recreational sport (the Hungarian term 'edző' is used in both areas). However, the English linguistic practice does make differentiation: coach is used in competitive sports, while trainer or instructor is used in recreational sports. This study is using the term 'trainer' in the measured dimensions.

trainers' economic efficiency in this paper. We assume that the attendance of training sessions, the perseverance and commitment of customers vary in relation to the chosen and used communication style of trainers.

As an element of a complex research concept carried out in the topic of coaches' and trainers' communication style and business performance of fitness clubs, this study is intended to present preliminary analyses of pilot data collection. This article focuses on presenting the results collected during evaluating the trainers and participants and introduce the design and the elements of the broader research concept.

## METHODS

The data collection for the investigation was conducted by standardized questionnaires and structured personal interviews in a country-side large sport centre. The questionnaires were filled by 20 trainers and 160 customers. The trainers and their groups having at least three training sessions per week were taken as samples of this analysis. The evaluation of trainers' communication style and their groups was measured by structured interviews. The sampled trainers were distributed in groups based on the communication model of Rudas (1990). The trainers were also measured by in-depth interviews related to their work. Furthermore, we asked for the subjective perception of their professional competences. We applied Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital<sup>2</sup> as a methodology for analysing the competences of trainers. The trainers' professional competences and their level of cultural capital were studied by surveys and interviews. The trainers' professional qualifications, their broad knowledge of skills related to sport, their acquisition and awareness of the most important competences and the efforts made to improve these elements as well as utilizing and applying the materials and electronic sources connected to the professional trainers' job was registered into one variant. Apart from qualification, trainers were grouped into categories (1/very low/ - 4/high/) founded on both the activity and willingness for further training and self-development as well as on the basis of possessing and employing professional materials (such as books, journals, DVDs, electronic sources). The fitness centres provided statistics were compiled on the basis of maximum attendance of the training sessions recording a-year-long-period. The attendance of the training sessions was represented by percentage in relation to the maximum. A sequence was established based on statistics by trainers' attendance assuming that trainers with the highest attendance rate are the most business effective. It was assumed that the efficiency of the trainer is determined by his communication style and it also correlates with their customers' motivation. The variables measured with self-designed interview protocol and their categories are summarised in Table 1.

This questionnaire also surveyed customers training habits indicating how long and how often customers participated in

sports and in what extent they were dedicated to their trainers and what their relations with the other customers were. The commitment was measured by the frequency of training sessions and the length and regularity of the training period.

The study serves as a pilot study in the development of research methodology for a large scale examination in the fitness human resources environment.

Table 1.: Model

dimensions	variables	categories
trainers	Communication style (Rudas scale)	<i>aggressive, assertive, passive, manipulative</i>
	Cultural capital (Likert scale 1-4)	<i>types of education, degree, self-improvement, professional materials (books, magazines, DVDs) possession, use, willingness of training, organisation membership, certificates</i>
	Perseverance	<i>length of training period, frequency of training sessions</i>
fitness clubs	Attendance statistics	<i>average annual hours of attendance</i> <i>(&lt;40%: low;40-60%: satisfactory;60-80%: medium high;80-100%:high)</i>

Data analysis was completed by the use of SPSS version 18 statistical program using parametric tests.

In this present study sociodemetric variables\* were not analysed due to the restrictions in length of this journal.

## RESULTS

### Coaches communication style

The results related to communication style assessment using Rudas-scale (1990) resulted in a distribution that represented coaches in all the predesigned communication style categories. Specifically in the aggressive style 32%, in the passive style 32% in the assertive style 20%, and in the manipulative style 16% of coaches were represented.

### Communication style and customer attendance

This distribution did not support the original hypothesis as a dominance of assertively communicating coaches were expected. It seems that a diversity of customers appear in a fitness club calls for the need of coaches representing all communication styles. The results show that the aggressive and passive communication style is more frequent among the examined coaches. For the question, whether the most effective communication style reaching and maintaining the maximum attendance will be the assertive style is reported in Figure 1.

Based on the annual data of customer attendance provided by the training centre, 32% of the trainers performs an 60-

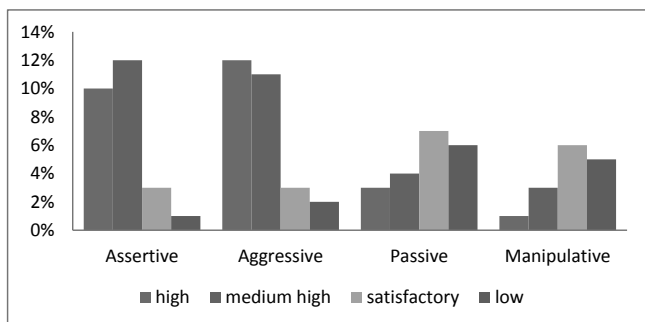
<sup>2</sup> According to Bourdieu (1984), willingness for professional qualification, further trainings and self-development is called cultural capital. Three types of capital can be distinguished: embodied (inherited), objectified and institutionalised.



80% (medium high) yearly average attendance. While 24% of them regularly maintain a customer attendance above 80% (high) and 33% between 40 and 60% (satisfactory). Based on the calculation of the fitness club from 40% of attendance, a group class economically breaks even, thus 56% of trainers considered 'very effective' from economic point of view and only 11% of the trainers have low attendance classes (below 40%). Consequently the majority of trainers (65%) fall into the average attendance (40-80%) group class category.

Analysing the relation between communication style and the rates of attendance we found that the assertive and aggressive communication styles are coupled with a larger customer attendance compared to passive and manipulative styles. 88% of the training sessions held by trainers using an aggressive style produced high and medium high (over 60%) customer attendance. A similar ratio (82%) can be detected regarding trainers with aggressive communication style. Incontrarily only 15% of the classes of trainers characterized by passive and manipulative communication styles provided the fitness club with economically profitable or breakeven customer attendance (over 40%). Henceforth, training sessions held by trainers with aggressive or assertive communication styles are characterised by considerably higher customer attendance. Therefore, trainers' communication style is probably one of the elements of a complex action mechanism that shapes both willingness and retention for attendance.

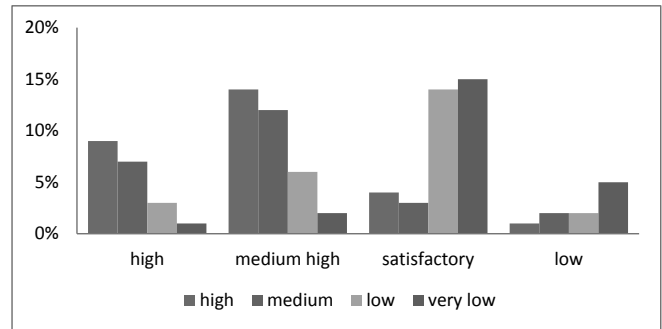
Figure 1.: Average yearly attendance of group classes by communication style of trainers



**Competencies of trainers and customer attendance**

We analysed the role of professional qualification and competencies (cultural capital) in relation to class attendance. Besides the communication style of trainers, their professional qualification and competencies were the additional variables that showed relation with customer attendance. The more health-, sport- and fitness related qualifications a trainer had, the higher attendance rate can be recorded in their classes. The number of participants in the training sessions held by trainers with high level of cultural capital was most medium high or high (above 60%), whereas 32% of them regularly had outstanding (more than 80%) customer attendance. Interestingly those trainers performing satisfactory (40-60%) class attendance reported low or very low level of professional qualifications and competencies.

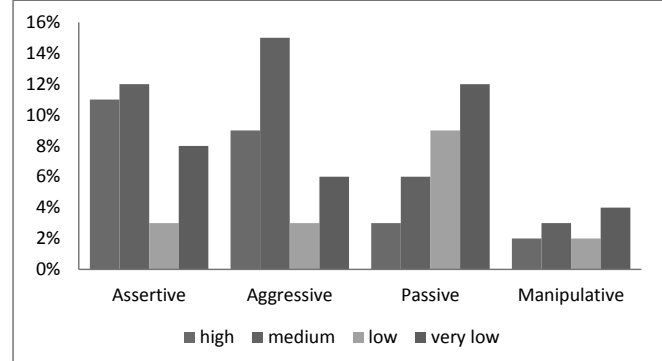
Figure 2.: Competencies of trainers in relation to yearly average group class attendance



**Trainers and customers**

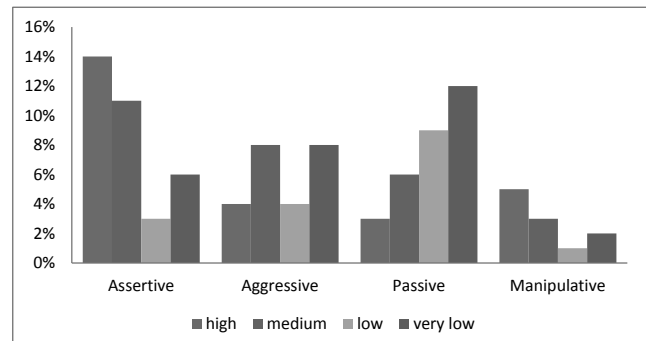
The trainers' communication style is a determining factor regarding the loyalty of class participants to their trainers. From this perspective the result show that customers training with assertive and aggressive communicators are the most committed, they are followed by those training with passive and manipulative communicators (Figure 3). It seems that the loyalty of participants from passively communicating trainers gives high rates in both very low and low loyalty. Interestingly in the groups of trainers with manipulative style were not major differences in loyalty of training participants. The causes of high distribution of customers with very low or low loyalty in groups of trainers with assertive and aggressive communication style needs further analysis.

Figure 3.: Level of customer loyalty by communication style of trainers



Trainers with assertive communication style facilitate group cohesion the most, while the weakest cohesion could be discovered in the passive group (Figure 4).

Figure 4.: Level of group cohesion by communication style of trainers



Furthermore, studying the connection between cultural capital, as independent factor and customer loyalty to trainers, the group cohesion developed during the training sessions and training session attendance. It was found that the level of cultural capital only shows relations with customer attendance (Figure 2). Other studied variants (group cohesion, loyalty to the trainer) in this sample did not suggest relations further analyse with larger sample shall be conducted in the future.

## CONCLUSION

In the area of recreational sport the trainers' communication style strongly influences customers' perseverance in trainings, frequency of their training sessions and the customers' loyalty to their trainers. The results show that the applied communication style affects the customer's motivation, commitment, the group cohesion and the popularity of the training sessions. In other words, it has an impact on the trainers' economic efficiency. The most important elements of motivation in communicating with sportsmen can be identified with the help of results in the research.

The customer attendance at trainers who communicate in an assertive or aggressive style is higher, therefore it means a larger and continuous income for the sport facility where they are employed. Precise target fixation and professional justification when setting up training sessions correlate with repeated attendance of the training sessions and customer retention. It is important for the trainers to acquire the techniques of facilitating effective communication as much as possible.

Trainers communicating in an effective way encourage the maintenance of the customers' motivation not just in a direct way, but also in an indirect way via developing group cohesion. Groups with emphasized communication are characterised by stronger group cohesion and social relationships could develop faster there. These have an effect on the perseverance and commitment. As a result of these observations we considered it to be necessary to examine the strength and effects of the factors impacting the development of the group cohesion with regard to the commitment and motivation of the recreational sportsmen.

Influencing elements such as education stated by Buda (1994) are applicable in recreational sport. Therefore, the trainers' professional level of education, their broad knowledge of skills related to sport, the acquisition and awareness of the most important competences all have key roles. It seems making efforts to improve the already acquired qualifications and competences during further trainings, participating in professional workshops as well as utilizing and applying the materials and electronic sources connected to the professional coach's job are fundamental.

Communication style, skills and professional qualification of those who work in the fitness industry correlate with the customers' motivation and the statistics of customer attendance, thus it also correlates with the economic success and sustainability of the clubs. Subsequently, trainings and further trainings are equally important elements of the

professional competences for those employed in fitness industry. As part of the training curriculum, besides skills for sport experts, communication skills are also inevitable.

Among the limitations of the study the size of the trainers sample shall be mentioned. The pilot study can only create a base for further develop of the research mode. Interconnections are also hard to be estimated and understood in connection to the two examined groups, further development on statistical methodologies will be necessary in future approaches.

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