

Improving Workplace Communication through Educational Messages and Manager Perspective-Taking

Factories with innovative human resource management systems provide employees with mechanisms for voicing complaints and suggestions and promote receptivity by managers to the information workers provide. Two randomized controlled trials were conducted in apparel factories in Bangladesh to measure the impact of [Laborlink](#)¹ mobile-phone surveys and educational messages intended to enhance worker-manager communication and improve the use of worker views by factory managers. These experiments, both supported by USAID DIV, analyzed the effect of surveying workers on workplace perceptions and sending messages to workers about grievance procedures and the effect of sharing worker feedback with managers. Use of the grievance procedure by workers was promoted by making workplace communications salient for workers, providing information about grievance procedures and informing workers that their views are taken seriously by managers. Processing of worker reports was promoted by having managers engage in a perspective-taking exercise before receiving data on worker-reported experiences.

Worker Experiment: How Effective Are Mobile Surveys & Educational Messages?

What leads factory workers to speak up when they have a complaint or suggestion? Effective grievance procedures require that workers be aware of their existence, know how to access the grievance system, believe that the system is fair and effective and be comfortable using it.²

Apparel workers in six factories in Bangladesh were randomly assigned to complete a Laborlink mobile survey on workplace communications (designed to increase knowledge of the grievance system and its salience) or a survey on occupational safety (see full paper at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3180123). Following the baseline survey, half of the participants in each survey condition were randomly selected to receive four educational messages, also delivered via mobile phone. The messages covered 1) the presence of a worker committee in the factory, 2) the ability to make a complaint, 3) organizational norms concerning verbal abuse and 4) a statement by HR that grievances are taken seriously and acted upon. In a follow-up, participants were surveyed on their knowledge, perception and use of grievance procedures. Participants were also asked whether they had recently received educational messages. All data were collected and educational messages were transmitted via cell phones using the Laborlink platform.³

Analysis of treatment effects was limited to participants who have a gender match between the baseline and the endline, who reported the same or similar amounts of work

¹ Laborlink delivers light-touch scalable interventions of tech-supported worker engagement, based on the WEST Principles, a set of best practices for engaging workers.

² For more on effective grievance procedure criteria, see UN Guiding Principles on Business & Human Rights http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf, p. 33

³ Laborlink was developed in 2010 by Good World Solutions and acquired by ELEVATE in 2017. For more information, visit <http://www.elevatelimited.com/services/consulting/worker-engagement>

experience at each time point, and who had a match between assignment to educational messages and self-report of hearing messages.

Key findings are as follows:

1. Both the educational messages and the communications survey independently increased the probability of being aware of the existence of the worker committee and comfort making a complaint.
2. Educational messages significantly increased the belief that grievance procedures are fair; those who received the messages were 6% more likely to report that grievance procedures are fair. The effect was independent of salience, i.e. the survey, and was not sensitive to which messages a participant heard.
3. Hearing educational messages was positively correlated with ever having made a complaint. However, the question does not distinguish between making a complaint before or after hearing the educational message. Thus, the direction of causality was not determined.

Although focused on workplace communications, these findings indicate the possibility that a light-touch intervention of mobile phone surveys and educational messages, also delivered via mobile, can be effective at raising worker awareness and/or willingness to act on other working conditions issues.

Manager Experiment: Are Factory Managers Willing to Use Data to Drive Change?

Why do managers tolerate workplace verbal abuse despite its damaging effects? Does worker dehumanization, i.e. managers seeing workers as lacking human qualities, affect the processing of information about verbal abuse, and if so can it be mitigated?

Existing research demonstrates that when subordinates are dehumanized, their superiors are less likely to process information concerning the ineffectiveness of abusive motivational techniques. Managers of dehumanized subordinates are more likely to employ harsh motivational techniques and less likely to process information related to the techniques' ineffectiveness than managers who perceive subordinates as having human qualities. However, rehumanization of workers in the minds of managers can be accomplished by undertaking a simple perspective-taking exercise.

A randomized controlled trial analyzing the impact of a perspective-taking exercise on the processing of information concerning verbal abuse was conducted with factory managers in 16 Bangladesh apparel factories (see full paper at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3165040). Managers' most frequent perception of the prevalence of verbal abuse was not consistent with the prevalence reported by workers, indicating managers' resistance to acknowledging verbal abuse. The perspective-taking exercise, in which managers imagined their workers' preferences and daily routines (such as what they had for breakfast), improved information processing, but the response was heterogeneous. Treated managers who spent longer on the perspective-taking survey were more likely to report being interested in the information (see Figure 1). Managers who spent more than 6.5 minutes on the

perspective-taking exercise were more likely to report being interested in the information if they were in the treatment condition rather than the control condition.

Overall, treated managers were more likely to report being happy with the results, but those who spent longer on the survey were *less* likely to feel happy (see Figure 2). Similarly, treated managers were overall less likely to report an intention to make changes based on the results, unless they spent longer on the survey. The more time managers invested in the perspective-taking exercise, the *more* likely they were to want to make changes (see Figure 3). For example, treated managers who spent 800 seconds on the exercise were 9% more likely to want to make changes than treated managers who spent only 100 seconds on the exercise. In contrast, untreated managers who spent 800 seconds on the exercise were 17% *less* likely to want to make changes than untreated managers who spent 100 seconds on the exercise.

Treated managers who think that verbal abuse is appropriate or were less engaged with the exercise were more surprised by the data and more likely to acknowledge the prevalence of verbal abuse (Figure 4), but less willing to make changes based on the information they received. These findings indicate that perspective-taking can influence managers' response to information about verbal abuse, but that the effect is variable.

There is some risk of creating defensiveness in managers when asking them to focus on workers' preferences. A defensive reaction could explain the tendency of some treated managers to report being happier about the information they saw, and less likely to make changes. However, managers who engaged with the treatment were more interested in the data and reported being more likely to make changes.

Overall, the research indicated that perspective-taking does have the potential to reduce verbal abuse in factories. It also raises the possibility that this approach could be used to increase factory manager interest and willingness to act on any number of issues related to working conditions.

Figure 1. How do you feel about these results? [Interested] Treatment effects by seconds to complete perspective-taking exercise.

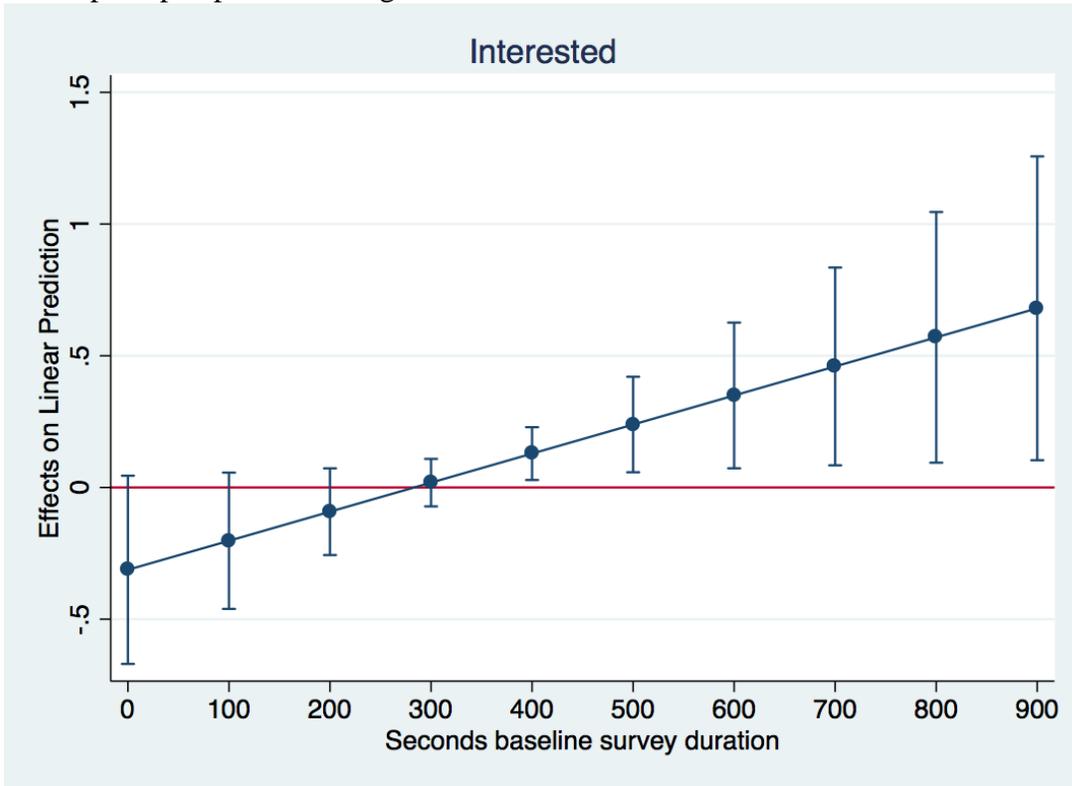


Figure 2. How do you feel about these results? [Happy] Treatment effects by seconds to complete perspective-taking exercise.

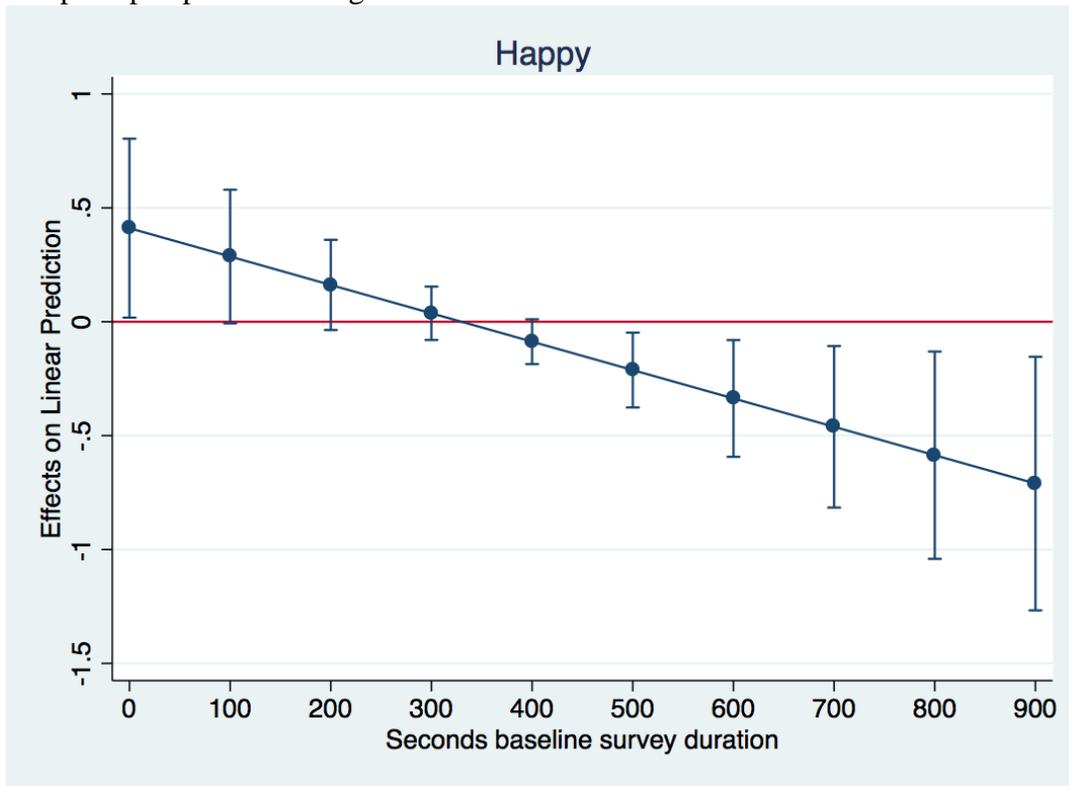


Figure 3. How likely are you to use these results to make changes? Treatment effects by seconds to complete perspective-taking exercise.

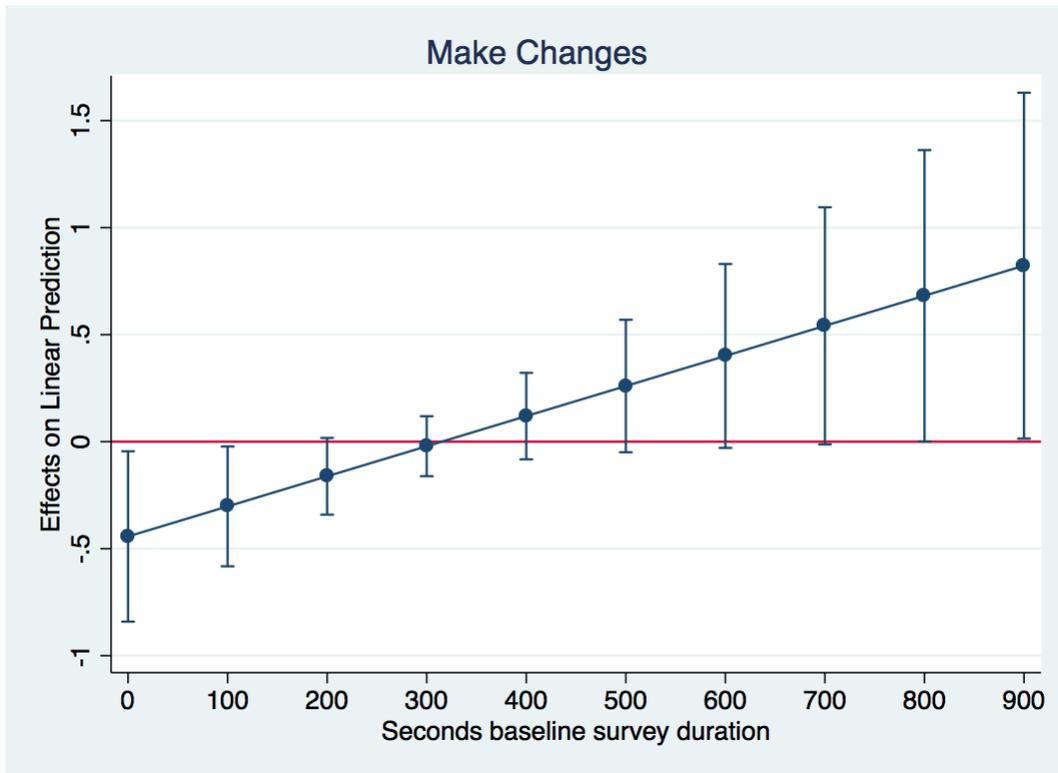


Figure 4. How common do you think it is to yell or use harsh language with workers in this factory? Treatment effects by belief that verbal abuse is appropriate.

