Big Five Personality Traits and Assertiveness do not Affect Mastery of Communication Skills

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Big Five Personality Traits and Assertiveness do not Affect Mastery of Communication Skills

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Abstract

Background: Mastering communication skills is often emphasized as an important aspect of job or academic performance. However, research into the relationships between personality factors and these skills is scarce.

Purpose: This study investigated whether the big-five personality factors and assertiveness predict mastery of communication skills before and after following communication skills training.

Method: The skills level of 143 psychology students was assessed after two communication skills courses, namely a basic and an advanced communication skills training. Personality factors were assessed with the Five Factor Personality Inventory and the Scale for Interpersonal Behavior.

Results: Participants showed substantial progress in their mastery of the communication skills after both courses. Surprisingly, none of the personality factors predicted the level of mastery of these skills.

Discussion: This seems to imply that trainees can become professional communicators, regardless of their scores on these personality factors.

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Keywords: Communication skills; Personality; Assertiveness; Training; Assessment

1. Introduction

One of the aims of personality research is to improve procedures for personnel selection, career or school counseling and educational methods. Therefore, during the past decade many researchers have been interested in using personality measures to predict job and academic performance.\textsuperscript{1-8} Meta-analyses suggest that some personality factors, for instance agreeableness, conscientiousness and extraversion, are reasonably good predictors for job or academic performance.\textsuperscript{9-13} Although, mastering communication skills is often emphasized as an important aspect of job or academic performance,\textsuperscript{14-20} studies about the relationship between personality factors and the mastery of
communication skills are scarce. Therefore, this study aims to investigate possible relationships between the mastery of communication skills and the big-five factors extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability (vs. neuroticism)⁴ and autonomy, and assertiveness.

The results of the few studies into the relationship between personality factors and communication skills are mixed. For instance, one study found non-significant correlations between on the one hand the big-five factors extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and autonomy and on the other hand the adequate use of communication skills.²¹ Another study found no relationship between self-efficacy and the level of mastery of communication skills after a course in these skills.²² However, a negative correlation was found between an instrument that measures a person’s tendency to be closed-minded and rigid on the one hand and a self-report measure of basic communication skills on the other hand.³ Interrogation skills of police interviewers correlated positively with extraversion and conscientiousness and negatively with neuroticism.²³ Also self-report measures of assertiveness and communication skills were found to relate positively.²⁴

In this study we concentrate on the big-five factors extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and autonomy and on a measure of assertiveness. Persons scoring high on assertiveness are often characterized as experiencing little social anxiety and performing adequately and frequently in interpersonal behavior.²⁵-²⁷ Consequently, assertiveness is often associated with having adequate social skills.²⁷ Therefore, and because of the positive relationship found between assertiveness and self-reported experience in communication skills,²⁴ this study examines whether assertiveness has a positive relationship with the mastery of communication skills.

The subjects for investigating the relationships between the above-mentioned personality factors and the mastery of communication skills were psychology students who had followed a training program in communication skills. Many psychology curricula give attention to training communication skills, because mastering oral communication skills is one of the requirements that lead to the diploma of a registered European psychologist.²⁸ An effective training program for acquiring communication skills is the microcounseling method.²⁹-³² Several studies³³-³⁷ and meta-analyses³⁸-⁴¹ reported medium to large overall effect sizes for this training method.

We assessed the mastery level of communication skills of first and second year undergraduates in a Dutch psychology curriculum who followed a basic and advanced training program in these skills, respectively. The trainees’ mastery of these skills was assessed with a behavioral measure, namely a video test.

The communication skills that are dealt with in these training programs are also known as microskills.²⁹-³²,⁴² In these training programs the complex skill of professionally interviewing a client is disentangled into small meaningful communication skills, e.g. concreteness or paraphrasing. Table 1 shows an overview of these microskills, and Appendix 1 gives a more detailed definition of these skills.

The communication skills, displayed in Table 1, fit within the helping model developed by Egan.⁴³-⁴⁴ This model consists of three stages: (1) problem clarification, (2) gaining new insights and (3) strategies for treatment. The first stage, problem clarification, aims at clarifying the clients’ problem. The second stage, gaining new insights, aims at helping clients gain new insights in their situation. Having discussed the problem(s) in the first and second stage, the client and helper formulate strategies to solve these problems in the third stage, in which strategies for treatment are developed. The seven basic communication skills are mainly used in the first stage and the five advanced communication skills in the second stage. In the third stage the helper uses the skills giving advice, techniques for behavioral change and dealing with resistance.⁴⁵

European psychology curricula offer a three-year bachelor program. Students follow general psychology courses in the first two years of this bachelor program, such as introductions in social psychology, personality psychology, developmental psychology, clinical psychology, work and organizational psychology, history of psychology and methodology and statistics. In the third year they follow a minor and after that they need to choose a specialized program, for instance clinical psychology or biological and cognitive psychology, and they need to write a bachelor thesis. After the third year they can continue with a specialized master program of one year, in which they follow advanced courses, do an internship and write a master thesis. These psychology curricula often provide a course in basic communication skills in the first or second bachelor year and a course in advanced communication skills in consecutive years. Accordingly, the psychology students who participated in the present study received a
basic communication skills training program in their first bachelor year and an advanced communication skills training program in their second bachelor year.

These training programs were developed according to the Cumulative Microtraining (CMT) method. The CMT method consists of five steps. First, trainees receive a theoretical instruction about one communication skill (e.g. asking questions or summarizing) and its function in a professional interview. Second, trainees observe video clips showing examples of inadequate and adequate performance of the skill (modeling). Third, trainees practice the skill separately. Fourth, the skill is exercised in a role-play with another trainee after which fellow-trainees and the trainer give feedback on the trainee's performance. Fifth and finally, trainees formulate learning points according to the feedback they received. In the next session trainees concentrate on these learning points and practice a new communication skill. In the CMT the training gradually increases in complexity. In each training session one or two new skills are trained; however, the main aim of this method is to integrate the communication skills that have been dealt with up to that moment in the training program. Both the basic and the advanced skills training program intend to increase the adequate use of the communication skills of the trainees.

Instructors of these training programs had a master degree in psychology, held a part-time position at the university and were mostly practicing as psychologist in their field of specialization. They received an extended instruction in the CMT-method before executing the training programs.

The Communication Skills Progress Test (CSPT) was developed to investigate whether the aims of the communication skills training programs are realized. The psychometric qualities of the CSPT were investigated by using a between subject, a within subject and a control group design. The CSPT had high reliability and proved to discriminate well between groups of trainees that were supposed to differ in their mastery of the communication skills. Factor analysis on the items of the CSPT revealed that there was support for the division in basic and advanced communication skills. One factor consisted of items assessing the basic communication skills and was labeled the Basic Skill Factor (BSF). The other factor consisted of items assessing the advanced communication skills and was labeled the Advanced Skill Factor (ASF). As expected, trainees showed most progress on the BSF after the training in basic communication skills and improved most on the ASF after the training in advanced communication skills.

For the present study new data on the CSPT were gathered to investigate the relationship between on the one hand the big-five personality factors and assertiveness and on the other hand the mastery of the basic skills and the advanced skills.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 143 bachelor students of a psychology curriculum at a large Dutch university. Eighty-three percent were female and the average age was 19 years ($SD = 3.6$). Eighty percent of the students completed University Preparatory Education before starting their study in psychology, which is the highest level of secondary education in The Netherlands. The remaining 20% had a degree either in Higher Professional Education or in a university program other than psychology. Regression analyses showed no significant influences of gender, age and prior education on the CSPT-scores.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Five Factor Personality Inventory (FFPI)

The FFPI was used to assess the participants’ level on the broad big-five personality factors extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and autonomy. It consists of 100 items containing descriptions of various behaviors. The respondents need to indicate how accurate each item describes them (ranging from ’very inaccurate’ to ’very accurate’). The $\alpha$ reliabilities of these five factors as measured by the FFPI range from .81 (Autonomy) to .86 (Extraversion). Criterion validity coefficients were obtained by correlating self-ratings with other-ratings. These coefficients ranged from .54 (Autonomy) to .73 (Extraversion). Correlations with the NEO-PI, 49-50

| Table 1 Communication skills in the CSPT as defined in Lang and Van der Molen (2004). |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Basic skills | Advanced skills |
| Minimal encouraging | Advanced accurate empathy |
| Asking questions | Confrontation |
| Paraphrasing | Positive relabeling |
| Reflection of feeling | Examples of one's own |
| Concreteness | Directness |
| Summarizing | Situation clarification |

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another measure for the assessment of the big-five personality factors, provided high concurrent validity coefficients. The absolute values of these coefficients ranged from .60 (Autonomy-Openness) to .83 (Emotional Stability-Neuroticism).

2.2.2. Scale for Interpersonal Behavior (SIB)

The SIB was used as a measure for assertiveness. The SIB is a widely used, multidimensional self-report measure of assertiveness and assesses two aspects of participants' interpersonal behavior, namely anxiety in social situations and frequency of assertive behavior. The SIB consists of 50 statements, e.g. 'Saying you are sorry when you have made a mistake'. Subjects evaluate each statement on two separate five-point Likert-type scales: one for the amount of anxiety subjects experience when performing social behavior in different social situations (ranging from 1 'not at all' to 5 'extremely') and the other for the frequency of engaging in this social behavior (ranging from 1 'never do' to 5 'always do'). By summing the scores on all 50 items, overall assertiveness scores for anxiety and frequency of performance are obtained. Persons scoring low on anxiety in social situations and high on frequency of assertive performance are considered to be non-assertive, whereas persons scoring high on anxiety and low on frequency are considered to be non-assertive. The α reliabilities for the scales from the SIB range from .81 to .95. Satisfactory concurrent validity coefficients were reported for the anxiety and frequency of performance scales of the SIB by correlating these two scales with the shyness scale of the Dutch version of the MMPI. The coefficients were .60 for the anxiety scale and −.44 for the frequency of performance scale.

2.2.3. Communication Skills Progress Test (CSPT)

For the assessment of the participants’ level of mastery of the communication skills the CSPT was used. Based on previous studies that investigated different methods for the assessment of communication skills, the CSPT was developed as a video test. It consists of forty-two short video clips. In every video clip an actor plays the role of a client telling something concerning his or her personal situation. After each video clip trainees write down literally what they would say to the client, after having received the instruction to use a certain communication skill (e.g. 'Give a summary in an appropriate manner').

The first 30 items intend to determine the level of mastery of the seven basic communication skills. The level of mastery level of the five advanced communication skills is assessed by the next 12 items. The rationale for the higher number of items for the assessment of the basic skills than for the assessment of the advanced skills is that there are more basic skills than advanced skills and that the assessment of an advanced skill takes more time than the assessment of a basic skill.

Three trained raters assessed the students' answers. They used an instruction guide developed for the assessment of the application by the students of every communication skill, based on the skill definitions. Expert counselors specified for every item what the requirements were for an adequate answer, a moderately adequate answer and an inadequate answer. For an adequate answer the students received two points, for a moderately adequate answer one point and for an inadequate answer zero points. Finally, scores were calculated for the two dimensions underlying the CSPT, namely the Basic Skill Factor (BSF) and the Advanced Skill Factor (ASF). These two factor scores range from 0 to 2.

Two parallel versions of the CSPT were developed in order to control for any testing effects. No significant differences in students’ scores were found between these two versions. Furthermore, the α coefficient for both versions was high (.91 and .92) and inter-rater-reliabilities ranged between .89 and .97.

2.3. Procedure

The students filled out the FFPI and the SIB in the first year of their bachelor psychology curriculum. They took the CSPT three times during the first two consecutive years of the curriculum. The CSPT was administered to the students for the first time when they just had started their study psychology as freshmen, roughly three weeks after the start of the academic year, to assess the basic level of their mastery of the skills (T0). Students took the CSPT for the second time six months later in their first year, just after they had followed the training program in basic communication skills (T1). This program consists of five sessions spread out over five weeks. The third time the CSPT was filled out by students after six months in their second year, when they just had finished the training program in advanced communication skills (T2). This program consists of four sessions spread over four weeks. During the first and the second year students took the CSPT as a formal examination after respectively the training program in basic communication skills and the training program in advanced
communication skills. Cut off scores to pass the examination were determined for both groups.

The order in which the versions of the CSPT were filled out by the freshmen was determined randomly. The first year students took the version of the CSPT they had not received when they were a freshman and the second year students received the version of the CSPT they did not take when they were a first year student.

3. Results

First, the students’ mastery level of the communication skills on T0, T1 and T2 was examined. The scores of the 143 students on the CSPT were investigated using a repeated measures analysis. Every student received three scores on the Basic Skill Factor: one score at T0, one at T1 and one at T2. Similarly, every student received three scores on the Advanced Skill Factor. The mean scores at T0 were .42 on the BSF and .15 on the ASF; at T1 1.23 on the BSF and .20 on the ASF and at T2 1.41 on the BSF and .97 on the ASF. Fig. 1 visualizes these results.

The within-subjects differences on both the Basic Skill Factor and the Advanced Skill Factor were significant across time, respectively $F(1)=1050.3$ ($p<.001$) and $F(1)=767.2$ ($p<.001$). As can be seen from Fig. 1, students improved most on the Basic Skill Factor between T0 and T1 ($t(142)=-35.9$; $p<.001$). Students followed the basic communication skills training program between these two measurements. The effect size ($d$) was calculated by taking the mean difference on the Basic Skill Factor between T1 and T0 and dividing it by the pooled standard deviation on this factor.56,57 This resulted in an effect size of 3.1, which is considered to be a large effect.56,57 Students received the training program in advanced communication skills between T1 and T2. In comparison with the progress on the Basic Skill Factor between T0 and T1, they showed less progress on this factor between T1 and T2, but this progress is still significant ($t(142)=-7.3; p<.001$). The effect size ($d$) is .6, which should be interpreted as a moderate effect.56,57

Fig. 1 also illustrates the increase of students’ scores on the Advanced Skill Factor. Between T0 and T1 students showed a small ($d=.3$) but significant progress on this factor ($t(142)=3.8; p<.001$). Students improve most on this factor between T1 and T2, ($t(142)=28.2; p<.001; d=2.4$), which is considered as a large effect.

Thus, trainees show most progress on the Basic Skill factor after the training program in basic communication skills and on the Advanced Skill Factor after the training program in advanced communication skills.

Second, the relationships between the big-five personality factors, assertiveness and the mastery of communication skills were analyzed. Correlations of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, autonomy and assertiveness with both the basic and the advanced communication skills levels on T0, T1 and T2 ranged from -.12 (conscientiousness-ASF at T1; $p=.15$) to .17 (autonomy-ASF at T0; $p=.6$), all being non-significant.

Finally, hierarchical regression analyses were performed to investigate whether the progress on both dimensions of the CSPT could be predicted from scores

![Fig. 1. Mean factor scores on the Basic Skill Factor (BSF) and the Advanced Skill Factor (ASF) per time of measurement (T0, T1 and T2); $N=143$.](image-url)
on the big-five personality factors and assertiveness. The scores on T1 and T2 were used as criterion scores. With the scores on T1 as criterion, first the scores on T0 were entered and in the next step the scores on the FFPI and the SIB were entered. With the scores on T2 as criterion, first the scores on T0, then the scores on T1 and finally the scores on the FFPI and the SIB were entered. The results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that scores on the Basic Skill Factor at T1 were only predicted by the BSF at T0 ($\beta=.1; \ p=.05; \ R^2=.02$). For the scores on the Basic Skill Factor at T2 no predictor was significant. When using the scores on the Advanced Skill Factor at T1 as criterion scores, only the scores on this factor at T0 significantly predicted these scores ($\beta=.19; \ p=.04; \ R^2=.03$). Only the ASF scores at T0 also only predicted the scores on this factor at T2 significantly ($\beta=.18; \ p=.03; \ R^2=.03$). The big-five personality factors were neither significant predictors of progress on the Basic Skill Factor nor of progress on the Advanced Skill Factor. Standardized regression weights for these predictors ranged from −.14 to .08 (all n.s.). Both indicators of assertive behavior, anxiety in social situations and frequency of engaging in social behavior, also failed to significantly predict progress on the BSF and ASF. Standardized regression weights for these predictors ranged from −.01 to .14 (all n.s.).

Summarizing, the criterion scores at T1 and T2 were only predicted by scores on the same factor at T0, with the exception of the scores on the Basic Skill Factor at T2, for which no significant predictors were found. However, the effects of the scores at T0 on the criterion scores were small.

4. Discussion

In this study the relationship between the big-five personality factors extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and autonomy and a measure of assertiveness on the one hand and the mastery level of communication skills on the other hand was investigated.

First, the change in mastery level of communication skills after following a microcounseling training program in these skills was analyzed. It was found that trainees improve their use of basic communication...
skills most after receiving the training program in these basic skills. Trainees show most progress in using advanced communication skills after following a training program in these advanced skills. These findings are consistent with effects reported by former research.\cite{21, 25-41, 44}

The main purpose of this study, however, was to investigate the relationship between the big-five personality factors and assertiveness and the above-described progress in mastering communication skills. Surprisingly, none of these variables were found to be a significant predictor of mastery of communication skills.

The finding that the big-five personality factors were not significantly related to the mastery level of the communication skills is consistent with the results of a former study,\cite{21} in which these big-five factors also were found to be non-significant predictors of the mastery level of these skills. One explanation for this finding is that acquiring communication skills is not influenced by personality. For instance, being an extravert or introvert seems not to be relevant for adequately applying communication skills.

An explanation for the finding that assertiveness is not significantly related to the mastery of communication skills is that being assertive does not necessarily lead to adequately applying communication skills. People scoring high on assertiveness are associated with performing adequately in social behavior.\cite{27} However, it might be that general adequate performance in social behavior is different from adequate performance in a professional interview. In the latter context adequately applying communication skills, such as asking open-ended questions or adequately paraphrasing what a client has said, is more important than in ordinary daily social situations. In an interview the psychologist has a formal professional relationship with the client, whereas the relationships in daily social situations are more informal.

Another explanation for not finding significant relationships between these variables and the mastery of communication skills could be restriction of range. It is possible that the sample of psychology students used in this study is a selective group with a homogeneous personality profile. However, we think this explanation is less likely because an additional analysis of the data revealed significant correlations between the measures for assertiveness and the big-five personality factors (anxiety in social situations correlated −.40, −.27 and −.36 with respectively extraversion, emotional stability and autonomy; frequency of assertive behavior correlated .32 with extraversion; these correlations were significant at the .01-level), indicating there is a sufficient amount of individual differences between the personality profiles of these subjects.

Overall, we consider the outcome of this study as favorable for training purposes, because, from an educational point of view, it may be considered as positive that the big-five personality factors and assertiveness are not related to successfully completing communication skills training programs. Trainees scoring high on the big-five personality factors or on assertiveness do not profit more from the training programs than trainees scoring low on these variables.

4.1. Implications and limitations

The results of this study, together with the findings of one previously mentioned study,\cite{37} show that well-structured programs for training these skills are effective. But the main implication of the results of this study is that the mastery level of these skills is not dependent on the big-five personality factors and assertiveness. This is useful knowledge for both skills training instructors and trainees. For instance, because self-reported non-assertiveness is associated with a self-reported low level of communication skills,\cite{24} this knowledge could be used by instructors to enhance trainees’ confidence about their opportunities to acquire and master these skills.

Limitations of this study are the restricted number of subjects and the absence of a control group. Moreover, the ultimate goal of both training programs is that trainees are able to integrate the separate skills in a real professional interview with a client or patient. The results on the CSPT do not give insight whether this goal is realized.

4.2. Future research

Future research should investigate whether both training programs realize their ultimate goal: integration of these skills into adequately performing a professional interview. Examining whether scores on the CSPT can predict actual performance in a professional interview would give insight in this matter.

Furthermore, it is recommended to investigate whether other trait measures could be better predictors for the mastery level of communication skills. For instance, the basic level of empathy of the trainees could be positively related to the level of mastery of communication skills after following a training program, whereas the personality trait rigidity could be
negatively related to the opportunity to acquire professional communication skills.

Disclosure

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None.

Other disclosure

None.

Appendix

Definitions of the communication skills assessed by the CSPT

The definitions of the basic and advanced communication skills as assessed by the CSPT are listed below. The definitions are derived from Lang and Van der Molen (2004).

Basic communication skills

Minimal encouraging

Minimal encouragements are brief verbal responses intended to encourage the client and show that he is being listened to. Examples of minimal encouragements are: 'hm, hm'; 'yes'; 'and then'; 'go on'; or the repetition of one or two words in an inquiring tone of voice. These interjections at first seem to be rather insignificant, but are in practice a great help in encouraging the client to go on talking.

Asking questions

The object of asking questions is to help the client put his own thoughts into words and to clarify his problems. A significant distinction can be made in open and closed questions. Open questions leave the client a considerable amount of freedom in the formulation of his answer. The client can talk from his own frame of reference and determine for himself the direction and content of the conversation.

With closed questions the answer is determined largely by the content of the question. Generally the person answering can simply give a confirmation or denial.

Paraphrasing of content

Paraphrasing of content means briefly reproducing in one's own words the gist of what the client has said. The main characteristic of the paraphrase is that it refers to the information content of the client's responses; it gives a 'translation' of the essence of what the client has said. The use of this skill has three purposes:

1. The client realizes that he is being listened to, and it can be refreshing and stimulating for him to hear his own story again but worded differently.
2. The helper finds out whether he has understood the client correctly.
3. The helper reproduces what the client has said more precisely, thereby giving the client a clearer picture of his problems.

Reflection of feeling

Reflection of feeling literally means the reproducing or mirroring of feeling. The helper stresses the more emotional aspects of the client's story. He demonstrates that he is trying to understand how the client feels during the conversation or has felt in the situation the client is describing.

Concreteness

Concreteness is a composite skill in the sense that the skills mentioned above, encouraging, open and closed questions, paraphrasing and reflecting, all contribute to it. The purpose of the skill is that the client achieves greater precision with regard to his problem.

Summarizing

A summary gives structure to what the client has said by ordering the main points of his story. The main difference with paraphrasing is that with a summary, statements of the client over a longer period of time are reproduced. A summary serves three functions:

1. The helper can see whether he has understood the client correctly.
2. It encourages the client to explore his thoughts and feelings further.
3. It brings order into the client's account.

Situation clarification

Situation clarification refers to the ability of the helper to recognize and discuss ambiguities or misunderstandings occurring during the relationship between the helper and the client. It is especially important when there seems to be a breakdown in the
mutual expectations between the helper and client. The objective of this skill is to bring about or restore these mutual expectations.

**Advanced skills**

**Advanced accurate empathy**

With advanced accurate empathy the helper gives an interpretation of the client's story that is more distant from the client's frame of reference, but which gives a sharper or more constructive view of the problem. The helper not only shows understanding by accurately reflecting the feelings expressed by the client, for example, but also by bringing out the half-hidden emotional tone in the client's story.

**Confrontation**

The skill confrontation is a more pronounced form of advanced accurate empathy. The helper uses interpretations that are quite distant from the client's frame of reference. The helper gives a response to the client's views about himself and the world that is significantly different from that of the client.

**Positive relabeling**

Positive relabeling means: to apply a new, positive reconstruction to the parts of the problem originally found to be negative. The purpose of positive relabeling is to place the client's 'sick' aspects in a favorable light. An attempt is made to give a favorable meaning to the complaints and symptoms themselves. The function of this skill is that the negative self-image of the client is altered.

**Examples of one's own**

With this skill the helper shares some of his own experiences with the client and thus shows what is on his mind or has been in the past. It is often referred to as self-disclosure. Examples of one's own has three functions:

1. The helper shows that what the client is going through is something shared.
2. The helper talking about himself increases the chance that the client will also reveal his personal views.
3. It helps the client to put into words those things that he cannot or dare not express himself.

**Directness**

Directness implies that there is a frank discussion about what is happening in the here-and-now situation of the contact between helper and client. The first aim of this skill is to promote further joint cooperation; it concerns the personal relationship between client and helper. The second goal of directness is to give the client an idea of the consequence of his behavior.

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