

The effect of organizational commitment on the relationship between communication quality and managerial attitudes

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ABSTRACT

The effects of perceived downward and upward communication quality on employee job satisfaction and turnover intentions was examined among a sample of 101 middle managers. Hierarchical regression and sub-grouping analyses showed that organizational commitment moderated both these effects, but that the latter were unaffected by the direction of communication, whether it was downward or upward. The results confirm the importance of communication quality in organizations, but make clear that its effects on valued outcomes like job satisfaction and intentions to remain in the organization vary, being much stronger among employees attached to the particular organization. Implications of the findings for improving communications are developed, and ideas for further research suggested.

INTRODUCTION

A number of organizational theorists have argued that communication has a pivotal role in organizations and that variations in its quality are often more closely associated with overall effectiveness than variations in the other processes that provide the dynamics for organizational change and development (e.g. Likert, 1973; Schuler, 1985; Katz & Kahn, 1989). In view of the pivotal role and importance of communication in organizations, it is appropriate



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that several studies should have investigated the effects of communication quality on both employee job satisfaction and performance, as well as on several indicators of organizational effectiveness. Unfortunately, their results have been equivocal, with not all of them supporting the hypothesized positive effects of communication quality on these valued outcomes.

On the one hand, several studies have confirmed that the accuracy, completeness and timeliness of communication, especially between superiors and their subordinates, does lead to greater em-

ployee job satisfaction and often to better performance as well (Roberts and O'Reilley, 1984; Sussmam, 1989). On the other hand, negligible relationships have also been found between indicators of communication quality and these two outcomes, that are typically associated with organizational effectiveness (Muchinsky, 1979; Pinchus, 1986). Whilst different samples and unlike measuring instruments across the studies may be partly responsible for the different findings, according to Larson *et al.* (1990) the relationship between the quality of communications and employee satisfaction with their jobs depends on a number of contingency factors that probably varied across these studies, two of which will be examined in the present investigation.

Following Locke (1986), it is argued that if employees are strongly attached to their organization, they will want to perform well – to help the organization – and will be correspondingly upset and frustrated by anything that prevents them from achieving this aim, such as inaccurate and incomplete communications. Employees who feel less attached to their organization will be neither so pleased by good communication nor so upset by poor communications, since they care less about their organization and what it does to them than their committed counterparts.

Based largely on the analysis of Porter and Roberts (1986), the second potential variable whose effect is to be explored in the current study, is communication direction; specifically, whether it is downward (emanating from superiors) or upward (emanating from subordinates). There are a number of features that distinguish downward from upward communication and make it likely that downward communication will be regarded more

importantly by managers. For one thing, communications from superiors typically vary more widely in content than those from subordinates (Schuler, 1985). For another, communications from superiors are more likely to be evaluative, either praising or blaming the managers concerned, than are communications from subordinates (Katz & Kahn, 1989). Finally, what happens to managers is usually more directly and immediately affected by the content of downward communication than by that of upward communication (Porter & Roberts, 1986). As a consequence, the effect of communication quality on job satisfaction should be stronger for downward than for upward communications, an hypothesis to be tested in the present study.

Besides exploring the implications of communication quality for employee job satisfaction, the current investigation also examines how it affects employee leave intentions. In view of the close association between job satisfaction and decisions about remaining or leaving the organization (Orpen, 1980), it is predicted that communication quality will have much the same consequences for stay/leave intentions, as for job satisfaction. It is also predicted that the effects of downward communication on leave intentions will be stronger than those of upward communications. Both these hypotheses are to be tested in the present study.

METHOD

The subjects of the study were 101 middle managers and supervisors, working for 45 different public and private employers. All were responsible for the work of several subordinates, and reported directly to senior management. For our present purposes, an important feature of the subjects' jobs is that regularly received communications from both their superiors and subordinates, and that their effective-

ness was determined to a large extent by how well they dealt simultaneously with the demands placed on them from these two sources of communication.

Communication quality was assessed by a six-item scale adapted from that used by Frone and Major (1988), that required the subjects to indicate the extent to which communications received from (1) their superiors and (2) their subordinates was (a) timely – you get information when you need it, not too early or too late, (b) accurate – the information you get can be relied on because it is usually correct, and (c) complete – you get the right amount of information needed, not too little nor too much. The degree to which the two kinds of communications were characterized by each of the three aspects of quality (timeliness, accuracy, completeness) was rated on five-point scales, from 'to a very little extent' (1) to 'a very large extent' (5). Subjects' responses to the quality ratings were summed separately for each type of communication, to yield two scores for each subject, indicating perceived downward communication quality and perceived upward communication quality respectively. Organizational commitment was measured by a 10-item version of the scale developed by Allen and Meyer (1990). A 15-item version of the Action Tendency Scale, developed by Hartman *et al.* (1989) which measures the behavioural rather than the cognitive and emotional components of job attitudes, was used to assess overall job satisfaction. Finally, leave intentions were measured by the four-item scale employed by Rosin and Korabik (1981), that requires subjects to indicate how often they have thoughts associated with leaving their present employer.

The posited bivariate relationships were examined by product-moment correlations, whilst sub-grouping ana-

lysis and hierarchical moderated regression analysis were used respectively, to examine the hypothesized effects. The effects of the dichotomous variable of direction were tested by comparing the respective sizes of the quality-satisfaction and quality-leave intention correlations for upward and for downward communications (Zedeck, 1971). The effects of the continuous variable of commitment were tested by computing the respective increments in explained variance in job satisfaction and leave intentions, when the cross-product term (quality * commitment) was added to the particular regression equations already containing the main effects (Cohen and Cohen, 1983).

Results and Discussion

The mean scores (and standard deviations) of the subjects were for downward communication quality 7.56 (1.66) and for upward communication quality 11.01 (2.33). The corresponding scores for organizational commitment were 29.52 and 5.34. The subjects obtained mean scores (and standard deviations) of 44.39 (8.77) for job satisfaction, and 3.45 (1.78) for leave intentions. As predicted, the quality of downward communication was significantly correlated with job satisfaction ($r = .28, p.01$) and also with leave intentions ($r = -.19, p.05$). The correlation between the quality of upward communications and job satisfaction was also significant ($r = .26, p.05$), but that with leave intentions was nonsignificant ($r = -.10, p.05$). Organization commitment was significantly correlated ($p.05$) with the quality of both downward communications ($r = .24$) and upward communications ($r = .21$), as well as with the two outcomes measured in the present study (.24 for job satisfaction, and $-.19$ for leave intentions). Finally, a significant negative correlation of $r = -.23, (p.05)$ was obtained between organizational commitment and leave intentions.

The increment in variance in job satisfaction, from $R^2 = .21$ to $R^2 = .38$, when the interaction term (organizational commitment * upward communication) was added to the regression equation after the two main effects had been calculated, was significant, $F = 7.11$, $p.01$. The inclusion of the downward communication interaction term also added significantly to the explained variance in leave intentions, with R^2 increasing from $.29$ to $.34$, $F = 5.01$, $p.05$. Similarly, the increment in leave intentions variance, from $R^2 = .19$ to $R^2 = .28$, when the organizational commitment * upward communication interaction term was added to the regression equation was significant, $F = 5.61$, $p.01$. The inclusion of the downward communication interaction term also added significantly to the explained variation in leave intentions, with R increasing from $.26$ to $.33$, $F = 6.88$, $p.01$. However, the communication quality/job satisfaction correlation for downward communications ($r = .29$) did not differ significantly ($p.05$) from that for upward communications ($r = .27$). There was also a nonsignificant difference ($p.05$) between the correlations for downward communications and leave intentions ($r = -.21$) and for upward communications and leave intentions ($r = -.17$).

These results indicate that for the present subjects both upward and downward communication quality were positively associated with job satisfaction. They also make clear that for these subjects downward, but not upward, communication quality was negatively related to leave intentions. The results also indicate that organizational commitment was positively associated with perceived upward and downward communication quality, as well as with both valued outcomes, of job satisfaction and stay intentions. Moreover, as hypothesized, organizational commitment also served to moderate the rela-

tionships between perceived communication quality and job satisfaction.

Whilst organizational commitment had these consistent effects on how subjects responded to communication quality, the direction of the communications had little impact on their responses, contrary to what was hypothesized. Perhaps the present subjects regarded communications from their superordinates as just as important as those emanating from persons above them in the hierarchy. It may also be that the climate in these organizations was sufficiently open and supportive, for upward communications to vary as widely as downward ones in the extent to which they praised and blamed the recipients. Perhaps upward communications were especially significant to the present subjects because it let them know how the tasks they had necessarily delegated to their subordinates were being performed, something that in turn determined how their superiors would judge them. It is for future research to examine how each of these factors determines the relative effects of downward and upward communications on the present outcomes in various circumstances.

There are a number of implications for managing communications effectively that follow from these relatively clear-cut findings. First, the findings support the contention of Roberts and O'Reilly, (1984), that timely, accurate, and comprehensive communications can cause employees to be more satisfied with their jobs, and hence less likely to leave the organization. Second, managers can expect employees who are committed to the organization to respond more favourably to improvements in communication than those with weak or negligible attachments, suggesting that if they want communication improvements to have the widest possible effects, it may some-

times be necessary for managers to make sure beforehand that the target employees have a strong sense of attachment to the organization. Thirdly, the findings confirm that managers cannot rely just on improving their communications, but need to establish that these improvements are perceived as such by the target employees. Finally, managers need to realize that the communications employees receive from subordinates can be just as influential as those from superiors, or even from the managers themselves. The present findings suggest, contrary to what many managers believe to be the case, that downward communications do not necessarily have stronger consequences for employee attitudes than those emanating from persons lower in the hierarchy than the recipient. This means that efforts at improving communications should normally be directed just as much at upward communications as those from superiors to subordinates, despite the greater difficulties involved, as suggested by Katz and Kahn (1989).

Given these findings, future research could profitably investigate whether organizational commitment alters the impact of communication quality on employee job performance and actual turnover in the same way it has been shown for their work attitudes. It may also be fruitful to determine the general conditions under which downward and upward communications have different consequences from employee work attitudes – and hence possibly for their actual performance – rather than the similar ones found in the present study. Finally, future research should try to uncover the precise mechanisms that are responsible for the moderating effect for organizational commitment established here, so that accurate predictions can be made about the effects differences in such commitment will have on the consequences of com-

munication for such valued outcomes as employee job satisfaction, performance, absenteeism and turnover.

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