

The influence of organisational climate on communication in organisations

R. Verster

Department of Industrial Psychology
University of Bophuthatswana

Abstract

The situation/environment in which a person finds himself, influences his behaviour – also his “communication” behaviour. A large part of this situation/environment in the organisational setting is accounted for by the organisational climate which is established and maintained in the particular organisation.

In this paper the term organisational climate is defined and from the vast body of literature that exists on the topic, some common characteristics are emphasised. A model of organisational climate is presented, showing the components of organisational climate and their interaction and interrelatedness and how it affects communication in the organisation. The characteristics of a sound organisational climate will be stressed and reference will be made to some research in this field in the South African industry.

Introduction

Every town, geographical area or country has its own particular climate. This climate attracts people to that area or could result in people leaving that area. What is more important is that the climate influences the behaviour of people in that area. Likewise, in every organisation, a psychological climate, organisational culture or the more commonly used term, organisational climate, is established or develops (and should be maintained if it is sound) that could attract workers to that organisation or may result in people leaving that organisation. The organisational climate also influences people’s behaviour in that organisation — also their communication behaviour.

The importance of organisational climate was already described in 1973 by Guion (p 120) as follows: “The construct (or perhaps, family of constructs) implied by the term, organisational climate, may be one of the most important to enter the thinking of industrial-organisational psychologists in many years”. He, however, continues by saying that “. . . it also seems to be one of the fuzziest concepts to come along in some time” (p 121).

Let's therefore look at a few definitions of organisational climate and then summarise the common characteristics emphasized by most definitions of organisational climate.

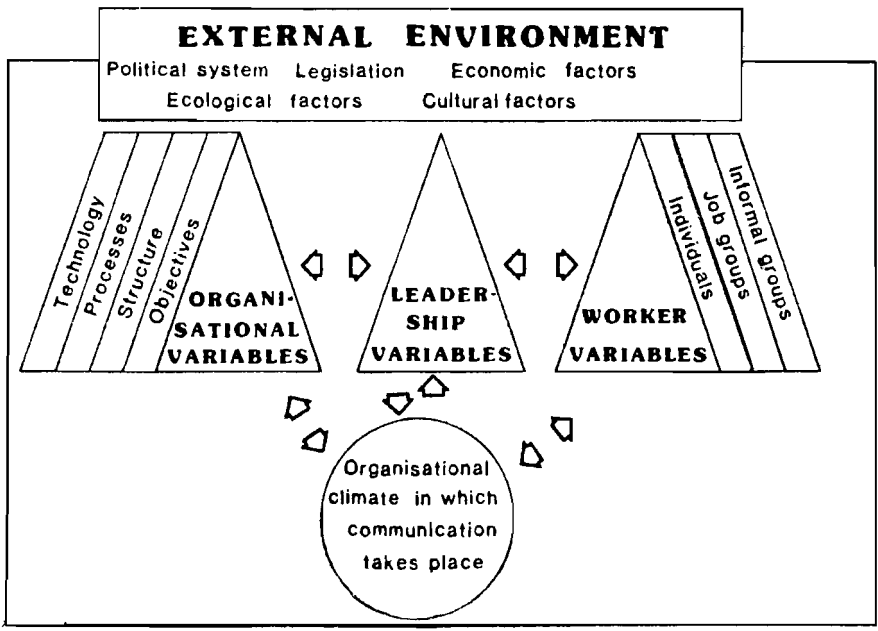
"An organisation's climate can be described as a set of properties of the work environment, perceived directly or indirectly by the employees who work in this environment and is assumed to be a major force in influencing their behavior on the job" (Gibson, et al., 1973: 313).

"Organisational climate refers to a set of attributes which can be perceived about a particular organisation and/or its subsystems, and that may be induced from the way that organisation and/or its subsystems deal with their members and environment" (Hellriegel and Slocum, 1974 : 256).

The common characteristics emphasized by most definitions are that organisational climate:

- influences employees' and management's behaviour. This influence could be direct or indirect. In a study by Friedlander and Greenberg (1971 : 287), they found that the sole correlate of the hard-core unemployed worker's work effectiveness and behaviour was the degree of supportiveness of the organisational climate in which they were placed.

Figure 1
A model of organisational climate



Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

- of every organisation is unique; it distinguishes it from all other organisations.
- is the perception of the people in the organisation of the qualities/ attributes of that particular organisation.
- is multi-dimensional. After a thorough study on this topic, Pritchard and Karasick (1973 : 12) conclude that the “attempts to generate taxonomies of climate seem to have resulted in a fairly small number of dimensions of climate . . . Common sense says that the psychological environment of an organisation is tremendously complex. It is highly doubtful that six or seven dimensions can adequately tap this complexity.”
- is a relatively permanent or long term characteristic of the organisation.

The interacting components in an organisation that contribute to the particular organisational climate can be classified into human and organisational component. The human component is further subdivided into leadership variables and employee variables — as individuals, formal working groups but also informal groups in the organisation.

Although it is nowadays realised that organisational climate is determined by more than just leadership style, it is apparent from the literature and research that it plays a vital role in the establishment of organisational climate (cf Lawler et al, 1974 : 141, Litwin and Stringer, 1968 : 104 - 111; Pritchard and Karasick, 1973 : 126 - 128). After studying the literature on organisational climate, McFarland (1974 : 548) concludes: “The conclusion to date of these studies . . . suggest that the most important influence on organisational climate is the manager’s leadership style.”

There is also ample proof in the literature of the influence of workers, individually or as groups on organisational climate (cf Lawler et al, 1974 : 153; Hellriegel and Slocum, 1974 : 430). In every group, a particular group climate is established or develops, which in turn could have an influence on organisational climate.

The organisational components contributing to climate are classified as organisational objectives, structure, processes (such as decision making, communication, conflict resolution, personnel management) and technology in its widest sense. The influence of these variables on organisational climate has received a lot of attention in literature and research and is beyond the scope of this paper and the time allowed to go into more detail. For those interested in the relationship between these variables and organisational climate, I would like to recommend a thorough study of the works of Hellriegel and Slocum (1974), Lawler et al (1974), Mahoney and Frost (1974), Tagiuri and Litwin (1968), Campbell et al (1970), James and Jones (1974), Von Haller, Gillmer and Deci (1977).

The components of an organisation also interact and are inter-dependent on each other. Furthermore, the organisation and its components operate within an external environment which is often turbulent and in which uncertainty features strongly. One should also bear in mind that these human and organisational components could also have a direct influence on communication apart from the influence on the organisational climate in which communication takes place.

Characteristics of a supportive organisational climate

In the now classic study by Gibb in 1961, the characteristics of a supportive climate were described as:

- Description — giving and asking information.
- Problem orientation — mutual collaboration in defining problems and seeking solutions.
- Spontaneity — free from hidden motives.
- Empathy — identifying with other person's problems, feelings and values.
- Equality — mutual trust, respect, participative decision-making.
- Provisionalism — open-mindedness.

Although the labels have changed, these characteristics are still very much part of how a supportive climate is described in the more recent literature. It is clear that characteristics such as mutual trust and respect, openness, a supportive team spirit, involvement, loyalty, a recognition of individual differences and opinions as desirable, an emphasis on the uniquely personal nature of growth, a willingness to communicate and be communicated with, enhancement of the quality of work life are typical of a sound, supportive and selfactualising organisational climate (cf McAlindon, 1980 : 40; Schuler, 1981 : 466).

Die invloed van organisasieklimaat op kommunikasie

Die invloed van organisasieklimaat op kommunikasie is wederkerig. Die kommunikatiewe gedrag word beïnvloed deur die organisasieklimaat, en die kommunikasieproses in sy verskeidenheid van fasette is 'n bydraende faktor tot die organisasieklimaat wat ontstaan, tot stand gebring word en die instandhouding daarvan (vergelyk die model van organisasieklimaat).

Die kommunikasieproses in organisasies — die inhoud van boodskappe, die kanale wat gebruik word, die tydsberekening van boodskappe, ens. — kan 'n invloed op die organisasieklimaat uitoefen. Aan die ander kant kan die invloed van die ander bydraende faktore en dimensies van die organisasieklimaat, soos uitgewys in die model, beperk of die teenoorgestelde resultate bereik word, indien die wese daarvan nie na behore gekommunikeer word nie. 'As die instelling van 'n nuwe pensioenskema

vir Swart werkers nie bv. ten volle met al sy voordele en implikasies gekommunikeer word nie (deel van die vergoedingsproses), kan hierdie goedbedoelde skema tot groot probleme, skade aan die organisasieklimaat en die persepsie daarvan en uiteindelik tot 'n staking lei. Die belangrikheid van die kommunikasieproses en die status van navorsing op hierdie terrein word as volg deur Lawler et al (1974 : 153) opgesom: ". . . the communication pattern(s) used by the organisation has an immediate impact upon the individual's life within the same organisation and may be a vital, yet currently unexplored, aspect of organisational climate."

Organisasieklimaat aan die ander kant beïnvloed gedrag in die organisasie en dus ook kommunikatiewe gedrag. Organisasieklimaat se invloed op gedrag kan direk of indirek wees. Die situasie in enige gedragsdaad voorsien die stimulus in die spesifieke gedrag. Organisasieklimaat bepaal die menseverhoudingsatmosfeer wat in die organisasie bestaan en waarbinne gekommunikeer word. Gibb (1971 : 211) sê in hierdie verband: "One way to understand communication is to view it as a people process rather than a language process. If one is to make fundamental improvements in communication he must make changes in interpersonal relationships."

Indien die organisasieklimaat ondersteunend eerder as defensief is, kan 'n mens verwag dat daar 'n wedersydse gewilligheid sal wees om met mekaar te kommunikeer en 'n gewilligheid om mee gekommunikeer te word. Hierdie laaste punt van ontvanklikheid vir kommunikasie moet nie uit die oog verloor word nie omdat werkers of bestuur die stadium kan bereik waarin hulle nie meer belangstel om met die ander party te kommunikeer nie. Hierdie situasie kan hom in alle kommunikatiewe situasies in die algemene lewe voordoen, bv. in 'n verbrokkelende huwelik, terwyl 'n groep stakende werkers in die bedryfsituasie 'n goeie voorbeeld kan wees van 'n party wat hulle gewilligheid om mee gekommunikeer te word, verloor het.

Nie alleen kan organisasieklimaat die ontvanklikheid van werkers en bestuur beïnvloed nie, maar dit kan ook tot die filtrering van inligting aanleiding gee. Monge et al (1978 : 325) se waarneming uit 'n oorsig van bestaande literatuur en navorsing is dat die ondergeskikte se tevredenheid met sy werksomgewing (ook sielkundige werksomgewing) sy vertroue in sy toesighouer, sy eie mobiliteitsverwagtings, die belangrikste veranderlikes is wat opwaardse filtrering beïnvloed. Faktore soos wedersydse vertroue, wedersydse respek, geloofwaardigheid, betrokkenheid, openhartigheid in verhoudings (alles eienskappe vir 'n gesonde organisasieklimaat), is ook die hoekstene vir suksesvolle kommunikasie in die bedryf.

Organisasieklimaat kan ook 'n indirekte invloed op gedrag uitoefen deurdat dit individuele verskille soos verwagtings, houdings, motiveering, emosies, persepsie, ens., kan beïnvloed. Hierdie individuele

verskille is belangrike beïnvloedende faktore in menslike gedrag en dus ook in kommunikatiewe gedrag.

Opsommenderwys sê Schneider et al (1975 : 52): "The communication climate in organisation is a crucial factor in determining the quantity and quality of communication which can be achieved."

Enkele navorsingsresultate in Suid-Afrika

In 'n ondersoek oor die kommunikasie van swart werkers in die bedryf het Verster (1976 : 75 - 91) onder meer die volgende bevind:

1. Organisasies met 'n gunstige organisasieklimaat vergelyk statisties beduidend beter as organisasies met 'n minder gunstige organisasieklimaat ten opsigte van:
 - kommunikasie in 'n swart taal
 - delegering van verantwoordelikheid aan swart werkers
 - doeltreffende konflikhantering
 - die kweking van 'n betrokkenheidsgevoel
 - verskeie personeelbestuursfunksies en -aktiwiteite
2. Organisasies met minder arbeidsprobleme vergelyk statisties beduidend beter as organisasies met meer arbeidsprobleme ten opsigte van:
 - openhartigheid van kommunikasie (bestuur teenoor swart werkers en omgekeerd)
 - groepsgees in die verskillende departemente, afdelings en werkgroepe
 - wedersydse vertroue tussen blank en swart
 - lojaliteit (bestuur teenoor swart werkers en omgekeerd)

Slot

Die algemene aard van organisasieklimaat is reeds die afgelope twee dekades redelik omvattend nagevors — in so 'n mate dat daar reeds verskillende denkskole bestaan. Navorsers raak meer spesifiek in hulle navorsingspogings en die terrein van organisasiekommunikasie kan ook baie baat deur toenemend tot hierdie navorsing toe te tree.

Verwysings

Campbell, J.P., Dunette, M.D., Lawler, E.E. en Weick, K.E. (1970). *Managerial Behavior, Performance, and Effectiveness*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Friedlander, F. en Greenberg, S. (1971). Effect of job attitudes, training, and organisation climate on Performance of the Hard-core unemployed. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 55, 287 - 295.

- Gibb, J.R. (1971). Defensive Communication. In Kolb, D.A., Rubin, I.M. en McIntyre, J.M.: *Organisational Psychology: A Book of Readings*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Gibson, J.L., Ivancevich, J.M. en Donnelly, J.H. (1973). *Readings in Organisations – Structure, Processes, Behavior*. Dallas: Business Publications.
- Guion, R.M. (1973). A Note on Organisational Climate. *Organisational Behavior and Human Performance*, 9d, 120 - 125.
- Hellriegel, D. en Slocum, J.W. (1974). Organisational Climate: Measures, Research and Contingencies. *Academy of Management Journal*, 17, 255 - 279.
- James, L.R. en Jones, A.P. (1974). Organisational Climate: A review of theory and research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 81, 1 096 - 1 112.
- Lawler, E.E., Hall, D.T. en Oldham, G.R. (1974). Organisational Climate: Relationship to Organisational Structure, Process and Performance. *Organisational Behavior and Human Performance*, 11, 139 - 155.
- Litwin, G.H. en Stringer, R.A. (1968). *Motivation and Organisational Climate*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Mahoney, T.A. en Frost, P.J. (1974). The Role of Technology in Models of Organisational Effectiveness. *Organisational Behavior and Human Performance*, 11, 122 - 138.
- McAlidon, H.R. (1980). Towards a more creative you: the actualizing climate. *Supervisory Management*, 25, 35 - 40.
- McFarland, D.E. (1974). *Management: Principles and Practices*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Monge, P.R., Edwards, J.A. en Kirste, K.K. (1978). The Determinants of Communication and Communication Structure in large organisations: A Review of Research. *Communication Yearbook 2*. Transaction Books: New Jersey, pp 311 - 331.
- Pritchard, R.D. en Karasic, B.W. (1973). The Effects of Organisational Climate on Managerial Job Performance and Job Satisfaction. *Organisational Behavior and Human Performance*, 9, 126 - 146.
- Schneider, B. en Snyder, R.A. (1975). "Some Relationship between Job Satisfaction and Organisational Climate." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 60, 318 - 328.
- Schuler, R.S. (1981). *Personnel and Human Resource Management*. New York: West Publishing Co.

Tagiuri, R. (1968). The Concept of Organisational Climate. In Tagiuri, R, en Litwin, G.H. (1968). *Organisational Climate: Explorations of a Concept*. Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University.

Verster, R, (1976). *Communication with Black Workers – A systems approach*. Bloemfontein: Afdeling Personeelnavorsing.

Von Haller Gilmer, B. en Deci, E.L. (1977). *Industrial and Organisational Psychology*. New York: McGraw Hill.