

The Effect of Communication on Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship

Vandana Madhusudan*

Research Scholar, Maharaj Vinayak Global University, Jaipur

Abstract – The aim of the present paper to give a review of studies and theory within organizational communication. In the first part of the paper four influential approaches used in the study of organizational communication are presented; the mechanistic perspective, the psychological perspective, the interpretive symbolic perspective and the systems interaction perspective. In the second part study examined the relationship of supervisor-subordinate communication to supervisor-subordinate relationship in terms of trust, fairness, friendliness and competence. Total 900 questionnaires with 74 supervisors and 800 subordinates were under analyzed. Results suggest that despite different nationalities between supervisors and subordinates, most subordinates perceived no language problem when communicating with supervisors. Besides, while subordinates generally perceived themselves very open in expressing their opinions to supervisors, the supervisors did not seem to be very willing in accepting different ideas from subordinates. The study of organizational communication is most often related to three different aspects of the organization: structure, context, and process.

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INTRODUCTION

Supervisor-subordinate communication has been one of the most popular areas in organizational communication research. Research has shown that one-third to two-thirds of the managers' time communicating with subordinates (Jablin, 1985) and most supervisory communication is verbal and occurs in face-to-face contexts (Luthans & Larsen, 1986; Whitely, 1984, 1985). In 1987, organizational communication – job satisfaction studies were summarized by Pincus and Ray field. It was found that superior-subordinate communication and its link to job satisfaction received most research attention.

While most of the studies in the area of supervisor-subordinate communication focused on its relationship to subordinate general job satisfaction, not much of them took detail examination in its effect on various factors in supervisor-subordinate relationship. Based on the research conducted by the International Communication Association with 17 organizations in the United States and Canada in 1979, the supervisor-subordinate relationship and employees' involvement within their work unit were found to be the most important predictors of job satisfaction (Goldhaber, Yates, Porter, & Lesniak, 1979). Moreover, most major studies in supervisor-subordinate communication were conducted in a western context, the applications and implications of the results may not be totally valid in Asian cultures such as Macau, Hong Kong and other overseas Chinese communities. Recently, Macau has caught the world's attention in its handover to China on

the 20th December of 1999. Like Hong Kong, this small territory is known as the gateway to China from the world. The findings of the present study will enhance our understanding in the areas of supervisor-subordinate communication, and employee satisfaction with supervisor in the context of an Asian community.

The present paper will attempt to give a brief review of studies done within the field of organizational communication. Studies done within this field is often placed into three different categories; (1) Structure; (2) Context (3) Process. First communication studies that have been conducted within the frame of organizational structure will be reviewed, and also some suggestions for future research will be mentioned. Structure refers to the building blocks of organizational life, whereas context refers to the framework that embeds behavioral and structural aspects of organizations, meaning the environment. Environments can be both external and internal to the organization. In the present paper it will be focused primarily on the internal environment, more specifically on the importance of organizational and communicational climate. Also a presentation of studies done on superior-subordinate communication will be presented under this heading.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Among the research areas on supervisor-subordinate communication, openness in communication is one of the major topics. Jablin stated that "in an open communication relationship between superior and subordinate, both parties perceive the other interactant

as a willing and receptive listener and refrain from responses that might be perceived as providing negative relational or disconfirming feedback.” (Jablin, 1979, p.1204) Openness in supervisor-subordinate communication involves two interrelated dimensions: openness in message-sending and openness in message-receiving (Redding, 1972). Many researchers reported that subordinates’ perceptions of openness are positively related to their job satisfaction, and in particular their satisfaction with supervision. Wheelless, Wheelless, and Howard (1984) suggested that subordinates’ perceptions of supervisory “receptivity” (openness in message receiving) are a powerful predictor of workers’ job satisfaction. On the other hand, Tjosvold (1985a, b) found that subordinates’ perceptions of openness are also related to the nonverbal warmth (communicated through eye gaze, posture, facial expression, and voice tone) displayed by superior in their interactions with subordinates.

Regarding upward communication, one of the more frequently reported results is that subordinates are often hesitant to communicate upward information that is unfavorable or negative to themselves. Fulk and Mani (1986) examined the degree to which supervisors’ downward communications affects the accuracy and frequency of subordinates’ upward communication distortion. They suggested a reciprocal relationship between superiors’ and subordinates’ communication behaviors such that “subordinates reported withholding information and generally distorting communication sent upward when their supervisors were seen as actively withholding information”.

Other studies have focused on the exploring relationships between a number of superiors’ and subordinates’ communication-related characteristics and subordinates’ levels of job satisfaction. For example, Johnson, Luthans, and Hennessey (1984) reported that “internal”(with respect to locus of control) supervisors tend to use persuasion more with subordinates than “external” leaders, and that supervisor persuasiveness is positively related to subordinate satisfaction with supervision. Relatedly, Infante and Gordon (1985) suggest that subordinates’ satisfaction with supervision are positively related to the degree to which they perceive their superiors as high in argumentativeness and low on verbal aggressiveness. Similarly, Richmond, McCroskey, and Davis (1986) found that subordinate satisfaction is related to their supervisors’ use of power and affinity-seeking strategies. On the other hand, Remland (1984) reported that perceptions of leader “consideration” are positively related to the degree to which supervisors display less status nonverbally and subordinates exhibit more status nonverbally.

Multiple Perspectives

Perhaps more than any other area of communication inquiry, organizational communication stands defenseless against claims that researchers fail to articulate theoretical frameworks underlying their work

(Richetto, 1977), and are negligent in their use of theoretical models to integrate research results involving numerous and often disparate variables (Redding, 1979). However, Aubrey Fisher (1978) proposed that scholars tend to assume one of four basic conceptual approaches to the study of human communication. Krone, Jablin and Putnam (1987) have adopted this view and presents four perspectives (1) mechanistic, (2) psychological (3) interpretive-symbolic and (4) system-interaction perspectives, where each of these perspectives models the process of communication from a relatively distinct point of view. Krone et al. (1987) acknowledged that the four perspectives represent the most influential and comprehensive frameworks used in organizational communication to date. Moreover, they claim that while other philosophical frameworks may be used generally to categorize social science (e.g. Habermas, 1971), none is as explicitly communicative as the Fisher model.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Questionnaires were administered to 1000 employees from seven out of the total fourteen 4 and 5- star hotels in **Macau**. This contribute to 24% of employees in the 4&5 star hotels and 16% of the total employee in hotel industry in Macau based on statistics of 1998. Due to the control of the size and overall administrative system of the hotels, only 4 and 5 star hotels are invited to participate in this study. Hotel industry is chosen for this study because this is one of the most important industries in Macau in terms of the annual revenue and employment. Respondents completed questionnaires at the company location on company time. Because of the inconsistency and incompleteness of some questionnaires, only 915 questionnaires with 841 subordinates and 74 supervisors were used for analysis. Based on the information provided by the Human Resource Department of each participated hotel, one supervisor who had the most work interaction with subordinates was identified in each department. Subordinates were asked to evaluate their communication satisfaction and supervisor satisfaction towards the identified supervisor in their own department. Supervisors are asked to answer the questionnaires based on their relationships towards the subordinates of their own departments.

Measures

(1) Communication Satisfaction

29-item questionnaire about communication was developed to survey managerial communication behaviors. The first 23 items assess communication content, or the sorts of functions played by managerial communication, and the second 6 items exploring communication style, or the manner in which the content was conveyed. Respondents

indicated, on a Likert- 5-points scale, how much they agree with each of the 29 statements concerning communication behaviors occurred during their supervisor-subordinate interaction. Wordings of the questions in the questionnaires for the supervisors are opposite from the ones for subordinates. For example, instead of the statement "My supervisor never quick to disagree with me" in the subordinate questionnaires, this statement will change to "I never quick to disagree with my subordinates" in the questionnaires for supervisors.

(2) Supervisor-subordinate Relationship

13-item questionnaire measuring supervisor-subordinate relationship in this study was developed by the researcher based on the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) of 1984. The Job Descriptive Index (JDI) developed by Smith, Kendall and Hulin (1969) involved 72 items relate to five dimensions of job satisfaction: work, supervision, pay, promotion and workers. The 72 items, was reduced to 30 by Wheelless, Wheelless and Howard in 1984. Only the items for supervision were used in this study for reference. Extra questions were added by the research based on the topics of interest being studied in this research.

CONCLUSION

One immediate conclusion of this study is that communication satisfaction is highly related to the supervisor subordinate relationship. "Concern for subordinates" and positive "communication style" seems to be the two most important communication factors in affecting supervisor-subordinate relationship here in Macau. This suggests that for good relationship to be developed between supervisor and subordinate, like other kinds of interpersonal relationship, the feeling of being cared and respected are essential.

People in Macau generally perceived their supervisors are not fair enough in dealing with their subordinates. Besides, they would like to see their supervisors more willing to accept their ideas and show more concern about their well-beings. In terms of communication style, supervisors should be more careful not to criticize their subordinates in front of other people and be more patient in listening to their ideas. Besides, "communicate actively with subordinates" is necessary and significant in developing communication satisfaction.

Many research studies demonstrated that supervisor-subordinate communication has significant impact on different variables on subordinates' work outcome and job satisfaction. In 1987, organizational communication – job satisfaction studies were summarized by Pincus and Rayfield. It was found that superior-subordinate communication and its link to job satisfaction received most research attention. While most of the studies in this area focused on its relationship to subordinate

general job satisfaction, none of them took detail examination in its effect on various factors of supervisor-subordinate relationship. Based on the research conducted by the International Communication Association with 17 organizations in the United States and Canada in 1979, the supervisor-subordinate relationship was found to be the most important predictors of job satisfaction. Moreover, most major studies in supervisor-subordinate communication were conducted in a western context, the applications and implications of the results may not be totally valid in Asian cultures such as Macau, Hong Kong and other overseas Chinese communities.

SUMMARY

Research and also application in the field of organizational communication are based either explicitly or implicitly on a particular view of communication. This view shapes the way people see and interpret organizational communication. A manager who insists; "my subordinate just doesn't listen to me. I sent him that message several days ago" exemplifies the mechanistic approach to communication. Researchers who take this approach see communication as a materialistic substance that travels through computers, telephones and other concrete substances. In contrast, managers who view communication from a psychological perspective concentrate on the receivers perceptions. Effective communication in this perspective is based on adapting one's needs to meet the values and attitudes of the respondents. Researchers operating from this perspective center on cognition together with personality traits of communicators. Managers rarely have conceptualizations grounded in the interpretive-symbolic perspective. However, if they do, the manager would concentrate on how employees and superiors are interpreting the events in their work-environment, and moreover how he/she can influence the consensual meanings organizational members construct. Finally, in the systems-interaction approach to communication managers concentrate on the patterns, routines and the interaction that define their relationship with others. They also realize that these patterns can become self-sustaining over time, considering they are not in our awareness findings of researches demonstrated the importance of supervisor-subordinate communication in various subordinates' work-behaviors. The purpose of the present study is to examine the various factors of supervisor subordinate communication and supervisor-subordinate relationship and to study their relationship between each other in an Asian context. The above research findings have provided the framework for this research concerning communication behaviors of supervisor and supervisor-subordinate relationship. Based on those results, five major communication variables are chosen for the present research. They are: (1) openness of supervisor in accepting different opinions, (2) openness of subordinate in expressing their own opinions, (3) informative of the supervisor in

providing information, (4) feedback provided to subordinates, and (5) concern of the supervisor to subordinates. In addition, due to the special environment of Macau where different nationalities between supervisors and subordinates are commonly found, the sixth variable of "language understanding" is added in this study. Subordinates may need to communicate with their supervisors in the language other than their mother language. Therefore, language problem becomes a relevant barrier in supervisor-subordinate communication. On the other hand, supervisor-satisfaction variables including employee general satisfaction with the supervisor and employee perspective on the supervisor in terms of trust, fairness, friendliness and competence. It is hypothesized that the higher the subordinate satisfaction on various factors of the supervisor-subordinate communication, the higher the supervisor-subordinate relationship in terms of trust, fairness, friendliness and competence.

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Corresponding Author

Vandana Madhusudan*

Research Scholar, Maharaj Vinayak Global University,
Jaipur

E-Mail – vandana.madhusudan@gmail.com