INFLUENCE OF SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE COMMUNICATION ON EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

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Abstract

The paper concentrates on the review of the research carried out in the field of the relation between superior-subordinate communication in a company and its influence on employee job satisfaction in the last decade. The purpose of the paper has been to identify the possibilities of further research in that field in Poland. International research confirms direct and strong impact of good superior-subordinate communication on employee satisfaction. In future studies in that field a qualitative component should be included as the studies carried so far were primarily correlational. Implications for further research in Poland cover checking Motivating Language Theory in Polish environment, directionality of behaviours, how employees form their perception on communication satisfaction, influence of gender on the perception of employee satisfaction and on managerial communication competence.

Keywords: superior-subordinate communication, employee job satisfaction

Paper type: Literature review

1. Introduction

If we want something to happen in an organization, we must communicate. Our best inventions and intentions will not become a reality unless we communicate what we want. It is undoubtedly interesting for a communication scholar to research the relations between internal communication and other variables that influence the bottom line.

Companies are in business for profit. Both communication and job satisfaction are related to company's turnover. That is why the understanding of the impact of communication and job satisfaction on each other could have its consequence for the way the business is run.

Although researchers point out there is no consistent relationship between job satisfaction and individual performance (Kim, 2002), there is consistent evidence that low job satisfaction results in absenteeism, reduced commitment to organizations, turnover, and stress (Locke 1976; Tett and Meyer 1993; Brooke and Price 1989; Barling, Wade, and Fullagar 1990). Hence, it is important for researchers to clarify the factors affecting employees' job satisfaction in the organizational context.

This paper will try to sum up the recent research on the link between internal communication between superiors and subordinates and its influence on employee job satisfaction. The purpose of the paper is to identify possible implications for further research in that field in Poland.

Between the 1950s and 1970s the downward, top-down management focus shaped the majority of research about the communication in organizations. Despite the length of time spent on the examination of the superior-subordinate relations it still remains one of the major foci of interest in organizational communication studies. Since the 1980s the question whether a well-informed employee is a satisfied employee seems to have been answered. The contemporary research elaborates finer elements of that relation.

The article begins with a review of the literature on the communication process, and then moves on to the talk about job satisfaction. Next, it discusses the research on the internal communication between the supervisor and subordinate and its impact on job satisfaction. The final section of the article presents the implications of the findings and suggests further study in the field. The article will focus mainly on the most recent studies carried out in the last decade.

2. Communication

As with many words in English, *communication* has a variety of meanings. The first two definitions listed in the American Heritage® Dictionary serve to highlight a subtle but important distinction in usage:

1. The act of communicating; transmission.
2. a) The exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signals, writing, or behaviour;
   b) Interpersonal rapport.

Although the second definition seems simply to elaborate the first, a significant difference separates the two. The first definition contains the *transmission* synonym that commonly underlies our use of the word. The second definition forms the focus of this discussion: the *exchange* of ideas.

The *transmission* approach to communication emphasizes the act of sending. We can transmit an electrical signal or a disease. When we focus on sending or transmission as a definition, we may assume that because of our actions we have *communicated*. However, there is no guarantee that the transmission was received, that the receiver knows it, or that it met our own expectations. When organizations experience a failure of communication, the fault frequently lies with the assumption that mere transmission is equal to communication.

All communication occurs at the level of an individual person. There are three basic methods of communicating: oral, written and non-verbal. Individuals speak, write, gesture; but more importantly, individuals interpret these signs and symbols. However, how a person engages in the process of communication

changes depends on the circumstances and the others involved in the process. People tend to act differently depending on circumstances and who are they with. Because these circumstances change, there are 'levels' of communication, starting with the self and one other person, expanding to a small group, then expanding further to a large group, to an organization, or to the wider society. Our role in the process affects the final act of communication; nevertheless, the message received always remains and individual activity. Communication scholars have moved their interest from the *transmission* to the *reception* focus, and the message received is the only one that counts.

When the term *internal communication* is used it implies all the directions of communication. In the company communication channels are both formal and informal. Formal channels are established by the organization and serve to transmit messages that are related to the professional life. The formal communication channels go downwards, upwards or laterally. *Downward* communication is used to coordinate efforts and activities, to instruct, to direct, or to explain company decisions. *Upward* communication is usually for the purpose of giving feedback and keeping management informed. *Lateral/ horizontal* communication flows between employees of approximately the same level of responsibility. The final, *the grapevine*, is the informal communication network, which is random and spontaneous (Bovee and Thill, 2000).

A manager is one who works with and through others to meet the objective of an organization. Whether the organization is large or small, public or private, employee or volunteer, for profit or not for profit, producing goods or services, managers have certain functions inherent in their position: planning, organizing, directing, controlling and motivating (Claude 1972). Communication serves 4 major functions in an organization: control, motivation, emotional expression and information (Robbins, 2005). Two of those overlap the manager's roles: control and motivation. Communication acts to control members' behaviour. Communication supports motivation by clarifying workers what needs to be done or how well they are doing. Information function of communication enables both superiors and subordinates to make decisions and perform their work well. As the work group for many employees is a major place for social interaction communication provides release for the emotional expression of feelings such as frustration or satisfaction. Thus, communication between superiors and subordinates and the expression of job satisfaction by the latter is interrelated.

There is very little research on communication and communication skills of the employee as opposed to managerial communication. Despite the fact that the communication implies the *exchange* the research on internal communication between the superior and the subordinate is usually focused on the skills and behaviour of the manager as the person who carries out the internal exchange of communication.

According to Drucker (1974, 1992) and Mintzberg (1990) managerial roles are strongly determined by communication and they imply communication. The manager fulfils his/her roles through communication. Most of the research on internal communication in an organization deals with managerial communication.

Communication scholars have determined the communication styles, channels, media and skills which should be used in successful running of a business. Those cover among others the ability to use feedback, active listening, controlling emotions, the use and awareness of nonverbal communication (Robbins, 2005), the ability to express the ideas clearly in writing and speaking, the choice of a proper communication medium, etc.

3. Job satisfaction

Early work by Taylor suggested that worker satisfaction may be attributed to the highest possible earnings with the least amount of fatigue (Taylor, 1970), whereas Locke defined job satisfaction from an employee's standpoint as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state from the appraisal of one's job or experiences" (Locke, 1976). Taylor's classical theory prompted a number of studies that revealed differing factors behind job satisfaction.

In 2007 the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Condition in their comparative analytical report on job satisfaction in 16 European countries presented the notion of job satisfaction in several different ways. The authors of the report, Cabrita and Perista, selected three definitions of job satisfaction. Spector's definition of job satisfaction (as cited in Cabrita and Perista, 2007) is simply how people feel about their jobs and different aspects of their jobs. It is the extent to which people like or dislike their jobs.

The second approach is proposed by Souza-Poza and Souza-Poza (as cited in Cabrita and Perista, 2007), based on the foundation that there are basic and universal human needs, and that, if an individual's needs are fulfilled in their current situation, then that individual will be happy. This theory postulates that job satisfaction depends on the balance between work-role inputs – such as education, working time, effort – and work-role outputs – wages, fringe benefits, status, working conditions, intrinsic aspects of job. If work-role outputs increase relative to work-role inputs, then job satisfaction will increase.

The third definition is cited after Rose who has viewed job satisfaction as a bi-dimensional concept consisting of intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction dimensions (as cited in Cabrita and Perista, 2007). Intrinsic sources of satisfaction depend on the individual characteristics of the person, such as the ability to use initiative, relations with supervisors, or the work that the person actually performs; there are symbolic or qualitative facets of the job. Extrinsic sources of satisfaction are situational and depend on the environment, such as pay, promotion, or job

security; these are financial and other material rewards or advantages of a job. Both extrinsic and intrinsic job facets should be represented, as equally as possible, in a composite measure of overall job satisfaction.

From the internal communication viewpoint, some of the factors found to mediate job satisfaction include supervisors' displays of nonverbal immediacy (Madlock, 2006b; Richmond and McCroskey, 2000), humor (Avtgis and Taber, 2006), communication satisfaction (Hilgerman, 1998), effects of gender (Madlock, 2006a), and supervisors' communication style (Richmond, McCroskey, Davis, and Koontz, 1980).

4. Communication vs. Job Satisfaction

Let's have a closer look at internal communication with the employees and its influence on the employee job satisfaction.

The research elaborated on the subject of communication and job satisfaction can be broadly divided into 2 groups. The first and largest supports the idea that communication and job satisfaction directly influence each other. This kind of relation seems to be most obvious and was subject to scientific research the earliest. Within this group, some researchers examine internal communication as a general process happening in a company. Others focus on the managerial communication skills and behaviours. The second group of research on the subject presents indirect relation between the two introducing additional variables among others trust, communication competence, communication satisfaction, job involvement.

Studies indicated that interpersonal interactions involving the exchange of information and affect between co-workers and between employees and their supervisors can have significant effects on the employees' psychological job outcomes, including job satisfaction (e.g., Muchinsky, 1977; Down and Hain, 1982; Pincus, 1986; Downs, Clampitt and Pfeiffer, 1988; Ray and Miller, 1994).

Two key sources of information in organizations include top management and the immediate supervisor (Young and Post, 1993). For example, satisfaction with communication from top management and from one's immediate supervisor positively relates to perceptions of job satisfaction (Pincus, Knipp and Rayfield, 1990). In their research, Goldhaber et al. concluded that communications received from important relationship partners (i.e., supervisor, top management) and the amount of information (i.e., as much as employees feel they need on relevant topics) received within the communication were the best predictors of job satisfaction (Goldhaber et al., 1978). In addition, employee's perceptions of top-level management's openness of communication and willingness to include employees in the participation of decision making have been positively correlated with employee's overall job satisfaction (Byrne and LeMay, 2006). Putti et al. found differences between communication from the top management and the

supervisor, in that the strongest correlate of organizational commitment was satisfaction in communication from top management versus communication from the supervisor. In the aggregate, this research shows that two important sources of information are top management and the immediate supervisor, and that satisfaction in communication may differ depending on the source (Putti et al., 1990).

Since the turn of the century the research on communication has intensified. Goris, Vaught and Pettit studied the moderating influence of communication direction on the Job Characteristics Model. JCM proposes that the relationship between job characteristics and work outcomes is moderated by employee's growth need strength (GNS), a measure of employee's desire to obtain growth satisfaction from their work. The JCM implies that when individual's GNS is matched with job scope or job characteristics, i.e. higher individual-job congruence is achieved, higher performance and satisfaction will result. They indicated that downward communication had statistical support as both moderator and predictor of job satisfaction in low individual-job congruence situations. So if there is no match between job characteristics and employee's desire to grow it is the downward communication that can make a difference in keeping the employee satisfied (Goris, Vaught and Pettit, 2000).

In Romania the survey was carried out by Firescu to determine the elements of employee work satisfaction. The respondents replied to a series of questions regarding the elements of job satisfaction. Work appreciation that comes from the boss, communication feedback at workplace and workplace climate occupied the first three positions in respondents' replies out of 12 possible factors, including, among others, financial rewards (Firescu, 2008).

In Poland, Zientara and Kuczynski surveyed low-ranking administrative employees in a public administration sector to check employee perceptions of HR practices and their relations with job satisfaction and commitment. They found out that communication (together with distributive justice and teamwork) has a positive and statistically significant effect on job satisfaction (Zientara and Kuczynski, 2009).

Some researchers focus their interest on managerial communications only, that is, on the skills and behaviour of the supervisors. This is the manager and his communication skills that have a direct influence on employee job satisfaction. Kim's study explored the relationship between participative management in the context of the strategic planning and job satisfaction in local government agencies. Participatory management practices balance the involvement of managers and their subordinates in information-processing, decision-making, or problem-solving. Having surveyed over 1,500 employees in Nevada Kim found out that participative management that incorporates effective supervisory communications can enhance employee's job satisfaction, i.e. the employees who believed they had

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effective communications with their supervisors in their work units were more likely to express higher levels of job satisfaction. The research also showed that supervisor's listening skills were perceived as crucial in assessing the effectiveness of supervisory communications (Kim, 2002).

Sullivan's Motivating Language Theory (MLT) hypothesizes that superior's use of motivating language, including perlocutionary or direction giving, illocutionary or sharing feelings, and locutionary or explaining culture, would have positive impact on key worker productivity and processes outcomes including performance and job satisfaction. His theory triggered further research on the subject (Sullivan, 1988). In the US, Mayfield and Mayfield studies throughout many years (Mayfield and Mayfield, 1998; 2006; 2009) have proved Sullivan's MLT that strategic applications of leader oral communication have positive measurable effects on subordinate performance and job satisfaction. The Motivating Language Theory is further developed by Sharbrough, Simmons and Cantrill study which indicates a clear and easily identifiable link between ML, subordinates' satisfaction with leaders' communication, perceived supervisory communication competence, perceived leader effectiveness, and employees' satisfaction (Sharbrough, Simmons and Cantrill, 2006). Undoubtedly, it would be interesting to check the application of the theory in the organizational environment in Poland. The Anglo-Saxon perception of the Motivating Language Theory may be different from the Polish-culture viewpoint, and the components of the ML may vary in Poland.

In Madlock's research supervisors' communication competence accounted for the greatest variance and was found to be the greatest predictor of employee job satisfaction. His findings provided an association between communication, leadership and employee job and communication satisfaction (Madlock, 2008). This supports the research findings of Pincus, who indicated that the behaviours of supervisors have an important influence on their employees' job satisfaction (Pincus, 1986).

Phillipe, Helping and Koehler recognised managerial communication as important determinant of employee perception and behaviour. Their survey found a statistically significant connection between employee job satisfaction and the success of management's communication with employees. Their research is valuable for recognizing managerial communication to be at the centre of employee satisfaction and identifying six areas of communication that were found to be critical to employee satisfaction. The areas are following: providing feedback, explaining the vision, clarifying the reasons for change, communication of reward systems, differences between words and actions of a manager, and whether the communication of the vision guide the employee's actions (Phillipe, Helping and Koehler, 2009).

In their most recent study Madlock and Kennedy-Lightsey examined 200 full-time working adults. The findings of the study confirmed their prior research indicating positive relationships between mentoring behaviours of supervisors and their subordinates' job satisfaction. Mentoring is seen not only as teaching the protégé; the term implies a broader and longer interest in the lives of protégés, such as sponsoring, encouraging, counselling, and role modelling. The results indicated also that supervisors' verbal aggression was a greater negative predictor of subordinates' outcomes than was mentoring a positive predictor, supporting the presence of a negativity bias in the supervisor-subordinate relationship. A negativity bias is described as a condition in which the psychological impact of negative events tends to be longer lasting and have a greater influence on a person's state of mind than do positive events (Madlock and Kennedy-Lightsey, 2010). Therefore, the effects of a verbally aggressive supervisor will likely have a greater negative impact on an employee's well-being than would a positive event, such as mentoring.

Other researchers go into further details concerning managerial communications. In 2006, Byrne and LeMay surveyed 598 employees from the US based offices of a high-technology sector organization. The authors examined the use of various media with different richness (lean, medium and rich). The study proved that the proper choice of communication media suitable to the employees' needs directly improves their job satisfaction. The practical applications of that study imply that information from top management is perceived as accurate, timely, and useful (i.e., quality) when delivered via a lean communication medium, thus top management need not worry about having to meet everyone in person to ensure their messages are perceived with high quality. Information from direct supervisors is perceived as higher quality when delivered via a rich medium, and therefore, direct supervisors may want to consider using rich media more than lean. Their results suggest also that how employees form perceptions of satisfaction in information may be related to the technology used to transmit the information, and not on the content of the message alone or on the qualities of the sender (Byrne and LeMay, 2006). More research in this area is clearly needed.

Most of the quoted research suggests generally as employees experience more positive communication relationships with their managers, they also experience more positive job outcomes such as job satisfaction.

As stated above, the direct relation between the supervisor-subordinate communication and employee job satisfaction has been proved by many studies since the 1950s. The second group of research examining the relations between the internal communication and employee job satisfaction shows the dependence between communication and job satisfaction influenced by other variables. This relation is seen as a by-product of examining other issues connected either with supervisor-subordinate communication or employee job satisfaction. Johlke and

Duhan researching the role of managerial communication in sales teams proved that communication quality is positively associated with salesperson satisfaction with communication, and in turn, salesperson communication satisfaction is positively related with the salesperson's job satisfaction (Johlke and Duhan, 2001). Albrecht and Travalione's (2003) results reveal that effective organizational communication and job satisfaction are the elements of trust. Also Goris, Vaught and Pettit supported the importance of trust as the predictor of employees' job satisfaction and performance (Goris, Vaught and Pettit, 2003). Sollund carried out her research on mechanistic and organic forms of organizations and their influence on job satisfaction and commitment. She suggested that the organic form of organization has assets the mechanistic type of organization lacks (such as flexible forms of communication), which facilitates offers of promotion, and other work values which produce work satisfaction and work commitment (Sollund, 2006). Zeffane researches the impact of job satisfaction on commitment at the same time proving the significance of communication climate and trust for both (Zeffane, 2009).
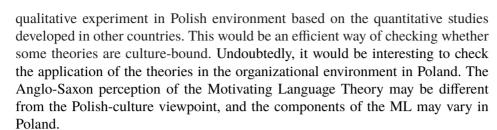
5. Conclusion

As the article presents the recent research conducted on the subject of internal communication shows the influence of superior-subordinate communication on the employee satisfaction.

Since the notion of internal communication is a wide subject, the study on superior-subordinate communication covers a wide range of issues. The authors indicate that employee satisfaction is predicted and moderated by successful communication of the superior. Issues such as work appreciation that comes from the boss, communication feedback at the workplace or downward communication are the confirmed elements of employee job satisfaction. However, the most important elements still remain the skills and behaviour of the supervisor: leader oral communication, perceived supervisory communication competence, perceived leader's effectiveness, and the behaviour of the supervisor. Other variables that are related to the subject are trust, communication climate and organic rather than mechanistic form of an organization. The studies give the HR specialists the background to design successful training for leaders, as well as provide businesspeople with the information on what is needed to keep the employee satisfied.

It would be undoubtedly interesting to include a qualitative component to provide a richer understanding as to the actual reasons employees attribute to perceiving their supervisor as a competent communicator. A limitation of the studies carried out so far is that they were primarily correlational studies. This limitation only allows for associations to be made between the variables. Rather than relying on the relations between the variables it would be worth carrying out

qualitative experiment in Polish environment based on the quantitative studies developed in other countries. This would be an efficient way of checking whether some theories are culture-bound. Undoubtedly, it would be interesting to check the application of the theories in the organizational environment in Poland. The Anglo-Saxon perception of the Motivating Language Theory may be different from the Polish-culture viewpoint, and the components of the ML may vary in Poland.

Additionally, directionality would have been of value in determining which behaviours elicited the others. For example, do satisfied employees perceive their supervisors as more communicatively competent as a result of their being satisfied, or do the competent communicative behaviours of the supervisor actually account for the employee satisfaction? For example, the suggestion that companies train supervisors to be better communicators may not necessarily cause employees to experience greater satisfaction.

More research is clearly needed on the subject on how employees form their perceptions on communication satisfaction, which, as the research suggests (Byrne and LeMay, 2006), may be related to the technology used to transmit the information, and not on the content of the message alone or on the qualities of the sender.

Moreover, it would be interesting to find whether the employee job satisfaction depends on the gender of a superior or a subordinate; or whether the perception of managerial communication competence depends on the gender of the superior or the subordinate.

Nonetheless, the findings of various authors do suggest that supervisors who are communicatively competent are likely to be perceived as leaders by their subordinates, which in turn may result in positive employee and organizational outcomes.

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