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## Organizational Communication Climate and Conflict Management: Communications Management in an Oil and Gas Company

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### Abstract

Communication climate is of paramount importance in an organization as it contributes to the effectiveness and success of an organization. The communication climate of an organization may influence the atmosphere in the organization which either encourages or hinders horizontal, upward or downward communication among the employees. In organizations with defensive climates, employees have the tendency to abstain from communicating their *needs*, as they become very cautious in making statements, and may have low level of motivation. On the other hand, organizations with supportive environments encourage active participation, healthy exchange of information and constructive conflict resolution. Instilling collaborative communication climate in an organization however requires effective management of conflicts. This paper reports a study conducted in a high risk work environment of an oil and gas company, in which the personnel have to work with volatile chemicals and heavy machines. The communicative behaviors in such hazardous environments are not to be taken lightly as communication errors could lead to fatal incidences. The study thus investigates the impact of communication conflict strategies used by the personnel on the overall organizational communication climate in a high-risk workplace environment. A set of questionnaires were administered to employees at all levels in the organization working at the administrative office and at the gas plant. One hundred and twenty five employees responded to the questionnaire, which attributed to more than fifty percent of the total population. The findings discuss the impact of various communicative strategies used in conflict management on the organizational communication climate. The overall findings suggest that conflicts management is related to the roles the personnel play in the organization. In assuming the leadership role, the top management's approach to conflicts include confrontational and compromise, instead of non-confrontation and control, which have a degree of impact on the communication supportive climate. The executives, technical staff, non-technical staff have different approaches in conflict management strategies.

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*Keywords:* Communication climate, conflict management, Organizational Communication

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational climate has been identified as a critical component between the members of an organization (Guzley, 1992). Organizational communication climate, which has been deliberated separately from organizational climate in the literature, has increasingly become one of the most important factors in creating an effective organization (Zaremba, 2003). Communication climate has been treated separately from organizational climate and separate from other climates in the organization, such as motivational climate or achievement climate (Poole, 1985). The Management has primary responsibility for the establishment of the communication climate of the organization.

“Climate” can be defined as the “relatively enduring quality of the internal environment of the organization that (a) is experienced by its members, (b) influences their behavior, and (c) can be described in term of values of a particular set of characteristics (or attributes) of the environment” (Taguiri, 1968:27). The climate thus sets the atmosphere in the organization that either encourages or discourages communication. Organizations with supportive environments encourage worker participation, free and open exchange of information, and constructive conflict resolution. In organizations with defensive climates, employees keep their views to themselves, make only guarded statements and suffer from reduced morale. Thus effective communication is important for the establishment of a collaborative communication climate. However, management of controversy and divergent thoughts as part of the communication climate forms a crucial task to be achieved in an organization.

Effective communication skills can be the most useful tool in dealing with organizational and personal conflicts. Fischer and Koue (1991) argued that “communication is inherent in almost any organizational conflict” (p.145). Conflict is “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals” (Miller, 2006:194). The basis of conflicts therefore lies in the perception of incompatibility regarding various issues in the organizations, the interdependent behaviors of organizational members, and the role of interaction that allows expression of incompatibility. This highlights the importance of communication in the study of conflict.

The study is contextualized within an oil and gas company with a highly hazardous work environment. Employees in the gas plant work with safety as their job priority. Failure in effective communication could be fatal. Literature however addresses the concern that the technical leaders today lack management training (Vieth & Smith, 2008) and opening up to two-way communication poses a big change to an engineer when assuming managerial role (Mhaskar, 2010). As engineers are trained to be task-oriented and highly technical, training such employees people skills i.e. communication skills, can be challenging especially when managing conflicts amongst the employees, and across the departments, to maintain supportive climate. The purpose of this study therefore is to explore the relationship between organizational communication climate and communication conflict in an oil and gas company. As the organization is made up personnel from of various levels and job expertise, the analysis will be conducted in relation to the different levels of the personnel i.e. Management, Executives, Non-executives, and Technical staff.

## 2. Literature Review

Organizational communication climate functions as a link between individual employees and the organization (Falcione, Sussman & Herden, 1987). The overall climate would give a hint of its employees’ beliefs and attitudes towards the organization. It conceptually consists of employees’ perceptions of the information flow and the climate in which the communication occurs (Pace, 1983: 126). Studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between the communication climate in the organization to the level of commitment of the employees to the organization (e.g. Trombetta and Rogers, 1988). Welsch and LaVan (1981) argued that quality of information, accuracy and communication flow are all related to commitment.

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