

Understanding the Effect of Organizational Culture and Employee Engagement on Organizational Performance Using Organizational Communication as Mediator: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract This paper attempts to investigate the relationships between employee engagement and organization culture and to explore what drives employee engagement. Engagements at work, organizational communication, organizational culture, and workforce effectiveness have gained much popularity and a considerable amount of discussions among employers and indeed is of escalating interest to researchers. Various research suggested that there is a need to focus on research that holistically cover the most significant issues of the subject and not to always arrive at more or less similar results. Therefore, aiming to fill this gap, this study proposes a conceptual framework to understand the effect of organizational culture on employee engagement and organizational performance. In addition, this study also suggests the adoption of organizational communication as mediator as it is one of the critical factors in producing an ideal environment which cultivates the best out of employees and organizations, and the commitment and experiences of the people in it. First, the concepts of organizational culture, employee engagement, organizational communication and organizational performance are briefly discussed. Then, the proposed conceptual framework for the study is presented. The intended participants of this study are full-time executive level employees in selected 5-star hotels located in Sabah, Malaysia. This study plans to employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in addition to using survey instrument design and Likert Scale questionnaire to assess dimensions of all constructs and the level of engagement of employees. Western studies may provide comparable findings in Asian studies due to certain similarities in the environment, culture, and communications. However, there has, so far, been no consensus in terms of results, thus more in-depth research on this area of employee engagement at work, organizational culture, and communication is required.

Keywords Organizational Culture, Employee Engagement, Organizational Communication, Sabah, Malaysia

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Problem Statement

Work engagement, organizational communication, and commitment are researchers' interest of late (Halbesleben, 2010). Researchers equate employee engagement with a positive relationship to customer satisfaction, productivity, profit, employees' retention (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999) and organizational effectiveness and success (Saks, 2006). In addition, this topic has gained much interest among researchers and organizations because of the fact that engaged employees are highly involved; they are emotionally attached to their job with a great enthusiasm

going the extra mile in making sure the success of the employer beyond the employment contractual agreement (Kampaso and Sridevi, 2010).

Bakker and Leiter (2010) likewise stressed the importance of engagement: "Modern organizations need employees who feel energetic and dedicated—i.e., who are engaged with their work. . . Work engagement can make a true difference for employees and may offer organizations a competitive advantage" (p. 1). Lockwood (2007) equally asserted that focusing on employee engagement is a promising strategy to improving organizational competitiveness.

Sak (2006) acknowledged the necessity to explore this subject of work engagement and the variables related to it. In 2008, Macey and Schneider, in their research identified that practitioners were more into researching the subject as opposed to the academic literature. The authors further stated that research supporting the possible significance of employee engagement is evident, however, research pointing

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Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/economics>

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at creating employee engagement, exploring the relationships between the topic in question and the organization and what might be the outcomes of doing so is still remarkably not fully explored. This knowledge gap has directed further research intended at facilitating employee engagement in organizations.

Preliminary literature findings suggest that only a handful of research that examine the relationship between organizational culture and employee engagement using organizational communication as mediator can be found. Past research such as Richardsen et al., (2006), Llorens et al., (2006) and Hakanen et al., (2006) focused mainly on work commitment.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the literature to understand how organizational communication can be used effectively to mediate the processes of/between organizational culture, employee engagement and organizational performance. Fraser and Hemming (2010) emphasized that communication on any level and setting is imperative and necessary for without it is the tendency for those affected to fill in the gaps and make assumptions. This can be disastrous for the organization. Currently at the initial stage, this research is expected to focus on the service sector specifically the tourism industry in Sabah.

1.2.1. Background: The Service Industry in Sabah

The service industry is a major provider to Sabah's GDP (Gross National Product). According to Dr. Abdul Rahman Hassan, Head of National Statistics Department, the sector contributed to 50.4 percent of the state's overall GDP (Murib, 11 July, 2012). He further reiterated on the state's aim which is to grow the services sector further to 65 per cent by 2020; this he said would complement the country's effort toward realizing a developed nation status, by stressing on the shift to service-driven economy.

In addition, it is the aim of the state government to further develop its services sector as a primary income generator. In Feb 2014, Sabah Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Raymond Tan Shu Kiah stated that the service sector was increasingly recognized as supporting the manufacturing sector and acting as enablers to boost the growth of the states's economy. Tan, who is also the state Industrial Development Minister, said that "*the knowledge-intensive service providers today were no longer perceived only as specialized knowledge carriers but also as connectors, technology transfer agents and problem-solvers.*" (Bernama, February 18, 2014).

1.2.2. The Tourism Industry

For Sabah, tourism being the third highest contributor to Sabah's economy after agriculture and manufacturing, the industry is envisaged to be a key driver for the services sector. In other words, Sabah aims to produce good quality workforce for the industry, which is in line with state's effort

in promoting the tourism industry, thus make Sabah among the most liveable places in Asia by 2025.

In its 2011 report, Oxford Business Groups stated that by 2009, 443 hotels had mushroomed in Sabah. This resulted in an increase in employment opportunities that saw the percentage of the state's workforce employed in hotels and restaurants increased to 4.6% in 2005 and 6.1% in 2009. On the same year, Sabah prided in having the following number of hotels: seven 5-star, seven 4-star, and thirty-three 3-star accommodations (The Report Sabah 2011).

As in any other countries, the major challenges for the Sabah tourism industry are to motivate employees as well as to keep them engaged fully. The customer's satisfaction is almost entirely dependent on how engaged a particular setting's workforce happens to be (Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes 2003). To increase competitiveness in order to realize Sabah's vision to make the tourism industry the key driver for the services sector, there is a need to look into the drivers of engagements such as the right employees in the right jobs(right match), organizational systems and strategies among others.

1.2.3. Brief Background of Sabah

Sabah's potentials in the services industry can be seen in the state government's implementation of the ¹ *Sabah Corridor Blueprint* in which the tourism industry had been identified as one of the economic drivers in Sabah (The Report Sabah 2011).

Table 1 indicates some of Sabah's primary industry advantages:

1.3. Significance of the Study

First, this study contributes to the literature in organizational behavioral studies and organizational communication.

Second, this research is important in providing a sound and useful knowledge to guide organizations pertaining to well-being and development of employees in the research setting. It attempts to derive fitting components of organizational culture and employee engagement and to examine how organization can significantly contribute to this process. Successful organizations rely on a healthy organizational communication to acquire a strong culture. Hence, the need for organizations to scrutinize both how employees can and want to actively contribute to the success of the organization; how employees can be equally concerned about things like quality, costs, customer service, and safety – not because they were being employed to do their job and that they have to, but because they want to.

1.4. Research Objectives

This research has as its aims the following research

¹ a document that over the course of the next 18 years, the strategies and programs outlined in the Blueprint will be regularly reviewed, its implementation closely measured and assessed to ensure that the initiative will continue to benefit the State and its people through the years

objectives:

- a) To examine the hypothesized components of organizational culture that include the processes, systems, leadership, person work-fit, realistic expectation, support, security and organizational communication.
- b) To determine the roles and impacts of organizational communication in driving employee engagement. Organizational communication helps in aligning employee expectations with those of the organization; in connecting employees with the organizational fabric and, in harnessing their engagement levels.
- c) To investigate how organizational culture captures work engagement amongst the employees. Employee engagement moderates the relation between organizational culture (the climate of the workplace) and individual personal accomplishment, work time dedication, emotional exhaustion, and overall well-being.
- d) To uncover whether the results of employee engagement affect the organizational culture and organizational performance by adopting effective organizational communication to mediate this process.

1.5. Research Question

- a) What are the components of an organizational culture which are necessary to be communicated for

employee's work engagement?

- b) How could organizational communication become an effective mediating factor for organizational culture and employee engagement toward achieving an increased organizational performance, in the service sector, specifically focusing on the tourism industry in Sabah?
- c) Is organizational culture included as a mediating factor that affects employee engagement?
- d) What are the effects of organizational communication on organizational culture and employee engagement?

2. Findings from Literature

2.1. Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is an important issue as it has been linked to employee productivity and organizational performance (Young, 2012). Engaged employees are viewed as a pillar of good working atmospheres where employees are effective (Robertson-Smith, and Markwick, 2009). There are also researches which suggested that engaged employees are likely to be productive (Saks, 2006), remain with their current employer (Saks, 2006; Shuck, Reio, and Rocco, 2014), and interact positively with customers (Chalofsky, 2010).

Table 1. Sabah's Industry Advantages

Advantages	
Strategic Location	Sabah serves as a connecting point to the rapidly growing ² BIMP-EAGA region and to the capital cities and market in North East Asia
Oil, Gas and Energy	Provide investors with an opportunity to invest in the petrolchemical and gas industry. In recent years, the oil, gas and energy sector was the hive of much activity, with the commencement of various projects such as the Sabah Oil and Gas Terminal (SOGT), Sabah Sarawak Gas Pipeline (SSGP) and so forth.
Agricultural and Natural Resources	Sabah's fertile agricultural land, marine resources and forests offer great potential in resource-based manufacturing activities such as the timber and wood-based industry, food and agro-based as well as biotechnology industries. Almost 30% of Malaysia's oil palm production comes from Sabah.
Human Capital	The ³ Sabah Development Corridor offers green field opportunities in human capital development, especially in environmental, natural resources and biotech-related industries. With direct air accessibility to many capital cities in Asia, Sabah can serve as an education and research center in environmental and conservation studies. The Danum Valley Field Research Centre has been harboring research scientists in tropical rainforest from all over the world.
Biodiversity as Eco-Attraction	With more than 2,000 flora species, Mount Kinabalu, Southeast Asia's tallest peak, pristine national parks and conservation areas as well as access to island, Sabah's natural charm is hard to ignore. Mount Kinabalu is listed as a UNESCO heritage site. Sabah biodiversity resources have been well conserved and unaffected by the Ice Age.
Cultural Appeal	Known to be the home of 32 ethnic groups, Sabah's culture is distinct and unique. The multi-cultural environment can inspire creative minds and offers great opportunities in the tourism industry.

Source: The Report Sabah 2011

² Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East-ASEAN Growth Area

³ An economic corridor initiative that spans throughout the state of Sabah; leveraging on its natural endowment as well as locational advantage to generate economic

Being engaged or satisfied in work has been associated with overall life satisfaction which go beyond the experience of work and physical boundaries of the workplace (Judge and Wantanabe, 1994). In his findings in 2000, Salkever asserted that work is centrally related to a person's quality of life providing a sense of direction, status, and purpose. Thus, employees regard work as place where they could identify in terms of "meaning, stability, and a sense of community and identity", and not just a place to earn a living (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006). These vital qualities of employees have to be sustained for better organizational performance.

Kahn (1990), the first to put his theory of employee engagement into practice stressed "meaningfulness, safety and availability" as critical in this concept, which years later was improvised by Maslach et al., (2001). They both emphasized the need to look further at possible antecedents necessary for engagement. Lockwood (2007) asserted in his research findings that culture in the organization could be the answer to shaping a culture of an organization. This paper also proposes that in shaping an organization, the culture that is intended has to be communicated to all members of the organization.

2.2. Organizational Culture

According to Schein (1984), culture in organizations serves to integrate members so that they know how to relate to one another and that of the working environment; culture gives employees a sense of identity and generates a commitment toward particular values and ways of doing things. In addition, the researchers asserted that organizational culture aids the organization to adjust to the external environment.

According to Klein (2008), his research findings posited that the past two decades of cumulative result of studies in organizational culture is a strong indication that culture and employee engagement matter. In an attempt to understand engagement and how this affect how things work around in the organization, Siddhanta and Roy (2012) explored

implications for theory, further research and practices by combining modern 'employee engagement' activities practiced by the corporate and drawing together the review of findings from previous research.

Singh and Shukla (2012) tried to find out what variables are significant to create a conducive organization and an engaged workforce. The study has been collected from a tin manufacturing organization and was exploratory in nature and the data.

2.3. Organizational Communication

Sharma (2014) related that organizational communication is the deliberation and exploration of the role of communication in organizational context. He further stressed that organizational communication is often a component of effective management in the workplace environment.

Hahn, Lippert and Paynton (2013) also stated that efficient organizational communication involves having the ability to work with diverse groups or individuals, knowing how to create and exchange information in complex and changing environments, as well as having the ability or motivation to communicate in fitting conducts.

Ziuraite (2008) further contended that organizations would expect favorable organizational outcomes if employees are exposed to appropriate communication within the organization as the perception of organizational communication is built on the idea that a person's reasoning and affective perceptions of the organization created an impact on his/her behavior in the organization.

Shockley-Zalabak (2006) posited that organizational communication is the method adopted by organizations to create and shape events. Organizational communication aids in aligning employee expectations with those of the organization, connect employees with the organizational fabric and to harness their engagement levels. Without a proper organizational communication, unveils a tendency for those affected to fill in the gaps and make assumptions.

Table 2

	Terms	Definitions	Source
1.	Employee engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." ▪ a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organization's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organizational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being 	<p>Kahn, 1990:694</p> <p>MacLeod and Clarke, 2009: 9</p>
2.	Organizational Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the way language is used to create different kinds of social structures, such as relationships, teams, and networks ▪ how organizations represent, present, and constitute their organizational climate and culture—the attitudes, values and goals that characterize the organization and its members. 	<p>Miller, 2014.</p> <p>Hahn, Lippert and & Paynton, 2013</p>
3.	Organizational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ shared organizational values, visions, beliefs, behavioral norms and the artifacts that are present in organizations 	Schein, 1985; Sathe, 1983; Cooke & Rousseau, 1988

According to Ridder (2004), organizational communication is helpful in facilitating supportive employees. Organizations are first and foremost communicating entities (Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis 2005).

2.4. Organizational Performance

Sundaray (2011) focused on various factors that led to employee engagement and looked into ways company needed to do to make the employees engaged. His findings further revealed that proper attention to engagement strategies will increase the organizational effectiveness in terms of higher productivity, profits, quality, customer satisfaction, employee retention and greater adaptability. Bhatla (2011) focused on the need for such employees and how their presence can enhance the progress and work efficiency of the organization as a whole. Bhatla also focused on the challenges faced by the HR managers to improve employee engagement for the organization's survival.

2.5. Working Definitions

The working definitions (not limited) of the proposed conceptual framework for this paper are as indicated in Table 2.

3. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper suggests investigating the relationships between employee engagement and organization culture and to explore what drives employee engagement. Looking at this study from an organizational perspective, organizational communication is used as a mediator to examine the potential antecedents of organizational conditions that could foster employee engagement at work thus entails an improved organizational performance.

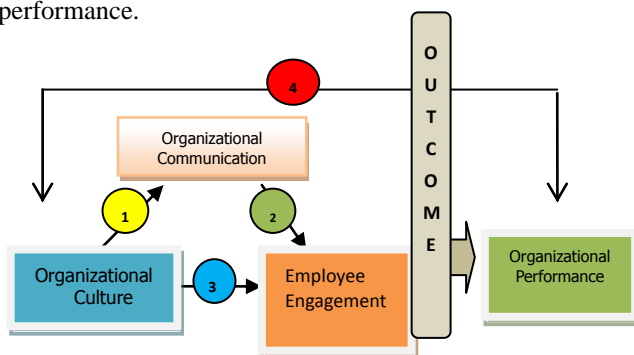


Figure 1. Illustrates the proposed conceptual model of this study

The coverage of the study is shown in figure 1. The arrows indicate the relationship between the variables (numbered) that will be examined:

1 Organizational Culture → Organizational Communication

Examines components of an organizational culture which are necessary to be communicated for employee's work engagement. *(Proposed components consist of systems,*

leadership, person-work fit, realistic expectation, support, security.)

2 Organizational Culture → Employee Engagement

Understanding the relationship between organization culture and employee engagement, determining whether by emphasizing the proposed components of organizational culture could capture engagement amongst the employees.

3 Organizational Communication → Employee Engagement

Explores ways in which the components of organizational culture could effectively be communicated for employee engagement. Organizational communication climate functions as a link between individual employees and the organization.

4 Linking the relationship between Organizational Culture, Employee Engagement and Organizational Performance: Why Organizational Communication matters.

How can organizational culture help in increasing organizational performance by adopting effective organizational communication to mediate this process?

Pawar (2009) reviewed the many antecedents of employee engagement in which he considered organizational culture and communication as most important. These antecedents have been identified as predictors of employee engagement and considered to be the central construct which comprise of vigor, dedication and absorption (Xanthopoulou, Bakker and Schaufelli, 2009).

In their attempt to examine the subject of employee engagement, Kular, et al (2008) reviewed three sets of areas: the conceptualizing of employee engagement and its accomplishments, ways in which engagement differs amongst individuals, and ways in which involvement affects engagement.

Robertson-Smith and Markwick (2009) revealed that employee engagement is an important yet complex challenge, and there remains many scopes for discussing the various approaches.

Simpson (2009) discussed the current state of knowledge about engagement at work through a review of the literature. This study highlighted the lines of engagement and focuses on the bases and concerns of engagement at work.

According to Barney (1991), internal characteristics of an organization make up essential sources for effectiveness; that the success of any organizational lies within this constraint. In this paper, the proposed set of component of an organizational culture consists of systems, leadership, person-work fit, realistic expectation, support, security. This component has to be communicated well so that members of the organization know how to perform or act in a manner that is most effective for them.

In Bertalanffy's theory of system, an organization has to be viewed holistically as it is the collective actions and interactions of the members of the organization that makes or break an organization. He further contended that suitable

communication mechanisms have to exist for the organizational system to exchange relevant information with its environment. (Bertalanffy, 1956).

In a different study, Cook et al (2013) asserted the importance of social structures in an organization because this can equally provide guidelines and directions as to how employees exercise the authority within their work scope and influence the surroundings to make work meaningful.

In Kahn's research, he regarded engagement as delicate elements – a combination of attitude and traits. This combination is important as it emphasizes the need for employee communication. (Kahn, 1990).

4. Methodology

The intended participants of this study are executive level employees in selected 5-star hotels located in Sabah, Malaysia. This study plans to employ the following methods:

- Using quantitative methods as the primary method and qualitative approach as secondary
- Survey instrument design to assess dimensions /aspects of all constructs
- The use SmartPLS for performing analysis related to structural equation modelling procedure
- Questionnaire (using Likert scale) to assess engagement of employees
- Interviews

5. Conclusions

The literature review findings led me to draw an assumption that if employees are more engaged in their work, better organizational performance could be achieved. When there is proper and effective communication in place, members of the organization could manage their job better. This premise allows an organizational culture that could be well managed. When effective communication is applied, the organization's goals and objectives could be achievable.

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