

Summary of the City of Roseville's Participation in the UPenn/SacState Communications Climate Study

Background

The City of Roseville was invited in March 2008 to participate in an academic research study being conducted by Prof. Hakan Ozcelik of Sacramento State University's College of Business Administration and Prof. Sigal Barsade from the Wharton School of Management at the University of Pennsylvania. The City of Roseville represented the public sector in their study.

Why communication climate matters

Improving communication climates could help organizations gain competitive advantage in terms of:

- **Increased productivity and effectiveness:** Studies showed that 60 percent of work errors have been due to poor communication among organizational members, and up to 80 percent of information can get lost as messages move up and down in organizations.
- **Better-connected employees:** Previous research has also found that 53 percent of the people in the U.S. reported that they feel intensely lonely in their public lives.

This study drew on a number of previous studies Prof. Ozcelik conducted on emotional climate of organizations. One of these studies received the Best Paper Award at the 2005 Academy of Management Conference and has been featured in the [Sac State Magazine](#).

Goal of the study

- To help managers better understand the communication climates in their organization and how these climates affect employees' performance, commitment, and satisfaction
- To understand how the communications climate can be improved
- To understand the role of loneliness (the researchers' interest area)

Why the City of Roseville participated

- The credibility afforded by statistically valid results obtained by academic researchers can help us manage and improve our organizational effectiveness.
- Participation was free for a study that would normally cost about \$30,000 to conduct.

Why results were reported over a year after the study was administered

It took several months for the researchers to analyze the amount of data and the dimensions of their study. The results were ready to be presented for about eight months, which were a time when changes abounded in our organization, beginning with early retirement incentives, budget cuts, layoffs, and an organizational redesign. The climate was less than optimal during that time for the results to be received, given the concerns dominating the organization's attention.

How the study was conducted

Members of the Citywide Communications Team provided data on workgroups, that had at least 5 people. Their supervisors were included in the study, and all study results were collected by the researchers and their research assistants, guaranteeing anonymity in the study. Workgroups included most departments in the City and all levels of the organization. The research assistants also came on site to administer paper surveys to employees who didn't have computer access at work.

The longitudinal survey study was administered at Time 1 in April 2008 to employees, and at Time 2 in June 2008 to employees and their supervisors. The timing was to ensure a level of validity through consistency in results, by controlling for the effect of daily circumstances on responses.

Data were analyzed using factor analyses and multiple regression analyses.

Who participated

The researchers were thrilled with the sample size and the response rate within our organization since it added to the validity of the results.

- 445 out of 694 participated
 - 64% response rate
- Average age: 43.6 years old
- Average tenure: 9.4 years
- 37% female; 63% male

The study's approach

Based on previous academic research, the study used the following **outcome variables** to indicate organizational effectiveness:

- Employees' performance
- Employees' commitment
- Employees' intention to stay
- Employees' satisfaction

The study then examined the relationships between the outcome variables and the following dimensions that comprise an organization's **communications climate**:

- Trust climate—Employees' willingness to depend on each other, with a belief that their coworkers are benevolent, concerned, reliable, and constructive.
- Positive emotional climate—The extent to which the work environment is active, determined, interested, alert, and enthusiastic.
- Openness climate—The degree to which employees can freely express their true ideas and emotions while interacting with others.

The study next examined the relationship between dimensions of the communications climate and the following ***technical and managerial factors***, which supervisors control or influence:

- Frequency of communication—Number of information exchanges per week via various channels, such as formal and informal meetings, written communication, phone conversations.
- Informality of communication—The degree to which interactions are spontaneous, face-to-face, and do not strictly follow the formal chain of command.
- Duration—The length of interactions between organizational members when they communicate.
- Supervisor support—Employees' perceptions about whether their supervisor values their contributions, considers their goals, and cares about their well-being.

What the results showed

The researchers noted the strength of the correlation, even throughout the diverse departments and at all levels of the organization. Our workforce spoke strongly and in unison on how certain factors affect others.

- ***How communications climate affects outcome variables at the City of Roseville:***
 - Our organization said resoundingly that trust has the strongest influence on all of the outcome variables: employees' performance, commitment, intention to stay and satisfaction.
 - Trust had a particularly strong influence on commitment.
 - Satisfaction was almost equally influenced by trust, positive emotional climate, and openness
- ***How technical and managerial factors influence the communications climate at the City of Roseville:***
 - Our organization said resoundingly that supervisor support has the strongest influence by far on all dimensions (trust, positive emotional climate and openness) of the communications climate, twice as much as frequency, duration, or informality of communication.
- ***How loneliness plays a role in the City of Roseville's communication climate:***
 - Loneliness: When a person feels estranged from or deprived of close personal relationships. One doesn't have to be alone to feel lonely. It's about the quality of a person's relationship.
 - When loneliness was factored into the analysis, it had a stronger influence on outcome variables (performance, commitment, intention to stay, satisfaction), than any other dimension of the communication climate (trust, positive emotional climate, openness).
- ***How technical and managerial factors can influence loneliness***
 - Supervisor support, once again, proved the strongest influencer on the loneliness dimension of the communication climate as well, far surpassing the effect of frequency, duration, and level of informality of communication).

In summary, our workforce said:

- Communications climate influences major outcomes including:
 - Performance
 - Commitment
 - Intention to stay
 - Satisfaction
- The trust dimension plays most significant role, influencing all four outcomes.
- Communications climate influences outcome variables mostly because employees feel more lonely when there are problems in the communications climate.
- Level of supervisor support is most significant predictor of success.
- Lack of supervisor support had an additional effect of decreasing employees' trust with their coworkers.

Suggestions based on study results

- **Longer, more frequent** interactions can improve **trust** and alleviate loneliness
- To create more **openness**, the level of **informality** is key, but not frequency or duration of interaction
- **Informal** communication is more conducive to sharing ideas, which increases **commitment and satisfaction**
- Helping employees alleviate **loneliness** can significantly improve their **attitudes and performance**

Special thanks to the Citywide Communications Team for their extensive assistance in ensuring the success of this study.

If you have additional questions about the study, please email [Megan MacPherson](#).