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By Munazza Ambreen & Prof. Dr. Rehana Masrur

Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

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Are Our Universities a Prey to Defensive Communication Climate: A Comparative Study of Public and Private Sector?

Munazza Ambreen^α & Prof. Dr. Rehana Masrur^σ

Abstract - The present study aimed to analyze the pervasiveness of defensive communication climate in higher education institutions in Pakistan. In this regard an attempt was made to investigate the six elements of defensive communication climate in the higher education institutions in Pakistan. The study also taken into account the differences between public and private sector institutions, with regard to extent up to which defensive communication climate prevails in these institutions. For the present study 5 public and 3 private sector universities located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad were selected as the sample clusters. From the selected universities 20% of the faculty members of each department were taken as respondents / sample. For collection of data adapted form of Communication Climate Inventory and informal Interviews were used. Data analysis revealed that on the whole there was a considerable extent of defensive communication climate in public sector universities. But very interestingly some of the elements of defensive communication climate for example neutrality, strategy and evaluation were present to a significant extent in private sector universities as well. Majority of the respondents pointed out that elimination of defensive communication climate was crucial for assuring quality in the higher education institution. Therefore no- defensive communication climate be established, strengthened and maintained to gear efforts towards quality assurance and enhancement. It was suggested that seminars and forums be organized to discuss the issue and action oriented research be conducted to find out the factors creating defensive communication climate.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Communication plays very critical role in an organization. It works as life blood and not only the success but even survival of an organization is not possible if no communication occurs in the organization (Zalabak, 2002, Bovee, Thill and Schantzman, 2003, Hynes, 2005). Tim and Detienne (1995) argued that communication breathes life into managerial functions and managers spend 90 % of their workday in communicating. In an organization all the

communication events as perceived by the members of the organization create communication climate. Communication climate plays a pivotal role in determining the effectiveness of an organization and for pro-motive and positive interaction among members of an organization it is important to create an effective communication climate Rutenbeck (2006). This critical but invisible phenomenon is not easy to be defined. Zalabak(2002) defines communication climate as when communication occurs between managers and employees or between employees, individuals evaluate this communication, develop beliefs about it, and these collective beliefs, expectations and values regarding communication are called communications climate. According to him communication climate is a subjective reaction to organization members' perception of communication events. Organizational climate and communication climate are not the same things rather communication climate is the part of organizational climate Guzley (1992). Allder (2006) describes communication climate from another angle when he argues that it is emotional "atmosphere" between speaker and audience -created by the way the speaker addresses his audience and vice versa. Buchholz (2001) defines communication climate as the internal environment of information exchange among people through an organization's formal and informal networks. He adds that if the information flow is free there is an open communication climate in the organization and communication climate is closed when information is blocked.

According to Jack Gibb as cited in Beck (1999) communication climate lies on a continuum from defensive to supportive. According to him in a defensive climate the speaker intimidates the listener which ultimately results in cautious and withdrawn of the listener.

Gibb expanded his discussion about climates with the help of six polarities of defensive communication climate that are: Evaluation; Control; Neutrality; Strategy; Superiority and Certainty (Beck, 1999, Wood, 2007).

Pervasiveness of defensive communication climate is a threat for any organization because this sort of communication climate results in lack of interaction between manager and employees and among the

*Author α : Assistant Professor, Secondary Teacher Education Department, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
E-mail : munazza.ambreen@aiou.edu.pk*

*Author σ : Chairperson Secondary Teacher Education Department, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
E-mail : reha_masrur@yahoo.com*

employees themselves which ultimately leads towards an ineffective; unsupportive and non cooperative organizational culture. Guffey (1997) believes that closed or defensive communication climate acts as a powerful communication barrier, in this type of communication climate employees receive little organizational news and they feel devalued. Buchholz (2001) supports these views and further argues that defensive communication climate is undesirable as it results in lost business, damaged reputations and general unhappiness. He argues that research evidence shows that an absence of defensive communication climate enhances human relationships, resulting in increased morale and productivity. Zalabak (2001) also supports the notion that communication climate affects the employees and resultantly the organization in many ways by arguing that it is closely tied to morale, job satisfaction and actual organizational effectiveness.

As presently, we are living in an era where knowledge has become the key driver of social, economic and political development. No nation can dream to march forward without creation, utilization and diffusion of knowledge. (Rahman, 2008; Hussain, 2008). Higher education institutions are mainly responsible for this task and quality higher education is the solo incubator for knowledge economy and socio-economic progress. As a result the institutions of higher education across the world are striving to achieve or improve quality. In order to develop a quality culture in higher education and to improve the standards of quality in academic activities, Higher Education Commission Pakistan has developed procedures and guidelines for quality assurance in the higher education institutions and the variables considered for this process are students, faculty staff, governance, infrastructure, facilities and funding. In this context the communication events of the organization and particularly communication climate also play a significant role. Sufficient empirical support is available to prove that supportive communication climate leads towards many positive organizational outcomes. A study on 'communications climate, job satisfaction and organizational commitment' conducted by Trombetta (1998) found a positive relationship between communication climate and job satisfaction. A significant correlation was found between communication climate and organizational commitment. Costigan and Schmeidler (2001) studied the elements and impacts of supportive and defensive communication climate and argued that communication climate in any organization is a key determinant of its effectiveness. Organization with prevalence of defensive communication climate would result in demoralization of the employees and communication barriers. It is therefore necessary that organizations should take necessary considerations to judge if any element of

defensive communication climate exists in the organization so that the same can be addressed and steps can be taken to stop the prevalence of the defensive communication climate. The present study is an attempt in this regard which aims to explore the pervasiveness of defensive communication climate in higher education institutions in Pakistan.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was designed to achieve the following objectives

- i. To investigate the pervasiveness of communication climate in the higher education institutions.
- ii. To measure the difference between defensive communication climates of public and private sector universities of Pakistan.
- iii. To highlight the perceived antecedents and consequences of defensive communication climate with special reference to institutions of higher education in Pakistan.

III. NULL HYPOTHESIS

In order to achieve objective no 2 and 3 following null hypotheses were constructed

1. There is no significant difference between mean scores of the faculty of the public and private sector universities on evaluation dimension of defensive communication climate in the organization.
2. No significant difference is there between mean scores of the faculty of the public and private sector universities on Control dimension of defensive communication climate in the organization.
3. There is no significant difference between mean scores of the faculty of the public and private sector universities on Neutrality dimension of defensive communication climate in the organization.
4. No significant difference is found between the mean scores of the faculty of the public and private sector universities on Superiority dimension of defensive communication climate in the organization.
5. There is no significant difference between mean scores of the faculty of the public and private sector universities on Strategy dimension of defensive communication climate in the organization.
6. Mean scores of the faculty of the public and private sector universities on Certainty dimension of defensive communication climate in the organization do not differ significantly.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Population of the study comprised of all the public and private sector universities of Pakistan. For selection of representative sample cluster random sampling technique was used and 5 public and 3 private sector universities located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad were selected. From these selected

universities 20% faculty members. Two instruments for data collection were used, adapted form of communication climate inventory, developed by Costigan and Schmeidler in 1984, and informal interviews. Reliability coefficient of the adapted inventory was found to be .822 which indicated that the instrument was quite reliable.

Data were collected through personal visits of the researcher to sample universities. For interpretation of data, both descriptive and inferential statistics were

used. In order to compare the views of faculty members from public and private sector universities, t-test for independent samples was used.

V. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In order to compare the perceptions of the faculty members from high ranked and low ranked universities t test was used. The result of the data is shown in the following table:

Table 1 : Significance of difference between mean scores of faculty members from public and private sector universities regarding different dimensions of defensive communication climate

Statements	Respondents	N	Mean	S.D	SE _p	t	p
Evaluation	Group A	91	2.57	.69	.18	.669	>.05
	Group B	74	2.69	.71			
Control	Group A	91	4.07	.49	.52	3.38	<.05
	Group B	74	3.83	.44			
Neutrality	Group A	91	2.16	.84	.22	1.79	<.05
	Group B	74	1.77	.81			
Strategy	Group A	91	3.91	1.29	.13	.573	>.05
	Group B	74	3.70	1.28			
Superiority	Group A	91	3.85	.44	.04	6.10	<.05
	Group B	74	3.46	.35			
Certainty	Group A	91	3.90	.44	.06	2.03	<.05
	Group B	74	3.73	.63			

$df = 163$ Critical value at $0.05 = 1.64$

Group A : faculty members from Public sector Universities

Group B : faculty members from Private sector Universities

The table indicates that there was no significant difference found between the views of the faculty members of public and private sector universities on evaluation dimension of the defensive communication climate. Whereas perceptions of the faculty members of public and private sector universities were found to be significantly different on control, superiority and certainty dimensions of the defensive communication climate within the organization. A non significant difference between the views of faculty members of public and private sector universities was found on the strategy dimension of the defensive communication climate.

The above findings indicate that null hypothesis no 1 and 5 were accepted whereas null hypothesis no 2, 3, 4 and 6 were rejected in favor of faculty members of the public sector universities.

a) Conclusions

Based upon the data collected through Communication climate inventory and informal

interviews following conclusions were drawn.

- Both in public and private sector universities managers tend to focus upon evaluation more than description. This means that employees are judged, and questioned frequently by the manager as a result they feel reluctant to disclose their ideas and information.
- Communication climate in public sector universities was found control oriented which is characterized by manipulating others and imposing the manager's point of view upon employees.
- Academic managers of the public sector universities were found to be more neutral and less empathetic in their communication. Neutral messages shows lack of interest regard and care. (Gibb 1961; Beck 1999; Wood 2007) and the employees feel devalued which ultimately leads towards negative feelings about the managers in particular and the employees in general.

- Both in public and private sector universities, the faculty members believed that strategic messages were common in the communication patterns which refer to deceiving or misleading behavior.
- Public sector universities were found to be more inclined towards a communication climate characterized by superior-inferior nature. A defensive communication climate is created when manager conveys the message that he/she is more knowledgeable, important, intelligent and superior than the other persons involved in the dialogue. This makes the employees reluctant to self disclosure resulting in defensive communication climate.
- Communication climate of the public sector universities were found to have certainty as a more prevailing element as compared to private sector universities. When certainty is there in communication messages, the managers tend to believe that they are always right, they have low tolerance for ideas that disagree with theirs. (Beck, 1999)

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of conclusions following recommendations were made:

- Action oriented research be conducted to identify the factors contributing towards the establishment of defensive communication climate in higher education institutions.
- Seminars and workshops be organized to highlight the significance of communication climate and the ways to foster non-defensive communication climate in all organizations in general and in higher education institutions in particular.
- Attention be given to other communication factors for example usefulness of communication technologies, new communication channels and communication styles of the managers and employees of higher education institutions.
- Skills required for non-defensive communication climate be taught to the managers of higher education and opportunities be given to practice these skills.

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