



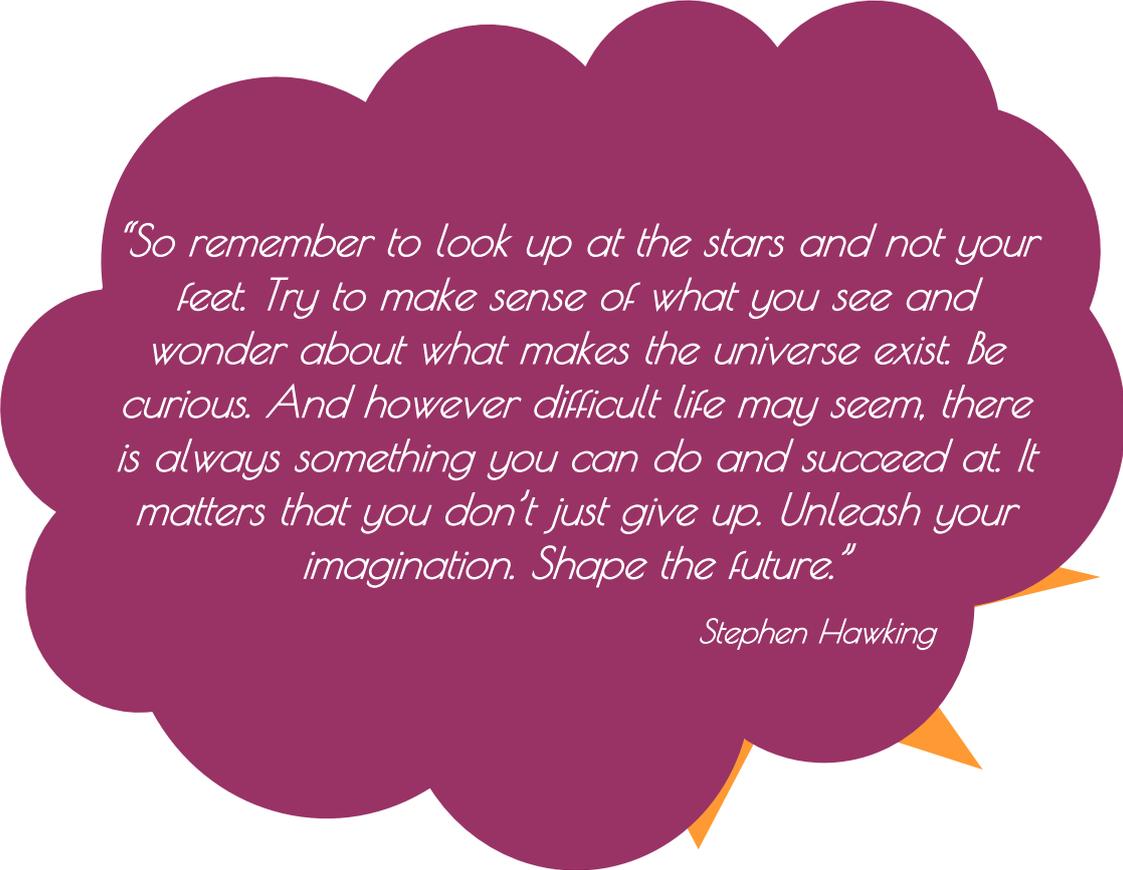
Understanding Communication Climate: A story about supportive interactions in organisations

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Master thesis Corporate Communication

October 31st, 2018
Rotterdam School of Management
Executive master in Corporate Communication

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“So remember to look up at the stars and not your feet. Try to make sense of what you see and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious. And however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. It matters that you don’t just give up. Unleash your imagination. Shape the future.”

Stephen Hawking

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Preface

Human behaviour has always fascinated me, and most of all why we sometimes create such adverse or dysfunctional circumstances for ourselves to achieve success, alone, in a group or in an organisation, while in the meantime we absolutely crave this connection. Unfortunately, as anyone who has ever been part of a group, family, team or organisation – basically every human being – knows, this connection is not something that simply can be forced. Think of a supervisor who dislikes one of his subordinates and the effect that might have on both their performances through the quality of their relationship.

Even as a child I was curious about the world around me and the humans in it. I became mesmerised by how vastly fascinating the entire universe is, how insignificantly small we humans are on its stage and what possibilities the future might hold. Life science has intrigued me in the broadest sense of the term. I am fascinated by what connects or separates us, through our language and our behaviour. My interest in communication originates from a deeply held desire to understand this, and how we can create circumstances that support connection and avoid separation. There are many fields of study that connect to this subject: Psychology, anthropology, human resources, behavioural sciences, organisational science and neuroscience to name but a few. To me communication feels like a cross roads where they all meet.

I started out my academic career studying chemical engineering, and conducting very fundamental research on catalysts. When studying fundamental laws of nature, there is usually one clear explanation, one solution to every problem (although that too, as I now know, could be debated). But there is definitely not one solution when it comes to studying social phenomena, because each of us is in a sense unique and has a hidden world inside, made up of our chemistry, the sum of our experiences, the way we look at the world.

The context of a group of people functioning in an organisation, and as such corporate communication, keeps fascinating me. After a career of almost two decades in human resources, event management and corporate and internal communication, at the end of 2017, I decided to combine all my experiences and knowledge, became an entrepreneur and started Ingage inc. My mission is to help people work together better in organisations, departments or teams. To achieve this I don't just try to optimise internal communication, but most of all to raise awareness for the power we each have to make an impact when we communicate effectively. Because without communication, how can strategy be executed by the employees of the organisation? If an organisation wants to be successful - in the broadest sense of the word – a supportive connection between employees seems a necessity to me.

To focus my thesis on employee (internal) communication, and especially communication climate, was inspired by Cees van Riel and his master class on Employee Communication which I attended in 2017. In figuring out along the way how to research it, it was a gift that I was introduced to an organisation that struggled with their internal communication and that was willing to let me research and help them. It threw me into the hands of a coach that helped me see things from a different perspective. There is no such thing as coincidence.

This thesis project has been part of a transformational journey. Throughout my master studies I visited several fields of study and vast amounts of research. It led me through struggles within my rational mind, revelations and caused my brain to seemingly short circuit more than once. It helped me understand the fabric of connection better, and it made me realise I know a lot and actually this means I know very little. I came to understand eight step plans are nice but it's far better to understand how to translate them to the reality of a specific organisation. I also came to understand and wholeheartedly believe there is something every organisation can do in order to nurture connection between employees and guard their communication climate. Welcome to the journey.

Myriam Heffels
Vleuten, October 31st 2018

Contents

Executive summary	7
1 Introduction.....	9
1.1 Employee Communication	9
1.2 The relevance of communication climate	10
2 Research question.....	12
2.1 Influences on communication climate	12
2.2 Researching an educational institute.....	13
2.3 A twofold research question	13
Part I Theoretical background.....	15
3 Theoretical background	16
3.1 Communication climate.....	16
3.1.1 Continuums of communication climate	17
3.1.2 Levers of communication climate: a preliminary conclusion.....	19
3.2 Organisational identification in relation to communication climate	20
3.3 Employee participation in relation to communication climate	21
3.3.1 The role of feedback	22
3.3.2 The role of participation in decision making	22
3.4 Employee voice in relation to communication climate	23
3.4.1 A climate of silence: Fear to voice	23
3.4.2 The influence of group context and supervisors on climate	24
3.5 Trust in relation to communication climate	25
3.5.1 Trust and teamwork: trust building in relationships	26
3.5.2 Building trust supports an open communication climate.....	27
3.6 Corporate culture in relation to communication climate	27
3.6.1 Culture is enduring but can evolve.....	28
3.6.2 Corporate tribe: culture exists in-between people	28
3.7 Communication climate from the perspective of followership.....	29
3.7.1 Servant leadership: Empowering employees to follow.....	29
3.7.3 Connecting the continuum of followership and communication climate	30
3.8 Conclusion and discussion of literature research	31
3.8.1 A proposed theoretical framework and definition	31
3.8.2 A proposed overall continuum of communication climate.....	33
3.8.3 Supporting communication climate through supportive behaviour	33
3.8.4 Conclusion: theoretical insights.....	36

Part II Research & findings	37
4 Research	38
4.1 Research subject: educational institution	38
4.2 Research methodology and data collection	40
4.2.1 Qualitative research	40
4.2.2 Responsive interviewing method	41
4.2.3 Qualitative content analysis, observations and other conversations	42
5 Data analysis and findings	45
5.1 Analysis of previous findings from the institute	45
5.2 Findings from mediation, workshops and qualitative content analysis	47
5.2.1 Mediation	47
5.2.2 Workshops, conversations and other observations	49
5.2.3 Qualitative content analysis	52
5.3 Findings from the interviews	54
5.3.1 Experiences management team members	55
5.3.2 Experiences employees in general	56
5.3.3 Reflection on the interview process and analysis	63
5.4 Analysis of the interviews by responsive methodology	63
5.4.1 Gestalt 1: I have to fight for my rights	64
5.4.2 Gestalt 2: I do what we have always done here, let's just move on	67
5.4.3 Counter story: I guard our professional relationships	68
5.5 Applying the continuum	70
Part III Conclusion & Discussion	72
6 Conclusion and Discussion	73
6.1 Conclusion theoretical background	73
6.2 Research conclusion: summary of findings	73
6.3 Discussion	75
6.3.1 Theoretical relevance of the findings	75
6.3.2 Practical relevance of the findings	75
6.3.3 Limitations and recommendations for further research	77
7 Management recommendations for the institute	79
7.1 Follow-up with a story workshop	79
7.2 Management development	79
7.3 Build internal communication	80
7.4 Continue to build supportive employee relationships	80
7.5 Address cultural differences of employees	81
8 Reflection	82

Appendices	84
Acknowledgement	85
References	86
Appendix 1 Dynamics & effects corporate silence	91
Appendix 2 VENPIL Progressive Model of Voice	92
Appendix 3 The Decision To Trust model	93
Appendix 4 Conversational Dashboard and Intelligence Matrix	94
Appendix 5 Previous survey results institute	95
Appendix 6 Previous session results institute	96
Appendix 7 Interview topics and suggested questions	97

Executive summary

Effective employee communication has proven to be key in stimulating employee alignment and engagement, which are linked to improved organisational performance. However, employee communication is also still a neglected topic in literature. Of its four dimensions, structure, flow, content and climate, communication climate is the most intangible one, but it has also been linked to increased job satisfaction and employee commitment. So it seemed well worth gaining a better understanding of communication climate and what influences it. When an educational institute that struggled with their internal communication entered the scene, this opened up an opportunity to study those influences in the reality of an organisation. The answer was as surprising as simple: a positive communication climate arises from supportive interactions between employees, and most of all, between employees and their supervisor.

In the first part of this thesis, through an extensive study of literature the concept of communication climate in organisations and how identification, participation, employee voice, trust and culture relate to it was explored, as well as how communication climate relates to followership of employees. The second part of this thesis describes the research in a small, internationally oriented educational institute in the Netherlands. They needed help to improve their internal communication.

Part 1: Understanding communication climate

Communication climate is a social construction, which means it is constructed, subjectively, from the perception of each employee of the communication behaviour in the organisational environment of the employee. This means there is not just one communication climate in an organisation. As the culture of an organisation is expressed in the behaviours of employees, it is also expressed in the communication behaviour, which in turn is perceived as the communication climate.

A communication climate that is perceived as open, or rather as 'conductive to positive mutual connection' strengthens organisational identification of employees to their organisation. When employees are able to participate in the organisation, by being able to give upward feedback or to influence decision making, they perceive the communication climate as more positive too. To be able to participate, employees have to feel safe to voice their feedback, thoughts or ideas. This is especially important in the relationship between the employee and their supervisor. Employees have to trust their supervisor or their colleagues in order to be able to voice, and that trust is built by the supportiveness of the interactions that employees have.

The perception of communication climate lies between two extremes on a continuum, from open (supportive, trust building, voice stimulating and participative) to closed (defensive, distrust fuelling, silence inducing and non-participative). Each of these extremes are connected to certain behaviours and dimensions, which can be a useful tool for employee communication professionals to shed a light on where improvements could be made or initiatives could be taken to develop the communication climate. However, the most important role for employee communication professional could lie in helping develop supportive relationships in organisations, by coaching management and supervisors to build trustworthy relationships with employees, and take up the responsibility they have to empower employees to become more committed to or even stewards of the organisation.

Part 2: Researching an educational institute

The educational institute that was researched has 57 employees, roughly half of them academics (many coming from countries all over the world) and the other half support staff. The employees are very committed to their work and the cause it serves, feel at home in an academic environment, have much freedom and are in general very happy with their job. However, the employees expressed a lack of trust in the management team and suffered from (reporting) structure and roles not being clear. There is a lack of collaboration, even competition between the teams, favouritism and unjustifiable differences in the execution of rules. There is much going on in the undercurrent of the institute, which in the recent past led to a situation of intimidation, and ultimately to employees burning out or leaving. Management decided to take action to reorganise the structure, implement HR management to define job roles and support personal development.

They brought in mediation, and I was allowed to join one of the sessions, as well as several other workshops and working group meetings. In addition I interviewed 12 employees by responsive interviewing, which means the interviews have a conversational character, and questions are based on the responses of the interviewees. The interviews were analysed by responsive methodology. This meant constructing narratives, stories written from a personal perspective out of the interviews, from connecting examples and attributed meaning and interpretations from the interviewees. This, together with previous findings from the institute (employee surveys) led to an understanding of the issues of the institute as well as several recommendations to improve internal communication.

A story of supportive interactions: recommendations for the institute

The key issue of the educational institute is a lack of leadership, which allows for much freedom and autonomy, and thus each team can create their own work and rules. There is a disconnection between academics and support staff and teams are working in silos. A constructive dialogue, by the use of the developed employee narratives, can help (re)build the relationships and stimulate more supportive interactions between all employees and with management. In addition employee communication needs to be developed and management should develop their role in this. Currently information mostly travels through informal channels, which creates noise and is unreliable. Giving of feedback needs to be improved. Also, employees are not aligned to the strategy and have no shared values.

Armed with the theoretical insights of the first part of this thesis, the following recommendations could be formulated to address employee communication and the relationships between employees and with management.

1. Follow-up with a story workshop.

The research findings from the interviews with 12 employees have been converted into three narratives and after a member check is done on them, they are ready to be used in a story workshop. The goal of this workshop is to let employees have a dialogue, sharing experiences and stories, helping them create a new understanding together, and to (re)build their relationship as colleagues.

2. Management development

As the lack of leadership is the key issue for employees of the institute, the development of the roles of management and supervisors needs attention. Management needs to lead by example and show the supportive behaviour they want to see returned from employees, take up their role in employee communication and build alignment. A group coaching session can be designed to address this and together develop awareness, skills, rules or processes to this end. In addition the supervisors can develop their leadership skills through regular intervision sessions.

3. Build internal communication

Another important improvement would be the development of a formal internal communication structure (design a meeting structure for teams and management, develop the intranet and introduction for new employees) as well as an internal communication plan connected to the strategy of the institute. Employees can participate in the development, and HR should be connected.

4. Continue to build supportive employee relationships

As a follow up after the story workshop, employees (including management) can participate in a session in which they work on creating the future of the institute together, building on the strengths of the institute like their idealism, the history, the international environment, the exciting work, the family atmosphere and the freedom. The goal of such a workshop is to continue with building positive relationships between the employees, and employees and management, and let them come up with ways to sustain that themselves. By improving the interactions between all employees, trust can start to be built again, and the employees can define shared values that can guide them in their job.

5. Address cultural differences of employees

The cultural differences between employees impede mutual understanding. Learning about those differences, trying to understand them more, can also help connection and avoid isolation of certain groups or employees.

1 Introduction

Organisations consist, of course, of people – employees – brought together based on their knowledge, skills, experience and motivation, with their own thoughts, feelings and aspirations, convictions, goals, sense-making and -giving processes, biases and so on. In an organisation they are expected to work towards a common goal from multiple personal desires and motivations. To work on that common goal, employees need to be aligned with it and to connect and work together to reach it.

Research shows that humans are “hardwired to seek the company of others – to connect” (Brown, 2012). Within an organisation, this connection is fostered by internal communication, which has to be strategic in nature in order to support employee alignment with the strategy of the organisation (Dolphin, 2005; Welch and Jackson, 2007).

You don't have to look far to stumble upon the societal debate on how to balance work pressures and find more happiness, how to create employee engagement and ensure retention of talented employees. As employees also act as advocates for the organisation in the outside world, they can and will impact its reputation. In a world where the gap between the magnitude of change and the organisational ability to manage it widens (Jorgensen et al., 2014), empowering and engaging employees to act as co-owners of the organisation seems important to make ongoing change work and to sustain an organisation. Employees that are committed, motivated and even excited to follow what leadership sets out to reach can give an organisation that extra competitive edge. However, you also don't have to look very far to find that in practice it is a challenge to truly foster that followership.

1.1 Employee Communication

During his lectures on Employee Communication at Rotterdam School of Management in March of 2017 professor Cees van Riel mentioned that employee communication (also called internal communication) has been a neglected topic in academic literature (Van Riel, 2017a). Yet employees are the key stakeholders of an organisation as they are crucial to achieving the goals an organisation – or rather the (social) group of people that make up the organisation with their group and individual goals – strives to reach.

That there are gaps in the knowledge of employee communication is supported by other scholars. Welch and Jackson (2007) wrote a paper on internal communication, noticing those gaps in the research and providing examples of many scholars who concluded the same throughout the years: Grunig et al. (1992, p. 557) who stated that there was “little theoretical understanding of internal communications”, and Argenti (1996, p. 94) who mentioned that employee communication was a part of corporate communication that offered many opportunities for further research, as well as Smidts et al. (2001, p. 1051) who call it a “neglected management instrument”. In 2011 Ruck and Welch (2011, p. 295) still concluded that employee communication has been given “minimal attention”. And, even more recently, as part of their research on communication of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Crane and Glozer (2016, p. 1240) notice that further research into employee communication with regard to CSR would be desirable. One of the issues they see, is the difficulty of securing data from employees as “firms are typically reluctant to open up to external researchers in this sensitive area, making extensive surveys, experiments or interviews difficult to realise”.

Still, effective employee communication has proven to be a key to better employee performance, and thus deserves more attention. Van Riel explained during his lectures (Van Riel, 2017b) that companies can apply both hard-wired initiatives like restructuring the organisation, changing structures, processes and procedures (reorganising) and soft-wired initiatives, involving internal communication and development of trust and work relationships to create an aligned company. Such ‘soft wired’ initiatives have been proven to work the best in creating alignment and engagement in the long run, because they allow employees to shape their own thoughts on and position of their work (Van Riel, 2012, p. 66).

Creating employee alignment

Employee communication should function to increase employee alignment (how employees behave, acting in line with the strategy and goals of the organisation) and employee engagement (how employees feel in terms of motivation and commitment). Van Riel defined employee alignment as ‘a mutually rewarding relationship’ between employees and the organisation (Van Riel, 2017b, p. 13). An employee most definitely wants to get something out of their job too, and for an organisation aligned behaviour has significantly positive results. Aligned behaviour has proven to improve performance of both employees and the organisation as a whole (Van Riel, 2012, pp. 47–49).

Three efforts of management are proposed to stimulate aligned behaviour in employees: (1) informing efforts, (2) motivating efforts and (3) capability building efforts (Van Riel, 2012; van Riel et al., 2009). All three efforts are needed; when the information and development options that employees receive are not perceived as adequate, any efforts to motivate seem to be ineffective to stimulate strategically aligned behaviour (van Riel et al., 2009). So both informing and capability building play in turn influence employees’ motivation. Once employees feel well informed about what is expected of them, as well as sufficiently trained, it will motivate them. And one could also propose that without motivation, employees cannot become well aligned at all. Motivating employees, so they are both informed, prepared and committed (aligned), is one of the roles of employee communication.

A definition of employee communication

Employee communication is “the process through which organisations share information, build commitment, and manage change by a professional application of four dimensions: (1) structure, (2) flow, (3) content and (4) climate” (Van Riel, 2012, 2017c). The dimensions structure (channels along which messages are formally and informally spread), flow (processes through which communication moves, e.g. horizontally or vertically) and content (e.g. language used) shape communication behaviour within an organisation, and can be tuned to create alignment. Communication climate, however, concerns the “emotional environment of the organisation” (Van Riel, 2012, p. 73) and to me seems a dimension that can both influence the communication behaviour in an organisation, and would also be influenced by the communication behaviour shaped through the other three dimensions. In other words: How employees perceive the communication behaviour in the organisation, shapes the communication climate (their perception of the behaviour) and in turn shapes their own communication behaviour and thus influences communication climate.

Van Riel et al. (2009) discovered that clarity of the received information on an organisation’s strategy as well as an open communication climate (which, among other things supports employees room to voice their ideas) was related to increased motivation and aligned behaviour. As such, I became intrigued by the role of communication climate as a dimension of employee communication, and wanted to find out what was known about it and how it could connect to the motivation and alignment of employees.

1.2 The relevance of communication climate

My interest in communication climate was reinforced by the research of Downs and Hazen (1977) whose results showed that communication climate “stands out as the major important factor of communication satisfaction” in relation to job satisfaction, together with receiving personal feedback and a positive relationship with one’s manager. Even back in 1977 scholars found a connection between how communication is perceived within an organisation and how satisfied employees are with their job, which might also translate to how motivated employees are to do their job. Communication climate seems to affect an employee’s feeling of wellbeing with regard to the job and the employer.

As life and work pressures seemed to have increased, leading to problems like burn-out, how to achieve work happiness has become a hot topic. The corporate world seems forever struggling with challenges on work load, finding and retaining talented employees, developing leadership, increasing job satisfaction and most of all maximising both profit and performance. In the future certain routine, physically demanding and analytically complex tasks are expected to be increasingly taken over by artificial intelligence – robots and computers. This might make it more important for organisations to

develop their employees in terms of that which is unique to our human brain: Empathy, social connection, creativity and coming up with creative innovative solutions. Maybe we have reached the ceiling of improving human productivity in streamlining tasks and processes in organisations, and maybe the next step is to step up or aside from artificial intelligence, to find growth from fostering and improving our social connection in the context of an organisation (Davenport and Kirby, 2015).

A deeper understanding of the mechanisms that affect an intangible like communication climate could very well be a crucial factor or even necessary foundation for successful employee communication of the future, and thus successful organisations with happy, engaged employees. Therefore, I set out to define a research question which would serve to explore communication climate, both from what literature already provides, as well as from the reality of an organisation.

1.3 Reading guidance

In chapter 2 an overarching research question will be formulated with regard to the exploration of communication climate and several antecedents that seem related to it. Chapter 3 describes my exploration of literature, in the hope of shedding light on communication climate and answering the first part of the research question. This leads to a discussion of the insights and their relevance, how they might be translated into a proposed framework and continuum, and ends with a conclusion with regard to the theoretical background.

Chapter 4 will describe the research design and experiences with regard to qualitative research (i.a. interviews) on the internal communication, communication climate and related concepts among the employees of an internationally oriented, Dutch educational institute. This research aims to answer the second part of my research question. In chapter 5 all findings of this research process will be summarised. The chapter ends with an analysis of the interviews with the employees by use of responsive methodology, shaping them into three stories that each capture an overarching “gestalt” or narrative from the perspective of an employee.

In Chapter 6 final conclusions from both theoretical background and from the research findings at the institute will be drawn. I will also further discuss findings, limitations of the research and recommendations for future research. Chapter 7 offers recommendations and next steps for the institute that was researched. This report concludes with an overall reflection on the thesis process and master program Corporate Communication in chapter 8.

2 Research question

The first question I had was, what concepts or antecedents seem to be related to communication climate, from preliminary exploration of available literature? By defining this, I would be able to define a research question, at least for a further exploration of the theoretical backgrounds. Simultaneous to contemplating this, I was introduced to an educational institute that had internal communication issues, and was interested in my help and my thesis subject. How both things came together in a twofold overarching research question is the subject of this chapter.

2.1 Influences on communication climate

Communication climate is what the perception of employees creates it to be; it's a social – both group and individual – construction. Employees construct it from the communication behaviour they think is accepted or fitting, and they will, consciously or not, adapt to it if enhances their identity. This is why I considered organisational identification to be relevant to the concept of communication climate. Smidts et al. (2001, pp. 1056–1057) support this, as they found that “the strength of employee identification appears to be influenced strongly by the communication climate”.

Several scholars have found certain antecedents to an open communication climate, such as participation in decision making as well as openness, and trust (Dennis, 1974; Guzley, 1992). When communication structure allows bottom up participation of employees in expressing their feedback and contribution to decisions, it is connected to a communication climate that is perceived as open. In addition, when management does not stimulate participation or acknowledge employee opinions, a communication “climate of silence” can be created, in which employees are reluctant to speak out on important issues. (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Therefore a communication climate is often referred to as being open or closed, as this alludes to the extent to which employees can voice their concerns or thoughts towards management freely. In addition, according to Hurley (2017) “trust is a relational concept, and communication is critical to the situational factors in the decision to trust.”. In other words, trust lives in the space between relationships of employees (or not) and defines whether things can be expressed or not, whether it's okay to communicate.

Lastly, understood as – a rather sticky and hard to change – glue between people and organisation, the corporate culture provides an organisation with a high level of structural stability and reliability and belongs to the most important sense-making elements of an organisation (Freiling and Fichtner, 2010). Culture is something that exists in the ‘in-between’, through patterns and rituals etc. that make up the atmosphere in an organisation. As communication climate is also something that exists in-between employees – an atmosphere –, culture is expected in some way relate to the perceived communication climate of the organisation.

So from a preliminary scan of literature and based on the knowledge I gained from the master class Employee Communication (Van Riel, 2017b, 2017c, 2017a, 2017d) I decided to research the following concepts that seem to stand out as significant as antecedents to or consequences of communication climate. I expect that understanding their interrelationships might help to evolve and broaden current understanding of what affects communication climate:

- Organisational Identification: Assumed to be increased by an open communication climate and connected to commitment of employees.
- Employee Participation: Assumed to be related to improved employee commitment and an open communication climate.
- Employee Voice: Assumed to be related to an open and positive communication climate.
- Trust: Assumed to be a condition for an open and positive communication climate, and important in relationships between employees (and in supervisor-subordinate relationships)
- Organisational Culture: Described as the glue between employees, determining their interactions, the cultural rituals and patterns within the group, influencing organisational

behaviour, and thus expected to influence communication behaviour and communication climate

I realised that in exploring communication climate in organisations, I will inevitably touch upon the role of leadership in an organisation. Yet, I believe it would also be interesting to look at communication climate from the perspective of the employee, the follower of leadership. Choosing this perspective also originates in the fact that much has been written and researched about leadership.

2.2 Researching an educational institute

In February of 2018, while beginning to develop my thoughts on this thesis, I was introduced to a small, internationally oriented educational institute in the Netherlands. The majority of the 57 employees that were employed at the institution (and who had about fifteen different nationalities) had expressed a lack of trust in each other and management, a lack of clarity on roles, rules and opportunities for personal development, as well as the clear desire to be “one” organisation (instead of a collection of separate silo’s as it felt now). These feelings and issues surfaced after an employee survey on a new strategy for the institute, and were also laid bare after an incident that influenced psychological safety of several employees. This needed to be dealt with first, to be able to move on.

On the one hand, the employees express a lot of love for their work which is quite idealistic in nature, and on the other hand, the institute is also run as a commercial business, where central decision making was in the hands of the director. In other words, the educational institute displayed an overall identity of bureaucracy as described by Van Riel (2012, pp. 21–26), with a ‘high level of centralisation and formalisation’, and an overall intent ‘to contribute to a greater cause that improves the quality of life in a society’, as is usual for education. However, there seemed to be a desire to move more towards a shared meaning identity, with employees displaying a need for stronger identification with and visionary inspiration by top management as well as a stronger focus on ‘we’ instead of me. This shift requires, among a lot of other challenges to make it work, a shift in communication climate regarding participation, openness and seriousness (the extent to which employees feel taken seriously) from low/medium to high (Van Riel, 2012, p. 84). So the institute presented an interesting opportunity to explore communication climate in their organisational context.

What surfaced from the experiences of employees showed that there were several challenges, for example in the structure of the institute, HR management and overall internal communication. Still, it seemed the biggest challenge to reconnect employees so they could tackle these challenges together. Management showed itself willing and committed to improve the situation, so they initiated an extensive reorganisation process, with employee participation sessions on structure, electing and appointing a works council, and even mediation. As their internal issues are of a sensitive nature, the organisation wished to stay anonymous in this report. After some deliberation and talks, mostly with the institutes policy advisor as my contact, I was allowed to step into the organisation in June 2018, and do research with regard to my thesis. I was allowed to follow the mediation process and be present during several workshops and working groups.

The result of our collaboration was to be twofold: The institute presented me with an opportunity to do thesis research connected to communication climate, and I could present them with recommendations and propose next steps to improve their internal communication and communication climate as part of that. What I learned from my research in the institute determined to some extent what theory I explored to develop the theoretical background overview and vice versa.

2.3 A twofold research question

Theory and practice were intertwined in this thesis process, reshaping my original research proposal accordingly. From both the theoretical and the practical perspective to examine corporate communication climate a twofold overarching research question was formulated:

1. *How do organisational identification, employee participation, employee voice, trust and corporate culture relate to communication climate and/or vice versa, and how does communication climate connect to employee followership?*
2. *What do the employees of the educational institute perceive to be key issues that need to be addressed in relation to the internal communication and communication climate of their institute, and how can the gained theoretical insights help the educational institute to understand and improve their internal communication and communication climate?*

This also means this thesis consists of two parts. In the first part, chapter 3, I will explore literature in order to deepen an understanding of communication climate and whether it would be possible to propose a framework or model for communication climate. Literature research was guided by several sub-questions like:

- *What definitions of each concept can be determined? How do they relate to communication climate or influence it?*
- *What important factors (or pitfalls) to create an open communication climate are known?*
- *Which communication climate mechanisms could an organisation lever to empower employees through employee communication and what is their (known) effect?*
- *What is the relationship between organisational culture, sense-making and sense-giving to communication climate?*
- *What evidence can be found that organisations with an open communication climate achieve stronger employee followership (commitment) and thus greater organisational success in terms of performance?*
- *What is known about followership of employees, and how can it be connected to communication climate and the other concepts?*

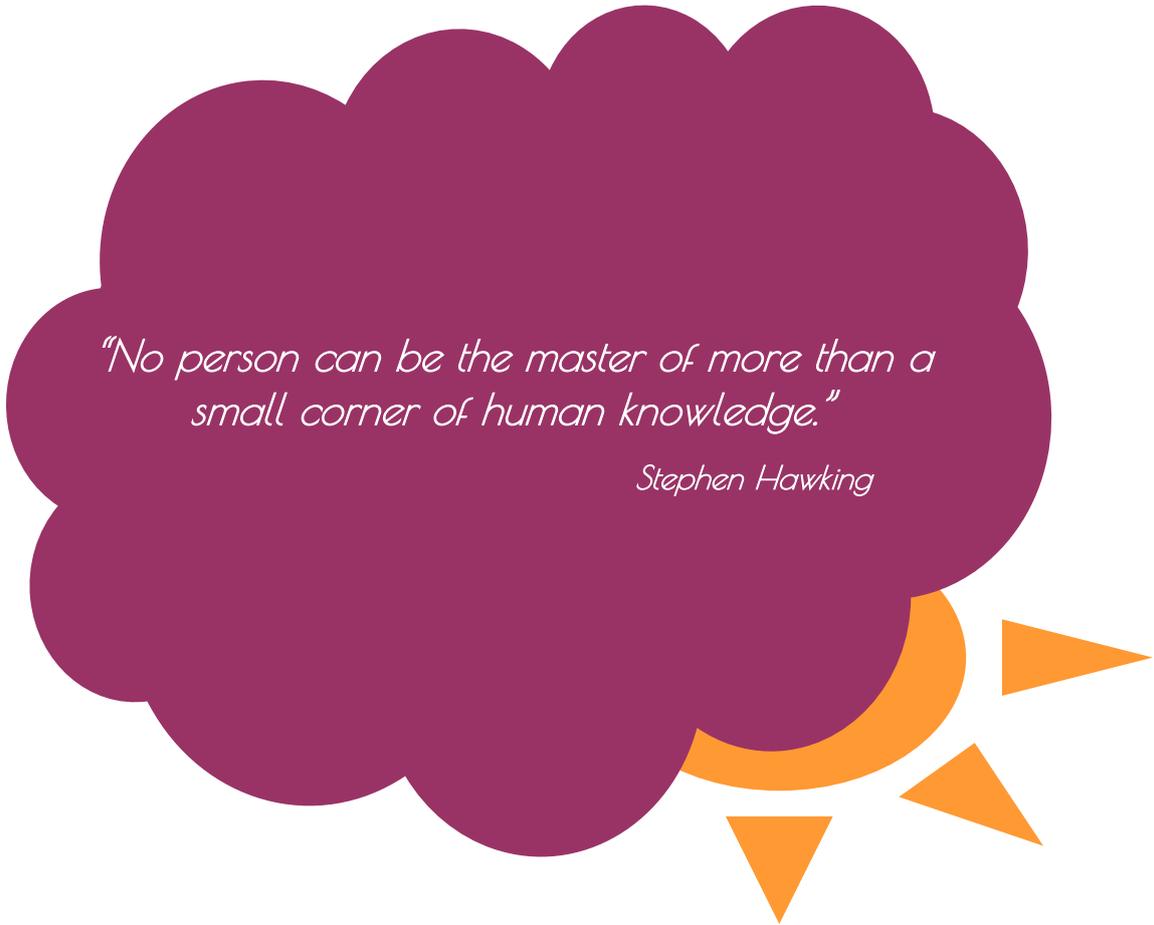
The second part (from chapter 4) will look at internal communication and communication climate based on quantitative research of the (social) reality of the aforementioned institute and the perceptions of its employees. I will elaborate on the background of the institute, and the research methodology.

I hope to deliver both general insights, as well as specific insights and recommendations for the educational institute to improve their internal communication and communication climate. Ultimately this thesis research hopes to extend the current vision on and understanding of communication climate and its meaning, as well as its relative importance for organisational success.

Part I Theoretical background

"No person can be the master of more than a small corner of human knowledge."

Stephen Hawking



3 Theoretical background

What overwhelmed me from the start is the vast number of definitions of different concepts and angles mentioned in relation to or connected with communication climate as well as the amount of different ways there sometimes are to describe those concepts or antecedents.

I discovered that many different climates exist in the corporate world: Working climate, organisational climate and communication climate are but a few. It seems relevant to mention organisational climate, which is defined as “a set of properties of the work environment, perceived directly or indirectly by the employees who work in this environment and <...> assumed to be a major force in influencing their behaviour on the job” (Ireland et al., 1978). Pace (1983) poses “communication climate is a subset of organisational climate”. According to Welsh and LaVan (1981, p. 1086) communication (consisting of acceptance, accuracy and all directional flow) is one of five variables of organisation climate, and also the one that more strongly strengthens employee commitment than the other variables (although the correlation is only moderately strong with $R = 0.6192$). This is another indication that communication climate, in relation to organisational climate, could be important to stimulate aligned behaviour of employees and thus improve performance.

3.1 Communication climate

Dillard et al. (1986, p. 87) call communication climate the perception of “communicative phenomena, e.g. judgments concerning such things as receptivity of management to employees, or the accuracy of information being disseminated”. According to van Riel (2012, p. 73) communication climate “is the emotional environment of the organisation, which determines how open, frank and comprehensive successful communication might be.” Putnam and Cheney (1985, pp. 130–159) define communication climate as “the atmosphere in an organisation regarding accepted communication behaviour.”. In addition, Dennis (1974, p. 29) defined it as “a subjectively experienced quality of the internal environment of an organisation”.

Towards a working definition of communication climate

What I take away from all these definitions, is that there are probably as many of them as there are perceptions of communication climate. But the essence is that communication climate is clearly subjectively felt or perceived (atmosphere) on the inside of an organisation and that this depends on the emotional responses (feelings of trust or respect) to communication behaviour. Communication climate is the result of both the communication behaviour and the attitude towards communication in a work environment, which are “generally a result of the level of trust, support and respect that exists between people in an organisation” (Sanford et al., 1976), so it indeed exists in the relationships between employees. Smidts et al. (2001) also surmised that communication climate both exists as a perception of the individual employee, as well as in shared perceptions that can exist on a group level, but found that “the evaluation of communication climate depends more on the interpretation of individual employees than on commonly shared perceptions.”

This shows communication climate is clearly a social construction, which would not exist without human interaction, and is based on individual and shared perceptions of the communication behaviour and attitudes in ones work environment, which should be positive towards strengthening employee commitment. As such, there can never be just one communication climate in an organisation, as it is not the organisation that communicates to employees. It is a group of people and even more the individual that communicates in the context of an organisation whose behaviour or attitude is perceived by others. This could also mean that the perceived communication climate of an individual employee might depend most on the communication behaviour that is displayed in a team or in the relationship between employees (more specifically subordinates and their supervisors).

Openness, trust and information

Scholars have tried to rationalise and operationalise communication climate by defining the levers that can be pulled to affect it. Dennis (1974, p. 31) reports five factors that induce the perceptions of communication climate: Quality of information, reliability of information, superior openness/candour,

opportunities for upward communication and superior-subordinate communication. In general, employees are expected to perceive the communication climate as more open or what I would call 'conductive to positive mutual connection' when they receive good quality, reliable information, trust their superior to be open and honest, are able to voice their own thoughts and ideas upward and have a good communicative relationship with their supervisor. This again shows that when employees feel informed and know what is expected of them to do in their job, as well as feel more positive about their organisational environment (there is trust to be open and a positive relationship with the supervisor) they will transfer this feeling onto their perception of communication climate.

In addition, Smidts et al. (2001) found that the perception of "communication climate is strongly affected by the adequacy of personal and organisational information" (with a determination coefficient of $R^2 = 0.68$). This too gives credence to the fact that communication behaviour aimed at dispersing adequate, good quality and reliable information to employees is a basic need for a positive perception of organisational communication climate. It is also an important function of the other three dimensions of internal communication: structure, flow and content. And as we have also seen, providing information is a core managerial effort to align employees.

Supportive behaviour

We have already seen that an open communication climate is stimulated by positive, supportive relationship between subordinates and their supervisor. Guzley (1992) studied a large American service organisation with three locations and found that attentiveness and perceptiveness of the supervisor in the communication behaviour towards the employee also supports his or her commitment to the organisation. In connection to this, Van den Hooff and De Ridder (2004) found that a supportive, constructive communication climate is a necessity for knowledge sharing and commitment. So when communication behaviour and attitudes are perceived to be positive and supportive, the communication climate is perceived to be open and this further stimulates sharing and communicating, which thus improves commitment. Supportive behaviour builds better relationships and 'opens up' the communication climate. This is like the chicken and the egg, in that communication behaviour affects how relationships develop as well as how communication climate is perceived. We will look further at specific aspects of the supervisor-subordinate relationship when we explore employee voice (paragraph 3.4) and trust (paragraph 3.5).

Participative behaviour

Guzley (1992) also found that organisational clarity and participation, thus a communication climate in which participative communication behaviour (decision making and giving upward feedback to support supervisors) is valued, is a significant predictor (accounting for a moderately strong 41% of the variance in commitment) of employee commitment to the organisation, especially with employees who are employed for over one year. So when employees are around for a while, and are able to have a better sense of their job and the organisation (from the information they received), they might want to have more influence on them. Opposed to this, Trombetta and Rogers (1988) who tested the relationship between three considered variables of communication climate and job satisfaction among over 1000 nurses in four general care New York hospitals, found that communication openness and information adequacy are fairly strong predictors to job satisfaction, but participation, (with a correlation coefficient of $R = 0.267$) was not, and relationships with commitment were not significant. It seems quite reasonable to assume that such correlations would be different when researched in another type of organisation. Whether participation is defined as desired communication behaviour, or emerges as a result of openness, can also explain the difference in results. In any case, we'll explore participation more in paragraph 3.3.

3.1.1 Continuums of communication climate

The perception of communication climate has been positioned between several continuums in literature, each with their own dimensions. Sanford et al. (1976, pp. 220–223) described a continuum of communication climate between the extremes of closed to open (see table 3.1).

The four dimensions of Sanford's continuum translate to (1) structure and flow seen as one (and whether they are formal/informal), but also include (2) autonomy of employees (level of trust to let go versus exerting full control), (3) whether the climate is perceived to allow failure or not (openness connected to voice and silence) and (4) whether the work relationships are perceived as supportive or defensive. Sanford et al. (1976, pp. 220–223) pose that for all four of these dimensions the communication climate is more effective (perceived as positive) when the organisation operates at the 'open' end of the continuum, with informal (flexible) communication structure and flow, low control and high autonomy (so high trust and low control mechanisms), high risk tolerance (employees that give voice and can communicate openly and freely, and that can make mistakes) and stimulation of supportive behaviours (in the form of warm, positive and trusting relationships) between employees.

Table 3.1 The communication climate continuum (Sanford et al., 1976)

	Structure, rules and control	Individual Responsibility (level of autonomy on the job)	Risk tolerance (perceived ability to voice failure and take risks)	Support warmth
'Closed' communication climate	Formal – rigid and constrained, along set lines	Low autonomy (high top down control)	Low tolerance (Corporate silence is induced)	Defensive (inexpressive, shielding oneself from criticism)
'Open' communication climate	Informal – flexible and organic, cross cutting	High autonomy (low top down control)	High tolerance (Employee voice is valued)	Supportive (warm connections; care and consideration)

A closer look at: Defensive versus Supportive

One of Sanford et al.'s (1976, pp. 220–223) extremes between which communication climate can be placed is defensive versus supportive. Ireland et al. (1978) further explored this extreme (in relation to organisational climate). With the help of Gibb (1961), who described six dimensions to warm up (open) or chill (close) the communication climate, they derived the following description of contributing factors in perceiving the communication climate as supportive versus defensive (table 3.2):

Table 3.2 Supportive versus Defensive communication climate (Gibb, 1961)in (Ireland et al., 1978)

Supportive	Defensive
Descriptive criticism (to help reach potential)	Evaluating criticism (continuous supervision)
Problem orientation (open to alternatives and ideas)	Control (supervisor decides, feedback unvalued)
Spontaneity (of messages between employees)	Strategy (messages to control employee actions)
Empathy (genuine concern and care for each other)	Neutrality (lack of concern for each other)
Equality (mutual trust subordinates and supervisors)	Superiority (no mutual trust and respect)
Provisionalism (temporal perspective on decisions)	Certainty (decisions by management are final)

A supportive communication climate is non-judgmental and encourages open, constructive, honest and effective interaction between employees. A defensive communication climate arises when employees perceive the need to self-protect and might lead to competitive or even destructive conflict. Such a climate lacks all of what we have seen to be considered as part of a positively perceived communication climate.

Ireland et al. (1978) stress that with regard to the development of defensive versus supportive communicative behaviour, there is a clear link between organisational climate (and structure) and

communication climate: In an organisation where hierarchical structure and power is important and thus supervisors exert much control over subordinates, defensive communicative behaviour expected to develop. While in an organisational climate where hierarchical structure and rules are absent or more flexible regarding communication structure and flow, employees are expected to share ideas and take more responsibility, and thus supportiveness of each other might also flourish. In other words, the overall organisational climate – the perception that arises with employees based on ‘how the organisation is organised’ – shapes the communication behaviour, which shapes the perceptions of its communication climate.

A closer look at: Informal versus Formal

Another one of Sanford's et al.'s (1976, pp. 220–223) continuum extremes that has been explored separately by scholars is an informal versus a formal communication climate. These extremes are also clearly connected to organisational climate (and organisational structure) and subsequently developed formal and informal communication structures in an organisation. The formal structure consists of individuals or channels which have a formal role in internal communication, like management or the communication department. Formal communication flow is generally top down and based on authority and coordination of tasks (Johnson et al., 1994). There can also be a formal bottom up mechanism in place for employees to give feedback, participate in decision making or share their ideas. Yet, as any message is as credible and trustworthy as the source (and the tone of the message) is perceived to be, this also affects upward information flow and in formal structures. For some organisations a filter is desirable to avoid a surplus of information (Glauser, 1984). This would restrict the upward flow, which could also influence the perception of the communication climate

The informal structure allows for more organic interactions (in person or through channels like the intranet, e-mail and enterprise social media) between employees, and allow employees to connect across the organisation – from a friendly chat at the coffee machine to reaching out for help to colleagues across the organisation on the intranet. Such informal channels also create the opportunity to discuss anything of personal interest, be it work related or not.

Johnson et al. (1994) found that employees value line communication more than other formal internal channels, and they especially value direct personal contact with their supervisor to receive information. They also found that informal channels were more highly evaluated by employees, and were used more to communicate things like the mission of the organisation and other cultural objectives. Yet their conclusion was also that the interrelationship between informal and formal communication was complex and deserved further research.

In conclusion, formal communication structure and flow seem important to ensure information reaches employees as well as to ensure critical feedback can go bottom up. It would seem favourable to the perception of communication climate for employees to be able to (or rather perceive it is allowed to) be flexible to connect with colleagues when it seems relevant or important, or to feel allowed to surpass formal channels (and if needed their direct supervisor) with an upward directed message they believe is of crucial importance to the organisation. A communication climate can be perceived as informal, when employees can flexibly and openly communicate with whom they think is relevant and through whatever channel seems appropriate, both in and outside of hierarchical or communication structure.

3.1.2 Levers of communication climate: a preliminary conclusion

From what we've learned so far, it is safe to say that communication climate plays a role in building employee commitment and creating employee alignment. We have seen that employee identification with their organisation appears to be influenced strongly by an open communication climate. It is also reasonable to assume receiving adequate, clear (good quality) and reliable information to do your job seems a basic requirement, a sine qua non, to induce a positive perception of communication climate. Beyond that, it depends on the perceptions of several dimensions on the overall continuum, like supportiveness (in general and in relationship with the supervisor, also connected to trust) and ability to voice opinions and/or participate.

To create a preliminary overview, I have put all aforementioned dimensions together in one continuum. Table 3.3 provides a first draft of the overall continuum of communication climate.

Table 3.3 Draft overall continuum of communication climate

Overall continuum of communication climate (draft)	
Open - Participative	Closed - Non participative
Employee voice stimulated (high risk tolerance)	Employee silence stimulated (low risk tolerance)
High trust (in relationship with supervisor) - High autonomy	Low trust (in relationship with supervisor) - Low autonomy
Informal structure (flexible, two-way & cross cutting)	Formal structure (rigid, top down, control)
Supportive - Descriptive criticism (to help reach potential) - Problem orientation (open to alternatives and ideas) - Spontaneity (of messages between employees) - Empathy (genuine concern and care for each other) - Equality (mutual trust subordinates and supervisors) - Provisionalism (temporal perspective on decisions)	Defensive - Evaluating criticism (continuous supervision) - Control (supervisor decides, feedback unvalued) - Strategy (messages to control employee actions) - Neutrality (lack of concern for each other) - Superiority (no mutual trust and respect) - Certainty (decisions by management are final)

In summary, communication climate can be seen as the communication environment or atmosphere inside an organisation, and its effectiveness is determined by the level of supportiveness, participation, openness and trust perceived by employees with regard to communication efforts.

To further define communication climate towards a more comprehensive continuum I will move on to explore its relationship with organisational identity (paragraph 3.2), employee participation (paragraph 3.3), employee voice (paragraph 3.4), trust (paragraph 3.5), corporate culture (paragraph 3.6) and finally how this relates to followership of employees (paragraph 3.7). Paragraph 3.8 will conclude the literature analysis summarising insights by shaping a framework and an overall communication climate continuum as well as discuss how key insights connect to employee communication in the business practice.

3.2 Organisational identification in relation to communication climate

Organizational Identification can be defined as “the perception of ‘oneness’ with an organization” (Smidts et al., 2001), “where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organisation(s) in which he or she is a member” (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). An organisation consists of (a multitude of) groups that help employees “define who they are and <...> to elevate their status” as well as their own sense of self-worth (Tyler and Blader, 2003). The connection between employees as members of the same organisation is based on social, in this case organisational, identification, which is about the cognitive connection that helps an employee assess and shape his or her self-concept (Pratt, 1998).

Employees also perceive their own status and value within the organisation from how they believe others in the organisation or their team assess them (Tyler and Blader, 2003), in terms of the respect that they perceive to get. This can strengthen one’s self-concept and sense of self-worth within the context of the organisation, and thus organisational identification. Fuller et al. (2006) discovered that among other things, participation in decision-making was related to employees feeling this respect and this was found to be directly related to organisational identification. So the ability to participate at least indirectly has an effect on organisational identification. In literature the ability to participate has also

been connected to an open communication climate, as we already know and will further explore in paragraph 3.3.

Support was also found that “organisational identification is positively related to voice behaviour” (Fuller et al., 2006). When an employee feels respected, this results in a positive interpretation of who the employee is as part of the organisation and this in turn can act as a stimulus to employee voice. The ability to voice thus strengthens organisational identification. Employee voice also connects to a communication climate of openness, which is a relationship we will explore further in paragraph 3.4.

We have already seen that Smidts et al. (2001, pp. 1056–1057) found that an open communication climate, in which employees feel they are taken seriously and feel they can express themselves and can participate, strengthens their organisational identification (though it must also be noted that their results showed significant variation between the organisations they researched).

In addition, Bartels et al. (2007) found that communication climate is a multiple concept that has a “clearly positive relationship with organisational identification”. According to Bartels et al. (2007) the perception of communication climate will also affect identification differently on different levels, like in a team, department, business unit or the level of the organisation as a whole. This perception of communication climate influences identification more strongly on the level that is closest to the employee, like the team or department he or she is connected to. Paying close attention to the quality of the communication climate on the level of team or department could help develop a stronger sense of involvement and in turn positively influence identification with the organisation as a whole. Thus it seems beneficial to approach positively affecting communication climate on the level of work-groups or teams, rather than on the level of the entire organisation. As communication climate is based on individual perception of employees, this makes sense.

Is there an effect of organisational identification on communication climate?

So an open communication climate in which employees can participate and voice themselves strengthens self-esteem, builds respect and strengthens organisational identification, but does organisational identification in turn stimulate employee voice and thus an open communication climate? This can only be surmised. While exploring literature I have found no other clear evidence of the opposite relationship. Of course this does not imply that it does not exist. It seems reasonable to assume that they are intertwined, as organisational identification supports motivation and commitment to the organisation. This would also mean that an employee who is committed to the organisation would want it to be successful, and would at least be motivated to voice what he or she feels is important and try to participate.

3.3 Employee participation in relation to communication climate

The value of employee participation in stimulating an open communication climate has been mentioned quite a few times now, and is well worth exploring. Employee participation can be seen as “an internal organisational process capable of contributing to the achievement of the organisations instrumental goals <...> and embodies the interactions that take place among participants, the involvement of employees in participation activities and the vitality of the entire participation program.” (Rosenberg and Rosenstein, 1980, p. 357). Participation needs interactions, and the interactions need to have a certain quality for employees to be perceived as taken seriously.

First, let’s take a small but interesting sidestep in understanding the relevance of participation of employees in an organisation. Research has shown that the more employees can participate with the process of problem identification, problem solving and joint decision-making in their organisation, the more their productivity increases (with an explained variance of 49%, indicating a moderately strong correlation) (Rosenberg and Rosenstein, 1980, p. 367). The effect of participation was found to be stronger than the effect of financial rewards or incentives on productivity. So for employees to be able to participate and influence their work has a stronger effect on productivity than salary. This way participation also translates to an economic value, which in my opinion is a good incentive for organisations to consider stimulating participation.

Back to our prime interest: The relationship between participation and communication climate. We have already established in both paragraph 3.1 and 3.2 that an open communication climate is one in which participative communication behaviour of employees is stimulated, which in turn might have a positive effect on commitment and identification. Two different ways that allow employees to participate have also been mentioned: The ability to give upward feedback, and the ability to be a part of decision making.

3.3.1 The role of feedback

A definition of feedback is “messages conveyed to a receiver about his, her, or its (group) performance” (Cusella, 1987, p. 626). The practice of feedback has become engrained in organisational communication processes, especially between supervisors and subordinate employees (Tourish and Robson, 2006). Research showed that building an organisational structure that supports positive feedback practices indeed helps build morale of employees and makes them feel more valued (Settle et al., 2013). An open, positive communication climate is quite strongly determined by the degree to which it gives employees the opportunity to both give (upward) and receive (from their supervisor) honest feedback (Morrison and Milliken, 2003). For this both formal and informal upward feedback mechanisms can be implemented (see also paragraph 3.1.1), but Morrison and Milliken (2003) found that employees especially value face to face feedback with their direct supervisors, as employees generally trust them more than (top)management.

Feedback requires safe relationships

Feedback itself is not inherently a positive thing; it may be positive, neutral or critical in nature. Recent research has shown that employees retreat from colleagues or supervisors that offer negative or ‘disconfirming’ feedback, and actively look for other, more supportive, networks to connect to (Berinato, 2018). In other words, employees tend to avoid feedback they perceive as unconstructive criticism or unsupportive (not valuing their efforts) and connect to colleagues that do value them. Moreover, if an employee does not feel validated for their contribution within a personal relationship – or as a member of a group – critical feedback will not motivate the employee to change.

Brown (2012, chap. 6) has found that, at the core of the giving and receiving feedback process, being able to be vulnerable with each other is important. Being vulnerable is the ability to allow for uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure in the interactions with others (Brown, 2012). This can feel uncomfortable, but this discomfort is normal and fine if the relationship feels safe. This safety has to come from supervisors being non-judgemental and vulnerable themselves, instead of exerting pressure or blaming and shaming their subordinate.

3.3.2 The role of participation in decision making

Allowing employees to participate in the decision-making processes and voice their input and concerns, is of significant importance as it has been known to lead “to greater personal responsibility and commitment” (Van Riel, 2012, pp. 69–70). Participation serves to support and engage employees to implement decisions they have participated in, which in turn supports their sense of ownership in the organisation.

Whole Scale Change: Democratic participation

Especially in times of change, which we know organisations face frequently these days, the participation of employees in decision making and problem solving is an effective and even necessary way to help sense giving and co-creation of a new reality within the organisation (van Nistelrooij and de Wilde, 2008). Participation is central to the concept of Whole Scale Change, which teaches many lessons about the development of effective participation. One of the biggest pitfalls is that management neglects to be very clear on what subjects and issues employees can and can’t participate in (van Nistelrooij and de Wilde, 2008, p. 69). Another pitfall occurs when management stays fully in their superior role. For participation to work, it needs to be a democratic process; there needs to be a level of equality of its participants (van Nistelrooij and de Wilde, 2008, p. 140).

When employees are being involved in decision making, there is a continuous risk that they become sceptical about the level of influence they have as they perceive their participation to be irrelevant to the actual decision making (van Nistelrooij and de Wilde, 2008, p. 140). When management has already decided, such participation is only a façade. This distrust will more easily grow when democratic participation does not fit the culture of the organisation, e.g. when an organisation is very bureaucratic and political. It is very wise to take all of these things into account when designing participative processes, since one of the main goals to implement them should be to build respect of employees and strengthen their identification and commitment to the organisation, certainly in times of change.

In conclusion, we now know that if employees are being enabled to participate, as long as it is perceived as an honest, clear and engaged process by all concerned, this can have a positive effect on organisational identification and thus commitment of employees. We had already discovered that employee participation helps employees to perceive the communication climate as more open. Again, it seems reasonable to assume that an open communication climate also stimulates more participation, but I have not found a clear reference to that in literature.

Stimulating overall participation of employees consists of stimulating formal and informal two way feedback mechanisms as well as participation in decision making. Ideally thoughts, opinions, ideas, information, can be shared freely and openly, without fear of retribution, shaming or unsupportive criticism. Again, whether this is possible, is determined by what happens in the interactions that take place in the process, the communication behaviour displayed, and how this is perceived by those involved. This means it is important that relationships, especially between supervisor and subordinates, are perceived as sufficiently safe and trust building, for any participation to be effective. This brings us to the relationship of employee voice (and after that to the role of trust) and communication climate.

3.4 Employee voice in relation to communication climate

We have already seen that employee voice is mutually related to participation of employees (to participate means to voice, and to be able to voice allows you to participate). We have also seen that employee voice can strengthen organisational identification, as well as stimulate the perception that the communication climate is open. Promoting openness and creating a psychologically safe (communication) climate also seems highly crucial to safeguard an organisations reputation and license to operate (Van Riel, 2017c) because it can help uncover important issues and problems in the organisation before they might turn into a damaging crisis. Uncovering employees multiple perspectives has also shown to be beneficial to “organisational change and development” (Milliken et al., 2003).

3.4.1 A climate of silence: Fear to voice

When management does not stimulate participation or acknowledge employee opinions, a communication “climate of silence” can be created, in which employees are reluctant to speak out on important issues (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). This employee silence, which Pinder and Harlos (2001) define as “the withholding of oral and written expressions of their organisational circumstances to persons who can effect changes or redress”, results in employees that do not speak up about certain important issues or problems they see or experience within the organisation (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). A communication climate of silence can thus hamper organisational learning, creativity and innovation. It has also been found to demoralise employees, giving them a sense of not being a valued member of the organisation, resulting in low commitment and trust. A key condition of employee voice is that once expressed, “it needs to be acted upon, or at the very least acknowledged.” (Bashshur and Oc, 2015) (See also Appendix 2, which shows the found effects of ignored voice, like exiting or neglecting the organisation, and acknowledged voice, like improvements and innovation).

Morrison and Milliken (2003) state that silence can be caused by fear of speaking up, as it can be dangerous (e.g. for job security) and lead to being socially labelled and excluded, being shamed or other negative repercussions. Brown (2012, chap. Introduction) discovered that feeling shame also

breeds fear in return, and it undermines feelings of self-worth. This will make employees very reluctant to be vulnerable, as they do not trust it is safe to voice inner thoughts.

Silence can also be induced by the desire to avoid conveying bad news to one's supervisor, as this might affect the judgment of this supervisor. In addition, employees filter information that they convey upward to cast themselves in a favourable light (Milliken et al., 2003) especially when they have aspirations to move up and lack trust in their supervisor (Van Riel, 2017c). Lastly, when employees believe it would not change anything (and thus not be worth the effort and risk) to speak up, the tendency for them to resign to their fate and disengage is strong (Morrison and Milliken, 2003; Ryan and Oestreich, 1991).

Silence and voice are multidimensional constructs

It would be wrong to assume silence and voice are simply opposites of negative versus positive. Voice can also be pervasive and negative, and silence can be intentional, so "silence and voice have differential consequences in organisations" (Dyne et al., 2003). If employees' personal perceptions and convictions result in different communication behaviours, this will also include differences in voicing ourselves at work (Constantin and Baias, 2015). So "employee voice and silence are multidimensional constructs", and they are thought to consist of three types: Acquiescent (disengaged, resigned), defensive (self-protective because of fear) and prosocial (constructive and intending to contribute positively) voice (Dyne et al., 2003). In general, when employees use their voice, it is easier to understand their motivation to do so, than when they do not speak up. It goes without saying that in organisations the prosocial approach to either voice or silence is the most desirable in terms of organisational performance.

3.4.2 The influence of group context and supervisors on climate

An open communication climate – one which promotes prosocial, constructive contributions – can be encouraged or discouraged within the organisational (group) context (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Morrison et al. (2011) found that a positive group climate plays an important role in supporting open communication. This means that it is important to be aware of "normative and social pressures that exist in groups" (Morrison and Milliken, 2003, p. 1353). Employees are part of both formal and informal networks, and continuously look to each other to reach a collective and converging set of interpretations. This also alludes to the fact that the culture of the organisation, which we will explore further in paragraph 3.6, can encourage or discourage voice, and thus determine the perceptions of communication climate. For example, when there are powerful norms, heavy strategic emphasis on control, high centralisation of decision making (high power distance, many hierarchical levels) and defensive routines within organisations, the environment is often intolerant of criticism and dissent and thus promotes silence.

First of all, employees need to be in some way personally engaged with regard to what issue they voice; it has to be important enough to them. They also need to have access to the needed resources to do so, and believe in a successful outcome (Burris et al., 2017). When within a group there are pressures for unanimity, they will prevent employees from exploring their differences (Perlow and Williams, 2003). Especially when, in some way, employees believe to hold a minority viewpoint, the tendency to keep silent is strong (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The aforementioned fear of retribution or isolation can strongly affect employee contributions within their teams or workgroups, as the inherent desire to fit in outweighs the personal benefit of making the contribution.

Second, the issues employees voice, can be focussed on problems (prohibitive voice), or on solutions (promotive voice). Burris et al. (2017) found that managers were more likely to act positively on voiced ideas to help the entire team, than on ideas that help the employee personally. This indicates that supervisors should try to be very aware of judgmental tendencies towards what subordinates voice if they want to avoid employees to become cautious or even silent, especially when it comes to identifying potentially critical issues or problems.

Supervisors are crucial in supporting voice

Thus, supervisors, again, have an important part to play in supporting voice. A supervisor's ego (power, politics and control issues) can create a defensive barrier for open communication (Morrison and Milliken, 2000, 2003; Van Riel, 2017e). When supervisors fear negative feedback or criticism from a subordinate, or for example hold certain implicit beliefs, like employees are self-interested and untrustworthy, the supervisor knows best and disagreement is bad, they create conditions for a climate of silence to develop (Morrison and Milliken, 2000) (See also Appendix 1). Glaser (2016, chap. 6) adds that humans in general can get addicted to being right, getting ensconced in their own viewpoint. This happens because, similar to when you are winning, your brain rewards you by making you feel good and powerful. In order to maintain a level of status and (subconsciously) sustain this pleasant feeling supervisors (leadership) might not truly listen to subordinates or invite them to discuss their thoughts and issues. Certain convictions and beliefs seem to find their roots in management education that focusses on economic models of human behaviour, and again, can be strengthened by the culture of the organisation (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Certain behaviours also find root in the fact that supervisors are only human, and because they have the same fears as their subordinates. However, because of their position, they can wield power over their subordinates, and that power comes with responsibilities (see also paragraph 3.7).

Not inviting employees to voice their thoughts is also thought to be unwise because in the fast changing and complex world of today, managers are very likely not to have all the necessary information (Milliken et al., 2003). Getting bottom up feedback from employees helps them to take more informed decisions. All those in a position of leadership can greatly benefit from being a "bad news magnet" and creating a situation where it's safe to communicate everything deemed important, bad or not (Murray, 2014). As "effective communication must be two way between employees and management" (Grunig, 1992) a formal upward feedback route can also signal to employees that their contribution is valued, and help circumvent supervisors that block such contributions (certainly when this formal process is not censored or filtered, and the communication climate is informal, as mentioned in paragraph 3.1.1).

Employee voice, participation and communication climate are related

So far we have determined that fostering an open communication climate supports employees to actively participate and voice thoughts and issues in a prosocial (constructive and intending to contribute positively) way (Dyne et al., 2003), which in turn creates an open communication climate. Supervisors play a key role in this mechanism, as the relationship they develop with their subordinates, by the way feedback is exchanged and contributions are valued, can encourage or discourage voice. This requires supervisors to find the courage to acknowledge personal beliefs and barriers, to dare to be more vulnerable (Brown, 2012; Burrell et al., 2017; Perlow and Williams, 2003) and thus support a communication climate that is inclusive and involves all team members. We have also seen that the encouragement of employee voice, as well as the encouragement of participative efforts, is rooted in corporate culture, and thus some organisations will face greater challenges to stimulate an open communication climate (also see paragraph 3.6).

3.5 Trust in relation to communication climate

Just count the number of times that trust has been mentioned so far in this report, and it becomes clear that it is necessary concept to explore in relation to communication climate. Trust is a complex construct which Mayer et al. (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712) defined as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party". Trust is also defined as "a judgement of confident reliance on a person, group, organisation or system when there is uncertainty and risk" (Hurley, 2012a, p. 34, 2017). So when you trust someone, you feel vulnerable and at risk, yet you are still willing to voice your thoughts or engage (Brown, 2012, chap. 6) as you have a positive expectation that the other will have your best interests at heart (Hurley, 2012b). If there is uncertainty connected to a situation, but there is no (fear of) vulnerability attached (so nothing is at stake) trust is not a part of the equation (Hurley, 2012b).

It should be no surprise that all humans differ in their disposition to trust, depending on their risk tolerance, how adjusted and comfortable they are with themselves and whether they have a position of power and authority to influence events. Hurley (2012b) calls this the (internal) trust factors that define our (both consciously and – as we will see further on – mainly subconsciously reached) decision to trust. There are also situational factors (in the organisational context), like the fact that we tend to trust those that we perceive have more similarities with ourselves or those that show us benevolent concern (in other words that they care about us) (Hurley, 2012b, chap. 2) (See also the Decision to Trust model in Appendix 3, which is a tool to determine how to leverage trust towards being perceived as more trustworthy, for example in interactions between two individuals or teams). Communication is one of the situational factors, which is critical to the other six situational factors of Hurley's Decision To Trust model (Hurley, 2012b, chap. 2), because "trust is largely a relational concept". This means an open communication climate and frequent communication strengthens "trusting relationships" while the absence or "impoverishment of communication" will generally fuel distrust (Hurley, 2012b, chap. 2).

3.5.1 Trust and teamwork: trust building in relationships

An organisation is "not the physical facilities with which it operates, it is the networks of people in it" (Robinson, 2001), and as we now know, trust is about those networks of relationships Hurley (2017). A team is such a network of relationships, in which there are two principal dimensions of trust: 1) Reliance on others (how willing are employees to depend on one another) and 2) Disclosure of sensitive information to others (how willing is one to share personal or work-related information, within appropriate boundaries) (Gillespie and Mann, 2003). It seems logical that for organisational groups to function to their best ability, the involved employees trust each other enough to rely on each other's input and to share and voice their own thoughts. Ideally this leads to employees that show organisational citizenship behaviour (Caldwell and Hansen, 2010; Senge, 2006) which is connected to a high trust culture where employees are valued, respected and treated as co-owners (Caldwell and Ndalamba, 2017), which as we will see in paragraph 3.7, is the ultimate level of followership.

Building trust in relationships between employees

In the hierarchical relationship between supervisor and subordinate, there generally is something at stake for both parties, and thus trust would be involved. "Managers cannot motivate people who do not trust them." (Constantin and Baias, 2015, p. 977). This trust doesn't happen overnight; it must be earned. And as Hurley (Hurley, 2012b, chap. 7) puts it "high-trust organisations embed trustworthiness into the very fabric of their organisational architecture and behaviour. Trust must be fundamental." Hurley (2012a, 2012b) argues that the development of trustworthy leaders, who in turn are enabled to embed trustworthiness in the strategy, structure, culture, systems and processes of their organisation, is essential. This means that a sense of trust should permeate the entire organisation, including its culture and the communication behaviour that ensues from it and thus relates to how the communication climate is perceived.

Then how can leaders or supervisors, and in fact all employees, develop their trustworthiness in the eyes of others? The answer could lie in paying attention to the quality and supportiveness of employee relationships, and leveraging them towards trust. Let's take a little sidestep and look the similarity to romantic relationships – this might seem odd, but romantic relationships cannot be forced to work, and when you think about it, this is more or less the same for professional relationships (yet we try to force them nonetheless). Gottman (2011) who researched trust in the context of romantic relationships, explained how relationships can grow and improve over time. In every interaction we have, each time we connect, we have the opportunity to build a little bit of trust and thus improve the relationship. The same goes for professional relationships, or any other positive relationship for that matter. And as people are all different in their tendency to trust, it will take more time with some than with others.

Neurochemistry: trust is a result of our instincts based on our interactions

It has been mentioned several times now that human beings are hardwired to connect, that they can go at length to fit in and avoid becoming excluded. Many of our own behaviours are self-evident to us, and they are also influenced heavily by our instincts; it is just the way our brain has evolved. It is relevant to realise trust has a neurochemical origin, based on that human instinct, and this is quite relevant in

understanding why professional or other relationships are felt as positive or not. Glaser (2016) explains that, with every interaction with another person or group, the human brain is hardwired to immediately determine whether someone is a friend or an enemy. This instinctive decision (once vital for our survival) happens in a split second, and is subconscious. When trust is signalled, because someone shows concern or care for us, we activate our prefrontal cortex and are able to connect, think constructively and form partnerships. Levels of the feel-good hormones dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin go up, opening us up to this connection. When someone is signalled to be an enemy by how we perceive his or her behaviour, distrust activates from a different, primitive, part of our brain, the amygdala, creating a feeling of fear, threat or loss (for example because someone blames us for something and we feel ashamed), to which we respond with fight, flight, or appease. Other hormones are involved (testosterone, cortisol and norepinephrine levels go up) to induce a stress-response. When this happens, our prefrontal cortex is closed down and we are no longer in a state to share and connect (which is acting from our prefrontal cortex), but will resort to defending ourselves, fighting or moving away (acting from our amygdala). This response can be a physical one, but also a mental one: We can tune out in a meeting or we become argumentative towards our conversational partner.

3.5.2 Building trust supports an open communication climate

If supervisors, or indeed employees in general, can take into account human neurochemistry and instinct and try to approach interactions (and more specifically the conversations) in a way that builds trust, they will change the results of their interactions. Such communication behaviour will support being able to see each other's perspectives, feeling heard or acknowledged and being willing to share and discover new solutions together. One of the most common threats to trust is the conflict that can arise when people have significantly differing interpretations of reality. The only way to dispel this and sustain trust, is to be able to share our inner world, so to voice what's in our mind, or to listen well to someone who voices it (Glaser, 2016, chap. 3) (See also Appendix 4). This means that where there is trust, there can be openness and sharing, and we already know that where there is openness and sharing, there is a communication climate that is perceived as more open. Therefore it is very relevant to understand how we can build relationships in a way that promote sharing, and thus promote a communication climate that is perceived as positive.

Overall, from what we now know about trust, we can conclude trust can only fully thrive in an open communication climate, where it has the ability to grow from the supportive, empathic, caring relationships that employees have across the organisation (and supervisors have with their subordinates), which allow them to participate, give and receive feedback in any direction and feel empowered and safe to voice their thoughts. Trust can strengthen employees' organisational identification, and organisations that succeed well in being perceived as trustworthy by their employees see a significant increase in organisational commitment, employee engagement and job satisfaction, leading to better financial results (Hurley, 2012b, chap. 7). It takes time to build trust, which is an important prerequisite for a positive relationship between employee and organisation or between subordinate and supervisor, and is influenced by every interaction or conversation they have with each other.

The relationship between trust and communication climate seems to work both ways as well. Trust promotes openness and sharing, which we have already found to both be mutually related to an open communication climate.

3.6 Corporate culture in relation to communication climate

The most salient definition of culture originates from Deal and Kennedy (1982) : "Culture is the way we do things around here". Corporate culture exists in the space between people and thus is "the tacit social order of an organisation" (Groysberg et al., 2018), which can be determined by being "shared, pervasive, enduring and implicit". Culture is a "mix of rituals, values and traditions that defines a group" (Neyfakh, 2012). This includes things like rules and what behaviours are perceived to be rewarded or punished, who are perceived to be heroes, what money and other resources are spent on, the stories that are told, words that are used and what is talked about, and how openly we can discuss things

(Brown, 2012, chap. 6). In paragraph 3.4 we saw that the culture can encourage or discourage voice and as such influence the perception of communication climate to be open or closed.

This means that communication (in terms of communication behaviour and attitude) is one of the expressions of corporate culture. As corporate culture is a social construction too, it is created from the meaning employees give (their sense-making), in this case to their organisational environment. Values and norms are (partly) responsible for the properties of the organisational climate, as Katz and Kahn (1978) in (Ireland et al., 1978) indicated. So culture is expressed through organisational behaviour and attitudes (as employees do what they perceive is the way things should be done), and this expression creates the perceived organisational climate (by defining properties of the work environment for individual employees or groups). At the very start of this chapter we had already mentioned that communication climate is a subset of organisational climate, so we have come full circle regarding the relationship between culture and climate. But it will serve our understanding to dig a little deeper and try to understand how and where culture is shaped and subsequently evolves.

3.6.1 Culture is enduring but can evolve

In communication literature, culture is often discussed connected to organisational change, which in general also enforces a need for a cultural change, although daily practice proves this not is as easily done as said (Es and Boonstra, 2009). Culture can evolve in reaction to shifting circumstances in the environment that gain momentum, leading to a change in attitudes and behaviours, but when this change is forced it will meet resistance. Van Dinten et al. (2008) describe how prevalent orientations or behavioural patterns in an organisation can determine what is valued in terms of interaction and outcomes and which particular interactions can develop in that particular environment. They describe four patterns: Self-referential (the individual at the basis of everything, success or failure), Social (focussed on helping others, caring, togetherness), Rational (focussed on understanding and explaining, looking for one truth) and Open (flexibility, evolution, continuous change) (Dinten et al., 2008, pp. 39–58). Usually two of these patterns together are prevalent in people, and they are determined by where we were born, how we were brought up, the unique evolution of our entire lives. It is the same with organisations; they evolve and develop patterns that can be inexplicable from an etic perspective, but are self-evident from an emic perspective. There is no point in simply challenging what employees believe to be self-evident to create cultural change. Culture can only be changed from trying to understand what shaped it in the first place, and help employees to evolve it themselves. From an awareness of who we are now, we can develop a feasible path towards what we want to be and do and how we can change. This will take time, and can't be expected to follow a predetermined timeframe.

3.6.2 Corporate tribe: culture exists in-between people

From an anthropologic viewpoint, an organisation is a tribe or a set of tribes, adhering to the same general dynamics that can allow culture to develop in any group of people (Braun and Kramer, 2015, p. 25). Anthropology looks at what happens in the interactions and intangible connections between people to understand culture, as an interconnected web of stories, emotions and habits (instead of defining it by separate dimensions). Culture exists in-between people, in the relationships that are formed between group members, with supervisors or outsiders. In addition, the relationships between employees also determine the “informal structure” of an organisation, as opposed to the formal organisational model (which defines the arranged relationships) (Braun and Kramer, 2015).

Culture is expressed in our conversations

As culture is expressed through behaviour, it is also expressed in the communication behaviour we display in our relationships – in the conversations we have. If conversations are not supportive, if the interaction is not building trust, it will affect how we perceive the relationship. For example, Brown (2012, chap. 4) found that when a corporate culture gives rise to behaviour of blaming others, gossiping, favouritism (e.g. with rewards), name-calling (overt criticism) and harassment (bullying) – especially when it comes from supervisors – employees will suffer from shame. Shame is detrimental to engagement, productivity, creativity and trust, so as a result employees will disengage and keep quiet.

There is an “antidote to shame”, according to Brown (2012, chap. 4), and this “is empathy”: Placing yourself in the other’s shoes and trying to understand them without giving judgement.

To summarise, corporate culture exist in-between employees, in their relationships, and is i.a. expressed by the communication behaviour that is displayed in our interactions, e.g. our conversations. If these interactions are perceived to be supportive (empathic, non-judgemental), build trust, allow employees to voice their thoughts (from a prosocial intention) and participate, the communication climate will be perceived as conducive to such interactions, or in other words as supportive, trust building, open and participative.

3.7 Communication climate from the perspective of followership

Much is asked of leadership in organisations – to be competent and decisive, able to listen, be authentic, engage in open conversation, be as trustworthy as they expect subordinates to be, display charisma, be persuasive and visionary (Murray, 2014) to be vulnerable and normalise uncomfortable conversations (Brown, 2012) and most of all, as Maxwell (1993) described, be influential and ‘have the ability to inspire others to follow you’. Additionally, much has so far been researched about the position and role and desired actions of leadership and supervisors in employee communication. Argenti (2018) mentioned in his master class on leadership and communication that there is no definitive set of traits that ensures good leadership, but that there are essential qualities like being able to be vulnerable, being a sensor regarding what goes on around you, daring to be different and practicing tough empathy (giving people what they need, not what they want).

3.7.1 Servant leadership: Empowering employees to follow

Constantin and Baias (2015, p. 977) propose that supervisors need to ask themselves “if my position, title were removed, if I did not have the influence of my personal connections, would people that I am leading still follow me?”. This makes a plea for supervisors to realise what their responsibility towards their subordinates is, to allow them to follow, to let them forge the path with them, to discover, to develop, to make mistakes and learn. In literature this has been described as servant leadership: leaders who understand and serve to meet the needs of their followers and display empathy and deep care for them (Duren, 2017, pp. 235–236; Hayes et al., 2015, p. 1080). This is not about being perfect, but about being honest and acknowledging one’s own shortcomings. Brutus and Vanhove (2017, pp. 261–262) call this assuming a “superordinate leadership role”, which consists of “empowering, developing and obtaining key resources for followers”. Servant leaders enable their followers to achieve their full potential in order for the organisation to do the same. In this way, employees are empowered, maybe even expected, to become leaders in their own right. Again this is all about the relationships these kind of leaders build with their followers, and what researchers like Brown (Brown, 2012, chap. 6) see as humanising organisations.

3.7.2 A continuum of followership

As we have discussed, an open, positive communication climate is supported by participation and supportive interactions. This provides the best foundation for followership to move towards stewardship of the organisation, because it empowers and literally invites employees to be partners in the organisation. Hayes et al. (2015, p. 277) integrated many insights from literature into a continuum, which describes the zones followers in an organisation go through, from the first which is indifference, to the ultimate followership zone of stewardship (see table 3.4).

Each of the zones vary in the characteristics of several factors, among which one factor is the basic need an employee would have in that zone. The most basic essential need for a follower, in the zone of indifference, is understanding what is expected of him or her. In the next zone of acceptance, receiving sufficient information on how to get the job done is an added need. Thus, these steps through the zones also relate to employee communication. In terms of communication climate, as we also mentioned in paragraph 3.1, at the minimum, the information has to be adequate. In the next zone of followership, acceptance, an employee needs good quality information, and clarity on expectations from

the organisation (which include capability building). However, to move towards the zones of trust, commitment and ultimately the stewardship zone of followership, employees need to be further empowered to make truly substantial or even major contributions and innovations to the organisation. The communication behaviour needs to be developed so that the communication climate is perceived to foster trust, personal growth and employee voice. When supportive interactions (strengthening equality and partnership) between employees, and especially supervisors and subordinates to allow trust to develop, ideas to be expressed and participation to be enhanced further, followers will move into these more empowered zones. When an employee also gets the resources to make a contribution (e.g. ways to participate, carry responsibility and have the opportunity to make a difference) they become committed followers, and even stewards of the organisation.

Table 3.4 Variances and characteristics of followers by zone (Hayes et al., 2015, p. 277)

Factor	Indifference	Acceptance	Trust	Commitment	Stewardship
Primary motivation	Keep the job and avoid trouble	Satisfy the demands of the job	Help the organization fulfill its mission	Identify ways to improve the organization	Assist the organization achieve its potential
Degree of cooperation	Comply with "reasonable" requests	Comply with performance expectations	Accept responsibility for work assigned and achieve goals	Cooperate and look for ways to achieve results better	Total investment going the extra mile regularly
Social contract expectations	Work is an exchange relationship	Provide a fair day's work for a fair day's pay	Perform well and expect that commitments will be honored	Expect to be treated well for exceeding performance expectations	Expect to be given the opportunity to make a difference for the organization
Perception of leader	Purveyor of information about required tasks	Source of resources to get the job done and definer of tasks	A partner in a mutually rewarding relationship	A colleague and advisor to improve performance	A partner and co-owner in the pursuit of excellence
Degree of personal investment	Do what is required but no more	Stay up to date and meet performance expectations	Do what is required to do a good job	Look for ways to improve the organization	Constantly seek to improve the organization and achieve greatness
View of the follower role	Stay out of trouble	Meet job requirements	Contributor to the organization mission	Be a valued team member	Be a partner in the quest for organization excellence
Essential follower needs	Understanding of minimum expectations required	Information about how to get the job done, as required by the organization	Honoring commitments made to followers and reasonable support	Resources needed to make a contribution and appreciation for results	Opportunity to contribute to the organization's success
Implicit follower goals	A paycheck and a steady job	Job security and a career	Opportunity to grow and predictability of outcomes	Acknowledgement for being a top performer	Personal gratification from making a difference
Guiding underlying values	Self-interest and freedom	Fairness and security	Integrity and competence	Quality and appreciation	Excellence and self-actualization
Impact on organizational competitive advantage	Minimal or negative	Marginal	Positive	Significant	Differentiating
Contribution to organizational wealth creation	Minimal	Modest	Contributing	Substantial	Major

3.7.3 Connecting the continuum of followership and communication climate

We can connect and translate the continuum of followership to the continuum of communication climate: The more open the communication climate is perceived to be, the more empowered employees are to follow leadership of the organisation and the further they are allowed to move from being indifferent followers to becoming stewards of their organisation and having a vested interest in organisational performance. This is illustrated figure 3.1.

Every employee has his or her own personal motives to follow leadership of the organisation (or not). Such personal motives determine whether one applies for a certain job or leaves an employer, is of service or sabotages their supervisor and so on. Leaders are expected to motivate their subordinates to follow and to support them to contribute to the best of their ability to the goals of the overall organisation. The best leadership in any organisation can do is create an environment that is supportive to the kind of followership that is desirable, from understanding what it is that motivates followers to follow.



Figure 3.1: Continuum of followership (Hayes et al., 2015, p. 277) related to perception of communication climate

In the end, it is leadership that has to create the organisational conditions to allow the desired level of followership, including effective employee communication. This communication, expressed in communication behaviour and attitudes (supportive, trust building behaviours and attitudes, allowing employees to participate and voice their thoughts), influences the perception of communication climate. The more employees are allowed to participate and respected for it, the more committed followers they can be.

3.8 Conclusion and discussion of literature research

We have now visited all concepts we set out to discuss, and established a deeper understanding of communication climate, what relates to it or interacts with it and influences the perception of it. With this, an answer to the first research question posed in paragraph 2.3 can be formulated. Communication climate turned out to be a fascinating multifaceted organisational construction that is impossible to fully grasp, and at the same time I believe the answer to improving it is simple, though not easy. In this final paragraph, I will try to summarise and conclude what we have found, and discuss what this could mean for organisations and their employee communication professionals.

3.8.1 A proposed theoretical framework and definition

First of all, we have seen how each explored concept relates to communication climate, and vice versa. In table 3.5 these relationships are summarised in short once more. From this overview, a theoretical framework of the explored concepts can be proposed, which is depicted in figure 3.2.

We have seen participation and voice are interrelated, and they can only thrive through supportive relationships that involve trust building interactions. Together they are part of the communication behaviour and attitudes that are an expression of corporate culture. Participation strengthens organisational identification (and as participation requires voice, this enters the relationship too). I surmise the opposite might also be the case, as organisational identification builds commitment to the organisation and as such can stimulate, at least initially, a desire to participate.

The combined result of supportive relationships, trust building interactions, ability to voice and participate is communication behaviour, as an expression of corporate culture (as well as able to influence corporate culture to evolve), and is subjectively perceived by employees as the communication climate. Lastly, followership is thought to be strengthened by the level of democratic participation and voice that the organisation allows, which in turn can strengthen followership.

Table 3.5 Overview of found relationships to communication climate

Explored concept	Relationship to communication climate
Organisational Identification (OI)	Open communication climate (participative) stimulates OI Opposite relationship surmised
Employee Participation (EP) - Feedback (upward) - Decision making	Requires presence of EV. An open climate allows for EP, and EP stimulates perception of communication climate to be open. Requires supportive relationships/communication behaviour and trust
Employee Voice (EV)	Open communication climate stimulates EV, and creating a climate of EV, stimulates perception of communication climate to be open; EV stimulates effectiveness of EP. Requires supportive relationships/communication behaviour and Trust
Trust	Stimulates EV and as such EP, and is built when EV is acknowledged. Communication behaviour and attitudes most be aimed at trust building interactions
Corporate culture	Communication climate is a subset of organisational climate, which is the perception built on general accepted organisational behaviour and attitudes, which are an expression of Culture
Followership	Can be related to the level of EP in the organisation; the more participation is possible, the likelier it is that the communication climate is perceived as open.

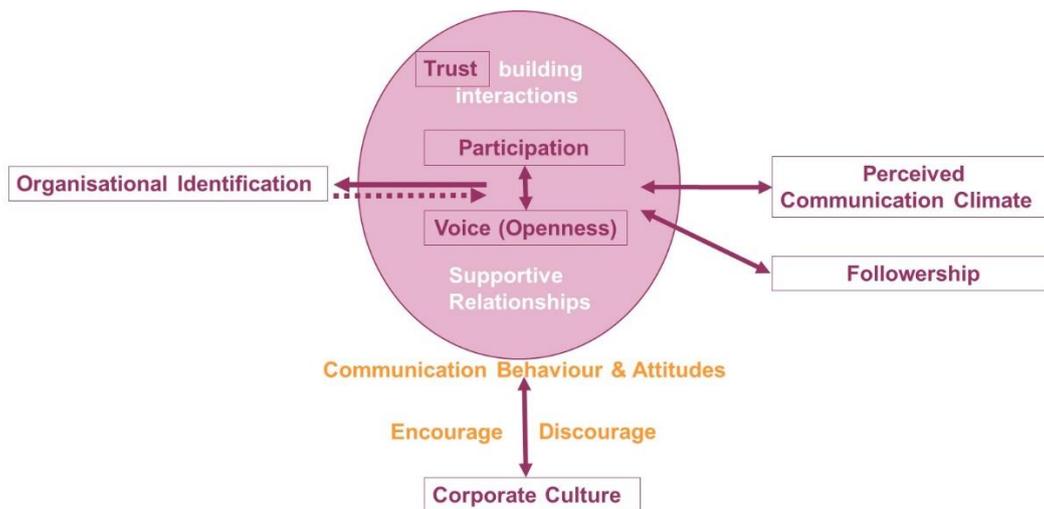


Figure 3.2 Proposed theoretical framework of communication climate and explored concepts

A definition of communication climate

In sum, this also leads to a proposed more comprehensive definition of communication climate:

Communication climate is the (individual or shared, subjective) perception of employees of the communication behaviour and attitude in the organisational environment of the employee. The extent to which these behaviours are supportive and trust building, stimulate employees to voice relevant thoughts and ideas and as such allow for participation of employees through upward feedback and decision making, influences the perception of the communication climate, positioning it on a continuum from open (supportive, trust building, voice stimulating and participative) to closed (defensive, distrust fuelling, silence inducing and non-participative).

It is not proposed that this is an airtight framework or all-encompassing definition; it is most of all meant to visualise and summarise my findings from literature. Despite the vast amount of literature that has

been covered (and even more that I explored and chose not to include), there are, of course, still several questions unanswered and new ones raised, which I will address in the discussion in chapter 6.

3.8.2 A proposed overall continuum of communication climate

In an attempt to operationalise the levers of the perception of communication climate, I have developed an overall communication climate continuum (see table 3.6) adding insights – behaviours and dimensions – to the original continuums discussed in paragraph 3.1.1. Again, this is comprehensive but not all-encompassing, and there is still overlap between dimensions. It should also be noted that the informal and formal extremes say more about the employee communication dimension structure, which can induce a perception, than about the dimension communication climate itself. An open communication climate can thrive when informal communication is possible, but a formal communication structure is also highly desirable and even a necessity with regard to delivering adequate, good quality and most of all reliable information to employees.

Nonetheless, the overall continuum in table 3.6 can be a useful tool for organisations, or teams, and employee communication professionals to determine on which side of the continuum a dimension is positioned and how that might shed a light on where improvements could be made or initiatives could be taken to stimulate the desired shared perception of employees.

It seems most convenient to use the terms open and closed to describe each end of the continuum, as is generally done. However, a fully open communication climate is not the Holy Grail for every organisation per se. What is effective and attainable for an organisation depends largely on the intrinsic nature of the organisation, the corporate culture and the context the organisation operates in.

3.8.3 Supporting communication climate through supportive behaviour

To conclude my analysis of literature I would like to add my thoughts on what is the most effective way to evolve communication behaviour in organisations and thus positively influence the communication climate, as this in turn was found to strengthen commitment and organisational identification of employees (Smidts et al., 2001). In support of that, I have translated the conceptual framework into a different model, a visualisation of the positive communication behaviours, how they influence the perception of communication climate and each other. It is a visualisation of the definition formulated above. It also positions the role of employee (or internal) communication in general in terms of fostering communication climate (see figure 3.3). At the core of employee communication, is adequate, good quality and reliable information available to employees as a basic condition. Employee communication has to encompass this, and structure, flow and content of employee communication should make this possible. The perception of the communication climate, however, also arises from an interplay of supportive behaviour, which induces trust so employees feel safe to voice and thus participate. These are things that employee communication professionals should help develop, in order to develop a communication climate that is open, or 'conductive to positive mutual connection'.

It was mentioned before that some interrelations between concepts seem to be like the chicken and the egg. They seem to influence each other. But it has to start somewhere, with some kind of behaviour that is perceived a certain way and that starts the chain of influences. Developing an open communication climate therefore has to start by stimulating supportive communication behaviour, in the relationships between supervisors and subordinates, or between employees in teams. If these interactions are mostly supportive, the rest (trust, voice, participation) can and will follow. We have seen that the relationship with the supervisor is most important. It is the one employees need to feel safe in, and when they do, they can direct more energy towards doing a good job to the best of their potential. If there is work to be done for those responsible for employee communication in organisations, it should be done there. In coaching supervisors, helping them to become aware of the effect their interactions have on their subordinates, and most of all in helping them have a positive impact on the behaviour and performance of employees.

Table 3.6 Proposed overall continuum of communication climate

Overall continuum of communication climate	
Open, Participative, Supportive & Trust building	Closed, Non-participative, Defensive & Distrust building
<p>Informal (Flexible)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both hierarchical formal, and informal channels; flexible communication structure, two way and/or cross cutting • Allows upward feedback and participation • Spontaneity (of messages between employees) • Provisionalism (temporal, flexible perspective on decisions) 	<p>Formal (Rigid)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only hierarchical and formal (top down) channels, rigid and based on control mechanism • Only top down feedback, no participation • Strategy (messages to control employee actions) • Certainty (decisions by management are final)
<p>Open: Employee voice stimulated</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice perceived as acknowledged • High risk tolerance (ability to voice failure and take risks) • Problem orientation (open to alternatives and ideas) • Strengthens employee identification 	<p>Closed: Employee silence induced</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice perceived as ignored • Low risk tolerance (inability to voice failure and take risks) • Control (supervisor decides, upward feedback unvalued) • Does not strengthen employee identification
<p>Supportive (relationships)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive criticism (feedback to improve) • Empathy (genuine concern and care for each other) 	<p>Defensive (relationships)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating criticism (continuous supervision) • Neutrality (lack of concern for each other)
<p>Participative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two way feedback (vulnerability) • Fully democratic participation in decision making • Strengthens employee identification 	<p>Non-participative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only top down feedback (criticism, shame) • No participation in decision making • Does not strengthen employee identification
<p>High trust (in relationship with supervisor)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High autonomy • Equality (mutual trust subordinates and supervisors) • Empathy in interactions • Genuine care for each other 	<p>Low trust (in relationship with supervisor)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low autonomy • Superiority (no mutual trust and respect) • Lack of empathy • Indifference

In recent years, several scholars have developed methods and dedicated books to explaining why and how the difference can be made at the level of interactions, of conversations. By the words we use, the judgement and ego we leave behind or by the way we listen, we can make an impact on our conversational partners.

Conversational intelligence

There were two books, that I read when I was researching literature, which provided huge light bulb moments for me. One of them handled the subject of conversational intelligence (Glaser, 2016),

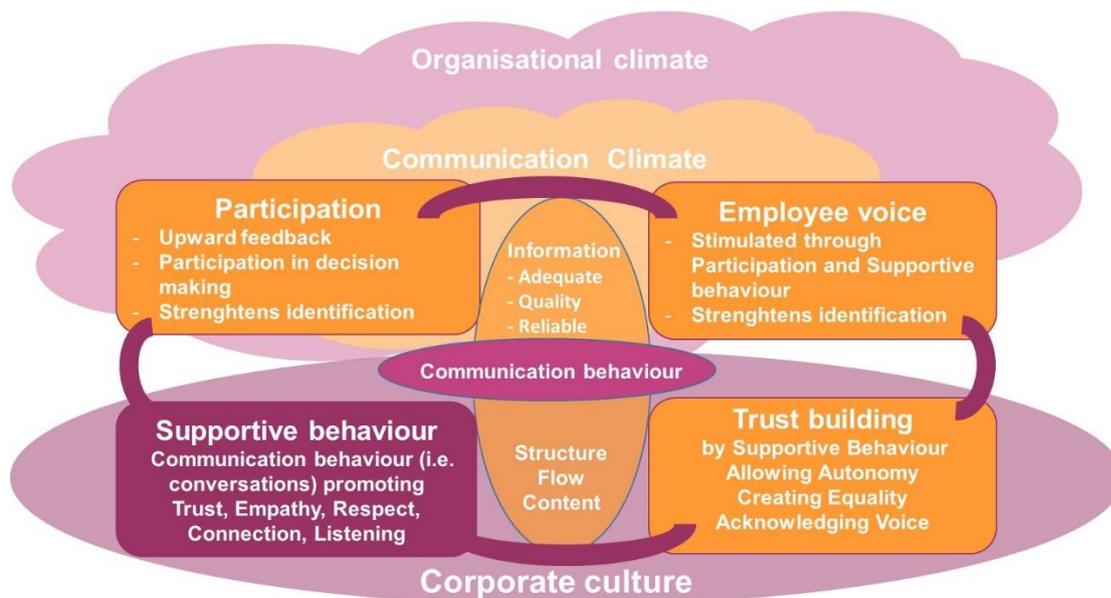


Figure 3.3 Conceptual communication climate model for employee communication

explaining that if we want to get to the next level of working together in organisations, this “depends on the quality of our culture, which depends on the quality of our relationships, which depends on the quality of our conversations.” (Glaser, 2016, chap. Introduction). And to which I would add which influences the perceived quality of the communication climate which – although indirectly – affects organisational performance.

If employees are expected to feel more positive and committed towards their work when the communication climate is perceived to be supportive and participative, as it induces more trust and a bigger sense of self-worth, and opens humans up towards sharing, creating and innovating, then it would seem reasonable to improve employee interactions, and most of all supervisor-subordinate interactions to be more supportive. If it is put this way, it seems simple. Yet what makes it so hard for all of us, is that we have to overcome our own instincts, our neurochemistry, which hijacks us all. The only way to go, is to try hard to be more aware of these instincts and adjust our interactions – our conversations – accordingly, so they build trust and promote sharing and developing. Truly empathise with the other, talk about each other’s perceptions and stop assuming others will easily understand us. Again, to quote Glaser (Glaser, 2016, chap. 4) “meaning is constructed by the person that receives your information”. It can be very helpful to check whether that meaning is what you wanted to convey, because we all make “movies in our mind” from what we perceive to be there (Glaser, 2016). Maybe the most important skill to develop further is listening with an open mind, which means not just hearing what the other says, but truly come to an understanding of what the other person means (Murray, 2013, chap. 10). The second most important skill is asking the right questions.

Asking better questions that have impact

How to ask questions, basically how to operationalise conversational intelligence, was also addressed in another book that gave me a lightbulb moment, about how to communicate, have conversations, with impact (Hertoghs et al., 2018). The key to that, in a nutshell, is not jumping to conclusions or judgement and asking open-ended questions that guide your conversational partner’s thought process in such a way that you can help them to arrive at a certain conclusion themselves (pulling). This is much more powerful than just telling someone what they should do or calling them out on their behaviour (pushing), because let’s be honest, none of us like to be told what to do or to feel ashamed for mistakes we made (Hertoghs et al., 2018, chap. 8). The key is to be genuinely interested in the other, which for our ego is more difficult to do in some situations than others. Again, it’s about realising what our basic human instincts are and to work with that towards more supportive interactions, both one on one and in group meetings.

Appreciative inquiry

Lastly, I was introduced to the method of “Appreciative Inquiry”, which is also based on trying to activate the prefrontal cortex and on changing the way we ask questions to support that. Appreciative inquiry also focusses on dialogue, and starts with having a listening attitude and asking open-ended questions, to explore and appreciate what is (instead of looking at deficits), in order to then visualise and imagine together what might be, shape what would be and embed together what will be (Whitney and Schau, 1998). From the viewpoint of appreciative inquiry, organisations are centres of relationships – human systems – connected to endless capacities and powers (Whitney and Cooperrider, 1998). It tries to tap in to these capacities and powers to improve organisational performance. The method also connects to whole scale change and participation as discussed in paragraph 3.3. As such, I believe it can be an interesting way to stimulate participation and voice, and help stimulate an open communication climate.

Brown (Brown, 2012) mentioned that “the two least-developed skills in the workplace are the ability to have uncomfortable conversations” for example to give feedback in a safe constructive way, and “the ability to ask what if questions”. We often look at the past and our mistakes (and give feedback that criticises rather than is constructive), but less often we appreciate what is good or successful (upon which to build constructive feedback, or rather feedforward), and dream about how the future could become even better. It is good to know there are actually practical tools that can help to understand and change this and develop supportive relationships in organisations.

3.8.4 Conclusion: theoretical insights

Fostering a communication climate that is perceived as open and positive means first and foremost improving our conversations, our meetings and other interactions bearing in mind the other will attach a meaning to it and perceive it in a way we did not intend. What matters is that we are willing to become aware of our human nature, and pay attention in our day-to-day interactions to support sharing and developing. In organisations such behaviour will support employees in speaking up and becoming more engaged and committed. Employee communication is crucial for employee alignment and engagement, and those who practice it can help develop and coach this kind of communication behaviour in organisations, or at least create an awareness that everyone can influence communication climate in their direct environment by changing their approach to conversations. Of course, some organisational cultures will be more open to this kind of coaching and awareness than others, but as we are talking about humans and their instinctive behaviours, any organisation that employs humans is expected to benefit from a more supportive approach to conversations and other interactions between employees and between supervisors and subordinates.

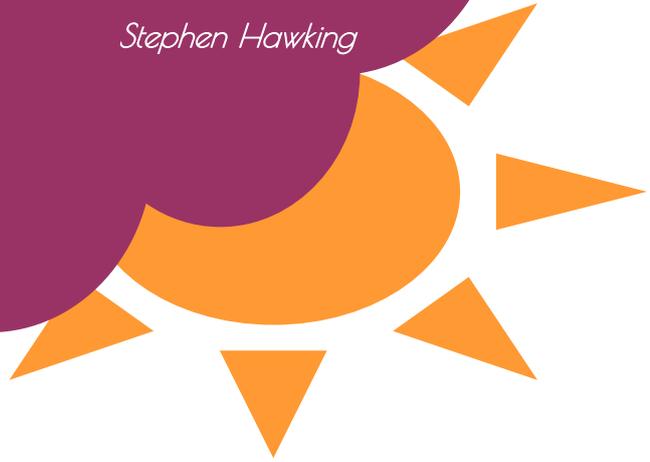
Communication climate is the result of many perceptions of many related dimensions of communication behaviour in an organisation. Corporate culture, induced by the identity and structure of the organisation, is expressed in organisational behaviour, which is perceived as the organisational climate. Communication climate is a subset of organisational climate. The communication behaviour that is expressed, is the foundation from which communication climate can arise in the perception of employees. This perception of communication climate is based on the extent in which employees are able to participate and give voice, which they will do if they are trusting of their supervisors (e.g. feel valued, receive adequate information and are listened to). It is this trust that is crucial to induce more committed followership of employees, and building it starts in the interactions that employees have with their supervisor which directly affect them personally and professionally. These interactions need to be supportive in order to build trust. So a communication climate that is ‘conductive to positive mutual connection’, revolves around trust, which revolves around the quality of relationships, which revolves around the supportive – intelligent – conversations employees have on the work floor.

With all of this knowledge and newfound wisdom in our minds, it is time to step into an organisation and see how the theoretical background and insights relate to its reality, and how they can be put to use. The next part of this thesis report describes the research done in an educational institute, and its findings.

Part II Research & findings

"Intelligent life need not be anything like humans. Little green men would do as well. In fact, they might do rather better. The human race does not have a very good record of intelligent behaviour."

Stephen Hawking



4 Research

With a thorough foundation and focus on the background provided by theory, we will now take a look at further research into an organisation which has stumbled upon issues with their internal communication and communication climate. First I will describe their situation, and then I will describe the chosen research methodology and data collection.

4.1 Research subject: educational institution

I was given the opportunity to do research in a small, internationally oriented educational institute, connected to one of the leading universities in the Netherlands. Because of the sensitive nature of their internal issues, the organisation and its employees wished to stay anonymous. During the research process I received much information about their history and events that have shaped their situation and background, which I will address before diving into the research methodology and how data was collected.

Structure and management

This educational institution is an independent corporation, but financially and legally part of the university's overall holding since 2003, when the institute went bankrupt and through major reorganisation. The relationship and influence of the holding vis-à-vis the university is vague to employees. They acquire HR support and IT support from the university, and report to them financially and in part also academically, through a separate academic director. The current general director is appointed, by statute, by the Governing Council and the holding in 2011. He has a background in business economics and experience running a large institution, but, unlike his management team members, no active experience with the research field of the institution. The entire staff is managed by two heads, members of the Management Team (MT) who are both experienced academics who in the past year got their PhD's. Both have been connected to the institution for a long time, one for 18 and the other for 24 years. When it comes to financial, personnel and strategic decisions, the director ultimately decides; the heads can only advise. The overall organisational model and daily practice does not provide clarity on certain professional relationships regarding who has supervision and who decides about who and what. On the other hand, all employees can work quite autonomously.

Currently the institute has around 74 master students, last year 118. This means student numbers are decreasing again, but this is consciously so to ensure the quality of the program. Besides the master, academics work on international projects and research which serves to finance the institute.

Academics and support staff

The institute occupies one floor in one of the university's buildings, as the centre of their activities for staff and students. Currently the institute employs 57 people (excluding a number of academic interns that are only with the institution for a short period of time). Approximately half of the employees are academics – research assistants, junior/mid-level/senior academics, who work to secure and execute research projects all over the world); at least four of them (academics and one support staff employee) are currently absent due to burn-out issues, and a total of five employees (all academics, including an absentee) have resigned and were due to leave in September 2018.

The majority of the academics, especially the research assistants and junior researchers, are (young) women, and they all originate from different corners of the world (Africa, America and Asia). There are an estimated 15 nationalities that work at the institute. The academics also travel much for their research, and work much from home as well. It basically never happens that all employees are in at the same time. In total there are currently six small research teams of three to five academics all working on a specific subject in the field of the institution's expertise. Each of the teams makes use of interns that work on research there for several months as part of their own studies. Tenure is diverse, from under a year to ten years and over.

The other half are support staff, forming small departments of finance, marketing and admissions and an educational office, who each have a supervisor. In addition to that there are two management

assistants / HR administrators and a travel and acquisitions employee, three information managers (library services) and a policy advisor (former head of marketing and communication) who supports the management team in the current developments. The majority of the support staff come from the Netherlands, and their average tenure at the institution is relatively long. Many of them have experienced the reorganisation in 2003 and have experienced different directors.

Environment

The institute operates in an international environment. Students have 42 different nationalities; research is done around the world. The institute is connected to a university, which provides frameworks or even guidelines as well as overall surveys regarding issues like human resources, integrity (e.g. regarding harassment) and workload (and conditions connected to this like the job environment, work environment and the development of stronger leadership, as well as structure regarding tasks, autonomy etc.). The university will also facilitate action when institutes or faculties ask for it.

Developments and issues

Since the director was appointed the institute grew well financially and in student numbers (from 60 to 135 students in four years), but as the staff numbers did not grow with this, the work pressures grew. Employees started having burn-outs at that time, which caused some concern but was thought to be temporary. The student numbers are now going down again; in 2018-2019 74 students are enrolled.

In the spring of 2017 the management team of the institution embarked on developing a new strategy for the institution, which was supposed to be implemented from the summer of 2017. Upon the start of this implementation process, it became clear through internal group sessions and two surveys (see Appendix 5) that most of the employees felt there were important issues regarding trust and a feeling of safety that had to be addressed first and before any strategy could be implemented.

The institute has an intranet platform that was developed by the marketing team. The guidelines on how it should be used are not clear, and it is not well adopted by employees. As of recently the institute had no Human Resource officer: Contracts are done by the management assistants, and for legal and other advice the institute can contact a HR-officer of the university. It was identified that the institute was missing management responsibility on staff development, clear management structure (who supervises who), policy development, monitoring and evaluation regarding HR issues, as well as structurally updating regulations. This resulted in personnel and personal development that is not transparent and visible. The institute decided to hire an interim HR advisor per September 2018 to help develop performance management, career development, roles and responsibilities in line with a new infrastructure and new terms of employment.

The most pressing issue that emerged concerned an accusation of sexual harassment which was taking place. Several young female researchers found the courage to speak up about the conduct of their supervisor, which resulted, after some time, in an investigation that was private and done by the investigative board of the university. As this was the rule, management was not informed and they could not communicate about it either. Some people were heard as witnesses, but they could not communicate about that either. Ultimately the suspected academic left the organisation in the spring of 2018. At least two of the affected researchers experienced burn-out because of the situation and ultimately decided to leave, and one had to leave as her contract was not continued. Several other (junior) researchers and research assistants were involved but not directly affected.

I was brought into contact with the institute's policy advisor in February 2018, and we explored where I might support the institute in improving their internal communication. They were however not ready to implement anything, as the policy advisor first wanted to facilitate sessions about the positioning document (issued in March 2018 by the management team), and to try and solve the identified issues with the staff. In the following months several working groups were initiated with support of the management team, to move forward with the change and reorganisation. Besides the sessions, a working group on developing a healthy work climate ("good and healthy work") had been installed. The management team worked on the development of a new, clearer, organisational infrastructure with the help of an external organisation advisor. This new model would be participated in by staff divided in several working groups. An advisor of one of the Dutch Unions was asked to advise and inform staff on

how to organise the installation and role of a Works Council. To this end another working group on staff representation had been formed to design and guide the process.

At the point where the institute decided the issue had become too big to deal with – many employees stayed angry, absence because of burn out had increased, they did not feel they were moving forward – they chose to bring in mediators. This is where my actual research process started, in June of 2018.

4.2 Research methodology and data collection

The research was designed to focus on answering the second research questions formulated in paragraph 2.3, by looking for answers to questions like:

- *How are employees motivated or not by their supervisor? What do employees believe they need in order to become followers from management?*
- *What facilitates (or hampers) connection between employees and participation of employees?*
- *How do employees feel about voicing their opinion?*
- *How is feedback given?*
- *How do purpose and vision of an organisation (sense-giving efforts) motivate employees (or not) to perform for the organisation (e.g. by helping to make sense of their work and contribution)?*
- *How would employees describe the organisational culture and the current communication climate of their organisation?*

Those questions were a guideline, just to have a starting point. As we will see further on, the research questions were shaped by the answers of the employees (see also Appendix 7), and the issues regarding employee communication or the situation at the institute that they felt needed to be addressed.

The goal of this research was:

1. Connect experiences of employees in the reality of an organisation to the insights from theory, to further my understanding of them as well as an understanding of the key issues for the employees in general and with regard to employee communication
2. Formulate specific recommendations for the researched organisation to improve their employee communication in general and more specifically their communication climate.

To reach these goals, I did not research the institute with a narrow focus on the concept of communication climate only, but I looked at the interactions and input of employees in general to get a complete view of the situation in order to determine afterwards where the theoretical concepts fit in.

4.2.1 Qualitative research

As we have seen that communication climate is a social construction dependent on meaning, sense making and giving, experiences, beliefs, values, ideas etc., qualitative data collection to capture these different perceptions was most applicable. The type of research required should be able to connect communication science with anthropology and social science with regard to the experiences of employees, and their cultural sense making mechanisms within the organisation.

Action research or case study

Set on the path of possibly doing action research by my thesis coach, I considered it as a way to research the institute (RSM - Vakgroep organisatie- en Personeelwetenschappen, 2017). Action research would mean becoming part of the organisation as a colleague and observing the employees of the educational institute from an emic perspective (from inside the organisation) as one of them.

Unfortunately, I simply did not have the extensive period of time that is required to do so as it took the institute some time to decide on whether and how I would be allowed to do my research. I could start my actual research from July 2018, which gave me three months, in which a holiday period was

included. This is too short to be truly perceived as one of the organisation and really get a grasp of the social process, let alone develop a cyclical process of data collection, analysis, joint decision-making on actions, preparation of actions, act, data collection on consequences, analyse by reflection etc., which can be done in sequence but often also simultaneously. This thesis only provides a start to this process, which I do hope to continue.

Nonetheless, I have been able to observe and experience many interactions to collect data from my research to be able to triangulate data and support an extensive case study which was initially driven by theoretical assumptions, but could also tentatively be used to derive a more shared meaning of the social aspects. So I would call it a case study with action research aspirations, in trying to reveal social (cultural) patterns and social context of an organisation.

4.2.2 Responsive interviewing method

To collect in depth qualitative data, I chose to do interviews (Given, 2008). Because of the sense making, social nature of communication climate, and the fact that it depends on employees perceptions and attached meaning, I chose to conduct interviews using the responsive interviewing method (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). This method doesn't rely on predetermined questions, but is more flexible and about listening and 'hearing the data' in what the interviewees say. Questions are thus determined based on the responses from the interviewees, which helps to gain deep insight into individual perspectives.

I did use questions as guidelines to keep the interview moving and address certain topics connected to the research question (see Appendix 7). However, the interviews were not semi-structured because of this. I started every interview explaining my research topic and telling the interviewees that I wanted to hear about their personal experiences, their story. I opened each interview asking about the interviewee's role in the institute, their background, as a way to start the conversation. Then I would let the conversation take its course, and asked follow-up questions on what the interviewee said. Only when the conversation seemed to stall, I picked it up with a predetermined question on a topic we hadn't discussed. I did not use the list of questions as a guideline, but chose the next question from the top of my head, based on what I felt could be relevant. This resulted in interviews that in general did address many of the key topics, directly or indirectly, but these were based as much as possible on what the interviewee felt important to share from his or her perspective.

The interviews and interviewees

In total 12 interviews were conducted in a total of six days between August 21st and September 18th 2018 (see table 4.1). The interviewees were selected based on my observations during the first mediation session and the meetings I attended, and I consulted the policy advisor to complete the mix. To invite someone for an interview, I just walked into the office of the intended interviewee, and asked them whether they would want to talk to me. They all agreed. Thus I had a nice mix of interviewees regarding their role (supervising or non-supervising, academic and non-academic) and tenure (from less than a year to more than 15 years) (see also table 4.1). The interviewees consisted of:

- Five members of support staff (3 male, 2 female), one from each support department: Management support, Finance, Marketing and Acquisitions, Educational office and Information office (library). Among them one interviewee (male) has a supervisor role.
- Five members of academic staff (all female), from three of the six research teams in the institute. Four of them are researchers, who have a coaching role towards the assistants, but are not supervisors. One of the researchers also has the coordinating role of master program manager. One interviewee is research assistant.
- Two members of the management team (one male, one female) and both experienced academics. They have a supervising role, but also report to the director who is, of course, heading the management team and has financial responsibility. Neither of them have formal power over the academics. There is an academic director connected to the university who is involved, but not connected to the current organisational (hierarchical) structure.

The interview time was between 25 minutes and 1 hour and 20 minutes; the average interview time was one hour. Five interviews were conducted in Dutch, and seven in English. Every department of support staff was represented among the interviewees. With regard to the academic staff there was a mix between junior, mid and senior level experience, where the senior level academics are also in managing (MT) or coordinating (master) roles. I chose two researchers that were in some way affected by the sexual harassment issue, but did not burn-out.

I deliberately chose not to have any interview or meeting alone with the director for three reasons. First of all I did not want to have any other impression of him than what I observed during group sessions and meetings, from the viewpoint of the employees, in order to get an as unbiased as possible sense of understanding how he came across in such situations. Secondly, because I focussed on followership, I wanted to focus on his role from the perspective of the employees and his team members only and thirdly because, would I be allowed to continue with this process professionally after finishing this thesis project, I will have to discuss findings with the director. As I have not shared anything with him yet, or passed any judgement on what is going on before I distilled my findings, such a discussion about the findings can then help me to better understand his perspective, what it means to him and what could help him.

Table 4.1: Overview of interviewees

Staff	Role	Gender	Tenure institute
Academic	Head	Female	>15 years
Academic	Head	Male	>15 years
Academic	Researcher, coordinator master program	Female	7 years
Academic	Research assistant	Female	1 year
Academic	Researcher	Female	5 years
Academic	Researcher	Female	< 1 year
Academic	Researcher	Female	3 years
Support	Head	Male	10 years
Support	Employee	Female	6 years
Support	Employee	Female	>15 years
Support	Employee	Male	1 year
Support	Employee	Male	>15 years

4.2.3 Qualitative content analysis, observations and other conversations

In addition to interviews, having informal conversations with and observing people in the organisation, how they communicate with each other (both verbally and nonverbally) can also offer relevant information about the communication climate: Which words and channels do they use, do they seem to make an effort to listen/hear/understand each other, how are their relationships?

I have tried to treat everything I observed, heard or read as additional data to be used in the interviews I conducted, and to form a general understanding of the background of the institute.

Content analysis of reports and intranet

Qualitative content analysis (Given, 2008) of (internal) communication content (e.g. website, intranet, e-mails, vision, mission) will give further insight into the researched organisation, for example in terms of organisational culture, which might help to understand the perception current communication climate.

From the start of my research process from June 2018 until October 2018 I was also provided with reports and other input to deepen my understanding of the situation, its background, the issues, the thoughts and conversations of employees of the institution etc. These included:

- Documents on strategy development spring/summer 2017
- Employee survey done by the institute with regard to rating issues and asking employees to describe 'weaknesses', 'strengths', 'values' and 'What would you do if you were CEO for a day?' (See Appendix 5)
- Employee survey report with regard to strategy, November 28th 2017 (See Appendix 5)
- Positioning document of the institute (March 2018)
- Report from the mediators with their conclusions based on their sessions and interviews (of which I attended one)
- Working session reports (from September 2017 to March/April 2018) which were organised to discuss new strategy and later to discuss surfaced issues with employees, which were the basis of choosing to work with mediators
- Intranet content (messages and documents), as accessed on September 18th

From all this input I have summarised an overview of the issues that the institute had already defined in the year before I started my research process. This gave me insights into the progress made so far. I will discuss these findings in the next chapter.

Data collection formal meetings

I personally joined and observed during the following formal meetings in chronological order:

1. Mediation session (July 10th)

Support and observations of the first of two mediation sessions, led by two external mediators. The focus of the session was to raise issues endured in the past, giving participants a voice in the process in terms of individual concerns, interests and needs. This session started plenary with an introduction for the entire group of employees present (in total 26 of the 57 employees were present, including the full management team – getting all the employees together was impossible), and then broke down in five groups of five people each, consecutively discussing and answering the following three questions:

- a. Write down 3 individual concerns about what is happening now, what is an issue now (still). Share these concerns in your subgroup. Find out how it affects your daily work.
- b. From concerns to individual interests: What is important to me personally and why? List interests that you feel are important for the team's future. How does this relate to culture (how we work together), structure of the organisation, management support / HR support and the institute's strategic (positioning) plan for 2018-2023.
- c. From individual interests to individual needs (subgroups were reshuffled for this):
 - What I need is...
 - What can I do to help fulfil this need?
 - What do I need them to do?
 - What can I do myself?

The session ended with a plenary discussion about collective issues.

I did not attend the second session, which was a follow-up of the first, and was planned on July 18th, a week later. This session was attended by mostly the same people as the first session, but some were on vacation or chose not to come to this session after their experience with the first. Others, who could not attend the first session, did attend the second one. The focus of that session was to work on clustered issues and suggested improvements, so the focus was on the future (going from the individual needs to 'What can I do?' and 'Who can help?'). This session started with an introduction and recap of the first session, and moved on to a plenary session (by use of a talking stick) to talk about collaboration and transparency. At the start of this plenary session, the director gave a statement addressing his own role in the situation. Then the group would be divided in three subgroups, to develop scenario's on the basis of the results of session one.

2. Workshop proposal Organisational Infrastructure (July 12th)

The institute organised an afternoon to present the proposed new organisational model and internal structure. As it concerns a reorganisation, the Works Council should be consulted. As such a council is not yet in place, a staff meeting was in order. The Governing Council has to approve of the reorganisation.

The proposal was presented by an external organisation advisor, who helped the management team and the policy advisor design it. The presentation was done twice, for two groups. The first presentation was aimed at the non-academic (support) staff, and the second one was aimed at the academics. The presentations were visited by a total of 27 employees. There were also a few academics present at the first part. The purpose was to inform employees and collect their feedback. After this a participative process was initiated to give employees the opportunity to share their thoughts and suggestions and propose alternatives.

3. Working group meeting organisational infrastructure (August 21st)

Kick off meeting with the group of staff who volunteered to lead a total of five participative groups of employees in developing the proposed organisational structure/model, collecting thoughts, ideas and input. I advised them to structure this meeting towards defining chief interests with regard to the structure, and by looking at who they needed to connect to now to do their work. This would give them a starting point from to analyse which connections they would need to see reflected in the structure. In the following weeks I attended (part of) the meetings of two of these groups during lunchtime on days I also did interviews.

4. Join the work council meeting (August 30th)

A presentation of an advisor of one of the Dutch unions, designed to inform staff about the proceedings involving and role of a works council, for which elections were planned in October of 2018.

5. Evaluation of the mediation (September 5th)

Evaluation meeting regarding the mediation process, with the heads and director (MT), policy advisor, the two mediators that conducted the sessions and their manager.

I compared my own findings during these meetings with what was already known to me about the issues through reports and previous meetings with my contact. In chapter 4 I will also address this.

Data collection informal conversations

In addition to being present for certain meetings, I spent a total of eight days (Tuesdays and Thursdays) working in the institute from August 21st to September 18th. The first three days I had a work station in the office of one of the academic groups (where two interns and a research assistant had their office), and the other five days I put up my laptop in the office of another group (junior researcher and three assistants), which was also used as flexible work space. I could casually observe a few interactions and also had a long conversation with the two interns and a research assistant of the first office about why I was there, on the first day of my interview cycle. I met people at the coffee machine in the corridor, among which a very enthusiastic intern from Croatia. Of course I walked around the institute's floor, and into other offices or up to certain employees to ask practical questions, or to ask someone whether I could interview them

I also had several conversations with my contact, the policy advisor to the management team (and former marketing and communication manager) about the issues, to evaluate and discuss my initial thoughts on findings.

Lastly, on September 11th I had an informal meeting with the interim HR manager that started at the institute at the beginning of September. We both shared our thoughts and findings so far, as she has also talked to several employees, and mostly others that I had talked to. All of this, of course, fed in to my findings, and how I interpreted them. Let's turn the page to the next chapter and find out what those findings are.

5 Data analysis and findings

The process of researching started with analysing data that was already available from the institute (e.g. website) as well as meetings with my contact at the institute. Other qualitative content analysis, e.g. looking at the intranet, happened throughout the entire process until the interviews were almost finished. As I was in the midst of the process I also received full survey reports, session minutes, a positioning paper and additional information about the institute. Data collection was therefore all intertwined during the entire process.

I chose to start with an overview of what was already known and found by the institute itself before my research and the mediation process started. To that knowledge I will add my observations and findings from interactions, meetings and the mediation session I attended. Of course I observed and interpreted everything with a certain bias, as I already knew much of the situation. I tried to keep questioning my interpretation of what I saw, for example by asking my contact or the interim HR advisor how they perceived certain things. Thus, the observations or discussions that confirm data and certain patterns are presented here, as well as a few others that seemed important to complement existing data, and were relevant in light of my research question. My intention is to paint a picture of the situation and the issues of the employees of this institute, which is as complete as it can be.

I will include the results of the full mediation process (even though I was only at the first session). I believe it is relevant to take it into account as part of the entire research. Some of the interviewees also talked to me about their experiences with the sessions.

The interviews I did were part of the last stretch of my research process, and so make up for the last part of my findings. First I will address significant findings from the interviews in general. Second I will analyse the interviews by means of responsive methodology. This means constructing narratives from a personal perspective out of the interviews, from connecting examples and attributed meaning and interpretations from the interviewees.

5.1 Analysis of previous findings from the institute

From the results of two employee surveys, one general and one on strategy, done in the second half of 2017 (see Appendices 5 and 6), I discovered that employees were most concerned about issues with leadership, strategy and vision, internal structure, feedback on performance, need for collaboration, clarity on rules, job descriptions and decision making. Workload and clarity of reporting structure also are of some concern, especially with the academics. In addition it seems most employees feel relatively safe to voice their opinion towards other colleagues, but to management (MT, including director) that feeling of safety is less strong, especially for the academics.

From minutes and overviews made during several sessions the employees had in different formations over a period of months in 2017 through to 2018, these concerns are reiterated by determining management should focus on a clear direction, clarity and transparency, a vision on future direction and career development, internal organisation, and the internal culture which is described as conflict avoidant. Employees do seem to acknowledge that they have a responsibility to contribute to change, but they look at management to support this visibly.

The external agency that was involved in strategy development in the spring of 2017 also concluded management had to act to improve their relationship with employees to improve trust and to improve their functioning in light of the issues and concerns described above.

From several employee sessions (e.g. with senior staff) and the aforementioned employee survey I derived and summarized a list of core strengths and weaknesses that are significant from the viewpoint of employees (See table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Summary of core strengths and weaknesses of the institute as determined by employees (2017)

Weaknesses	Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No (central) leadership: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ No one vision ✓ Finances before people • No structure or guidelines: too much freedom, everyone does what they want • No transparency: No clarity on roles, decision making • No internal communication structure • Favouritism, not following rules in hiring people, ad hoc hiring, no HR strategy • Workload prevent innovation and change: too busy with the day to day • Not good at giving constructive feedback (conflict avoidance) • Working in silo's, good collaboration within, but not outside of them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idealistic drive, passion and engagement, working for something bigger, social focus • Strong history • International environment • Freedom to develop your work and job • Family atmosphere • Never a dull moment, exciting • Quality and strong ties with alumni • Autonomy and freedom

Working climate scan ('good and healthy working'): Experiences of bullying

In May 2018, the institute did a working climate scan that 50% of the employees participated in. Most results of this scan connect to results as mentioned from the other surveys. One of the items of the scan was bullying, harassment and intimidation. This showed disheartening results, which were published on the intranet:

- 43% of respondents have experienced intimidation coming from colleagues or managers (7% very often, and another 7% continuously).
- 68% of respondents state they have seen intimidation happening in the institute.
- The institute scores higher than the Dutch average benchmark on the occurrence of bullying (3.5 times higher), intimidation (2.5 times higher) and sexual intimidation (5 times higher).
- There are employees who talk about it, but also those who have kept silent about it. 67% of respondents say that the institute did not respond adequately when bullying or intimidation was reported.

In one of the interviews (also see paragraph 5.3 and 5.4) the employee I spoke with elaborated on her experiences with being bullied or at least intimidated herself. She talked, very emotionally, about being excluded from important decisions by both her direct colleagues and management, which made her feel very insecure about her position. Her direct colleague even sent her e-mails with vacancies, proposing she go and look for another job. She felt she was being excluded from everything, felt victimised and powerless to change it, although she also explained many different ways in which she tried to connect.

Many employees describe the family atmosphere, which they consider very positive. However, it seems there is also a lot going on under the surface of the relationships within the institute that is left to fester and creates feelings of exclusion, uncertainty and fear.

With this starting point in mind, I went into the first mediation session, and started observing the employees of the institute during several workshops and meetings.

5.2 Findings from mediation, workshops and qualitative content analysis

5.2.1 Mediation

The first mediation session on July 10th 2018 was attended by 26 employees, among which both MT members and the director. Unfortunately it was practically impossible to get all employees to attend the sessions.

Concerns

There were 77 individual concerns listed by the 26 employees that attended. The mediators distilled and divided these concerns into 5 key concerns, from the most mentioned one to the least mentioned one:

1. Lack of recognition and leadership by management (mentioned by 26 employees)
 - Lack of support from manager
 - Lack of recognition for professional contribution
 - Lack of leadership/role models
 - Abuse of power
2. Lack of collaboration between different groups within the institute (mentioned by 20 employees)
 - academic and support staff
 - management and all staff
 - between academics, across academic theme
3. Lack of clear roles, responsibilities and structure (mentioned by 14 employees)
4. Lack of communication/transparency (mentioned by 6 employees)
5. Unsustainable workload (mentioned by 3 employees)

Other mentioned concerns were instability of the institute, the tendency rationalise working conditions (this is how we do things), fears about the survival of the institute, seeming randomness in decision making, do I still love my job, how to provide quality for students.

Interests

Subgroups were asked to relate those concerns to:

1. Culture (how we work together) (connected 26 times)
2. Structure (Management/HR support and new organisational structure) (connected 26 times)
3. Strategic plan (2018-2023) (connected 7 times)

All employees listed interests as related to culture and structure. In the second session it was confirmed by the attendees that strategy does not have the attention as people are too much absorbed by day-to-day (crisis) management of their jobs

The plenary discussion showed that not everyone felt at ease to ventilate the issues in the larger group. One support staff employee walked out of the session at this point because she felt very uncomfortable by an academic staff member addressing the harassment case and displaying his anger. Moreover it was clear that everyone has a different perspective/emotion with regard to the issues endured in the past. Everyone has their own pace towards the future (focusing on past, present, and future).

Observations

As is usual with plenary discussions in such large groups, not everybody felt the need to say something. In the sub group talks, the discussions seemed open and was lively and engaged. It seems several employees did not hold back much, not even to management. Fear about not finding a solution was expressed. Candid words were spoken. The sub groups all seemed committed and eager to talk about the issues openly, while they also realised they can't see things the same way and have different interests.

I walked around during group discussions and noted things that were being said. They basically reflected all the issues already mentioned. A few quotes I noted seem relevant in connection to the other collected data:

*'Academic and non-academic staff **need each other**'*
*'**Behaviour** towards each other'*
*'There is **bullying**, distrust'*
'Do I still love my job?'
*'Lack of **ownership**: It's your problem'*
*'**Negative influences** of some people'*
*'I am concerned that the **issues are too big** to be resolved'*
*'I am amazed at the **distrust**'*
*'This will surely be **pushed to us top down** again'*
*'**Respect**. That people question my **good intentions**. That we all should have good intentions.'*
*'We need more **empathy**'*
*'I want **appreciation**, to be seen'*
*"Much talking about issues, but nothing happens. We have to **follow up**"*
*'**Work happiness**. I want to do what I love, make a better world. Here I can do it and get paid'*

During the plenary session at the end, emotions ran high and only a few spoke their mind. Once the harassment case was mentioned by someone who expressed his anger, this became the centre of a discussion and one employee who did not wish to be any part of this negativity left the room. Feedback from a few employees after the session was that it made them feel very unsafe. The director did not speak in the large group in session one, and felt seemingly more comfortable in the subgroups. The other MT members did speak their mind in the plenary sessions, and one of them even apologised for the way issues were handled. A few relevant things that were said during this discussion, which describe the emotional atmosphere, were:

*'We **need to be kind** to each other. Part of a team, with a common goal. I really miss that.'*
*'We need to move forward in a positive way. There has been an issue. I believe it is now closed. We want to **move forward, be a team, be a family**.'*

*'**Why are we silent** about it, why not discuss the way it has been handled or not?'*

*'What do you want to discuss? **No one knows exactly what happened, but from second, third, fourth hand. But we all made up our own story.** There is not one and only truth or story.'*

*'The **process is devastating**, too long and mistakes have been made. We can all agree. This should never happen this way again.'*

*'There is a number of **responsibilities that everyone should take**, and then we move forward.'*

*'The case dragging me down is the **lack of trust**. This has happened, a lot of pain and anger. But it's now past. It's about how we handled the case.'*

*'He said **we all looked away** and he is right. We all played a part. I saw the situation was unhealthy too.'*

*'**Acknowledge it**. I could have contributed more. I saw things, knew things. People who spoke up and shouted about it got sick'*

*'It's about being listened too. **When you shout and they don't listen.**'*

*'**Trust is such an important need** for collaborative work, team work. I don't know why we don't have this. I feel we need that much more. There is distrust, people feel attacked by colleagues.'*

*'It's a **lack of transparency**.'*

*'There is **no communication!** Transparency needs to be on the list. Big deal, big time.'*

Second session: five key wishes

From the report of and evaluation with the mediators, I received some data on the second mediation session. A total of 20 employees went to the second session on July 18th. I later heard from some interviewees that they did not go to the second session because they heard from others the first session was not positive, and those who went had mixed feelings (also see paragraph 5.3.2). Nine staff members who were on travels during one or both sessions provided additional input to the sessions by conference call.

The key concerns from the first session were flipped into five key wishes by the mediators, turning them into dreams for the future that could be worked on by the employees:

1. Leadership and recognition by MT and senior leaders
2. Build on team spirit and collaboration
3. Clarity on roles, responsibilities and procedures
4. Open communication & transparency
5. Sustainable workload

The idea was to then create scenarios for solutions to materialise these dreams. This was to be done in sub groups, after a short plenary summary of the first session and a plenary discussion. This discussion however, started with a statement of the director who gave a reflection on the sexual harassment case. He provided the facts of the case and the impact it had on him, not addressing the harassed colleagues. This resulted in many emotions by all staff. The mediators consciously took the decision to allow all staff to ventilate their emotions in order to make a first step towards building more transparency and trust as a team. As a result only a limited amount of time was left to spend on the scenario planning.

Evaluation of the mediation process

During the evaluation on September 5th, the management team expressed that they felt the first session ended with feelings of unsafety, and the second session had polarised the employees further. The mediators explained that everybody will change at their own pace, and those who are willing to change should be able to go ahead, and those who are still angry will at some point realise they are left behind. The fact that some things were said, out in the open, in the group, was important for progress. Especially the younger employees gave much input. So the focus should be on moving forward with the organisational infrastructure and developing scenario's, while asking people to take responsibility (ownership) and act when they see something they want to change ('walk the talk'). Transparent communication is important, on a day to day basis, on what is relevant. Management was asked to be visible in this communication.

Since I did not attend this session myself, I also asked for experiences of some of the interviewees (see paragraph 5.3.2). Two of them told me they did not go to the second session, because of what they heard from colleagues about the first session (which they could not attend). Four of the employees expressed they did not like the fact the director had been so emotional, while two academics expressed that they thought the director was self-centred and talked only about his own feelings.

5.2.2 Workshops, conversations and other observations

From several meetings and workshops that I was able to attend, I also derived background information and relevant data.

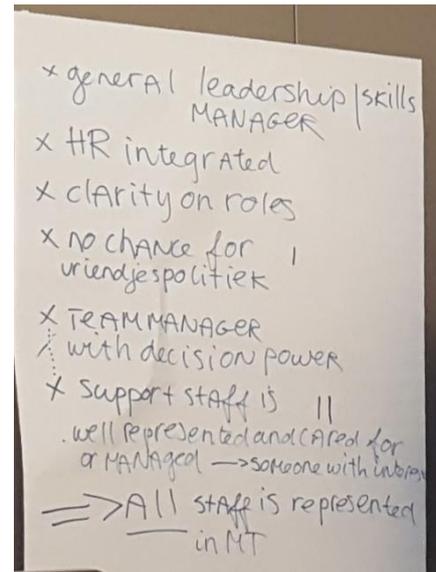
Workshop proposal Organisational Infrastructure

The proposed model still had certain gaps, because solving one issue sometimes created another one. One those issues is that the proposed model allows for a general and academic director that have equal decision making power, which spreads decision power and balances academic and non-academic concerns (something that is desired) but would basically create two organisations. A matrix organisation

where the employees report to a hierarchical manager that would be responsible for them - regardless of other projects or groups the employees would be connected to – was advised.

A logical clustering of non-academic (support) staff was one of the questions that was discussed. The non-academic staff could be organised in four departments, based on the aims of the institute and its most important processes, while academic staff could be organised on a proposed amount of three themes, each with a team owner. This is a model often used in academic institutions.

The academic staff had more input to give, since two of the pressing questions were how to decide on three academic themes, what 'crosscutting areas' could be determined (e.g. PhD/Master program, innovation), and whether a project coordinator could be the same person as a thematic manager. This could lead to a conflict of interest between teams.



Significant changes the model proposed are:

- Changing the informal management structure (where heads of specialisations are not evaluated on their management performance and MT members manage processes but are not responsible for staff) towards a clear structure in which formal management evaluation and roles as well as decision making are implemented.
- The management team will consist of more managers, coming from the support staff and the academic themes; this could even mean six to eight managers, which is a lot for such a small organisation
- Move towards a matrix organisation, where team leaders are hierarchical and the thematic project leaders are functional.

It was expressed that the proposal with thematic teams does not put an end to silo working, and it all depends on how well the management team members are trained and prepared for their tasks and their role, also regarding care for their subordinates and giving and receiving feedback. As time was too short to discuss the proposal well, an additional working group was initiated to further input from the staff. The organisation advisor advised against this, as he believed it to be utopian to get everyone's approval. In the end, he mentioned people will make any structure work as long as it's clear to them what their role is. His advice, however, was not taken aboard.

From general observation it seemed the academic staff felt more at ease to discuss the issues in the large group, and they didn't express the need to break out in smaller groups. They also had more in depth ideas and thoughts. For the support staff the concern was more 'What will my place be?'. However, in both groups atmosphere was, although at times (understandably) somewhat cynical, generally positive and constructive.

Working group meeting Organisational Infrastructure

During the working group meeting of the employees that were going to lead sub groups that would be giving feedback on the proposal of the organisational infrastructure model, the employees were all divided in sub groups (eight people in each group), by evaluating them one by one and deciding who should or should not be put together with whom, in order to get a mix of academic and non-academic staff in each group, as well as separate the outspoken or befriended colleagues.

It was expressed the task felt overwhelming, but the intention was to come to one balanced proposal distilled from all the feedback and sub proposals. But the group was convinced this was needed to get a balanced proposal, instead of something that is decided top down. The proposal was posted on the intranet, but there were no responses there. It was decided the process should be quick and clean, as change fatigue among employees was setting in, and the group leaders would do their best to ensure

all input was taken on board. The policy advisor said she had planned one to one meetings with the non-academics, and the ones she had already had seemed to have worked therapeutic for the colleagues involved.

During the first group session I attended (only partly), the top five interests that were listed regarding a desired organisational model were: (1) Flexibility, (2) Responsibility, (3) Clarity of structure (4) Communication and (5) Clarity of decision making. Four employees proposed more detailed input for the structure and presented their thoughts. During the second group session I attended (which was with a different group of employees) the group listed as important: (1) General leadership skills, (2) HR integrated, (3) Clarity on roles, (4) No chance for favouritism and (5) Team manager with decision power. Underlined was the fact that support staff must be well represented and cared for/managed (all staff is represented in the MT).

Generally the atmosphere in both meetings was good. The same themes were revisited, if only in a different order. During the interview that I had with one of the group leaders, I addressed the experience. She had found that not everyone felt they had something to contribute and some kept silent, and that time could have been managed better (some colleagues expressed frustration), but the meeting had been productive nonetheless as at least four people provided good input on the model.

Join the work council meeting

The turnout of the work council meeting was 21 employees. The interim HR advisor was also present. The first part consisted of a presentation of the union advisor, the second part was a presentation of the working group, presenting the election process design (time frame, voting for employees who would be travelling at the time). Present employees expressed they wanted to understand how the Works Council functions (rights and role), how much time is involved in working for the Works Council, what the tasks were, and generally what else is involved or important to know. Five employees were needed for the council, and it became clear there were already six people interested. Employees were very interested and seemed to feel empowered by the thought they would get a formal role in advising and controlling management. It was expressed (and agreed upon) that those in the Work Council should represent all employees of the institute.

Candidates could nominate themselves until September 7th; on the intranet a section would be devoted to the elections and presentations of the candidates. Voting day was set to be on October 16th 2018.

Conversations and observations

I spoke to three interns, two who worked in the same office as me, and one at the coffee machine. The two interns in the office did not express any concern with the situation. I asked them about the difference between the Netherlands and their home country. One student was from China, and she thought the weather was a big change. The other student was from Ohio, USA, and was studying in Berlin. He was already quite adapted to European culture. Both felt quite at home seeing they were interns and only temporarily in the Netherlands. Within the office there was also a research assistant from Spain I spoke at length with. She had just started in May and told me she started with high expectations and much excitement, but the situation and how her colleagues talked about it, did dampen her spirits. It had been quite demotivating to fall into a process like this, and she expressed the hope it would improve. The atmosphere in the office was open, but everyone was also focussed on their work and there was not much conversation. This was the same in the other office I worked from on other days. Colleagues work quietly, there was not much conversation.

The intern at the coffee machine was from Croatia. We started talking and she began to speak animatedly about how great she thought the Netherlands was, and how great the institute was. She expressed great positivity and was determined to come back after she had finished her studies and study further in the Netherlands.

There are a few things I noticed while walking around at the institute. The office doors are often open, and people do walk in and out. However, I saw some leave their office hardly at all. And for a small institute (also in floor space) it is very quiet (unless students are around for lectures etc.). People stick

to their offices and own groups. Sometimes (working) groups of colleagues were having a meeting in the open space. Around lunch time, they go to lunch in the same groups (or lunch individually). This was confirmed in the interview I had with one of the researchers. The HR advisor had also noticed that, when you are new and not attached to any group, like we both were, you kind of fall in-between the cracks when it comes to getting noticed and asked to join during lunch. Of course most people are very busy, and they stick to their daily routines. To me however this simple thing illustrated the silo-feeling quite well. What I also noticed, was that although everyone is busy, they all had time to talk to me at very short notice. On the one hand this to me illustrates the general kindness that I was approached with throughout the process, but also that they are all quite used to working ad hoc and feeling (too) busy might also be an effect of that.

5.2.3 Qualitative content analysis

Written content, like the positioning document and messages from the Intranet provided me with additional insights about the way management and employees communicate in the institute. Key insights will be discussed here.

Information and conversations on the intranet

At the end of the interview process, I had the opportunity to look at the intranet. Some employees had expressed that the intranet was a gossip channel, where, similar to social media, employees found it easy to be negative. There are no guidelines, or some kind of code of conduct of how to use the intranet. It is not embedded in day to day work behaviour (although there are instructions given to new employees), and not set as standard homepage. This could be because, as I learned from the interviews, it is a marketing team product, and it seems to be frowned upon by the other teams. It does not get much support for structural use.

The intranet is currently designed in both a practical, informing and entertaining way. The menu consists of buttons for several subjects: The institute at work, Organisational structure, Secretary and HR matters, News from the research field, the Master program, as well as a place for teams to have their own space and an overview of important documents (templates, procedures, collective agreements etc., organised by subject or theme). The intranet is used as a means to inform staff, yet from the interviews I did, I gathered that most of the interviewees did not check it regularly, and often only if someone else told them there was relevant information posted.

The homepage starts with an introduction section for new interns, and on the right there is an MT section with news from the management and vacancies, as well as a button to go directly to an overview of who is in and who is out. On the left there is a section on news and events of the institute, and at the centre of the page are posted messages. They can be about anything, when I looked the first message was from an employee who shared his candidacy for the Works Council.

There were several messages from employees that were about to leave the institute. Despite their trials and tribulations (as they were affected by the harassment) that caused them to leave, they spoke warmly of their colleagues:

“I will always love this institute for all the amazing people I met here, all the knowledge and professional growth I gained by studying and working in this institute. <...> I just want to remember the nicest memories of this place and I wish that the institute learns from past mistakes to avoid future ones. I appreciate the time working alongside each one of you. <...> I want to thank you for support, guidance and encouragement you gave me in these 4 years, you really became my institute family.”

“Over the last 11 years, I have had the opportunity to work on fascinating courses and projects, travel to places, learn and teach and truly engage with values that are close to my heart and most importantly to have worked with each one of you. It is <...> with sadness that I will leave this behind. As it has been thanks to you that have made my time at the institute an experience I will never forget. The knowledge you present, the commitment you give, the belief you have and the passion that we share for <our cause> is what you should all be proud of, cherish and continue to share.”

"I am leaving the Institute with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I have grown in this institute and learned a lot; and on the other, I believe that I have also given a lot to the institute. <...> I will always keep the good memories we had together, as well as the lessons learned, even from the difficult moments. I am very grateful to all of you for your collaboration and support throughout the years."

But the intranet is also used by some to share their personal opinion, leading to emotional online discussion. This message, posted by one of the non-academics right after the second mediation session, caused a stir of emotional reactions:

"I resent the overall negativism that seems to be growing during the sessions with the mediators, and with other workshops undertaken. I also resent the fact that new colleagues are told a lot of negative things about the institute and people within the institute. <...> It seems that all the positive things of the institute are being forgotten, <...> Indeed we used to be a family, but that was a long time ago. If we want to become a family again, we have to work on this together. It may sound harsh, but I think that if staff members are only negative about all aspects within the institute, it is time to look for another job. The market is booming, so that should not be too hard. I would really love to have the "old" institute back, where I have been working with great pleasure <for a very long time>."

This message, as was also mentioned by the heads and researchers I interviewed, did not go down well and was mentioned to me many times by others as well. One of the researchers removed her emotional comment, after she had been questioned about it and felt afraid to leave it on. Three people fully agreed to the message. Others commented:

*"I hear you and I wish the very same for all of us that we can get back to have a relation of trust and confidence within all the people working so hard at this institute. I would like to point out that the frustrations <...> triggered by the ways we all dealt with the occurrences of which **there are different stories and interpretations which divide us even further.**¹ Let us think how to move forward by bridging this gap and solve these issues in positive ways!<...>an honest approach to come to terms with our different stories would help enormously.<...> The biggest asset of any institution are its people – before we suggest to change the people, we should consider changing the institution."*

"I love the institute especially the people at the institute and I super love working in this place I called "my happy place". And so I will do whatever it takes to bring back a more positive environment where everyone feels safe, happy and healthy."

"For the new people and for the current ones, this my personal experience regarding the human side of this institute I felt and feel: <This> is the best place and group of people I ever had the pleasure to experience during the around 10 different jobs <...> around the world in the last 20 years."

"What I miss most (I am 100% sincere, so please read it carefully again) is all of you, the people, the students, the family feeling I had at the institute."

If anything, it shows employees identify strongly and generally very positively with their work and the institute, and are willing to improve and change the current situation.

Formal communication from management: values and impressions

I did not find any comments of any of the MT members on the conversations on the intranet. They also expressed they do not communicate online or respond to messages. There is, as mentioned, a section on the intranet with news from the director. The timing of such messages is not structured, like a weekly update or a monthly overview from the management team. Much of the information that is given is aimed at stating the facts, explaining next steps or reiterating desired values and behaviour. Much of

¹ This comment sums up quite nicely why analysis by responsive methodology as described in paragraph 5.4 can help employees in the institute to understand each other's perspectives instead of divide them.

the information about the processes is also written and shared by the policy advisor, and not by the management team or the director himself.

One significant message from the director, dated November 2017, states:

“We will never accept behaviour that threatens, damages or discriminates co-workers at this institute. We want to be an institute in which we work co-operatively together in order to achieve common objectives. In which good working relationships are established and we consider other people’s perspectives in order to help reach agreement.”

Yet employees, over six months later, still expressed that they would want to feel safer and collaborate better. It seems actions taken so far have not contributed to changing that.

Looking at the Positioning document, I also found a lot of beautiful visionary words in it, but did not recognise the key weaknesses and strengths described earlier by employees. The document does describe vision, mission and values of the institute. The list of values, however, is long, and the values themselves are very general in nature for an international educational institute: Being curious and understanding, inspiring, academic and applied, international, inclusive etc.

Interestingly, from the previously discussed general employee survey (see Appendix 5) the response to the additional question ‘If you had to mention 3 values that guide your work at the institute, what would these values be?’ showed hardly any overlap in the answers the employees gave; no one mentioned the exact same values (as in using the same words). This means there seems to be no shared view on the values, which could guide the work. Yet when you look at the strengths employees describe, there is a strong feeling of idealism and social purpose, as well as strong ties between colleagues. These ties, however, do not generally seem to cross the boundaries of the teams, as working in silos and lack of collaboration are also high on the list of dissatisfactory issues.

In short, management seems to speak a different language in addressing the pressing issues of employees. There is no agreement on the actual core values of the institute, yet it also seems the international atmosphere and idealism still connects them all. Vision, mission and other strategic information are at a level of abstraction, which does not seem to inspire or add anything to the way employees see the institute and their role in it. This connects to what I mentioned about the second mediation session, where strategy was found to be least important to most employees, and the content of the statement of the director had an adverse effect on some employees.

5.3 Findings from the interviews

As mentioned, the interviews followed responsive interviewing methodology, thus, there were no (semi)-structured questions. As responsive interviewing is about ‘hearing the data’, whatever interviewees express is what they believe is important to them at that moment in light of what I told them about my intended research goal. Not surprisingly, many of the issues and opinions apparent from the other findings were reconfirmed by the interviewees, who provided much background information, examples regarding personal experiences, opinions, perceived meaning and emotions. In this paragraph I will highlight those things that seem most relevant to me, either because the interviewees shared the same perspective, or because they provide insight in to the experiences connected to the concepts we explored in chapter 2. First I’ll discuss the perspective of the two management team members, added with input from two interviewees in supervising roles. Second I’ll look at the key issues raised by the interviewees in general.

Overview of key issues and concepts expressed

In table 5.2 I have summarised the number of respondents that mentioned key issues that emerged from the first mediation session, as well as certain sub issues that are connected to them. In addition I have added whether they clearly expressed thoughts connected to the theoretical concepts we explored in chapter 2. The purpose of this is not to quantify the qualitative data, but to reconfirm the prevalence of certain issues, and to support drawing conclusions about the internal/employee communication of

the institute, as well as the perceived communication climate. It should be noted that when an issue was not expressed in the interview, it does not mean the interviewee had no opinion of or experience with it; it might simply mean that it did not come up in the conversation.

Table 5.2 Issues expressed in the interview by number of respondents (N total = 12)

Expressed in the interview	Number of respondents (N total = 12)
Lack of recognition and leadership^{*2}	N = 8
Recognition of positive change attitude in management	N = 5
Positive personal perception of director	N = 7
Negative managerial perception of director (no people manager)	N = 9
Lack of support from manager	N = 7
Lack of recognition for contribution	N = 6
Lack of vision leadership	N = 6
Experience abuse of power	N = 5
Lack of collaboration outside of work group*	N = 6
Lack of clear roles, responsibilities and structure*	N = 10
Lack of clarity in decision making	N = 11
Lack of internal communication/ transparency*	N = 12
Information mainly from hearsay, grapevine	N = 8
Not structurally using the intranet	N = 3
Initiation of cross functional meetings outside of team	N = 4
Unsustainable work load / work pressure*	N = 7
Personal experience of bullying	N = 1
Personal experience of intimidation of some kind	N = 5
Positive identification with the institute**	N = 11
Perceived positive family feeling	N = 8
Positive attitude towards participating re structure**	N = 8
Holding back voice towards supervisor**	N = 8
Lack of trust in management/supervisor**	N = 5
Lack of trust in colleagues**	N = 6
Cultural issues of institute (the way we do things)**	N = 7
Experience cultural background differences	N = 9
Gender issue female/male	N = 6

5.3.1 Experiences management team members

Both management team (MT) members acknowledge in their interviews that they have been focussed more on academic content than on managing employees over the past years. Doing both equally well has felt impossible, and they acknowledge they made mistakes. In the new organisational structure (from which a new communication structure should be developed), both members might not be management team anymore. They are both fine with that and believe it would be good for the institute to have managers that can and want to focus more on managing. In addition, the supervisors of support staff have also expressed a desire to develop management skills. It was mentioned that they got together and plan to implement a meeting structure to discuss this and give feedback to each other.

Commitment

Both MT members express a love for the institute and most of all the content of their academic work, and have each in their own way tried to take care of the employees. They also recognise the great

² Items marked * are key issues as defined in the first mediation session, paragraph 4.2.1; Items marked ** connect to concepts from chapter 2.

commitment and loyalty of employees. One member described the institute as different from other academic institutes, it's less about 'publish or perish', and more about idealism. Not every academic fits into that mould. Both talk about the bankruptcy of the institute in the past, and how the employees all worked extremely hard to keep the institute running. One member mentions that when the institute started to grow in student numbers in 2012, they were not equipped to handle it staff wise as well as they expected (more students does not mean new processes or procedures), as certain processes needed to scale up too.

Disagreements leading to lack of clarity

Initially the members had a good relationship together, but at some point they drifted apart and didn't have each other's back. The issues of the past months have brought them closer together and speaking more with one voice. One member recognises the lack of introduction for new employees, which has been an issue discussed much without any action for many years, and which causes a lack of clarity on how things are done from day one. One member explains that signals of favouritism are picked up upon, and that they understand it's not clear how an academic can secure a permanent contract. However, within the management team including the director, there can be disagreements that add to the lack of clarity. Both members like the director on a personal level, feel they can be open with him and acknowledge his financial skill, but both also feel he has less understanding of the academic field and the people that work in it than they have, and they would like him to take their advice more often before reaching a decision.

Powerlessness and competition

One of the members expressed feelings of guilt that they could not or had not done enough to prevent burn-outs. The member however felt just as powerless as the employees, and not listened to. They both suffered from the lack of clarity on responsibilities and decision making, as academics were not formally reporting to them. Both talk about the competition between research groups. They saw academic staff who were creating 'little kingdoms' and fighting each other to get the biggest budget and prove their worth. The more students a group attracts, the more demands they can make, researchers they can hire. This stimulates an unhealthy competition.

Trust and communication

The management team was not allowed to communicate about the proceedings of the sexual intimidation case, moreover, they were not informed themselves. They both understand that employees were unhappy with the message sent out and distrusted their motives: "Trust has a whole lot to do with the fact that when you go to the MT you trust to be heard and taken seriously.", but one of them also mentioned that the management team felt distrust towards some employees. They both admit that the case seemed a tipping point – "that's when it all exploded" - for staff to more explicitly voice their experiences and anger, and show commitment to creating an institute where such incidents are not able to happen and certainly not to that extent.

Over the course of recent years, the internal communication structure was dismantled and management became more informal. One of the members expresses that this might have contributed to a lack of trust: "I also think that the lack of trust and the criticism on leadership has a lot to do with communication, with being transparent about what you are doing, by showing involvement." Within the management team, the members are often only informed of important decisions like strategic investments, HR investments etc. Both members mention there are no minutes made of the MT meetings and the amount of meetings decreased; there is no formal communication structure. One member acknowledges they let this slip which in hindsight was not a good idea. The employees that I interviewed all confirm this: hearsay and via-via communication prevails. One of them expressed the wish to have a more structural bilateral with the involved MT member.

5.3.2 Experiences employees in general

As mentioned, the sexual intimidation case made visible that there were things brewing under the surface for several employees, which were either not voiced that clearly before, or that were not adequately listened to. Every interviewee was aware of this, but there is, understandably, a difference

in the extent to which they were involved. What did affect all of the interviewees in some way, was the fact that it became an ongoing issue and subject of discussion at the institute. Support staff mentioned protecting themselves from the negativity, because “there is nothing you can change about it”, and “I can close myself off from such things. I hear it, but don’t do anything with it.” For one of them it was very difficult: “Apparently I did more to me than I thought, because I have struggled with it for some time.”

Three of the academics I spoke to were either directly involved in the case, or were in some way affected because they saw what happened. Two were not directly involved and said it didn’t affect their job, or they closed off from it and did their job: “I don’t pay much attention to what others do, I am so busy myself, trying to reach my goals.” Two were not directly involved, but worked with colleagues who were, and this at least proved to them something was very wrong: “I mean, I am affected still, because my colleagues, I do care for them.” and “I also sympathize with them. And I know the other colleague supported them and then things went back against her.” One of the interviewees experienced up close that the suspect was intimidating, and knew from previous personal experiences elsewhere, that something was very wrong. Lastly, one of the academics talked about how she did not want to be infected by all the anger that was vented: “I have to be professional about it. I have to walk away from hostile situations.”

The non-academics were not directly involved. Of course they knew the suspect, and two of them actually mentioned they liked him: “I felt like it was a witch hunt. Maybe it was more heavy than I heard. <...> I know it from his point of view, what went on.” A third interviewee thought the suspect was unpleasant but said “There’s two sides to every story, right? I don’t think it’s my business.” One of them said: “I don’t feel comfortable having conversations that I can’t contribute to, I’m peripheral to them. But I hear what I hear.” The support staff were more adamant in “wanting to move on” and one of them mentioned: “Those people <that are angry> just have a score to settle. It’s not about one specific issue anymore.”

So there are basically two central conflicting viewpoints, those that are angry about the entire situation, and those that want to move on and don’t want to hear any more about the issue, which I will address with regard to further analysis at the very end of this paragraph. First I will address certain concepts or issues that emerged in the interviews and which seem relevant to mention, both with regard to the theoretical background and the findings described in paragraph 5.1 and 5.2. I have summarised these issues in table 5.3, which also visualises how certain sub issues seem connected to key issues. I will address each issue one by one and support it with quotes from the interviews.

Table 5.3 Issues and connected issues expressed in the interviews

Issue	Connected issue
Leadership	Director Voice and silence
Culture	Uncertainty (lack of clarity) Favouritism Competition Collaboration Identification: Family
Academic versus Non-academic	
Internal communication	
Participation	
Trust	
Personal development and HR	
Different cultural backgrounds	
Gender issues	Sexual intimidation

Leadership

The experiences with leadership were also subject of most of the interviews, which is in line with the other findings that show this is a key issue to employees. One support staff employee talked about a perceived lack of management: “You have to fight, against the high tide, for what you want.” And “I expect some guidance, feedback. I also expect to be corrected, or told what I could have done better. But for my supervisor there’s never a problem – but there are, and they are not addressed. I do think they should see me.”

Another interviewee said about the management team: “I feel it still didn’t hit them, what people actually want.” Two academics talked about the fact that this kind of leadership gives the impression that the kind of behaviour that is going on is okay, as the director allows it and the other management team members seem powerless to act: “I think that the underlying root cause is a management that allows such behaviour because they <...> don’t have rules, they don’t control.” One said: “This is not even bad management. There is no management.” Another academic confirmed this: “Management should set rules and hold people accountable. That would save a lot of frustration.” but also mentioned that people should take their own responsibility in some way because: “Almost everyone here is a workaholic. <...> Is it management that is putting pressure on us, or not? In my case no.”

As we have already seen, reporting relationships were also perceived as vague: “They’re not managers, because, they are not really managing us. So it was a bit vague for me what exactly they were doing. And how they connected to us.” Several also talk about the lack of vision: “I feel like the institute has to be more forward thinking.” and “I see also, that, people are also kind of milked. They are really abused and then ‘thrown away’. <...> Then you also don’t ensure quality. <This is> a bit of a short-sighted view. Also two interviewees mentioned the fact that the MT members were fairly absent as managers because they were doing their PhD’s.

One of the academics stated: “What is lacking for me so far is that I don’t see change from the management. I don’t see anything.” Another academic talked about seeing improvement, as the management team members seemed more actively involved and listening better. Two of the non-academics said they did see improvements in the overall atmosphere, because of the process they are all going through: “I see some people act differently consciously. <...> I myself talk to colleagues that I wouldn’t normally have talked to.” And “I believe things have quieted down a bit, also because we are done with these emotional sessions.” One non-academic added: “Maybe people should all be given a chance to change together. <This> seems the most healthy way of moving forward.”

Director

Almost everyone said they thought, from a personal perspective, the director was a nice person: “I think he’s wonderful. He’s really easy to communicate with. He tries to include people. He’s organic.” One non-academic said: “You don’t have to be afraid to tell him something. He’s not a bully. He’s more...the opposite of that. He could be more firm.” One of the academics was very positive about him: “He is extremely colour-blind, or risk blind, or culture blind. He deals with the person.”

Unfortunately, this positive behaviour allowing for much freedom is also perceived as a downside, as one said: “It’s hard to take him seriously, he wears a mask.” and another “He tries too hard to be popular.” Someone else said: “He doesn’t conjure up respect with his jovial behaviour.” Generally interviewees have the opinion the director is not doing a good job managing the institute: “I think he is a good manager, but not for this institute.” and “He’s not taking up the role.” Some express the desire for him to listen to their input, and acknowledge mistakes. Only one of the interviewees explicitly said: “I really think he’s a good boss. If you have the drive and the will, he will give you the opportunity.” Pointing to the fact that he gave many of the current young academics the opportunity to work there and develop themselves.

The statement of the director at the second mediation session led to mixed feelings. Some non-academics found it hard to see their director cry. As one said: “I don’t think a director should do that.” and “We all make mistakes. I thought his statement was good.” Several of the academics thought his statement lacked both empathy for the colleagues and a sense of responsibility as a manager: “He seems like a victim of the circumstances, but he’s the director.”

Voice and silence

From the interviews it comes across that the perceived hierarchy (and your place in it) is connected to status, which for some is connected to being heard or not. Although the director is approachable, only a few people believe they can just walk in: “For many people here it’s still the director.” Still, most interviewees express they feel it’s possible to express their thoughts and opinions to managers, and certainly with colleagues. One academic stressed though: “If you go with facts, then you’re fine.” explaining that facts and not emotions will get you heard and taken seriously. A non-academic said: “I think my supervisor’s idea is that I’m just whining. I don’t really feel I’ve got a voice.”

What mostly keeps the young academics back, is being in a position where speaking up might affect their performance review and thus their chances to get a permanent contract: “I don’t want to ruffle a lot of feathers.” as one of them put it. This is seen by both academics and non-academics.

Another thing connected to voice and silence is that quite a few of the interviewees said, once they experienced they were not really heard by their supervisor or management, they gave up. One academic even mentioned feeling emotionally pressured by a colleague into keeping quiet about a certain issue: “This puts a lot of pressure on me and I felt really shit and then I was crying, I was nervous.”

Culture of the institute

Culture, as in the way we do things here, came up in several of the interviews, both in general, and also regarding certain expressions of it (which I will address separately, see table 5.3). A non-academic with experience in education said the culture was significantly different from what he was used to from previous employment: “A different way of working, which surprised me.” By two of the Dutch native interviewees the culture of the institute is described as very “left wing”, full of idealists and protesters who want to fight for a good cause. This connects to the family feeling that abounds too. This egalitarian culture is felt to clash with the more commercial vision the institute has, and what they want to convey to the world.

One interviewee felt the changes needed at the institute were about the culture, about how people behave and treat each other: “There is no magic wand of structure or HR that is going to fix this.” A non-academic experienced a lot of talk of ‘we can’t do anything about this’, as from a historical perspective: “This is the culture. There is no staff, no time, too much work, this is all we can do.” This person perceived the subliminal effect from this attitude to be one of the things that helps create silos as well, and it is very hard to accomplish things together this way.

Uncertainty and favouritism

Most of the academics talked about the fact that having a temporary contract means a lot of uncertainty. There is a large focus on securing a permanent contract, and two academics admitted to leveraging whatever they could to get it. This happens partly because it gives more security to be able to stay in the Netherlands (as for many academics it’s connected to their visa) and it noticeably gives them status within the institute: “It seems to me that people who are higher in the hierarchy are taken more seriously than junior ones.” The academics all showed ambition too, wanting to grow from assistant towards senior researchers. However, the academics also feel it costs them much energy to find out whether they are eligible for a permanent contract, what they need to show in terms of their work to secure it, and to get a decision within a reasonable timeframe before their temporary contract ends: “Your patience can be pushed to the limit.” Two of the interviewees express they think the academics want to have it all, and should be more modest.

What doesn’t help, is that it seems like the rules are not clear and not the same for everyone, and there is favouritism. Exceptions are made, and several interviewees, also from the support staff, see this as problematic: “So there’s a rule for one, and a rule for somebody else.” One interviewee actually mentioned being bullied by a colleague and said: “And I thought well, maybe this means I’m going to lose my job. <My colleague> knows how to talk to the right people to get what they want, has an agenda. I’m not good at it.” This caused a lot of distress and frustration with this particular staff member.

Competition and collaboration

As the MT members also mentioned, interviewees – both academic and non-academic – see there is an unhealthy competition between academic groups: “I expected more collaboration. So I didn’t feel this kind of natural nurturing environment. It’s more like a competition.” This is connected to status, as a research group that has the best projects can attract the most students and make the most money. This also results in competition over securing budget and hiring interns and new research assistants. This hampers collaboration between groups, as researchers stick to their own perspectives and the goals they set for their group: “They take care of themselves <before the organisation>. And even with just the specialisation or even the unit that I was in, I felt also very individual.” One academic explained that people would hoard activities for themselves, so they would have more billable time. Much revolves around the finances. There are however also academics who would like to collaborate more, and those who feel they do collaborate: “O, yeah, we do <collaborate a lot>....There are some issues in collaboration, but I think it’s more about the way people work.” One academic expressed that two groups had got together to see what they could do, and the reason this had not happened earlier, is because they were all too busy cleaning up “the mess”, which was the huge amount of work they had to catch up on after the sexual intimidation case came to a conclusion.

Identification: Family

There is a certain paradox in the institute. People complain a lot and believe the way the institute is organised makes work extremely difficult sometimes, but they also love working there and show such commitment. One non-academic said that even when pressures were very high “I always went to work with much pleasure.”

As an academic explains it: “There seems to be a genuine care for the place, which is why I think emotions run so high.”, and as a non-academic mentioned: “I think everyone is engaged. That is the mentality here. That’s how I feel it. I believe this is also because many of them, their families are abroad, so they can’t fall back on that.” Even an academic who was critical about certain issues said with a smile: “I’m actually surprised that this is the longest employment I’ve had. So there was a good thing why I stayed here.” and another said “Still now it’s the best place I have ever worked in my life. Work wise, the content of the work I do. I have a lot of freedom.”

Some talk about how great it is to work with students from all over the world, it’s young and dynamic. All the projects they attract are exciting and most colleagues, especially those the interviewees work with closely, are thought to be nice and caring: “It could be potentially a great place to work because it’s very international, a lot of people are incredibly nice.”

Two of the interviewees also talk about the fact that it is a job, and the family feeling actually works against the performance of the institute, because there is too much freedom and not enough structure to create clarity on what one can and cannot do.

Academic versus non-academic

It is also quite clear there are many differences between how the academics experience the institute and how the non-academics do. Some of the interviewees indicate there is friction between academic and non-academic (support) staff. Those of support staff realise very well that the academics are the ‘raison d’être’ of the institute. The biggest issue that was expressed by non-academics, was the way some of the academics treat them: “That the academic wishes are leading, no problem. But you have to treat each other as colleagues, not like some kind of slave. Well, <one group> liked to do just that.”

One academic believed the separation between support staff and academics to be caused by the fact that most of the support staff are Dutch native, while most of the academics come from abroad. Also, some of the academics might come from a cultural background where they feel entitled by status to treat support staff as inferior. One non-academic mentioned that academics and non-academics could be more vested in working together for a better output. In trying to collaborate with the academics, this support staff employee felt that: “They barely cared <about my input to improve>. Which is fine. I mean, it’s boring...But we want to improve things together with the academics.” On the other hand, one

academic also felt some support staff were not there when their support was needed, so it can go both ways.

Most of the interviewees express that the relationship, as far as there is one, is fine however. Staff does not mix much beyond their general groups and collaborations, except during the Friday drinks weekly held at the institute. A few interviewees mentioned they started going there, while others said they now saw colleagues there that never went before. One academic mentioned it might be good to have more “rituals” together, for example to initiate new staff.

Internal communication

The MT members already mentioned the lack of a formal employee communication structure. The interviewees all agree, most say they either don't get information (“I don't drink coffee, therefore I don't hear any gossip going on”) or they get it through the grapevine (“You hear it in the corridor”), from those they connect with (either a supervisor or a colleague from another team). They stay in their own information bubble.

So, the internal communication channels are informal through hearsay and e-mail, and there are hardly any formal meetings, or minutes of meetings to communicate. The intranet is the only way of communicating something at once to all colleagues, but three interviewees mentioned they hardly look at it. There are no guidelines to use it, it's not part of on boarding, and it is not seen by employees as an addition to the information flow. One said: “I like to get e-mail notifications, and they don't work, so I forget about it.” Another one said: “Intranet has become a portal largely for people to promote their own stories, rather than maybe some visual cohesive of departmental or collaborating things happening.”

What also happens, as one academic describes, is that decisions are not final. When a decision is reached and communicated, someone who doesn't like it can go higher up in the hierarchy and the decision can be changed without getting any feedback. This going back and forth, and having no formal place to discuss and decide on important issues, is very frustrating.

Participation

As discussed, currently staff are asked to contribute to creating a new organisational infrastructure, a new model. The interviewees have mixed feelings about that: “What if <we> participate and change things, and the director stays and he doesn't see the need to change things at the top.” Which was shared by someone else who said: “I must say I find it kind of irrelevant which organisational model has been implemented if the management stays the same.”

One non-academic said: “I like to be involved and be part of the process. But I don't like changes. As far as I'm concerned things can stay as they are.”, and another one added that it is difficult to contribute when it is too complex to really understand, let alone share ideas on it: “I mean, I'm interested. I want to be part of it. But the thing is, I don't know anything about it.” and yet another said “I'll go along with any structure, that is popular amongst the people that want change.”

In general, it seems that the interviewees are happy about the fact that there are changes initiated and that they contribute to it, but they are still reluctant to contribute, because they are not convinced it will amount to anything else than what has already been decided.

Trust

Trust was not addressed explicitly by most of the interviewees, but in some interviews it was clear that a lack of trust pervaded relationships with management or other colleagues. One interviewee felt that time monitoring when you work at home gave the feeling that management didn't trust academics to be honest about what they do. Another interviewee realised that the lack of trust, felt on a micro level, seemed to actually be a macro level thing – a part of the culture, of the way the institute is organised. One of the academics felt that management had eyes and ears everywhere, and that there is much gossip that does not help trust. One of the academics said: “I feel that, as long as we <get> different managers, people that I trust more, they can at least oppose to things that are not going well. At least make better decisions.” So trust in this case is tied to not trusting the decisions that are made.

One of the non-academic interviewees also mentioned: "It's nice just to maintain that trust <with colleagues>. There's a warmth in <personal> communication which is good to maintain." and went on to add: "What I do want is there to be a building of trust between the academic and support side as well." Lastly, one of the academics felt there was mutual trust with management: "I like the fact that they trust I recognise the problem."

Personal development and HR

Several interviewees also talk about the fact that they got hired on an ad hoc, or coincidental basis. One even mentioned not even having an interview. For two of the interviewed non-academics, job roles have changed over the course of their employment, just because something else was needed, not because they were necessarily good at something.

The academics, mostly young people, mention that a big part of working at the institute is to learn from the interaction with experienced academics. They would like more guidance and inspiration to grow, and think it's a shame that a few very good senior academics are leaving or have left.

The need for better HR vision, management and development is certainly felt: "The institute just has to take certain risks, and for that risk they have to invest in people. Give more time and flexibility for them to do that, because everyone is motivated, has personal and professional interest, but, this has to be, pushed, or grown or nurtured. We went through a lot in a very short time I think."

The institute has a personal development fund, which provides funding for training, courses and other development of employees. It is only available to those who have a permanent contract, but here too at some point, exceptions have been made that cause friction. Two interviewees also describe how they had to fight hard to get the pay they believed to be entitled to, based on their work and responsibilities.

Cultural background differences

The fact that the institute is international, and thus both students and employees come from different backgrounds is part of the DNA of the institute. On the one hand, employees like this, on the other hand, it seems to create difficulty in understanding each other. Some of the interviewees see it creates issues, because there is no introduction for new staff, and no special attention to those that come from other countries. For me personally, what brought home the extent to which these differences play out, is a sign in the ladies room saying: "Only use disabled toilet to wash feet!!!", referring to the Islamic ritual purification of the body such as washing the feet before prayer. One of these things that make sense when you are a Muslim, and as I am not, nor would ever think of sticking my feet into the sink at work or school to wash them, this was very new to me.



One male non-academic mentioned: "Don't forget I have a Dutch way of seeing things. When I compare this with colleagues with a different back ground, they encounter different issues than I do. That's a culture thing. For example a girl from India – she will really look up to me." He also mentioned that he perceived issues of silence because of cultural differences, as not everyone feels as safe to speak up as the Dutch would generally do.

All of the foreign academics mentioned that they did like the Dutch culture, and although they experienced differences, they tried to understand them and adapt to fit in, which they managed. The biggest issue from the viewpoint of the interviewees seemed to be a different perception of hierarchy and sensitivity to status. One academic addressed the fact that all these different nationalities should mean more structure. The freedom that people now have, combined with the different backgrounds, creates issues that clear structure and rules would keep in check.

Gender issue and sexual intimidation

Both of the MT members mentioned there was a gender issue, an inequality, as the newest employees of the institute are mostly young women with a non-Dutch background, whereas many of the senior

academics (as supervisors often in a position of power) are and were often men. They believed it to be a potential breeding ground for dysfunctional behaviour between supervisor and subordinate. It will take time for that to change. Two of the academics expressed taking their assistants under their wings, as they understand very well how vulnerable they are, and “new people just have to make it happen themselves. They do not want to create trouble. This is being abused.” They both said they felt there was a lack of understanding from management that some of the research assistants come from “countries where you don’t even can choose your marriage partner, you are 1.50 <high> and you don’t speak the language of the country you live in.” There has been little empathy felt from certain males in supervising positions in the institute, certainly around the sexual intimidation case.

Emerging differences in perspectives

In conclusion, from what was expressed in nine of the interviews, and most of all how it was said and how certain experiences made the interviewee feel, a few distinct differences in perspective emerged. One was the perspective of the young female academics with a non-Dutch background, who were ambitious and wanted more justice and equality in the institute. The other was the perspective of a non-academic older person, with more experience, often with a Dutch background or living in the Netherlands for quite some time who would love to just move on and go back to how the atmosphere used to be. These differences became the basis of my analysis by responsive methodology, which I will describe in paragraph 5.4. There were two interviews that could partly fit into each of the perspectives, and there was one interview that expressed such a different perspective, it became a counter story.

5.3.3 Reflection on the interview process and analysis

I was very aware of the fact that as an interviewer and researcher, I have some personal bias that I needed to curb in order to get results that are as objective and unjudged as possible. I have transcribed all the interviews fully from the recording (except for one interview, where recording had failed and which I summarised right after the interview). This confronted me with the fact that, especially in the first few interviews, I often gave my opinion and therefore judgement on the situation. Or was tempted, especially towards the end of the interview, to offer advice. When I realised this, I tried harder and succeeded to hold that judgement back. I did keep summarising what I believed was said to check whether I understood. In the last two interviews I held, I shifted further towards more actively asking for examples of situations and what they meant to the interviewee (which luckily they often did provide me with nonetheless). This resulted in interviews that made the interviewees think more and harder, and actively reassess their thoughts and feelings. Both of them mentioned after the interview that it had given them food for thought, which I took as a sign that I had succeeded.

It taught me a valuable lesson. Despite the fact that I believed my interviewing technique was quite developed over the years, it was a good wake up call to notice there was room for improvement and a deeper understanding of the effect of both my questions and interjections. I was only able to incorporate that into my interviewing technique, from the moment I came to understand more clearly which questions (e.g. asking to describe something) elicit opinions and which questions (e.g. asking what something means to someone) elicit perceptions and most of all meaning. Looking back, I would have wanted to realise this sooner. Of course I also realise that 100% objectivity as an interviewer is, as I too have experienced, impossible to achieve. There will always be interpretation involved. I felt a deep responsibility to be as respectful and comprehensive as possible with the personal information and examples the interviewees shared with me, and I hope I have succeeded at that.

5.4 Analysis of the interviews by responsive methodology

While I was already conducting interviews, I was introduced to a responsive approach to process them: Responsive methodology (Abma and Widdershoven, 2006). This methodology appealed to me, because a) it does not rationalise or quantify qualitative data, and b) it turns the qualitative data into narratives that can be helpful in starting a conversation about organisational issues in a different way than simply summarising data. This can then lead to a shared inquisitive process where those involved can voice their values and the meaning they give to things happening around them. It is a method that tries to improve understanding between people, and from there help them improve their

(work)relationships through a more effective dialogue. As I have posed the perception of communication climate is strongly influenced by the interactions and the relationships between employees, I believe this method connects very well to that.

The interviews one conducts for analysis by responsive methodology have more of a conversational character. Despite the fact I had already done the majority of the interviews when I learned about the method, I believed to have enough useful examples to apply it. As I had already approached the interviews responsively, by explicitly asking the interviewees to share what they think and feel, without being concerned about accuracy or facts, they shared many personal examples and feelings. Thus I was able to distil two key narratives, based on general differences in underlying convictions the interviewees showed and the subsequent meaning they gave to the situation. As we can find from the previous paragraph, these differences boil down to “fighting and ambition” versus “moving on – back to how it was”. This also coincides roughly with the perspectives of academics versus non academics, female versus male and young (short tenure) versus old (long tenure).

Next I looked for quotes and examples in the interviews that supported the difference in conviction, and turned them into two narratives (or “gestalt” as a way to describe a shared sense making perspective), representing a fictitious employee of the institute, talking from his or her perspective (Abma and Widdershoven, 2006, pp. 57–61). Four interviews roughly fit into the first perspective, and five into the second. Two interviews fit in each of the perspectives, and one interview felt totally different. This felt like a “counter story”, which does not fit into the general perspectives at all, or, I would rather say, merging them in showing the essence of what the institute might need to move on. All the wisdom needed to solve this issue is already present in the institute. This method, to me, is a wonderful tool to help it surface.

Member check and story workshop

It should be noted that any such analysis is always an interpretation of the researcher. However hard you try, you cannot unblock all that you already know about the context. Therefore, after creating the three narratives, the researcher is supposed to do a so-called ‘member check’ with the interviewee the narrative is based most strongly on, to determine whether the narrative captures perception and sense-giving well enough and is credible (Abma and Widdershoven, 2006, pp. 61–62). I have not been able to do this within the scope of this thesis. However, if the institute wishes to implement recommendations based on this research, the narratives can be used in a “story workshop” where employees of the institute are brought together to read and respond to the stories. This is not done with any intention to revisit the past, but to share experiences and stories, helping employees to create a new understanding together, and build their relationship. This is something I believe, strengthened by my findings in this thesis process, could help the employees of the institute truly move forward together.

5.4.1 Gestalt 1: I have to fight for my rights

I have come here from another country, a different culture. I studied here as well, so I know a bit about the Netherlands and really like the country. It was a coincidence that I could start working here. They needed someone, and I thought it’s a great opportunity to work here. Now I’m trying to build my life here. My future is tied up with being able to work in this institute. Of course there are always other opportunities and options, but it’s not so easy to just pick up and go somewhere else, once you start settling in somewhere. Sadly, they push your patience to the limit, before you know if you get a new contract. You can go from contract to contract. That is not very motivating. When you need to go and look for another job, it’s better if they can tell you in time. And when you are not doing a good job, it’s nice if someone tells you this honestly.

There is not really any introduction for those who are new here. It is difficult to find your place at the beginning. Most people are very nice to me here, but it’s still hard to find out how things work around here, what’s expected of you. There seem to be different rules for different people. You need to fight for your rights, for justice here. There always seem to be exceptions made, and it’s hard to trust that they see your work. Not getting feedback whether they do see it and approve, makes you feel insecure. Sometimes the feedback is mixed too. In my first performance review, management judged my

performance on incomplete information. They talked to my supervisor, but he was not present at the actual interview. That's different now, but still, my supervisor is not so good at giving feedback. So he mentions things that are really minor issues, but forgets to give enough credit to my achievements. Well, at one time he says you're valuable, and another time he tells you there might not be enough money to keep you. And there have to be enough projects for someone to stay, so we all go and work hard to secure them. The thing is, these things can come as a surprise. There is pressure to perform well, to treat your supervisor well. He or she holds the key to your progress. You don't want to appear to be difficult, so you keep things to yourself. It doesn't help at all to complain, or be emotional, especially not when you're new. They don't take you seriously. Getting a permanent contract depends on my relationship with those who decide whether you can stay. We also have a job to do, and this costs a lot of energy that we are not spending on work.

We are fighters here though, we want more equality and clarity. If they won't tell you, you just try to figure out what the rules are, put the energy into finding out. You try to prove them wrong by doing a good job. We need to stand up to injustice, get fair treatment. Management should stick to the rules. Some of us also try to encourage others to find out about rules and procedures, to understand and use them. We also help the younger ones and other new colleagues with what we've have learned.

Once you go from a temporary to a permanent contract, you get status in this institute. There is a divide between those who have and those who don't have a permanent contract. Once someone has a permanent contract, they become somebody. They get even more freedom to do what they want. Suddenly people respect you. The work is very much the same, but others talk differently to those with a permanent contract. You are allowed to sign things and make certain decisions. Before that, you are a second class citizen. When you have that contract, they can't get rid of you that easily too, that's the wonderful thing about having a contract in the Netherlands. You have something to bargain with, to make demands and unfortunately some of us have had to use it that way. Management will notice you then, but again, it costs a lot of energy and time to make them listen. Things that are very important can be decided in strange ways. Like hearing at the last moment, from a colleague instead of your supervisor, after weeks of pleading and asking, that there is a decision on your contract. Or you hear you get a raise, somewhere in the corridor, in front of the toilets. These things can push your sanity to the limit. When your responsibilities go above your job description and you try to address it with the director, he starts talking about money. Or offers you a part-time contract to be able to pay you, which makes no sense at all.

We all work very hard in my team. But we all enjoy it too. We bring in the money for the institute. Because the billable hours are the ones that count. We work together with other groups sometimes, and that is nice, but the others don't seem to put in all the effort they could. Their own work is always more important. That's because there is a lot of competition, which really doesn't help collaboration. When you get the biggest projects, you also get the budget to hire. So it's also us against them, because we all want to stay and we all need more hands to do the work. Successes are not really celebrated. Recently the institute won an award for the first time, and we were so proud. Then you get congratulations through the intranet or via e-mail, some colleagues come up to you. But we did not have a celebration in the institute. It would be nice to pay more attention to such things.

We do have activities together with colleagues sometimes; some see each other after work too, but not a lot. Recently we started going to the drinks on Friday. The director was there. He's friendly, always making jokes, laughing. But it's not so clear to us what he actually does for the institute, other than guard the finances. He probably does a good job with that, but he's not so good with people. He even asks us what he should do. How would any of us know? He's the manager, he should tell us! He doesn't have a vision about this institute, where we are going. If we knew where they wanted to go with this, we could all understand how we can contribute, where we can collaborate, how to set our goals, what options for development we have. We have been asked to think about a new structure. But who are we to say something about it? Sure, we want to participate, but to be honest, it's complex and most of us don't have a clue. They have not been here long enough to judge it. Let others do that.

He's very good at sending people away to someone else too. Yes, he does give you a lot of opportunities and freedom. But we don't feel management listens or understands what's important to us, what we

struggle with. They are not really bothered about what we do. They don't understand how or why we sometimes feel anxious, afraid and unmotivated. When my colleagues were harassed and abused, some of us saw that happen up close. We saw it, we knew something was going on. But they didn't believe us at first; they didn't understand how bad it was, how frightening it was. All the messages they sent to us about it showed that this crazy man was very valued by the director, that it wasn't that bad. It kind of felt like we were powerless.

There is a lot of gossip. Most things you hear at the coffee machine or through the grapevine. Sometimes on the intranet too, but that's a place where some people just like to promote themselves or vent their thoughts. When you want to know about something, you just go and ask someone you trust. Or ask a few people, but everyone might tell you something different. Sometimes people say things around here because they want to help you, they mean well, but it's not helpful at all. So you can get different answers: He said this, then she said that. Everything is blurry, the rules, the roles. Management doesn't even seem to know themselves what the rules are. The management team member said that they don't have any power to decide. They all make promises they cannot keep, or they go back on their promises. They tell you they'll think about it. And nothing happens. You simply don't know what is going on, where you stand. That's very hard.

Most of us feel the management team are very nice people. But it seems like they are absent when you need them. We don't really trust them, or we fear them a bit. We feel there is no management; everyone is left to fend for themselves too much and it leads to anarchy. Money is more important than people. The director and the other managers send out mixed messages. That is very confusing. They don't really listen to ideas or improvements for the institute, so at some point you just give up. Then they go and decide things you don't understand, or they go against the advice others give them. They don't tell us what is going on, so you'll have no clue whether they heard you and have different thoughts, or they didn't hear you in the first place.

Sometimes people can get really childish or be narrow-minded. Like that incident where two seniors didn't get along and didn't speak to each other. Then they ask you as a junior to mediate. You are the senior, you are the manager, you should fix it yourself! And it seems the support teams only think from their own perspective. Like when we had a financial issue with an important client, and they say let's just lose the project. While we are trying to work hard and it's an important client. We also have messes to clean up from people that have left or are leaving, which are mostly seniors. They are not replaced by seniors, because the juniors can do the work too and they say they are much cheaper. But there is so much work... You lose sleep over it, and it makes you feel anxious sometimes. Also, we miss out on the inspiration and knowledge of seniors, which is a shame.

Still, we absolutely love what we do, the content of the work, this is our own responsibility. Such nice people work here; we're like a family, certainly within the team. We are managing ourselves well and we feel pride in what we accomplish. We get to travel a lot for our work; which is also a way to escape the situation here, and not think about the issues. In a way the chaos is also positive; every day there are exciting new activities, and you have a lot of freedom. That makes it possible for you to grow as an academic. So it's a bit of a paradox.

Some people are very angry. Other people want to move on. But we can't just move on. If there are no fundamental changes, we will end up with the same problems. The situation that allowed things to happen is still there. If management doesn't change in some fundamental way, if accountability and rules are not followed. Sometimes there's fear that things are beyond repair. Some colleagues have a long history here. They say it's always been like this. But some of us want to change things – bring more equality to the institute.

We'll just see how it goes, and if change does happen. We need to change the culture, need to be more empathic towards each other. This is still the best job in the world and a great place to work. We get to make the world a better place, work with students from all over the world, teach, do exciting research, have lots of freedom to learn and develop in an international environment. It is dynamic, young, challenging. It can be a very good stepping stone, if you can create opportunities for yourself. From the

outside the institute still has a good image, people want to work here. But what if students hear about this and they stop coming? What would that mean for my employability as an academic?

5.4.2 Gestalt 2: I do what we have always done here, let's just move on

I have been around for a long time at this institute. Have seen several directors come and go. We are like family here. We went through ups and downs. In 2003 we went bankrupt and we had to work very hard to keep our heads above water during the reorganisation that followed. Worked after hours, in weekends. It has always been like that. I think we are all so very committed to our work, that we all just want to get it done. It's normal to work hard, get the job done, build service and meet targets. Sometimes things are not clear or difficult to understand. You don't complain about it. That is just the way it is, and you just try to do your job.

We had several different directors. The last three ones, after the bankruptcy, they were all good guys. The current director even managed to let us grow in terms of student numbers. That too meant a lot of hard work. We weren't able to scale up in terms of people to do the work. But we managed through that as well. You just keep on working. That's the culture around here. There is not enough staff, no time to really work on changing things.

When new people come in, they have to simply understand how we do things around here. Some things simply are not possible. They can't have everything the way they want it, get a permanent contract, and get more salary. They have to just do the work and then at some point they'll get what they deserve. Well, there have been occasions where the rules weren't really followed, that they made exceptions in promoting someone, or giving them access to the personal development fund, while they were not supposed to yet. Not very clear no, but they surely had good reasons to do so. That is the way we do it, although it would be less difficult if were clearer. Saves a lot of questions too.

Everyone that works here can go and look at all the information, but they don't seem to find or understand it. Or they don't like the answers they get. And then they come to us and ask questions. We want to help them, of course. But you can't give someone an answer, when you don't have it. The door is always open, just come in and ask us. They can all come and talk to us.

What the academics do, that pays all of our salaries, sure. But they need to understand that we can't support them well if they don't inform us. And they really don't, because most of us don't really know what they do. Or they treat us like we are only there for them and they don't care. There is a lot of status and competition going on. Of course we all want to know what we can contribute to education in the institute. That is our core product!

The people that work here are nice. Within my team, the relationships are great. We trust each other, try to take care of each other. We function well, we regularly discuss our work. There are some people from other teams that we connect with, sometimes because of work, and also because we have become friends. Others you barely know, and you never speak with them. Many of them are often away on travels anyway.

Working here is wonderful, to connect with all these students from so many different cultures. It is such a wonderful thing, to learn from them. Sometimes you can feel a bit more superior to them, maybe that's not right, but still, it's only human. It's not hard to believe your own degree is worth more than theirs, because maybe our education is better in the Netherlands.

We are dedicated to our jobs, we try to improve our work. You can go and look at other places, and you'll find this institute is really a great place to work. Who would think about leaving? If you're not happy, then do, but don't bother us with it. Everything that has happened, with the harassment and abuse, we haven't really seen it. What can we do? The guy they accused, he had his idiosyncrasies, and not all of us thought he was nice, but he was great for the institute. A magnet for great projects. He was attracting cutting edge research, he was attracting students. Some of us liked him, and they think

it was some kind of witch hunt. Could it really have been that bad? The director was friends with him too, wasn't he?

So all the fuss, why don't we stop talking about it and just get on with our jobs. It gets people down, all this negativity. It affected some of us, that we talked so much about all of this. All this talk about it, all these sessions. They keep harping on the negative things. There's nothing we can change now, we have to look forward. When you were not involved, you don't want to become involved either. It's a job, and you have to work together, even if you don't like someone. You have to do your job. You have to protect yourself and close off from it.

The director is a nice guy. He always asks you how you are doing, and he's very accessible. He does often put on a happy face, he's all about making jokes and having fun. Hierarchy doesn't bother me. I will go to the director when I need to. But, he's still the director. You can't just walk into the director's office, and expect him to make time for you. When it comes to the management team, there is a different attitude from them, they are more open, try to listen better. Still, it would be nice if they informed us more about things that are going on. That helps us to improve our performance.

Our director is good at managing. But maybe he might not be right for this institute. He's great with finances. And he can say no to people, and make decisions. But he doesn't seem to have an affinity with the academic issues, with the research. He can shout at you when he doesn't agree with you, and he just decides what he wants. But who's to say? He'll know more than we. Still, I feel he could be more interested in our ideas.

It was enlightening to hear from the director, as he told us during the mediation, how he felt about what had happened, what it did to him. Then angry people started to attack him; that was uncalled for. You don't treat your manager this way. It felt uncomfortable that the director cried at the mediation session. We don't need to see him like that. He is the director after all. Besides, they are too hard on him. It seems as if they are trying to get back at him, and it's no longer about one specific issue. We are all people, we can all make mistakes. You can't force change by scalping management. They should be given a chance to change. We all mean well. Look, we have been here for years and new people come in and suddenly everything is wrong. And some people have been here for so long; you can't just change them.

Well, they can ask us to participate in designing a new structure, but it's too difficult, especially of the academics. The most important thing is that the support staff should be represented in the management team. Because no one connects us with what is going on. Sometimes we are the last to hear something that concerns our work directly, like when an important delegation visited us. We heard that on the morning of the day they came, while we are the ones that have to facilitate the visit.

We have Friday drinks and we go as a team. When no one interesting is there, you just leave early. There's not a big need for other activities with colleagues outside of work. It can be nice, but we don't need it. Sometimes it's nice to have a relaxing conversation about work. The intranet? Not something we look at a lot. Sometimes you hear there's something on there you should read, or someone e-mails you.

Most of us have been here for years. And will be here until we retire if we have a say in it. It is a great place to work. This situation is only temporary. It always is. We have to move on, get back to the old institute.

5.4.3 Counter story: I guard our professional relationships

I work with everyone in this institute. That is quite interesting, but also challenging sometimes. When we had so many students, we were so very popular, but we didn't have the facilities to manage it, so it's good we are smaller now. Our director is a very ambitious person. He went for it. To me, he is a good director. There are so many things that I've heard from others that he made possible since he came here. He has given a lot of young people opportunities. He is extremely colour, risk and culture

blind and looks at the individual. There can be favouritism going on here, and certain discrimination, like this person is not right for this position, that person is. He doesn't have that.

When they asked me for my current job, he sat me down and told me, when he was younger he would have wanted someone to believe in him. He told me he believed in me, believed I could do it. He said "I have seen the way you work." This meant a lot to me. He didn't know me, but he saw my work and he noticed it. If you have the drive and the will, he will give you the opportunity.

I am also an ambitious person. Ambition to me means taking up a challenge and seeing how I can make it feasible. Being able to solve problems. That is what ambition is for me. Our students need the best, and it is our responsibility to make it work. We also have a responsibility to our students to be professional. Many of us have a multicultural background, and you try to question things, see things differently. This is a great fit here, because in the academic world you get the opportunity to question everything. Question norms. That is great.

When there is a problem, you first try and solve it yourself. Only when you can't, or it's beyond your position to do so, you go to the management team, or the director. That's a rule of thumb. He has an open door policy, but he is still the boss. It's difficult to know what you can and cannot say. There is this invisible line that Dutch colleagues have, which they don't cross. They know when you might get too friendly. They understand that line. It takes some time, but you can figure it out. You just have to be a bit cautious. Even last week a joke to one of my colleagues lead the colleague to send an e-mail that the joke was hurtful. That was definitely not the intention, so you need to apologise, be kind.

You can tell management a lot, but it is wise to be a bit careful with them. It is still a workplace right? It's a job. We are so much like a family here, and it doesn't work that way. You are employed, paid, to do a job. The family atmosphere can also enable some sort of abuse to take place, of favouritism because you like someone or not. Or for people to get offended way to quickly when you act a bit too familiar. Also because of our students, we can't have that. We can't bring family and friends in, we have to be more thoughtful and professional, and we have to guard the quality of our education.

You would want the management team to take you seriously. That, when you go there, they know there's a real problem, and come with facts, not emotion. So they know you really need them to act on it. Not that it would have any repercussions if you don't. But they should know when you knock on the door, it's serious. They listen, when you come with facts. They don't always act or do what you want. But you shouldn't expect that. If a decision they were warned about backfires, you can always go and remind them. You can also go and tell them when they made the right decision. Give them feedback. That too is part of the job, to indicate problems. True, in the beginning that was easier. When you discuss something and you are not heard at all, there's no need going anymore. But you never know, there might be things that management is considering, that we know nothing about.

Sometimes when you decide something, it can happen that someone complains about it with the management team, and they decide to change it without coming for feedback. It's fine to change a decision, but not like this. It is very frustrating; it reduces your relevance, you importance and your voice. There is a lot of hearsay going on, information travels through the grapevine. But after you have been upset for a little while, you just get on with the job. Too busy to dwell on it. But it was also nice to have a good talk with the boss about conditions to do the job and express my frustrations. They now involve you more in decision-making. Management are trying to learn from their mistakes. They are improving.

There are a lot of workaholics around here. It just happens, that your work load is high. We all love our work so much. They're all just going for it. Always interested in everything they can do. They put that pressure on themselves, it doesn't come from management. You put that pressure on yourself, to do the work as good as you can. It is hard to reduce your workload, but it should be your own responsibility to do so. Management will ask you to reduce your work load, and be careful. They can show genuine concern. The first impulse might be to work harder when they do that. You don't want to let them down and feel like a failure. My job matters to me; it has relevance. There is a lot of competition as well, so nobody is willing to reduce workload. But management is right when they ask it. When you get so much

freedom, you are also able to choose what you want to drop, and arrange it. Management agreed and supported it. They trusted that it would work out.

We are international, 15 nationalities in our staff. That are 15 ways of seeing and handling things. And our students have 42 nationalities. We have to be aware that this is a pressure cooker situation. So we need rules, we need clear guidelines. What you have to do, what you cannot do. Not simply appease trouble makers. Everybody should be eligible to the same things when they put in the work, regardless of how troublesome you are, or quiet, or friends with your bosses. Also, we have colleagues that just don't come to work here. We should have an understanding about that, when you work at home you have to communicate that, and come in at least at some regular basis. It might be worthwhile for these things to be put in place, to look at how other institutes deal with this, and learn from them. Management should set the rules, and hold people accountable too. It would save a lot of frustration. We also need to be more financially accountable, stay within our budgets when we design courses, otherwise we are going to get in trouble again. We need to work together, to provide our students with a program that's both feasible and good.

The director showed he was affected by this process we are going through. You can only appreciate how hard he tried. Others too are very emotional, really vested in improving things. What is upsetting are the people that keep complaining. The anger doesn't help, and now it's being brought to the students, that we have management issues. Everything management does seems to be a problem. The ones that make all the noise today, get everything they want.

Just hearing complaints is tiring. Yes, they have a point, but we need to start going to solutions, whatever they are. We need to talk to each other, and not stick together in groups that confirm each other's opinions. Try to create a situation where everyone can talk. Sometimes we should talk less ourselves and try to encourage others to speak their mind, tell them how much we appreciate them. When you have just one person that keeps on talking about his own circumstance, his own problems. Then you get a hostile environment. When this happens, it's so easy to get angry. It is very infectious. If you're not careful you're just shouting at people. So you have to be able to say sorry, and then walk away when it happens. You have to protect yourself and be professional about it.

Those who know the institute's history, where we have come from, are valuable. There are many people here, both in support and academics that went through a lot over the years. There are colleagues that have given everything to this institute, for many, many years. Longer than any of us. They have worked harder than we can imagine. These are the people we can be more like.

5.5 Applying the continuum

In paragraph 3.8 we derived an overall continuum of communication climate. Since the perception of communication climate is not something we can derive directly from the answers of the employees, the continuum might help us gauge it from what they say about the communication behaviours (like speaking up, interactions with their supervisor, their thoughts on participation) they experienced and the feelings (trust, fear etc.) it gave them or what it meant to them. To put the continuum to the test, I have tried to translate the findings to it. Although the result it is of course my interpretation of the findings translated into what the communication climate is like, it is at least a more founded interpretation.

It immediately becomes clear that within most teams the communication climate is probably perceived as much more positive than in the organisation in general. Another thing that becomes clear is that in formal and informal communication there needs to be a balance, so either extreme would affect the perception of communication climate in a negative way. If the climate is too informal basic reliable information suffers, if it is too formal and upward feedback and voice will suffer.

Looking at the perception of communication climate in the institute in general (and ignoring the climate within a team), we can see that the scale tips towards a closed communication climate. Not because employees are very silent, but because their voice is not sufficiently acknowledged or is defensive. Not

because they do not have supportive relationships within their team, but because leadership in general is lacking and is not trusted. I have tried to visualise my interpretation in figure 5.1.

Table 5.4 Continuum of the institute based on interpretation of the findings

Continuum of the institute	
Open	Closed
Informal (Flexible) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coffee machine communication Employees connect with their team and who they personally like Upward feedback possible (open doors) Spontaneous messaging Decisions do not have to be final, but can be discussed 	Formal (Rigid) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal channels: intranet, performance review and MT meeting Certain decision by the director are final Hierarchical position and status matters
Open: Employee voice stimulated <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autonomy in risk taking Within most teams input of ideas is possible and desired Voice is also negative 	Closed: Employee silence induced <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voice generally perceived as ignored Autonomy in risk taking Director decides, control in hierarchy Cultural backgrounds not taken into account Silence from those who don't have contract security
Supportive (relationships) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited feedback to improve (depends on team) Empathy (within teams or close work relationships in general) 	Defensive (relationships) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited evaluating criticism Limited perceived respect or understanding from management
Participative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in decision making, seemingly democratic but complex Upward feedback possible, but not everything can be said Sense of ownership because of autonomy 	Non-participative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perception that things are decided top down regardless of participation
High trust (in relationship with supervisor) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High autonomy Equality (mostly within teams) Empathy in interactions (mostly within teams) To some extent care for each other (mostly within teams) 	Low trust (in relationship with supervisor) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low trust in management Perceived lack of empathy and understanding from management Competition

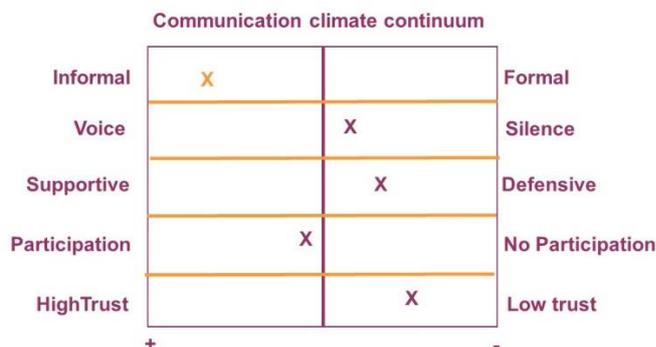
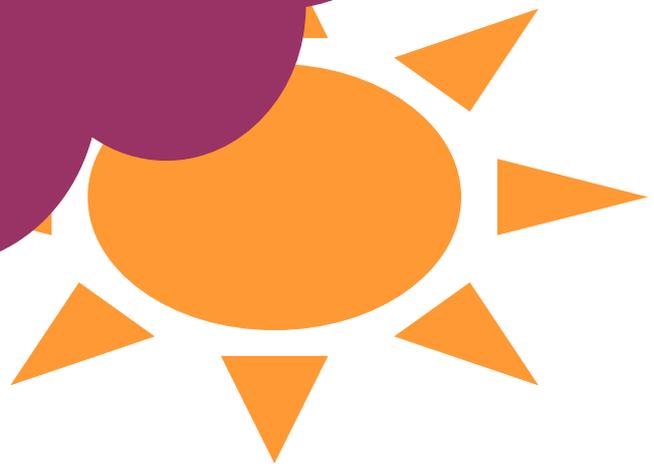


Figure 5.1 Interpretation of communication climate continuum for the overall educational institute

Part III Conclusion & Discussion

"The human mind is an incredible thing. It can conceive of the magnificence of the heavens and the intricacies of the basic components of matter. Yet for each mind to achieve its full potential, it needs a spark. The spark of enquiry and wonder."

Stephen Hawking



6 Conclusion and Discussion

With the insights from the literature research and the findings from the research at the institute, we can draw conclusions and answer both research questions as described in paragraph 2.3. First we will succinctly revisit the conclusion of the literature research in chapter 3.8 and after that a conclusion about the research at the institute will be drawn. In paragraph 6.3 the findings will be discussed by looking at their theoretical and practical relevance and how they connect. Next the limitations and recommendations for further research on understanding communication climate are addressed. Recommendations for the institute based on the findings and the conclusion, will be given in chapter 7.

6.1 Conclusion theoretical background

In short, the first research question regarding an understanding of communication climate and related concepts was answered in paragraph 3.8. There it was concluded that corporate culture is expressed in organisational behaviour, which includes communication behaviour. The communication behaviour is subjectively perceived by employees as the communication climate. This perception is based on the extent in which employees are able to participate and voice their thoughts and ideas, which they will do if they are trusting of their supervisors (e.g. feel valued, receive adequate information and are listened to). When employees perceive the communication climate to be open (because participation is desired and voice is acknowledged) their identification with the organisation is strengthened. In addition, trust is crucial to induce more committed followership of employees – which can ultimately turn them into stewards of the organisation.

An employee's perception of communication climate originates from the interactions that employees have with their supervisor and that directly affect them both personally and professionally. These interactions need to be supportive in order to build trust. So a communication climate that is perceived as open revolves around trust, which revolves around the quality of relationships, which revolves around the supportive interactions (e.g. conversations) that employees, and most of all supervisors and subordinates, have on the work floor.

From these theoretical insights a framework of how organisational identification, participation, voice, trust, culture and followership relate to communication climate could be proposed as well as a more comprehensive definition of communication climate. In addition a summarising continuum has been developed to help understand how related behaviours and dimensions shape the perception of the communication climate in a team or organisation (table 3.6) as well as a model that visualises communication climate as a dimension of employee communication and the behaviours and dimensions that affect it (figure 3.3). These can both be of help for those in employee communication to understand the dynamics and explore the perception of communication climate in their organisation, as well as help understand the influences involved in communication climate in general.

Next a summary of the results answering the second research question regarding the keys issues of the educational institute and recommendations can be formulated, based on the research findings.

6.2 Research conclusion: summary of findings

Qualitative research into the key issues for the employees of the educational institute with regard to their internal communication and communication climate shows that the key issue for the employees of the educational institute is a lack of leadership. This in turn allows for much freedom and autonomy. As this is combined with a lack of internal communication, clarity on structure, rules and roles, as well as the competition that is fuelled by the budgeting and reward system, this results in a situation where each employee and each team can create their own work and rules. As such this leads to other key issues like a lack of collaboration and perceived high workloads (and consecutive burn-outs), as well as a disconnection between academics and support staff and teams working in silos.

The issues of structure and role clarity (including personal development and HR management, reward systems and introduction for new employees) are currently being addressed. However, the current culture of the institute and the lack of employee communication, which are both connected to the lack of leadership, are not yet addressed.

Internal communication

The lack of leadership also means there is a lack of internal communication, i.a. because there is no clear formal internal communication structure. Information mostly travels through informal channels, which creates noise and is unreliable. Management uses the intranet only sporadically and on an irregular basis to inform employees. Besides this there is little other formally structured communication (e.g. structural meetings). This means the supervisors and their subordinates often do not receive adequate, good quality and reliable information about what is expected of them or to align them to the vision and strategy of the institute.

Management does not take up a role in employee communication. The current management team, preoccupied with their own issues and interests, and hampered by the structure, has been disengaged from each other and do not, and sometimes cannot, respond adequately to issues raised. The director, who has done well in terms of financial viability of the institute, shows a tendency to not consult his management team on important decisions and relies on the autonomy of others. After the initiation of the structural reorganisation, some employees see positive changes with regard to the behaviour of management team members, others do not. The entire management team is still too invisible in modelling a communication behaviour that sets basic boundaries and builds trust.

Culture and (communication) behaviour

The lack of leadership and what ensues from it, is also at the basis of other organisational and communication behaviour that express the culture in the institute. As there is much autonomy and at the same time reporting structures have been unclear, no one can or will set clear guidelines and hold employees accountable for their behaviour, which gives room to favouritism or unjustifiable differences with regard to executing rules. This results in employees being excluded, intimidated or even bullied. It also hampers collaboration and a sense of oneness. As there is no introduction for new employees, who often come from a non-Dutch cultural background, they are left to figure things out themselves within their team. Combined with the silo effect and under controlling supervision this can lead to, and unfortunately has led to a climate of silence in and around at least one team and sadly so, abuse.

The institute has a rich history and many employees have long tenure. What unites employees, mostly within their teams, is the love of the job, the passion for the cause of the institute and the academic surroundings. They identify most strongly to the cause, and this ties them all to the institute. However, they are not aligned to the strategy or a clear vision of the institute. Employees have no shared values with regard to the institute and transfer the issues of the current culture onto new employees by discussing negative aspects.

Those employees with a permanent contract feel secure to voice their opinions towards management. However, some voice defensively (with anger and negativity). They try to get their voice heard and acknowledged by management, but partly to no purpose. Others stay quiet. Not sufficiently acknowledging certain employees voices has led to absenteeism and exits. Employees are asked to participate and speak their mind, but also feel discouraged in doing so, because the issues are either too complex or disheartening, or they believe it won't make a difference. Feedback is given in both directions, but is often felt not to be constructive or useful.

Most employees want change and would like to connect more, but have become divided in opposite camps over what is needed. One side wants to let go of the negative and move on, the other is angrier and wants to fight for change. They have become opposites instead of standing together as one organisation, which makes it hard to understand each other's viewpoints. A constructive dialogue, for which the employee narratives developed from the interviews can be used, can help them move forward and (re)build the relationships between all employees and with management.

6.3 Discussion

In this paragraph the relevance of the findings will be discussed, as well as considered limitations of the methods and findings and recommendations for additional research. Management recommendations for the institute can be found in chapter 7. Overall, there are relevant connections found between the theoretical background and the effects of the key issues in the institute. Findings from the research in the institute support several of the theoretical insights, which in turn provide a good foundation to help the management and employees of the institute to improve the internal communication and perceived communication climate of the institute as a whole.

6.3.1 Theoretical relevance of the findings

The goal of the literature research was to explore and understand communication climate. As I tried to cover so many concepts, it was a great challenge to fathom and connect them (see also chapter 8). However, the result has provided me, and with it I hope others that have a part to play in employee communication, with a greater understanding of communication climate indeed. This understanding is valuable, as the perception of the communication climate is linked to job satisfaction, employee commitment, engagement and alignment.

What is most valuable is the insight that individual perceptions of communication climate are mostly formed in the direct environment of the employee, and most of all in the relationships within their team and with their supervisor. If the interaction with the supervisor is not conducive to building trust or allowing the employee to voice thoughts, ideas, fears, whatever is relevant to their work and motivation, then the employee will most likely not be able to move to a higher level of followership and commitment to their work and the organisation.

As I discussed in paragraph 3.8, this thesis research has convinced me that focussing on building good relationships by having more effective conversations is one of the most effective, and most rewarding ways to help employees and thus their organisations perform better. It goes beyond designing interventions like town hall meetings or participation work groups and trying to reach a certain goal or implement a change in a predetermined, often to short, period of time. Such interventions or tools definitely have their value, and I am not implying they should be discarded. They are also much easier to do, I realise that. Working on changing the very fabric of interactions, changing our conversations into ones that have impact, also means fighting some instinctive reactions and being able to reflect on your own judgements. Yet even if we only succeed only half or even less of the time, this still results in a fundamental shift towards more shaping and discovering, and moving towards the future. It is something we can turn back to at any time, and simply try again. Nothing is lost if don't do it, there can only be a gain.

Organisations that somehow can build this into their internal communication and human resource practice and help their managers develop these skills, while also making sure there is a foundation that ensures adequate, good quality, reliable information distribution, will be able to stay flexible and creative as well as foster employee followership and positive communication climates.

6.3.2 Practical relevance of the findings

The goal of the research at the institute was to understand the key issues of employees at the institute in order to give recommendations for improving the internal communication and communication climate.

Responsive methodology

Since there was data available from surveys and sessions prior to this research process, I was able to get a good idea of all of the issues, and the results of the mediation confirmed and summarised these data very well. This, together with the theoretical insights, gave me a foundation from which to use responsive interviewing as a means of collecting data on individual experiences and perceptions and to let the employees talk freely about what was important to them (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Both the

interviews and other quotes from employees brought colour and depth to the survey data in terms of perception. As I mentioned in paragraph 5.3.3, being introduced to conversational intelligence (Glaser, 2016) and responsive methodology for the analysis of the interviews (Abma and Widdershoven, 2006) was very helpful. Responsive methodology provides a means of analysis that encompasses the spirit of the experiences and feelings of several employees and keep them truly qualitative. It also provides a tool, as the actual analysis can be used in a story workshop and to start building supportive conversations (dialogue) between employees in order to exchange and learn from experiences, instead of winning an argument (Abma and Widdershoven, 2006, p. 55). This way it also helps employees to get in touch with “undercurrents of feelings, concerns“, which live below the surface (van Nistelrooij and de Wilde, 2008, p. 146). With regard to the institute’s current situation this methodology fits quite well.

The responsive methods have also helped me to detach from wanting to quantify qualitative data, which I would normally have done by coding and counting answers from semi-structured interviews, and general interpretation and which would not have translated the data in such a rich descriptive way. Besides, the method involves something that is close to my heart: writing stories.

Connection to theory and the importance of employee communication

The findings of the research at the institute, combined with the insights from theory, provide a solid foundation for practical recommendations for the institute to effectively improve their internal communication and develop their communication behaviour and as such the communication climate.

The findings also support the fact that employee communication fulfils a valuable role to connect and inform employees, even in such a small organisation. As the employees of the institute do not get adequate, good quality and reliable information to do their job, it creates problems and affects their alignment (van Riel et al., 2009). The fact that the employees do not share values and do not have a shared vision for the institute are manifestations of this lack of alignment with the institute itself. Some kind of clear formal communication structure is a necessity, it cannot be fully informal. As management has stopped taking minutes of their meetings, and there is no structure for meetings with supervisors or bilateral with management, employees in the institute have no clear channel to receive important information, or to verify whether what their supervisor or any other colleague tells them is accurate. It is obvious that the lack of information causes problems for employees, and increases their workload.

It is also safe to assume that within the institute the perception of communication climate affects identification differently on different levels (Bartels et al., 2007), as within the teams the atmosphere is in general much more positive than in the institute as a whole; there is an ‘us against them’ quality in the way employees speak about those in other teams. Within the team the employees, certainly the academic, appear to identify strongly with the work and the field they work in. Still, this does not shield the employees from a perception of the overall communication climate. That might have to do with the fact that the management team of the institute is quite close to the employees, and thus employees can’t ‘hide’ from the communication behaviour of management: They can, and do, interact with them.

In the interviews, there were many examples the interviewees gave about how they first assessed their environment, and then accepted and emulated it. This fully connects with the theoretical findings, indicating that employees experience certain communication behaviour from others and from their supervisor, and based on the interactions accommodate their behaviour to fit in (see paragraph 3.4.2). It is the quality of that interaction that influences perceptions and thus in turn the communication behaviour and attitude of the employee. To truly move on, the institute needs to take a look at these behaviours and employee relationships, most of all the relationship and dialogue between management and the other employees. The research confirms that this is indeed where it starts.

What is also worth mentioning: The research shows that certain employees are not afraid to voice their opinions, yet this does not mean the communication climate is perceived as positive overall in the institute. As we have seen voice can also be pervasive and negative, and can have a negative consequence (Dyne et al., 2003), in this case the anger only enforces oppositions between employees. Another eye-opener is the fact that, because employees have not been taken seriously, and their voice has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the institute, some of the negative consequences described by Bashshur and Oc (2015) have occurred (See also Appendix 2): burn-outs and exits. In this way

theory points to several identifiable behaviours in the institute which indeed led to the predicted effects connected to communication climate, commitment and alignment. It also shows that the kind of interactions employees have with each other (including with management) have slowly but surely eroded trust, thus these interactions (conversations, open dialogue, constructive feedback, reliable information) are important in (re)building relationships.

The issue of leadership

What the institute needs most is for management to step up. The freedom in the institute is both wonderful and damaging at the same time. Management needs to set some boundaries and hold employees accountable. The employees need some structure to make sense of their environment, information to understand which behaviour is acceptable or not, and shared values as guidelines for their actions. What goes on at the institute in terms of family dynamics, emulates what can go on in real life families. It is a group of people that live together, for better or for worse. There are black sheep, there is sibling rivalry over who gets the biggest piece of the budget and certain information or treatment is only for the privileged. Meanwhile the parents have left the kids to grow up on their own. This lack of leadership in the institute is also the issue from which several other issues, at least in part, ensue.

Because of a combination of competition and a love for the job, the ambition of most employees is high, and thus also their work load. As there are no guidelines and shared values on how people can deal with this, they will make up their own rules and defend their own viewpoints with vigour. Some even became addicted to being right (Glaser, 2016, chap. 6) and chose to stay ensconced in their viewpoints, or only connect to those that think the same. What further complicates the relationship dynamic, is the fact that there are so many different nationalities working together. Many see this as an issue, but no one ever really seems to take the time to try and understand what those employees need in order to learn and understand Dutch culture and ways, and what behavioural patterns might come natural to them and their background, which need to be understood (Dinten et al., 2008).

The institute can only evolve if those in management, whoever they will be after the restructuring process, are able to not just acknowledge but truly understand their part in this situation, take on the role of manager and try to address and develop their own communication behaviour. It depends on management's willingness to listen and acknowledge the employee's voice (which does not mean to do what they want, but it does mean to do what they need), to hold people accountable and model new behaviour. This means changing the culture and changing personal behaviours that, understandably, will meet with resistance. One can be optimistic, and hope management and employees can take up the gauntlet from all the lessons they have learnt this year and keep taking steps towards the one team they dream of. This research gives them a foundation to work with and the current management team has expressed and shown their willingness to help change come about. But one has to be realistic too. There has also been a certain reluctance so far from management to step up themselves, and the question is whether they can and want to be that kind of manager. This process has already taken up a lot of time and money and it will take more time yet, but if they can follow through and are brave enough to dig even deeper, it will be worth it. I like to be on the optimistic side and believe that, when the dream of the employees is big enough, change, one way or the other, will be happening.

6.3.3 Limitations and recommendations for further research

Some of the limitations of the literature research have already been addressed in paragraph 3.8, but I will repeat and supplement them here and add to them the limitations of the research at the institute.

Limitations and recommendations regarding theory

First of all the concepts relating to communication climate are intertwined with each other, and they have been studied from different angles. Several presumed correlations found between concepts are not very strong. For example the fact that participation, which is connected to an open communication climate, is both found to be a predictor of commitment (Guzley, 1992) and sometimes not (Trombetta and Rogers, 1988). One has to stay aware of the fact that each organisation, each context is different. Different organisational environments lead to different research data and different correlations. Also the research conditions will be different.

Other related concepts have emerged during my literature research, like respect and empathy. I have touched upon them, but they are worth exploring further with regard to supportive communication behaviour and an open communication climate and towards sharpening the continuum I derived (table 3.6). This continuum is a convenient summary of all the concepts and dimensions I found in literature, but definitely not all-encompassing (if ever it could be). In itself the continuum does not say anything (yet) about a possible relative importance of each extreme compared to the others. As my conclusion is that it starts with supportive behaviours, this might weigh more heavily on the perception of communication climate than the other extremes. The continuum does not take that into account and this might be something to build upon in future research.

In addition a word of modesty with regard to the model (figure 3.3). Any model of the concept of communication climate can only be an oversimplification (maybe even a distortion) of a complex reality, I realise that. But for those who like visual representations (myself included) it does help to grasp connections and get some kind of a 'feeling' for them. It helped me to fully grasp that it is most likely that communication climate starts to be developed with supportive relationships, mostly those closest to the employee and especially the one with the supervisor. It also helped me to keep in mind that culture is important as an antecedent as it is expressed in behaviour, and that communication behaviour of supervisors is also – to a certain extent – an expression of that culture.

It remains important to bear in mind that communication climate is constructed in the perception of people, and it is a complex concept related to many other complex concepts. Communication climate is what it is perceived to be, subjectively by every individual. We can only try to understand what influences this perception, but we cannot take it as science fact that these influences always have the same outcomes. No organisation is the same. The best scholars can do is continue the search and build the knowledge of how to leverage employee communication to support a communication climate that strengthens employee engagement and alignment.

Limitations regarding research

As mentioned, both structure and HR management are currently addressed by the institute. Developing an internal communication structure, as well as the role of management should be addressed in connection with these other developments. If one of the outcomes of restructuring is a change in management team, then it will be necessary to reassess the needs and thoughts of newly appointed members regarding their managerial role. In addition, the institute has a complex structure as part of a holding with a Board of Governors that determines who the director is. I did not explore this well enough to draw any conclusions about the effects of it, but I realise there are certain causes of the issue of both structure and management – like trying to combine and safeguard financial interests and academic quality – that will be difficult to change because of this legal structure. There will always be some friction and an incentive for competition there; an educational institute is not a regular business, but it has to be run like one in many ways, to secure budget. This means there are limitations in the extent to which certain incentives that support the current culture can be mitigated.

With regard to the interviews I want to reiterate that although I have tried to count how often an issue was expressed in the interviews, this doesn't add information about the extent to which an issue is perceived to be important. The interviews were not structured, and it is quite possible the interviewee had no opinion of or experience with a certain issue, or that it quite simply did not come up in the conversation. The interview results are personal descriptions of the experiences, which often touched upon key issues that emerged from previous findings. Communication climate as concept was not a subject of the conversations, so my interpretation of how the communication climate might be perceived in the institute (paragraph 5.5) is just that: My interpretation, based on the theoretical insights.

Lastly, I have not been able to do a member check of the narratives derived from the interviews. This means I do not yet know whether the interviewees that these narratives were modelled after can recognise the perspectives and believe them to be credible accounts. They might still need to be reworked. So before any story workshop can effectively be done, it is important that this is addressed.

7 Management recommendations for the institute

As the institute is fully engaged in a reorganisation process, both the structure and HR management (rules, roles and employee development) are being addressed. What has not been addressed is the desire to change the current culture of the institute and the behaviours by which it is expressed. For this, it is advisable to further develop the relationships between the employees, and thus break down perceived barriers between the teams. The most important recommendation is to coach and develop management to become more supportive in their interactions with employees, create certain guidelines and develop their role in employee communication.

In connection to a new organisational structure, implementing a more formal internal communication structure will ensure the employees get adequate, good quality and most of all reliable information. In addition this will help align employees to the strategy and vision of the institute, which has been developed but is still not supported by the employees. Employees can participate in the development of internal communication, as well as the development of shared values for the institute, as they have already participated in developing the organisational infrastructure. This will further support their sense of shared ownership of the institute. Defining clear shared values will help everyone in the institute translate what they mean in their own work. Lastly, it is advisable to look into helping employees with a non-Dutch background integrate, for example with a mentor program...

7.1 Follow-up with a story workshop

The research findings from the interviews with 12 employees have been converted into three narratives. Two describe what are in many ways opposing viewpoint, while one provides a counter story to the others, showing an alternative perception that can help employees learn from each other.

The stories will need to be checked with the employees upon whose perceptions they are based, to ensure that they are credible narratives. But they are there, and they are nearly ready to be used in a story workshop.

During this workshop the employees (including management) come together in groups, and read the stories. The employee that recognises him- or herself in this story is asked to share what they recognise (and this means the employees should not read the stories beforehand, to ensure a spontaneous response). Others can respond to that with their own experiences and perceptions. This will lead to a conversation, a dialogue, which, with the proper guidance and in a safe environment, helps those involved to get a better understanding of each other's viewpoints. It is preferable to do the workshop in a different environment than the workplace.

The goal is to let employees have a different kind of conversation, which opens them up to each other, and helps them see each other differently. It is not the intention to revisit the past, offer opinions or make statements about what must be done. It is about sharing experiences and stories, helping the employees to create a new understanding together, and to (re)build their relationship as colleagues.

7.2 Management development

As the lack of leadership is the key issue for employees of the institute, the development of the roles of management and supervisors needs attention. Management needs to lead by example and show the supportive behaviour they want to see returned from employees. The current management team members have already expressed the intention to work on creating safeguards that prevent issues like sexual intimidations or bullying from occurring. A group coaching session can be designed to address this and together develop rules or processes to this end. Part of this workshop (or an additional session) can be aimed at modelling behaviour with regard to supportive interactions, like giving feedback and listening, and addressing personal barriers (convictions, beliefs, experiences). The role of management in employee communication is also an important subject to address.

The supervisors have already expressed the intention to develop their leadership skills. This can be done through regular intervision sessions (with one kick off guided workshop in which supervisors can create their own framework for the InterVision). All those in a position of supervision in the institute should be involved. Growing an awareness about the pitfalls of being a supervisor, learning about giving and receiving feedback and listening (and supportive interactions in general), having constructive meetings are relevant subjects to address in these sessions. The goal is to let supervisors learn from each other's experiences, and share best practices.

7.3 Build internal communication

Another important improvement will be the development of a formal internal communication structure and an internal communication plan, first and foremost to secure adequate, good quality and reliable information that is relevant to the employees. The communication structure should be developed in connection with the organisational infrastructure (horizontal, vertical and cross-cutting) that is chosen to be implemented, as well as in line with developments on HR. The internal communication strategy should also be connected to the strategy of the institute, and support the alignment of employees to it.

The formal internal communication structure should include:

- Team meetings: structurally planned meetings of the supervisors with the management team to be informed about important issues. Timing of the meetings (e.g. bi-weekly) can be determined by the management team based on relevant issues.
- Bilateral meetings between supervisors and subordinates, e.g. a bi-weekly moment of half an hour to check up on each other.
- Performance review: HR is in the lead; giving and receiving supportive feedback could be a part of the framework of the review. Rewarding cross functional collaborations (if such an incentive is possible) could also be part of the performance review.
- Develop the intranet, mostly by creating a clear formal section with regular updates from the management team, which can also be used as formal upward feedback mechanism. Determine how the intranet should be used, e.g. that certain management information is not e-mailed but always published there so everyone can see it. This means at least some employees will have to go there to find it. Something as simple as setting the intranet as a default home page will also help employees connect to it, as they see it every working day. It is also worth finding out if there are certain technical issues that need to be overcome, and whether that is possible, e.g. getting e-mail notifications when there is a new message in the management section.
- Create an introduction program for new employees: This should be developed by HR (management and personnel administration) in collaboration with current employees. Ask the employees that joined in the past year what they have missed and what they would have wanted to know, and in what way an introduction would have been effective for them. Have new employees be mentored by a colleague from another different team, and preferably someone who can relate to the new employee with regard to their cultural background and thus help them integrate.

Employees, perhaps their representation in the form of the Works Council can be involved to participate and indicate needs, e.g. with regard to bilateral talks with the supervisor, and the use of the intranet.

7.4 Continue to build supportive employee relationships

In the second mediation session employees have started to formulate scenarios to plan actions. As a follow up after the story workshop, employees (including management) can participate in a session in which they work on the most relevant scenarios. The goal is to build on the strengths of the institute:

- Idealistic drive, passion and engagement, working for something bigger, social focus
- Strong history: What to take into the future, who are the heroes
- International environment: What are the benefits and how to enjoy them more?
- Freedom to develop your work and job: What should be the boundaries of that freedom?
- Family atmosphere: How do we preserve the positives of the family feeling?
- Never a dull moment, exciting: How do we handle the workload, how can we help each other with that?
- Quality and strong ties with alumni: How can we keep ensuring, even improving quality?
- Autonomy and freedom: What is the positive thing about autonomy? How can we preserve it while staying involved with each other?

What are successes, and what should still be part of the future of the institute? What more needs to be done to move towards that future? How do they want to connect and interact with each other? Which rituals or activities would help? How can we celebrate our successes? The counter story from the story workshop can also provide input for this. Part of this session can also be the development of a few (a maximum of four) clear shared values that can help guide everyone in their job.

The goal of such a workshop is to continue with building positive relationships between the employees, and let them come up with ways to sustain that. By improving the interactions between all employees, trust can start to be built again which hopefully, slowly but surely, will invite and improve the openness and participation of employees in the institute towards a more shared vision, shared values (co-creating the strategy) and a communication climate that is felt to be more open.

7.5 Address cultural differences of employees

Lastly, there are cultural differences in the institute. Learning about those differences, trying to understand them more, can also help connection and avoid isolation of certain groups or employees. The mediators proposed an additional session with regard to cultural sensitivities and differences that can provide a fun way to create awareness. This awareness will also reflect back to the students of the institute, and how they – coming from many different countries – can be supported during their studies. Use the knowledge that is already in the institute from those who connect to students and deal with these differences daily, like the educational office and the library.

8 Reflection

Throughout this report there are reflections, e.g. on the interview process (paragraph 5.3.3) and during the discussion in chapter 6. In this final chapter I will reflect on the parts of the thesis research in general (literature and practical), as well as the learning process of this thesis and the entire master program.

Reflection on the literature search

My research on literature started early on, as even before I started the thesis project I felt certain I wanted to connect my research to employee communication and more precisely the concept of communication climate. Once the thesis process kicked off, I started to look for additional literature to what I had already read from the elective course Employee Communication and a few of the other electives. I mainly used the EUR online library, but also used Web of Science. I only used peer reviewed literature and tried to check the quality of the journals I did not know by means of the Harzing Journal Quality list. In no time I had more literature than I could ever read and felt lost in the woods of knowledge, also because I had so many concepts to look out for. It was a true challenge to find my way through those woods, and I've struggled a lot with it. My own curious nature didn't help. It made many things very interesting, and exploring and summarising all of the articles was simply too big a task. I could have narrowed down my research question and focussed mainly on the research at the institute, but I chose to take the leap and see where literature would lead me. What complicated matters and supported this decision, was that I was not yet sure whether I could do research in the institute – getting the green light on researching it took a little longer than I had hoped and this delayed my process. At some point I feared I might not have enough time left to even finish the thesis. Although I had one alternative organisation, the situation at the institute simply provided the most perfect opportunity.

Putting the theoretical background together felt like a big wrestling match to tame a five-headed monster (or cluster bomb as my coach called it). Somehow, at some point, later than I had hoped, it came together. I am quite happy with the end result, although it is in some parts still a tough cookie to read. While it took me too long to get a grip on the initial research question to get focus on my literature, the practical research helped tremendously, but as said this only fully kicked off four months before my deadline and included summer holidays. What I learned during the research fed into what I looked for in literature, which led me to a few books that became my reading material over the summer holiday. What you put your mind to, is probably what you attract, because that was when a huge light popped on: Conversational intelligence, conversations with impact, appreciative inquiry, they all resonated with me as to how our being human creates situations that are not conducive to connection. It makes so much sense, and yet it is so hard to change (I know, I've been trying it myself).

I had already found the responsive interviewing methodology and instinctively understood this was a useful method, but other than knowing I wanted to do interviews (which I love a whole lot better than surveys; statistics was never my favourite thing, even when studying engineering) I had no clue how to do anything else than (semi-) structured interviews and then quantify the results again. It is thanks to my coach that I was introduced to different methods of research. He also pointed me in the direction of relevant literature about them, and provided me with a wealth of other insights and books that proved very useful to get some focus and new perspectives. If there was more time, I probably would have tried to look for literature that might fill certain gaps that I found in putting it together, and I would have taken more time to sharpen the structure of the chapter. But probably I would have spent more time on the most enjoyable part of this entire process: The research at the institute. Theory can never surpass actually stepping out into reality and trying to make a difference there.

Reflection on the research process

All in all, I can look back on a very interesting and satisfying research process. I have been given a wonderful opportunity and what have learned from it, both for the thesis and my personal development is priceless. My contact at the institute has gone out of her way to make things happen for me. She is the one that keeps the institute running for sure, and I have tremendous respect for her hard work. I also have great respect for the management team of the institute, because they are all willing to be vulnerable, change things around and ask for help. It was a great opportunity to see the mediators at work, and as there was already so much material to help understand the issues, I could focus on the

interviews and observations. Again, it would have been nice if I could have started sooner, especially when it comes to studying the existing data. But the process of the institute simply did not allow it me stepping in earlier. Things would have gotten too mixed up for the employees, and I had to accept that of course.

I would have wanted to be able to practice more with the interviewing techniques that my coach helped me with. That was a real eye-opener too. Especially the last interview was a great experience, and it turned out to be the most interesting story too. But I have already reflected on that in paragraph 5.3.3. Writing the transcripts was a horror, because it takes almost a day to write out one interview. I hated it thoroughly, but I wanted to do it myself, also because of the sensitive nature of some conversations. Turning them into stories was the most fun and actually the easiest part. It would have been great if I could have done the story workshop within the scope of the thesis. But I know that one way or another I will be doing more of this and developing workshops aimed at supportive interactions between employees. This process has helped me identify a focus for my work, which is a great gift.

Reflection on the thesis learning process

My personal goal in this thesis process was to find just that focus to further develop my business and professional life. Employee communication encompasses many things, and I was looking for my niche. For me this means accepting that some things you might be very able to do, are not what you should do. And realising that many things you have already done in your professional life and your personal life point you in the right direction. It's about finding how to connect the dots. This thesis helped me to do that. It has shown me that I am better at certain things than I give myself credit for – I will doubt myself forever, but it seems I am not the only one... It also showed me that even if you have done something a million times (like interviewing people), there is always something to be learned.

I have been through a process like this three times now. Each was totally different, but what was the same is that I committed myself fully to the process each time, which helped me to push through things that are difficult. Often I did not want to get behind my laptop and dive into literature. But when I did it was always interesting. I had to try and let go of things I thought I should be contributing to literature, or of coming up with clear cut solutions. I felt set straight by my coach many times, as he challenged my thinking. But that is what it is all about. As long as it feels uncomfortable but does not seem impossible I feel I am on the right track. Tomorrow, when this is done, that pressure to learn and get it all done is also gone, and I will be left with mostly challenging my own mind again. That is a bit of a shame. Although I think some sleep is also quite welcome.

Reflection on the master program

From the first summer course until this thesis, the program was an enjoyable experience. I love communication and I also love learning. This has reminded me again how much. The electives I did besides employee communication connected well to my personal and professional interests, as persuasive communication taught me more about the power of language and listening, strategic management taught me to think in both/and solutions, organisational change helped me to see the future more clearly, digital communication brought me in to the 21st century and leadership and communication helped me understand the concerns of leadership. Also, the study trip to New York was a once in a lifetime experience. I am proud of my achievements in all of them.

What was most wonderful about the program – besides the many inspiring lecturers and the great lunches and dinners that were included –, were my fellow students. I connected to a great group of people, some of which also went through the electives with me. Together we have had fun, but we also worked hard together on group assignments. It was special to me that I could count on such a team, with the same ambition and drive to achieve (and even at some point the unanimity and guts to decide to exclude a member from an assignment because of a lack of contribution). I have learned nearly as much from my fellow students as from the lecturers, and they all have enriched my personal network tremendously. All in all, I am very happy that I have followed this program. I tried to take out of it what I could and believe I succeeded. To me this program was a transformational journey towards finding my own 'niche' in the world of corporate communication, giving me an academically sound foundation, improving on skills and knowledge that are important to me, meeting inspiring people and finding focus on how to develop my own business. What a journey.

Appendices



"We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe, and for that I am extremely grateful."

Stephen Hawking

Acknowledgement

In the summer of 2016 I started on one of the most transformational journeys in my life. My then supervisor Martine Boer, manager corporate communication of Hogeschool Utrecht, had made it possible for me to attend the summer course Corporate Communication of RSM. There I rediscovered how passionately curious I am to build my knowledge and to develop myself. Most of all, I realised I needed to reshape my professional life as a communication professional, and take a leap. I am very grateful to Martine for helping me to become an entrepreneur and create Ingage inc.

Along the journey I have been helped, supported and inspired by many students and lecturers and I am grateful to them for their enthusiasm and knowledge. First and foremost I would like to thank professor Cees van Riel for sharing his wisdom, especially on the subject of employee communication. Also many thanks to those at the Corporate Communication Centre that went out of their way to support us students. Especially to Susanna Marco who, with her radiant presence, always takes good care of us all, as well as Ahong Gu who supported the thesis process and went out of her way to help. Many thanks and good luck to Joep Cornelissen and Marijke Bauman on their journey to further the corporate communication program. And last but certainly not least many thanks to Guido Berens, my co-reader for this thesis, for his timely responses and valued contributions to my thesis drafts up until the deadline.

I have also been fortunate to be inspired by and work with fantastic fellow students on assignments and during courses. A few of them deserve special thanks (in no particular order) because our collaboration was always great: Annemieke Calatz, Esther Gierveld, Annemiek Gouwens, Joanne Kelleher, Chloe Neath, Nathalie Soeteman and Lydia Verkerk. Ladies, you are all amazing! Thanks for the support.

A big thank you goes out to Bianca Spierenburg, who introduced me to Nannie Gieles, who deserves my deepest thanks for connecting me to my research subject. I also want to thank Felix Merks, Dominique Maas and Joris de Bie for allowing me to assist in and learn from their work as mediators. Both the policy advisor (my contact) and the management team of the institute I researched have been extremely kind and brave in allowing me to research them. All concerned, both the management team and the employees, have dared to be open and vulnerable in sharing their experiences. It has made a profound impact on me, both as a student and a professional. I know you will all rise strong.

Along the way I was also lucky to find a coach that was right for me and this thesis process. Ton Roodink has helped me to rethink my rational approach and silly desire for controlled outcomes. He has handed me insights, through methods, inspiring literature and his own experiences, which made me fully aware of the fact that when it comes to humans, theory and practice are two different things. Thank you for short-circuiting my brain more than once and helping me push myself to dig deeper and try even harder.

I have not yet written a thesis – this is my third in 21 years –, without giving thanks to my husband Robert van den Berg. The simple fact is I would not have been able to complete any of them without his support. It means the world to me that he allows me such freedom to find and develop my potential and create a business. We are one hell of a team, and I feel blessed to be part of it. We are also blessed with a wonderful eight year old daughter, who has been a great supporter to help me get it done.

Much of my curiosity was inspired by my father, who built things, literally, but he was also a master in building up people in his role as supervisor. Only when he passed away three years ago I came to fully understand what he meant to his subordinates. Some even came to his funeral, though over 15 years had passed since they last worked for him. My father understood, without ever learning it, that leading people is about understanding them and encouraging them to do better, not about shaming or frightening them into submission. His wisdom is like a north star on my personal and professional journey. I am glad that my mother is still around to share in this accomplishment, and I know my father was proud of me. He will be looking down on both of us today with much pride.

I am excited to contribute my knowledge and inspiration to organisations that want to develop employee communication that works. So, as my favourite Star Trek captain Jean-Luc Picard would say when encouraging his crew to boldly go where they had never gone before, let's 'engage!'

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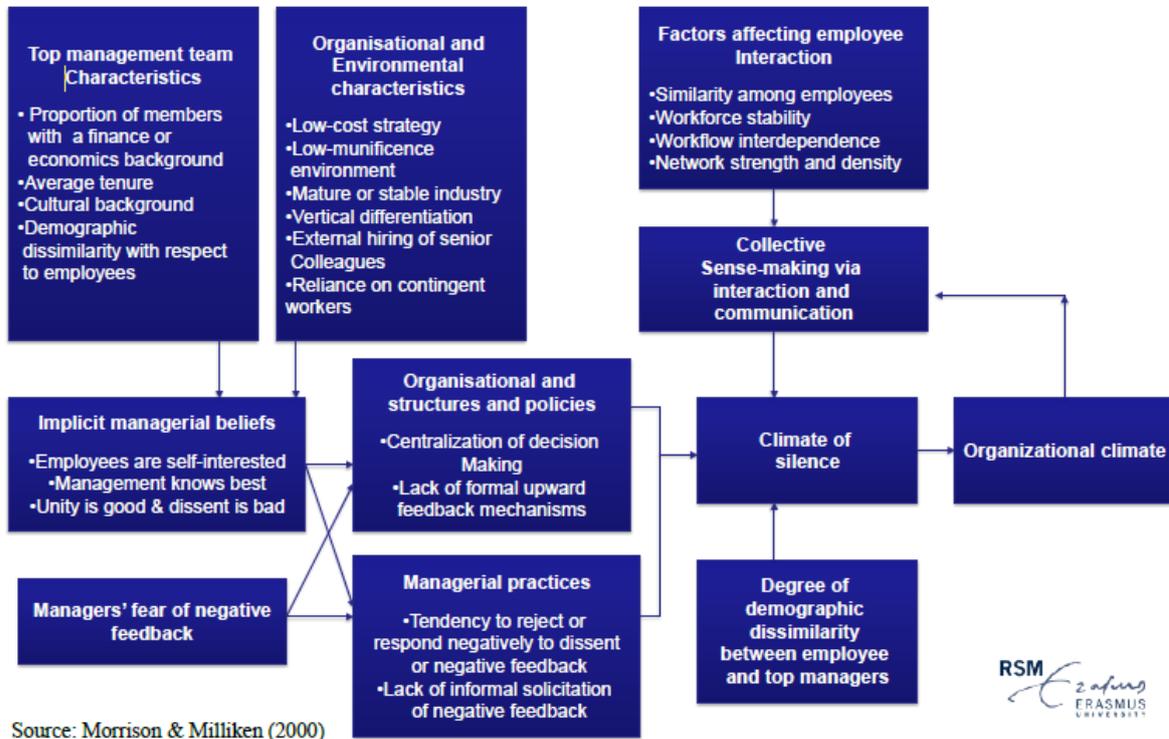
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Appendix 1 Dynamics & effects corporate silence

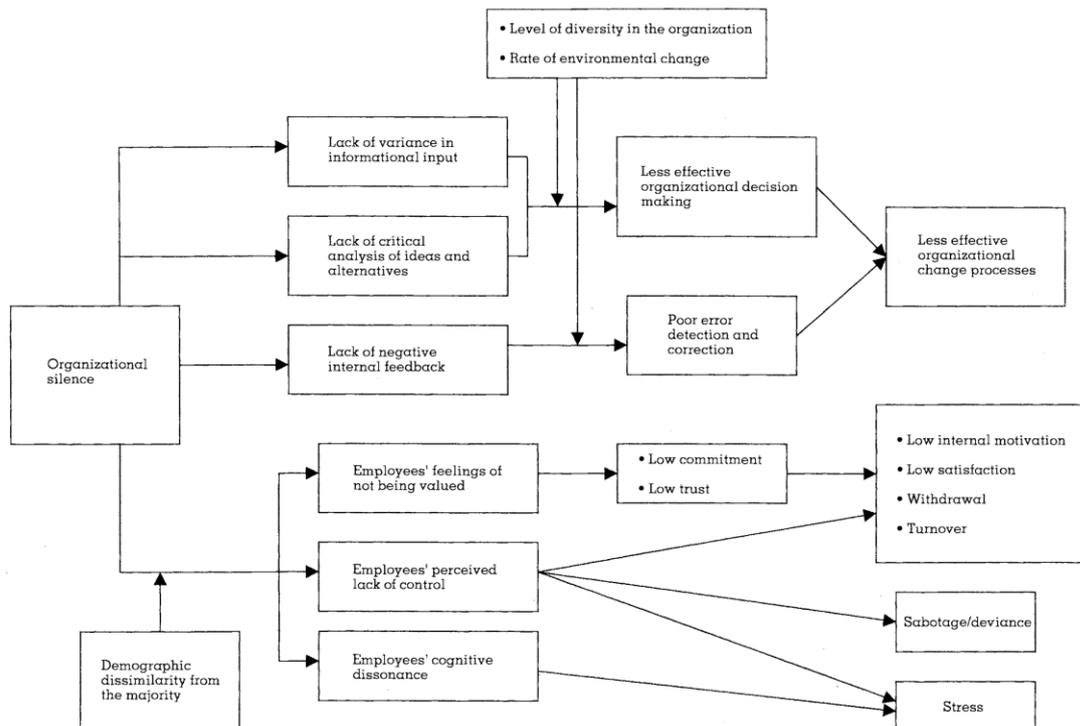
Dynamics giving rise to silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000, p. 709)

Dynamics giving rise to silence



Effects of organisational silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000, p. 718)

FIGURE 2
Effects of Organizational Silence



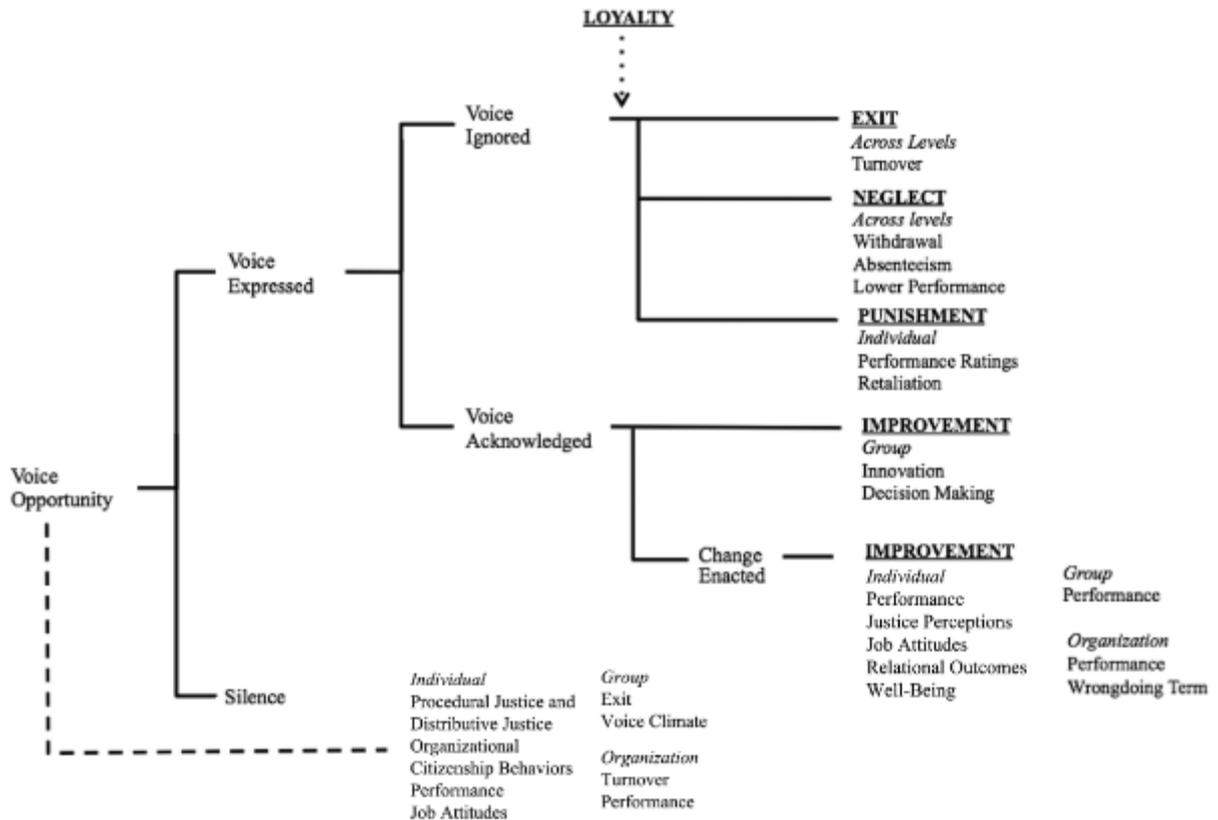
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Appendix 2 VENPIL Progressive Model of Voice

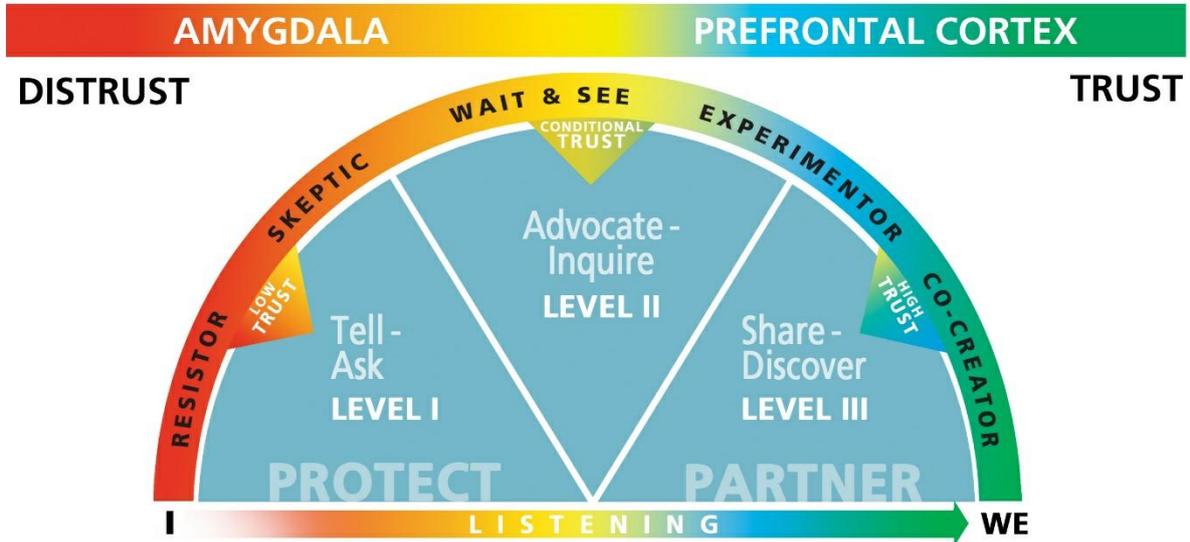
Voice, Exit, Neglect, Punishment, Improvement, Loyalty (VENPIL) Progressive Model of Voice



(Bashshur and Oc, 2015, p. 1574)

Appendix 4 Conversational Dashboard and Intelligence Matrix

CONVERSATIONAL DASHBOARD™



(Glaser, 2013, chap. 4)

Conversational Intelligence™ Matrix

	LEVEL I TRANSACTIONAL "Exchange Information"	LEVEL II POSITIONAL "Exchange Power"	LEVEL III TRANSFORMATIONAL "Exchange Energy"
What Do We Exchange?	TELL ↔ ASK	ADVOCATE ↔ INQUIRE	SHARE ↔ DISCOVER
Interaction Dynamics	Ask-Tell	Advocate-Inquire	Share-Discover
Space	Closes Spaces	Limits Space	Creates Space
Focus	Giving and taking information	Exploring others' positions seeking a win-win solution	Exploring others' perspectives; joining and transforming reality; innovating
Blindspots & Overuse	"Tell-Sell-Yell Syndrome" Tendency toward telling more than asking	"Addicted to Being Right" Tendency to ask questions for which you have all the answers	"All Talk No Action" Tendency for too much talk and no action
INTENTION	INFORM	PERSUADE	CO-CREATE
Listen	To protect	To accept or reject	To connect
I-WE	I-centric	I & We-centric	WE-centric
Success	My success	Win at all cost	Mutual success
Trust	Low trust	Conditional trust	High trust
Influence	Not open to influence	Desire to influence	Open to influence
Skills to Develop	Ability to ask open ended questions and foster 'give and take'	Ability to share the conversational space with others; expand power	Ability to ask questions for which you have no answers; co-creating

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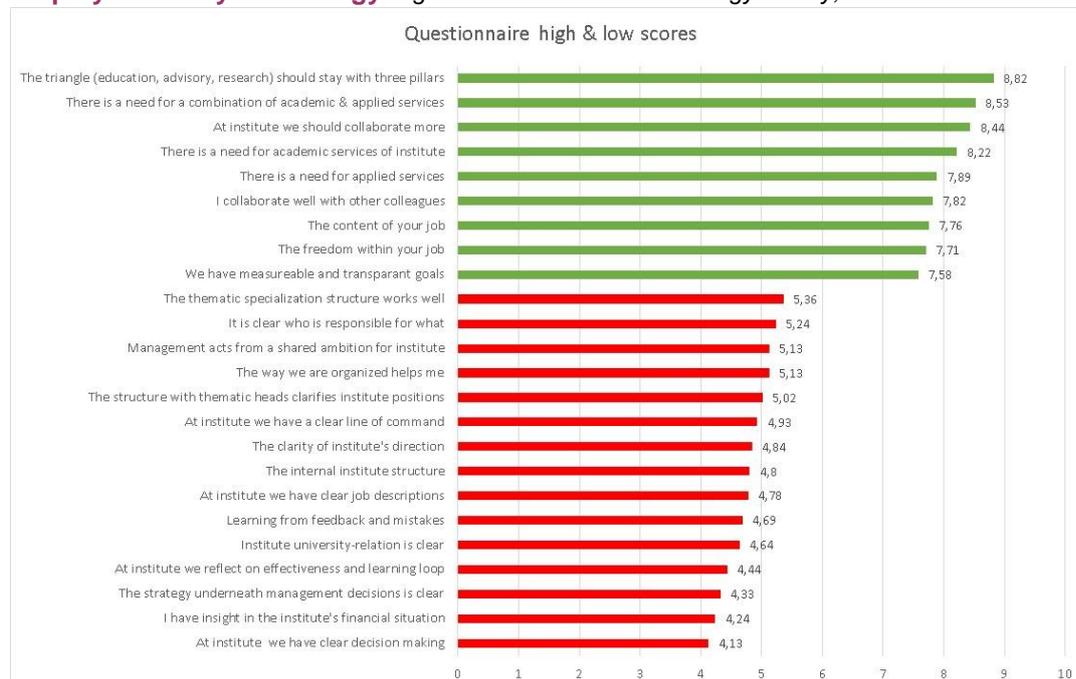
Appendix 5 Previous survey results institute

Employee survey by institute, 2017

Scores from 1 (low) to 10 (high) (Red: concern/negative, Orange: some concern, Green: No concern/positive)

	Support	MT	Academic
The content of your job	7,6	8	7,88
The workload at your job	6,4	7,5	5,5
The freedom within your job	8,2	9,5	7,29
Your direct colleagues	8	7,5	7,13
The Management (the director and the MTeam)	6,3	8	5,71
The clarity of institute's direction, where we're heading	5,2	8,5	4,46
The internal structure	5,9	6	4,29
The way we give feedback and learn from mistakes	5,4	6	4,17
My responsibilities are clear	8	8,5	6,33
It is clear who is responsible for what	6,3	7	4,67
I know who my manager is	9,4	10	5,83
I collaborate well with other colleagues	8,5	8,5	7,83
At Institute we should collaborate more	8,5	8	8,43
MT acts from a shared ambition for institute	5,7	7	4,42
The strategy underneath decisions of management is clear	5,1	7,5	3,54
Institute position in relation to the university is clear	6,2	8	3,79
I have the need for measurable and transparent goals to guide my work	7,2	6	6,46
As an organisation we need measurable and transparent goals to guide our work	8,6	5	7,25
At the institute we have clear job descriptions	5,7	7	4,29
At the institute we have clear decision making	4,6	6	3,75
At the institute we have a clear line of command (who can direct me, who can I delegate to)	6,3	6	4,17
The structure with thematic teams or departments within institute is an improvement	5,7	5,5	5,08
The formal evaluation process stimulates me to improve my work	5	5,5	4,67
The informal way we give each other feedback stimulates me to improve my work	6,6	7,5	6,13
I feel safe and convenient to address management with the issues and concerns I have in relation to institute	6,6	8,5	5,29
I feel safe and convenient to address my (senior) colleagues with the issues and concerns I have in relation to institute	7,6	8,5	6,67

Employee survey on strategy High and low scores from strategy survey, November 28th 2017:



Appendix 6 Previous session results institute

Session with senior academics, Sept 7th 2017: Short summary of key points

What should management focus on:

- clear direction
- provide structure/support to staff to enable them to do their work
- transparent decision-making, structure/flow of decision making
- intra coordination (groups), inter coordination (MT and groups)
- strategies for collaboration, innovation and learning
- career development
- reconsider status as part of holding, position as part of university
- reconsider internal organisational structure
- atmosphere
- conflict avoidant culture
- define CLEAR thematic focus areas (and teams)
- process for dealing with internal conflicts
- stimulate interaction between the different teams (thematic focus areas)
- guide personal development of all colleagues (HR focus)
- transparency in what is going on internally
- clear management directions, speak with 1 voice

How:

We all have to be change makers, change or die, get out of hamster wheel, take time to step back and innovate

Conclusions agency re. strategy process (2017)

From the survey re. strategy the involved agency concluded there is a significant dissatisfaction with regard to feeling safe, internal processes, decision making, strategic course of the institute and functioning of management. They advised the following:

- Focus on developing vision, mission and why, to give strategic document more context
- Do right by employees by **taking actions here and now. Improve trust in management team.**
- Employees have indicated that they fear nothing will change in the short term, but they do hope it will.
- Management team including director need to work on;
 - o Improving interaction between them and employees
 - o Build a clearer internal organisation
 - o Enhance feeling of safety
 - o Improve functioning of MT:
 - Organise sessions working on the **relationship and trust** between management and employees. Try to **understand each other's convictions and drive**, give **feedback and voice issues**, create **clarity** on roles in the management team, responsibilities and decision making power.
 - Be clear on accountability as MT
 - Determine what each member of MT can and wants to develop re. management role and functioning (e.g. people management)

Appendix 7 Interview topics and suggested questions

Interview questions, as suggestions to use within responsive interviewing situation

The interviews were not (semi-)structured, but responsive and more like a conversations. The opening question, to break the ice and start talking, was always “Could you tell me what your role at the institute is and how long you have been here?”

The questions below were only guidelines to keep the interviewing process going, and if felt relevant to the story of the interviewee address certain topics related to theoretical research. These questions often asked for descriptions, which, as I have learned, will lead to opinions rather than meaning. Especially in the last two interviews I tried to formulate my questions focussed on:

- Ask for examples regarding specific situations
- Ask for meaning constructed from these examples

Questions I had prepared to start and keep the interview process going:

General/job related feelings and thoughts (Climate, Identification)

- What is your role, how long have you been working here?
- How would you describe the current situation at the institute?
- What do you think of this situation (→ if negative, how does it affect your performance)?
- What does your job/the institute mean to you?

Change related feelings and thoughts (Identification)

- What have you tried to contribute to change?
- What is de biggest obstacle/concern you see? What, if you could change anything right now, would be the most important thing that should change/improve your work environment?
- How do the changes make you feel? What do they mean to you?

Internal relationships (re. Trust, Culture, Participation, Voice, Climate)

- How would you describe your relationship with colleagues, the atmosphere among colleagues at the institute?
- How often do you speak your mind? What happens if you do? Who do you go to? How does that feel
- How do you look at the different cultures of people that work here? How does that affect collaboration/work?
- What is the cultural difference you have experienced between your background and in the Netherlands/at the institute
- How do you feel about the process to develop a new organisational model/structure?
- How do you get information from colleagues, on work related issues etc.?
- How often do you meet colleagues, share work related info? How often do you socialise with your colleagues, and how/where?

Motivation / commitment (Identification / Followership)

- What are you most proud of?
- How do you see the future?
- Why do you (still) work here? What is important for you in your work?
- How do you feel as an employee of this institute currently?

Followership regarding management

- How do you see your supervisor/management, what is your relationship with him/her/them?