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# Building intra-organizational trust with managerial communications

by

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## **Abstract**

Trust is seen as critical in the knowledge-based network economy by having number of important benefits for organizations. Previous research has suggested that intra-organizational communication and information sharing are essential factors in trust building processes. Managers and managerial communication, in particular, are seen as key actors. In this study the relationships between different forms of managerial communication and the experience of intra-organizational trust is examined. The study adds to the literature by applying motivational language theory in explaining trust within organizations. The findings verify that all three dimensions of managerial communication, according to motivational language theory, are crucial elements in both building and maintaining trust within an organization. The results also indicate a notable gap in perceived trust that depends on whether managers communicate with their subordinates face-to-face or online. Thus, managers should consciously choose the channels depending on the task at hand, as well as pay more attention to social communication online and establish less task-focused management cultures.

## **Keywords**

Trust; trust building; communication; managerial communication; online communication; motivating language theory.

## Introduction

Trust is seen as critical in the knowledge-based network economy, especially as it is seen as a lubricant when managing uncertainty, complexity, and related risks (Arrow, 1974; Luhmann, 1979). Previous research has listed several reasons for the growing interest in trust, such as globalization and virtualization of organizational forms, increase of networked forms of organizations and alliances (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996), increase in attention to the benefits of collaborative behaviour (Kramer, 1996), and demands which organizational change can exert upon organizational members (Mishra, 1996). Indeed, trust is acknowledged to increase organizational commitment (Connell et al., 2000), enhance levels of collaboration (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), and help in managing organizational conflicts (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002).

Previous research has suggested that intra-organizational communication and information sharing are essential factors, being both antecedents and consequences in trust building processes (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Usoro et al., 2007; Whitener et al., 1998). In particular, *managers* and *managerial communication* are seen as key actors in trust building (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003; Burke et al., 2007; Norman et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2009). The virtualization of organizational forms and relationships has, however, challenged the traditional forms of communication within organizations. Managers and subordinates need to deal with relationships with lesser social and physical elements. How has this affected intra-organizational trust building processes?

Based on the previous literature and an analysis of empirical data, we examine the relationships between different forms of managerial communication and the experience of intra-organizational trust. Our research question is thus: **what are the practices of managerial communication that seem to build intra-organizational trust?** The empirical data were collected from four focus group interviews from several large Finnish-based organizations. The results of the study suggest that, in accordance with motivating language theory, the three dimensions of managerial communications that affect employee satisfaction and productivity are also central in building and maintaining intra-organizational trust.

However, only some of these practices seem to be manifested in online communication in terms of trust building.

The paper is structured as follows: First, the key theoretical background of intra-organizational trust and managerial communication is introduced. Second, the data collection and analysis methods are discussed. Finally, the results of the study are presented, followed by conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

## **Theoretical background**

### **Organizational trust**

There has been a growing interest in understanding the types, dimensions and roles of trust in organizations, and in formulating a more comprehensive theoretical framework, particularly as networked organizations cannot operate when based solely on direct interpersonal knowledge, but also rely increasingly on technology and institutions (Adler, 2001; Kramer, 1996; Lahno, 2002). Yet trust only “exists between entities able to experience good will, extend good will towards others, feel vulnerable, and experience betrayal” (Friedman et al., 2000, p. 36), and so ultimately depend on human consciousness and agency.

Blau (1964) notes that there are two factors that initially account for the basis of trust: relationships have a repetitive character, and achievements increase in importance in the course of time. In addition, there has to be *dependency* on the other party, meaning that one’s outcomes are contingent on the behaviour of another and furthered only by reliance upon the other (see also Mayer et al., 1995). Placing trust thus means suspending the *risk* involved in such situations, whether they be economic or social in nature.

Trust is most commonly defined as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another” (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). These expectations are based upon a set of beliefs about the other party’s trustworthiness. What follows the “intention to accept vulnerability” is a risk-taking act with respect to the trusted party, such as relying on them to do something on our behalf (with a concomitant reduction in our monitoring of them), or the disclosure of sensitive

information (Dietz and den Hartog, 2006; Li, 2007). Consequently, Mayer et al. (1995) conceptualize trust as embodying risk and vulnerability, and see it as a 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.

Socio-psychological aspects of organizational behaviour, business relationships and managerial practice have been the subject of growing interest during the last few decades (Kramer, 1996). In recent studies that aim to discover the factors that affect organizational competitiveness, aspects like flexibility and learning are the ones that are linked with trust. The argument is that trust enables the achievement of organizational openness – leading ultimately to competitiveness – since it reduces social uncertainty and vulnerability. In order, for example, to be able to learn and innovate continuously, employees need to “accept changing roles, to identify opportunities across functional boundaries and to challenge practices”. (Möllering et al., 2004)

Organizational trust has a number of important benefits for organizations. It can be a factor in the attitudes, perceptions or behaviours of an individual employee, and ultimately affect the performance outcomes of an organization. (Burke et al., 2007; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Mackenzie, 2010; Norman et al., 2010. See also Colquitt et al. (2007) for a meta-analysis of 132 samples). Organizational trust has also been linked to job satisfaction and perceived organizational effectiveness (Searle and Skinner, 2011; Searle et al. 2011; Shokley-Zalabak et al., 2000). According to Blunsdon and Reed (2003), trust has been found to lower transaction costs within organizations, to motivate individual employees to work towards collective goals, and to increase acceptance of unpopular decisions. Interpersonal trust is seen as an important mechanism that stimulates job satisfaction and the commitment of employees, as well as enhancing organizational effectiveness (see e.g. Chen et al., 2013; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Holland et al., 2012; Six and Sorge, 2008). Daley and Vasu (1998; see also Searle et al., 2011) state that trust is a catalyst in organizational performance and is therefore a critical element for organizations to foster. Trust creates an environment in which employees are free to perform and work together effectively, that is, trust establishes a climate in which cooperation is encouraged. It is expected that in this kind of organizational climate of trust

employees share their ideas, use each other as resources, and learn together (see e.g. Costigan et al. 1998; Zeffane and Connell, 2003).

If there is a high level of trust between managers and employees then an organization is more able to be competitive compared to its competitors. Competitive advantage is gained from increased cooperation within the organization and a reduced resistance to change. Moreover, if an organization is able to set itself apart from other organizations in terms of a higher level of trust, it can exploit the benefits related to organizational trust in order to increase its efficiency and effectiveness. The potential consequences of organizational trust, and trust in managers particularly, also include increased organizational commitment, a decrease in employee turnover, and more favorable attitudes towards change (see e.g. Albrecht and Travaglione, 2003; Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Kramer, 1999; Searle et al., 2011).

As shown above, the relevance of organizational trust has been widely discussed in the literature. Trust can be seen as a substitute for control. Thus, developing and maintaining trust is especially important in organizations where there is an increasing need for cooperation from members of the organization. Current pressures are pushing organizations from a “command and control” type of culture towards flat, team-oriented structures in which employees have the autonomy to make decisions. These kinds of arrangements require trust in order to be successful. Trust is especially important in knowledge-based organizations because trust can be seen as supporting knowledge-creation processes and related interactions (see e.g. Tyler, 2003; Whitener et al., 1998). The findings presented above support the idea that trust can be seen as a lubricant in a wide array of organizational processes. We argue that if organizations can use managerial communication in order to build organizational trust it can lead to more committed employees, more positively predisposed attitudes towards organizational changes, and it will ultimately positively affect an organization’s performance. Another crucial argument for the importance of trust in organizations is that trust is a factor that actually enables, and leads to, cooperation within and between the boundaries of organizations (Mayer et al., 1995).

In this study, we concentrate on interpersonal trust and particularly on employees’ trust towards managers (Burke et al., 2007; McCauley and Kuhnert, 1992). In the Mayer et al.

(1995) model (see also Burke et al., 2007), interpersonal trust is based on the competence, benevolence or reliability of the other party. Competence-based trust refers to a trust in the other party's skills, abilities, and characteristics: people trust those whom they believe can solve problems and deliver desired outcomes (Burke et al. 2007; Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007; Whitener et al., 1998). Benevolence-based trust refers to an assumption that a trusted person wants to do good; to act benevolently without egocentric or opportunistic behaviour. Trust in another party reflects an expectation that the other party has good intentions and demonstrates concern for the welfare of others (Burke et al., 2007; Dirks and Ferrin, 2001; Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). Reliability-based trust refers to the set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable; one can rely upon the other person's actions and words. Trust in reliability also implies an expectation that the other party will tell the truth and keep promises (Burke et al., 2007; Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007; Williams, 2001). In summary, interpersonal trust can be defined as "*the positive expectations of an individual employee about the competence, benevolence, and reliability of the managers*".

## **Communication**

In general, effective communication is "...the lifeblood of a successful organization" (Wyatt, 2006, p. 6), which connects employees to the organization and its vision, facilitates change, fosters process improvement, and builds relationships (Dasgupta et al., 2013). With reference to internal communication, some authors prefer to use terms such as 'employee communication' or 'leadership communication', whereas others refer to the broader concept of 'organizational communication'. More accurately, internal communication can be defined as '*all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization*' (Kalla, 2005, p. 304).

Current views on internal communication emphasize its role when implementing strategy and change management (Smith, 2005), and as a way to influence employee opinions, commitment and behaviour (Holtz, 2004). Internal communication can be broken down into four categories: communications required by law, human resources communications, business communications and informal communications (Holtz, 2004). Some internal communications, such as those required by law, may be the responsibility of a specific section of the



organization. However, much internal communication is the responsibility of the management in general or an employee's direct superior. A large portion of managerial work today consists of communication (Arman et al., 2013); managers hold a key position in the pursuit of organizational goals, and communication is their means for accomplishing the task (Viherkara, 2006). Therefore, the focus of this paper is in *managerial communication*.

Managerial communication frames the attitudes and behaviours of employees in the workplace, thus significantly driving intra-organizational relationships (Dasgupta et al., 2013). Organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) explains how the behaviour of employees is affected by organizational support; hereby, supervisors and managers are regarded as representatives of the organization, whose supportive behaviour employees feel obliged to return (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Recent empirical research on managerial communication demonstrates how employees' willingness to work and stay within a certain organization is associated with supervisors' open communication, showing respect, minimising differences between superior-subordinate relationships, and creating an environment where employees can develop and use their abilities (Dasgupta et al., 2013). Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) note how managerial communication also plays a focal role in implementing strategic change: it provides a template for understanding the changes required, and helps individuals make sense of that change.

#### *Motivating language theory*

One of the managerial communication theories that builds on motivation and path-goal theories (for a summary of path-goal theories, see, e.g., Northouse, 2004) is the motivating language theory originally presented by Sullivan (1988), and later tested and proved by Mayfield et al. (1995, 1998). The basic tenet of the motivating language theory is that management's use of three dimensions of communication has a positive impact on employee productivity and job satisfaction.

The first dimension of motivating language is *direction-giving language* that aims to reduce uncertainty. This type of managerial communication occurs when clarifying tasks, goals and rewards to an employee. The second dimension, *empathetic language*, involves sharing affect with subordinates, and can be seen as an expression of humanity. Concrete examples of this

dimension would be a manager complementing an employee, encouraging them, or asking about their professional well-being. Third, *meaning-making language* involves a leader explaining the organization's cultural environment, including its structure, rules, norms and values. This type of communication typically takes the form of stories or rumours (Mayfield et al., 1995, 1998; Sullivan, 1988).

Motivating language theory is based on several assumptions. The three dimensions are considered to represent the majority of any communication between a leader and an employee. It is also acknowledged that leadership behaviour strongly influences the impact of the communication; talk is viewed as being cheap when it contradicts actions, and the employee must understand the leader's intended message. Finally, the three dimensions of communication form an integral whole, and the full benefits of the communication are only attained when a combination of all three dimensions is used in managerial communication. (Mayfield et al., 1995, 1998; Sullivan, 1988). If motivational language is the way to communicate in order to foster satisfaction and productivity, how does it link to trust building?

The motivating language theory in its original form only concentrated on speech acts. However, as current enterprises increasingly adopt online communication tools and depend less on face-to-face communication, in this paper we extend motivating language to include all channels of managerial communication.

#### *Communication in online environments*

Information technologies have enabled novel forms of collective action within and beyond organizational boundaries, such as virtual teams, online social networks, or user communities (e.g. Faraj et al., 2011; Ridings et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 2008). These may go beyond geographical boundaries and connect people from different positions and backgrounds. At the same time, global and dispersed groups face challenges related to the lack of physical proximity; they embody the paradox of 'far-but-close', and depend on how members of the group perceive others to communicate (Wilson et al., 2008). In this regard, Handy (1995) underlines how geographically dispersed groups need trust to cooperate successfully. Trust

enhances the socially acceptable (norm-accordant) behaviour that is essential for the continuity of social interaction online (Ridings et al., 2002; Usoro et al., 2007).

According to Järvenpää and Leidner (1999), virtual organizing in general promises flexibility, responsiveness, cost savings and improved resource utilization. On the other hand, it can create some dysfunctions, such as lower individual commitment, role overload and ambiguity, absenteeism and social loafing. Sainsbury and Baskerville (2006) also note how relationships mediated by communication technology tend to exaggerate human characteristics, both negative and positive, and that they become more instrumental than face-to-face interactions. People more easily shirk responsibility and yet magnify their positive self-impressions to others, which raises challenges. In other words, visual anonymity enhances a positive social impression. It may also reduce one's willingness to commit oneself to the task at hand - a phenomenon to which Kollock (1999) refers as picking the "lowest hanging fruit". In this paper, we are interested in how the characteristics of online interactions and relationships are manifested in managerial communication and linked to trust building.

### **Communication and trust**

Communication has a great influence on trust building in the workplace (Butler, 1991; Butler and Cantrell, 1994; Mackenzie, 2010). Based on earlier literature, it can be argued that accurate information, explanation of decisions, and openness in communication have an effect on organizational trust and especially on trust in managers (Brower et al., 2009; Norman et al., 2010; Shokley-Zalabak et al., 2000). According to Mishra and Morrissey (1990), open communication is one of the most important factors that breed trust within an organization. Tzafrir et al. (2004), among others, state that if the level of organizational communication is high, that is, if employees can easily communicate and feel that they are listened to, it leads to an open and confident atmosphere, which in turn generates trust. Pfeffer and Veiga (1999) also stress the importance of communication in creating a high-trust organization: the sharing of information on matters such as financial performance and company strategy conveys to the employees that they are trusted. Moreover, open, honest and accurate feedback and communication from the employer (through supervisors or managers) affects employee trust in management and the whole organization, and the exchange of thoughts and ideas enhances perceptions of trust (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000; Whitener, 1997; Whitener et al., 1998).

Previous research has suggested that intra-organizational communication, and information and knowledge sharing, are all essential factors, being both antecedents (Ruppel and Harrington, 2000) and consequences (Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991) in trust building processes. In earlier research, trust – and trustworthiness – is linked with communication via three factors: information accuracy, explanations for decisions, and openness (Whitener et al., 1998). Managers are seen as trustworthy by employees when their communication is perceived as accurate and having value (O'Reilly, 1977). When managers' explanations are perceived as adequate and feedback is seen as being timely, there is an increase in trust (Sapienza and Korsgaard, 1996). Open communication, or mental accessibility, where thoughts and ideas are exchanged freely and willingly between managers and employees, is also seen to increase trust (Butler, 1991). All these studies provide information about the relationship between managerial communication and trust from a trust research perspective, and lack the communication theory perspective and its corresponding implications. In this study, we explore the linkage of motivational language theory and intra-organizational trust.

Having presented these general perceptions on trust, managerial communication and online communication, the next sections present our research setting, methodology and data, followed by the results of the study.

## **Methodology and data collection**

Given the small number of previous studies linking managerial communication and trust building, we chose an explorative research strategy and a qualitative research approach in order to attain new insights. Our data were collected in four focus group interviews in Spring 2006. Focus groups interviews were chosen as they are considered ideal for gaining varied perspectives, and thus a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1998). The advantages of the focus group method also include the utilization of group dynamics (Rubin and Rubin, 1995), the production of speedy results, and the sampling of large populations at relatively low costs (Berg, 2004, pp. 126-128). Data gathered in focus groups is socially constructed, and not merely individually created.

Open-ended interviews with unstructured questions were chosen as a method for data collection in order to obtain a deeper conceptual understanding and new insights about the complex concept in hand. Focus group interviews are considered as ideal for gaining varied perspectives and, thus, a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon being researched (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1998). The goal of focus group interviews is to let people be inspired by other participants, and to let participants “spark off one other, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of” (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 140).

Following the suggestions by Krueger and Casey (2000) and Krueger (2002), our aim was to compose homogenous groups and to avoid hierarchical influences between the interviewees. We therefore used the positions the interviewees had in their companies as a criterion for sampling. The total of 22 interviewees from multiple industries and companies of varying sizes were segmented (Morgan, 1996) into four groups consisting of 1) planners, 2) experts, 3) managers, and 4) HRD experts. The leading principle in the interviewee segmentation was to provide the richest and most relevant information regarding the research problems in question. First, planners were seen as an essential organizational group in providing the necessary conditions for executing daily expert work. Second, from experts we were able to gain the insight of knowledge workers possessing specific skills and expertise, the management of whom is seen to rely on trust rather than control (see e.g. Tyler, 2003; Whitener et al., 1998). Third, managers were an obvious target group for data collection, allowing them to share their thoughts and reflect on the practices of managerial communication. Finally, HRD experts were able to provide insights on how to best encourage employees to perform well and how they could be supported in conducting their daily work. The number of focus groups interviews was determined by saturation (Morgan, 1996) and diversity; it was seen that the voices of only one or two groups of organizational members could not have provided enough information about trust building with reference to managerial communication.

There were two moderators in each interview. The research questions covered issues linked to the subject of trust and the reasons for trusting. Each focus group interview lasted

approximately 150 minutes. All of the interviews were tape-recorded, with the permission of the interviewees, and fully transcribed for analysis. This resulted in a dataset of 146 pages.

The transcripts were coded and analyzed using Atlas/Ti qualitative analysis software. The major benefit of coding the data with a computer program is that its cut and paste abilities assist in the technical routines of coding the process and, moreover, it enables the researcher to maintain and track the chain of evidence. It thus assists in uncovering and developing theoretical connections among coded concepts. Regarding the reliability of our study (King, 2006), the findings were double-checked by two authors and the final template was agreed on jointly.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 56), coding is equivalent to analysis in qualitative research. The method used for analyzing the data was template analysis (King, 1998). This way of thematically and hierarchically analyzing qualitative data allows modification of the initial set of codes during the data analysis process, and thus makes the research process reflexive (see also King et al., 2002). We defined a final template consisting of three first-level codes derived from theory (see Table 1 in the next section) and further levels of coding which were inductively formed from empirical data by identifying common thematic elements and capturing these elements together. The final template served as the basis for the interpretation and illumination of the focus group data.

## **Results**

We outlined a set of managerial communication practices that relate to building intra-organizational trust. By doing this, all three dimensions of managerial communication of the motivation language theory (Mayfield et al., 1995, 1998; Sullivan, 1988) could be identified.

The identified communication practices are summarized in Table 1 below and our results are then discussed more in more detail.

**Table 1.** Managerial communication practices that build trust

<i>Dimension of the motivating language Communication practices that build trust</i>	
<i>Direction-giving language</i>	2-way -communication Providing enough guidance and training Informing about the future Face-to-face communication Communicating truthful information Communicating accurate information Communicating timely information Being open to discuss negative issues
<i>Empathetic language</i>	Showing that they care Listening Being closer to the employees
<i>Meaning-making language</i>	Communicating an open discussion culture Training / educating managers Communicating procedures and routines

The main goal of *direction-giving language* (Mayfield et al., 1995, 1998; Sullivan, 1988) is to reduce ambiguity as regards to the worker's role. From the trust building perspective, the two-way direction of managerial communication was emphasized in the interviews. Instead of simply being informed about upcoming events, schedules and tasks, people felt that the possibility to discuss these things with the immediately superior or higher management was important for trust – it was particularly online communication that was characterized by increased instrumentality (see also Sainsbury and Baskerville, 2006). Some interviewees described negative experiences of merely being information receivers about upcoming changes and requirements:

*“At least based on my experience, [in order to build trust] all those issues that are linked to what is expected from us, should be discussed together.”*

*“If people [as managers] want to become trusted, they cannot isolate themselves from others and then just mechanically send an e-mail note to their employees about what has been decided...”*

In order to be able to trust one's superior, the interviewees felt guidance and training from the superior was expected; however, this naturally requires that the superior has adequate expertise. The interviewees also pointed out that communication about the organization's future and upcoming changes builds and maintains intra-organizational trust – implying that managers should openly explain why certain things happen and justify the changes needed (see also Whitener et al., 1998).

In a similar vein, being open to communication about negative issues and showing that responsibility is taken when making mistakes were considered important in building trust. This practice was most closely associated with face-to-face communication: online channels were not considered appropriate for handling uncomfortable, highly risky or sensitive issues.

*“If someone has made a mistake, for example, it is a far different thing if it is discussed in a meeting or informal conversation, than if it is announced publicly in a forum that everyone may attend, such as our intranet...”*

For all managerial communication, information truthfulness, accuracy and timeliness were considered important. These notions link to potential power plays in an organization, and the interviewees speculated that when and how managers communicate also has political aspects. Information accuracy (Whitener et al., 1998) means that things are being communicated in a coherent manner in each situation, thus having value for subordinates. Interestingly, our informants also described how the *channels* through which managers communicate should be chosen appropriately, in addition to delivering accurate information. For instance, when a certain channel is used for a certain task, selecting another one in another situation for a similar task raises confusion:

*“I thought we would organize in a kind of concluding meeting where we discussed about our work [in the sub-project], about what was good and what we could do better from now on. It was rather surprising that we only got a group e-mail with short acknowledgements, it seemed that it was not an important effort at all.”*



In this respect, face-to-face communication was seen as primary channel of communication for fostering trust. With regard to online channels, it seemed more an issue of trying to *avoid* trust-eroding managerial communication practices than actually building trust.

The same findings applied to expressing care and humanity, which is central in the *empathetic language* dimension of motivating language theory (Mayfield et al., 1995, 1998; Sullivan, 1988). The interviewees stressed the importance of showing concern and care for employees in managerial communications in order to build intra-organizational trust. This relates to issues of benevolence, willingness to understand the employee and making morally right decisions.

The interviewees described how management should get closer to the employees and be more informal in their communications instead of simply focusing on completing formal tasks. It was felt to be very important that the management actually listened to the employees' concerns and did not muzzle the employee, even when dealing with negative issues. Some scepticism regarding the management's motivation in engaging in this type of communication was expressed:

*"I wonder how many managers or superiors there are who actually are interested in how people are doing!"*

*"We were working far too much, on late evenings, and our supervisor even was informed by the occupational health centre that we should do something about it... Well, I went to discuss my concerns and all I was told was 'everybody here is working overtime'. The kind of experience that I am not even listened to, or that I could share how I feel."*

The negative aspect within this dimension was described as alienation, particularly in situations where online communication channels were relied upon too much, resulting in a cold atmosphere that eroded trust. Our informants noted how the participants in these communication scenarios were "physically and mentally distant", yet also noted that it was more an issue of how supervisors and employees were used to communicate using online channels rather than their characteristics *per se*. For instance, they were aware of how the

younger generation fluently use online channels to express moods and feelings, but in work-related settings the culture is different and more focused on instrumentality.

Finally, with regard to *meaning-making language*, the importance of cultural aspects, such as values, attitudes and routines, came up often in the interviews. They were seen as crucial for building intra-organizational trust. The interviewees did not discuss the managerial communicative practices needed to build and make sense of organizational culture (Mayfield et al., 1995, 1998; Sullivan, 1988) in detail, however. They felt rather that upper management could pay more attention in how they train and educate managers to communicate well. Upper management was also seen as the primarily responsible quarter for communicating cultural values, procedures and routines.

When discussing cultural aspects, our informants did not refer to the appropriate channels of managerial communications; rather, they often mentioned that establishing an open discussion culture in general is important for trust. Openness implies that the employees know what is happening within the organization, which again demonstrates a core linkage between communication and trust (Whitener et al., 1998). We propose that the perceived channel-independency could be related to the informants' relatively long history and background in their respective organizations. One possible explanation is that after an initial understanding about shared meanings and culture has been established, communication becomes less dependent on the specific media used, and types of cultural "artefacts" may be transferred across a variety of channels, all contributing to building a shared organizational culture.

*"If your manager has worked here for a long while... even when absent, you can assume how he or she would behave in a certain situation, there are certain norms of behaviour and rules that he or she would presumably follow."*

To conclude, it seems that all three dimensions of managerial communication in motivational language theory (Mayfield et al., 1995, 1998; Sullivan, 1988) are crucial in building and maintaining intra-organizational trust. It can also be said that there are challenges in using empathetic and direction-giving language in online communication, when the aim is to build trust.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of trust in the context of organizational relationships. We add to the literature by applying motivational language theory in explaining trust within organizations. To date, research on organizational trust has not analyzed motivational language and its role either comprehensively or deeply enough.

The objective of this study was to discover how managerial communication affects perceived intra-organizational trust. Previous research (Brower et al., 2009; Ruppel and Harrington, 2000; Sapienza and Korsgaard, 1996; Whitener et al., 1998) has highlighted the importance of, for example, information accuracy and timeliness in managerial communications and trust building. In this study, we focused on the different dimensions of managerial communication in trust building. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this is one of the first studies to do so. Until now, this is something that has not been empirically tested or proved. The findings of the study strongly suggest that the direction-giving, empathetic and meaning-making dimensions of managerial communication are indeed antecedents of the trust experienced within an organization. This is in line both with previous theory and the rather scarce empirical research that has been conducted.

By using motivational language theory, the link between managerial communication and trust can be studied more deeply. In previous studies, certain communication practices for building trust (e.g. accurate information, openness, showing caring) have been identified. However, there has been no classification and connection of those practices to a larger background theory. In this study we have managed to link these practices to motivational language theory and to classify different practices under the three dimensions of that theory. Our investigation included both online and offline channels of managerial communication. We have verified that all three dimensions of managerial communication, according to motivational language theory, are crucial elements in both building and maintaining trust within an organization. By applying motivational language theory we have extended its original outcomes of job satisfaction and productivity to intra-organizational trust.

Our results also indicate a notable gap in perceived trust that depends on whether managers communicate with their subordinates face-to-face or online. We speculate that direction-

giving and empathetic communications are particularly challenging tasks in online settings. This raises several implications that are discussed next.

First, our advice for practising managers is to *consciously* engage in direction-giving and empathetic communications online. Existing research has noted how online communication easily becomes too fact-centred (Sainsbury and Baskerville, 2006; see also Wilson et al., 2008): sharing information, documents, plans or timetables. Many of our informants noted how the problem is not the communication environment as such – as the example of the younger generation maintaining relationships online demonstrated – but the existing management culture, which sees online communication from an instrumental rather than social perspective. Managers need to take into further consideration how to involve the direction-giving and empathetic communication dimensions of motivating language when largely relying on e-mail or other types of asynchronous communication channels. They also need to carefully consider in which situations the use of these asynchronous channels is reasonable, and whether face-to-face meetings or synchronous online communication such as instant messaging or videoconferencing would be better options. This is consistent with Järvenpää and Leidner (1999), who concluded that social communication that complements task communication might strengthen trust in virtual teams.

Second, even if there is a growing body of research on how to build trust in online settings (see Beldad et al., 2010 for a review), it seems that these studies focus on the willingness to use online services rather than managerial relationships and the interpersonal dimension of trust. To advance understanding on the latter issue, future research needs to identify *concrete practices* that would help managers to cultivate trust online. As our informants were mostly familiar with “traditional” online channels such as e-mail and teleconferencing, we encourage future studies that take into account the broad spectrum of communication channels available today, ranging from corporate-internal social intranets to external social media services.

Third, the questions of how increased globalization and novel forms of organizing work overall affect trust building still remain. People are increasingly working and collaborating in dispersed teams, departments or organizations, where social connections, ties, and control mechanisms are looser, shorter, or even absent (Tyler, 2003). This makes trusting and trust

building more difficult in many ways. Our data strongly emphasized the role of *face-to-face and two-way communications* in trust building, even in the case of informative issues. No matter how advanced the available communication tools are, face-to-face communication and the opportunity to discuss goals and get direct feedback remain important for building intra-organizational trust. For dispersed teams, this naturally presents a challenge. As we highlighted above, managers should pay special attention in their online communications to expressing their willingness to listen to their subordinates and provide opportunities to discuss challenging issues openly. This is in line with Butler's (1991) findings of the importance of openness and mental accessibility between a manager and a subordinate in trust building. In other words, online channels should not be applied just because they are available, but instead the basic principles and norms of communication should be agreed beforehand in order to build a trusting communication culture. Otherwise, managerial trust may easily be jeopardized.

The main limitation of this study is that the focus group data were collected for several different purposes, and the interview moderators did not ask any communication specific follow-up questions. Therefore, the results of this study may lack subtleties, and future studies should be conducted to explore and measure the relationship of the three dimensions of motivating language theory and intra-organizational trust in more detail. Yet our study extended the original outcomes - higher job satisfaction and productivity - of the motivating language theory (empirically tested and proved in previous research) to also include higher intra-organizational trust. We suggest that future studies should be conducted to explore and test this assumption.

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