The Influence of Organizational Communication on Service Culture of Thai Airways International

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The Asian Conference on Business & Public Policy 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

To date, effective organization communication with employees has long been recognized as the essential tool for developing and maintaining successful human resource management, especially in the service sector. Furthermore, it is also utilized in aligning, motivating and cultivating employees to be in line with the organization culture. Thus, this research was aimed to investigate the impact of organizational communication on service culture of Thai Airways International. The impact of three types of organizational communication (downward, upward and horizontal communication), communication obstacles and communication climate on service culture in the airline context were examined. This study employed the questionnaires as the means in collecting data with the prospect samples of 383 Thai Airways' front-line service personnel including 249 flight attendants and 134 ground-service personnel. The samples were recruited by purposive sampling and quota sampling by determining the sample proportion according to their job ranks. Regarding the flight attendant group, the research findings supported downward communication, horizontal communication and communication climate as the prerequisites of service culture as hypothesized. In contrary, only horizontal communication and communication climate were found to significantly influence service culture in the ground-service personnel group. Managerial implications were also discussed.

Keywords: Organizational Communication, Communication Obstacles, Communication Climate and Service Culture

Introduction

Currently, service organizations have dramatically focused on service quality as the major priority to differentiate themselves from their competitors and thus gain sustainable competitive advantages in the global market place (Gounaris, Stathakopoulos and Athanassopoulos, 2003). They strive to develop employees' positive attitudes toward rendering superior service to their customers through the development of service culture within the organizations (Grönroos, 2007). Previous researches acknowledged that service culture had a significant impact on service companies' performance (Ulrich, et.al., 2008). Firms utilize the organizational communication in aligning, motivating and cultivating employees to be in line with the organization's service culture. The effective organizational communication has long been regarded as an indispensible requirement for the business success (Verma, 2013). To date, the effective organization communication with employees has also been recognized as the essential tool for developing and maintaining successful human resource management, especially in the service sector. As a result, service firms need to effectively manage the organizational communication, communication obstacles and communication climate as the antecedents of service culture, in order that they will contribute to the achievement of service excellence (Dwyer, 2005).

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- to comparatively examine the influence of organizational communication (downward, upward and horizontal communication) on service culture between flight attendant and ground-service personnel groups.
- to comparatively examine the influence of communication obstacles on service culture between flight attendant and ground-service personnel groups.
- to comparatively examine the influence of communication climate on service culture between flight attendant and ground-service personnel groups.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Organizational Communication

In the organizational context, communication practices include downward, horizontal, or upward communication which can be initiated by any stakeholders within the organization (Carrie`re and Bourque, 2009). The effective communication was found contribute to organization's productivity, performance (Downs and Adrian, 2004), job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Carrie`re and Bourque, 2009), and job performance (Chen et al., 2006). In addition, effective communication is regarded as a prerequisite for promoting organizational culture (Linke and Zerfass, 2011). Based on the above discussion, the hypotheses are developed as follows:

H_1: Downward communication is positively associated with service culture.
H_2: Upward communication is positively associated with service culture.
H_3: Horizontal communication is positively associated with service culture.

Communication Obstacles and Climate

Earlier researches defined communication climate as the atmosphere in an organization regarding accepted communication behavior (Verma, 2013). Moreover, communication climate is determined by communication flow which in turn is determined by kind of governance. The communication climate can be either supportive or defensive communication climate (Hoof and Ridder, 2004). The supportive climate is nonjudgmental so that it encourages open, constructive, honest and effective interaction. In contrast, defensive climate leads to self-protective interactions and competitive or destructive conflict between individuals. The supportive communication climate facilitates the information flow throughout the organization which in turn encourages the development of service culture. In contrast, the communication obstacles were found to impede information and disrupt the orderly flow of activity (Verma, 2013). In light of the preceding discussion and findings, the hypotheses are proposed as follows:
H_4: Communication obstacle is negatively associated with service culture
H_5: Communication climate is positively associated with service culture.

Research Methodology

Target populations are 8,887 Thai Airways' front-line service personnel and the calculated sample size for this study was 383. Consequently, the prospect samples included 249 flight attendants and 134 ground-service personnel. The samples were recruited by purposive sampling and quota sampling by determining the sample proportion according to their duties as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Population and Samples

	Population	Proportion (%)	No. of Sample
Flight attendants	5,787	65.12	249
Ground-service personnel	3,100	34.88	134
Total	8,887	100.00	383

Measures

All of the scale items were measured by a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strong agree). The final self-administered questionnaires were distributed to respondents to provide their opinion towards the organizational communication, communication obstacles, communication climate and service culture of Thai Airways International.

Scale Internal Consistency

The first draft of the questionnaire was subjected to pretesting with total respondents of 40. The preliminary analysis revealed that the measurement scales of all constructs had acceptable internal consistency, which was evidenced by high Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.85 - 0.92 which exceeded the threshold value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). Contrary to our expectation, the reliability coefficients of the measurement scale of communication obstacles and communication climate were found to be less than the

threshold value (0.63 and 0.58, respectively). Thus, the measurement scales of these two constructs were modified by minimizing wording ambiguities to elevate the internal consistency of scales. The details of descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients were summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive and Reliability Coefficients

Construct	Number of scales	Flight attendant		Ground service personnel		Reliability coefficients
		Means	S.D.	Means	S.D.	
Downward communication	6	3.00	.76	3.10	.78	0.85
Upward communication	6	2.76	.82	2.91	.87	0.92
Horizontal communication	7	2.74	.73	2.74	.78	0.89
Communication obstacles	7	3.35	.45	3.53	.46	0.63
Communication climate	8	3.08	.60	3.17	.69	0.58
Service culture	7	3.23	.62	3.17	.73	0.85

Results

Respondent profile

Total number of valid questionnaires was 383 including 249 flight attendants and 134 ground-service personnel. Regarding the flight attendant group, most of the respondents are male (52.20%) and 25-35 years old (48.20%). The majority of them hold at least a bachelor's degree (74.10%). Most of them have monthly household income level between 1.001-2,000 US$. (45.00%) with the length of employment of 6-10 years (24.50%).

For the ground-service personnel group, 69.40% of them are female, 43.30% of them are aged 36-45 years old. The majority of them have bachelor degree (83.60%) with monthly household income between 1.001-2,000 US$. (38.10%) and the length of employment of 6-10 years (29.70%). The details of respondent profile are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Respondent Profile of Samples

Demographic	Flight attendants (n=249)		Ground-service personnel (n=134)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Gender				
- Male	130	52.20	41	30.60
- Female	119	47.80	93	69.40
Age				

Demographic	Flight attendants (n=249)		Ground-service personnel (n=134)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
- 25-35 Years	120	48.20	39	29.10
- 36-45 Years	67	26.90	58	43.30
- 46-55 Years	53	21.30	34	25.40
- More than 55 Years	9	3.60	3	2.20
Level of Education				
- Less than Bachelor Degree	15	6.00	2	1.50
- Bachelor Degree	187	75.10	112	83.60
- Higher than Bachelor Degree	47	18.90	20	14.90
Monthly Household Income				
- Less than 700 US$.	2	0.80	23	17.10
- 700-1,000 US$.	30	12.00	34	25.40
- 1.001-2,000 US$.	112	45.00	51	38.10
- 2,001-3,000 US$.	48	19.30	20	14.90
- More than 3,000 US$.	57	22.90	6	4.50
Length of employment				
- 1-5 years	63	16.40	44	17.70
- 6-10 years	94	24.50	74	29.70
- 11-15 years	50	13.10	31	12.40
- 16-20 years	72	18.80	38	15.30
- 21-25 years	65	17.00	37	14.90
- More than 25 years	39	10.20	25	10.00
Total	**249**	**100**	**134**	**100**

Hypotheses Testing

The relationships hypothesized in H_1 to H_5 were tested by using multiple regression analysis with service culture as the dependent variable. Hypotheses H_1 predicted a positive relationship between downward communication and service culture. The multiple regression results revealed that downward communication, as hypothesized, was found to significantly influence service culture only in the flight-attendant group ($\beta = .152$, $p < 0.05$). In contrast, H_1 was not supported in the ground-service personnel group ($\beta = .090$, $p > 0.05$) due to the statistically insignificant coefficient.

Hypotheses H_2 stated that upward communication was positively associated with service culture. The regression results showed that the beta coefficients of both flight attendant and ground-service personnel groups were statistically insignificant (flight attendant group: $\beta = .025$, $p > 0.05$, ground-service personnel group: $\beta = .108$, $p > 0.05$). It should be noted that counter to the author's predictions, the relationships between upward communication and service culture of both groups were statistically insignificant. Hence, no support was found for the hypotheses H_2 in both flight attendant and ground-service personnel groups.

Hypotheses H_3 predicted a positive relationship between horizontal communication and service culture. The results were consistent with this prediction as evidenced by

positive and significant path coefficients towards service culture in the flight-attendant group ($\beta = .212$, $p < 0.01$) and the ground-service personnel group ($\beta = .288$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, these results were supportive of H_3.

Hypotheses H_4 proposed a positive relationship between communication obstacles and service culture. The finding revealed that communication obstacles was found to insignificantly affect service culture in both flight-attendant group ($\beta = -.005$, $p > 0.05$) and ground-service personnel group ($\beta = -.002$, $p > 0.05$), providing no support for H_4.

Hypotheses H_5 stated that a positive relationship between communication climate and service culture. The finding revealed that communication climate was found to significantly affect service culture in both flight-attendant group ($\beta = .372$, $p < 0.05$) and ground-service personnel group ($\beta = .412$, $p < 0.05$), providing support for H_5. Results of the hypotheses testing of both groups are demonstrated in Table 4 and shown in Figure 1.

Table 4: Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Flight attendants				Ground-service personnel			
	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	**t**	**Sig.**	**Results**	**Standardized Coefficients (Beta)**	**t**	**Sig.**	**Results**
H_1: Downward communication → Service culture	.152*	2.083	.038	Supported	.090	.873	.384	Not supported
H_2: Upward communication → Service culture	.057	.795	.427	Not supported	.078	.775	.440	Not supported
H_3: Horizontal communication → Service culture	.212**	3.526	.001	Supported	.288**	3.858	.000	Supported
H_4:Communication obstacles → Service culture	-.005	-.098	.922	Not supported	.002	.035	.972	Not supported
H_5:Communication climate → Service culture	.372**	5.806	.000	Supported	.412**	4.488	.000	Supported
R^2	43.8%				53.2%			
Adj.R^2	43.8%				53.2%			
F-value	37.952*				29.066*			

*p <0 .05; ** p < 0.01

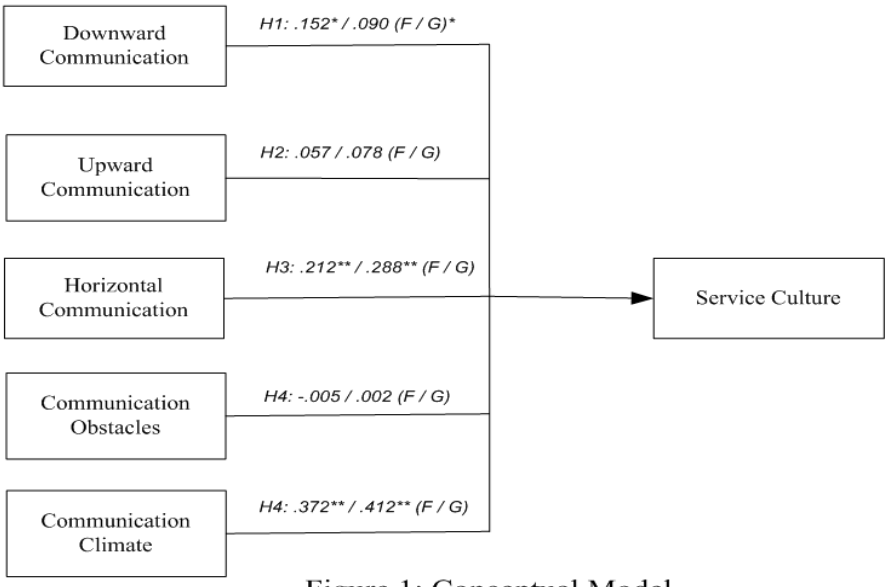

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Conclusion and Discussion

Regarding the flight-attendant group, the empirical results indicated that the most powerful predictor of service culture was communication climate of both flight attendant (β = .372) and ground-service personnel groups (β = .412). Consistently, the open and honest communication climate was found to foster the development of collective behaviors that are customer service orientation (Merio, Bell, Menguc and Whitwell, 2006). Moreover, horizontal communication was found to influence service culture of both flight attendant (β = .212) and ground-service personnel groups (β = .288). This finding is consistent with Robbins' notion that horizontal communication was regarded as the effective indicator in facilitating operational coordination among units through the exchange of information throughout the organization.

But downward communication was found to be the prerequisite of service culture only in the flight attendant group (β = .152). Previous empirical researches supported this finding since the effective downward communication contributes to the formation of service culture which emphasizes the provision of service excellence (Linke and Zerfass, 2011). Furthermore, it also results in organization's productivity, performance (Downs and Adrian, 2004), job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Carrie're and Bourque, 2009) and job performance (Chen, et al., 2006). Contrary to the hypothesis, upward communication and communication obstacles insignificantly affected service culture.

Managerial Implication

Based on the research findings, the management should give more emphasis on horizontal communication in organizations with an aim to cultivate service culture in both flight attendant and ground-service personnel groups. Moreover, the downward communication should also be encouraged to enhance service culture in Thai Airways

International Public Company Limited as well, especially in the flight attendant group. Consequently, the management should promote both kinds of organizational communications to facilitate the formation of employees' commitment in achieving the company's goal of service excellence (Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe, 2003). Regarding the communication climate, the management should develop the supportive, open and honest communication climate within companies to encourage the cultivation of service culture on providing excellent service (Merio, et al., 2006).

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