Although difficult to assess, communication climate is a variable of much interest to researchers of organizational behavior. The present article describes a unique research design which was successfully implemented in a large telecommunication organization to evaluate the factors most influential in affecting communication climate as related to organizational behavior. Discussion focuses on the general applicability and specific advantages of the questionnaire-interview design.

A RESEARCH DESIGN FOR STUDYING COMMUNICATION CLIMATE WITHIN A ORGANIZATION

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IN RECENT YEARS, several methods of analysis have emerged as useful in analyzing communication climates in organizations. Duty studies are employed to gain information on how managers use their time.[1,2,3] Trained observer techniques are used to collect first-hand information on the flow and content of employees' communication networks.[4] Communication audits are frequently being employed as the primary tool for soliciting information about communication climates within entire organizational systems.[5,6,7] Consultants as well as in-house research teams are employing techniques such as these to determine the communication climates of organizations.

Admittedly, communication climate is a complex, and even ambiguous, construct which is difficult to assess in organizations. Traditionally, management has placed a high degree of value on the communication within a company under the assumption that a positive communication climate leads to increased productivity, profitability, and job satisfaction; and reduced absenteeism, grievances, and turnover. Management's concern with communication climate, however, has not been paralleled by an abundance of specific research tools for valid climate evaluation.

Dennis[8] discusses the present instruments available for organizational climate analysis. He posits the need for an instrument designed for climate analysis which would measure managerial

climate in the broadest sense and, more specifically, would measure the most crucial communication climate factors. Dennis suggests that it is critical that more data be collected analyzing the relationship between perceptions of communication climate and actual communication behaviors. Such research showing the relationship between perceived climate and actual behavior is necessary to determine the practical significance of the communication climate construct. The relationship between climate attitude and communication behavior was the focus of the present research design. This study was constructed in an attempt to give greater clarity to the construct of communication climate by analyzing the attitude-behavior linkage.

The present investigation was commissioned by a large telecommunication corporation.[9] Although the specific findings are relevant only to this particular organization, the research design has general applicability for many organizations. The general purpose of the study was to focus upon those factors or behaviors which were most influential in affecting communication climate. An analysis of the established communication networks and structures within the organization facilitated the identification of critical problem areas. These problem areas became the focal points for initiating subsequent changes in the organization under study. To determine the critical problem areas a two-phase (questionnaire-interview) design was developed which attempted to link the attitudes of managers (climate perceptions) with their communication behaviors.

QUESTIONNAIRE TO DETERMINE
CLIMATE PERCEPTIONS

The first phase of the research design consisted of an attitude questionnaire constructed to determine managers' attitudes toward other employees and the organization in general. Specifically, attitudes such as trust, perceived openness, and satisfaction were measured by Likert-type instruments to determine which employees were more positive toward the organization and each other and which employees were the more negative. The specific questions on the instrument reflected the areas and concerns of the particular organization under study. The initial attitude questionnaire was designed to single out those

employees who felt most positive toward the organization as well as those employees who felt most negative.

Scores from the Likert-type instruments were tabulated and summed to give an overall attitude acore for each manager. The individual scores were then ranked from highest to lowest—from most positive toward the company to most negative toward the company.

INTERVIEW TO DETERMINE
COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS

After the most positive and most negative employees were determined, 100 subjects were selected for interviewing, 50 from each extreme group. Each intensive interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. The interviewer at the time of the interview did not know whether the subject represented the favorable or the unfavorable group.

The purpose of this second phase was to analyze the expressed communication behavior of employees at the company and to determine the critical communication factors which contribute to positive and negative employee attitudes or positive and negative climate within an organization. The interview was designed to focus on numerous areas of employee communication and to determine by content analysis whether or not there are similarities of communication behavior within the positive and negative groups and to determine if there are any significant communication differences or patterns between the positive and negative groups.

The open-ended interview was designed to investigate four general areas: 1) demographic information, 2) interpersonal communication patterns, 3) specific communication behaviors, and 4) reactions to company practices. The first area of demographic data generated by the interviews was not a central area of concern. Nevertheless, the information obtained in this section was useful in determining if background information other than specific on-the-job interaction patterns influenced employee's attitudes. Demographic information included such items as the employee's name, department, age, sex, title within the organization, years of service with the organization, and years within the present position in the organization.

The second series of questions on the interview were designed as open-ended questions to solicit explanations and detailed information from each subject as to their interpersonal communication patterns. Specific questions were designed to determine upward, downward, and lateral communication patterns. For example, questions probed for general topics that supervisors talked about or discussed with their subordinates, in both formal and informal settings. Probing questions were included to elicit specific responses from the subjects on these topics. These probes suggested specific items of discussion such as personal problems, company policy, current events, etc. Further probes asked about the frequency of and motivating forces behind these discussions. This pattern of questioning (general topic, specific content, frequency, and motivation) was continued not only for subordinate communication patterns, but also for supervisor and co-worker communication patterns. It was hypothesized that during these discussions of communication behaviors, patterns would emerge across all levels of employee interaction within the organization.

The third section of the interview focused on specific behavioral questions. These questions were designed to ascertain communication behaviors of employees within the organization and were more specific than the general pattern questions discussed during the first half of the interview. Some specific behavioral questions which were used in this section of the interview include: What avenues or channels do you have for expressing opinions about your job at company X? Specifically, what primary channel do you employ? How do you react to face-to-face discussions as a means of solving on-the-job problems? How frequently would you say you trade your opinions about corporate policy and practices with other managers? Do you frequently challenge the opinions of other? If you are confronted with the same recurring problem on the job, what do you do? If the company were to suggest that you were to change your techniques, what would you do? How would you react? These questions attempted to determine the degree of openness of communication and the variety of channels used within the organization. It was hypothesized that individuals who are happy and positive within the organization would have varied channels and open networks of communication within the organization.

The fourth and final section of the interview was specifically designed to focus on the effects of individual mechanisms and practices that existed within the organization. Particular kinds of staff meetings, new management practices, and controversial or interesting company publications were singled out for specific study. These particular areas within the company were studied and analyzed in terms of how they affected communication climate within the organization. Special focus was given to company publications and the effect of these company publications upon employees' communication behavior since this was of primary interest to the company under investigation. The interview was concluded by asking for open-ended evaluations of the company publication and general company practices.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The information on the four interview sections (demographic, communication patterns, communication behaviors, and reactions to company practices) was analyzed by means of content analysis which provided both quantitative and qualitative results for interpretation. For analysis, the interviews were divided into two groups as determined by the initial questionnaire—positive employees and negative employees. The comments and answers given by the positive employees were compared to those given by negative employees to determine the relationship between communication patterns and behaviors and attitudes; the relationship between company practices and attitudes; and the relationship between demographic factors and attitudes. The analysis was a direct attempt to investigate the linkage between attitude and behavior.

Although the purpose of this paper is not a discussion of the specific results found in the telecommunication organization, the following examples illustrate the type of results obtained from the content analysis.

1. Distinct differences in attitude and behavior were found between managers who were positive toward the company and managers who perceived the company negatively. The analysis indicated that 68 percent of the positive managers in the studies company believed that their comments and suggestions would be acted upon, while 67 percent of the negative managers believed their comments and suggestions would not be acted upon.

2. Differences existed in topic choice between positive and negative managers. The more negative employees discussed "shop talk" while the positive employees avioded "shop talk" whenever possible.

3. Certain attitudes and behaviors were common to both positive and negative managers. The analysis indicated that 80 percent of all managers expressed favorable reactions to an innovative company publication.

From the content analysis of the interview data, the issues central to an understanding of communication climate were formulated. These issues provided the rationale for the recommendations that were eventually provided to the company.

DISCUSSION

The specific value of the research design employed in this study is found in the advantages obtained through the valid empirical delimitation of the positive managers from the negative managers. The initial questionnaire provided the necessary information to determine those employees most favorable toward the company and those most negative. After being separated, the two groups were interviewed to ascertain why they were different. Why were some people positive toward their company, and why were some people negative? Was it in their communication pattern? Was it in their use of company publications or their participation in certain company practices? What were the specific differences between the positive and negative groups? The analysis provided answers to these types of questions.

In addition, the design provided information useful to management in analyzing the differential effects of company ideas, policies, or programs. The two-phase design provided data beneficial to an understanding of why a given company policy (e.g., MBO) was successful or why it needed buttressing within a specific group of managers. Certain innovative programs were accepted by both groups indicating a positive corporate approach to change within the organization.

A general, overall climate assessment is provided by the two-phase design. The questionnaire and interview format focuses on numerous attitudes and behaviors and thereby provides the researchers with data salient to a general climate assessment.

The degree of agreement between positive and negative managers on the attributes of critical company policies was a good indicator of the degree of positiveness within the organization.

The design provided a method of analyzing the link between attitudes and behavior. Much research points to the discrepancies between the way individuals describe their attitudes and the way they actually behave.[10-15] By conducting the interviews after the initial questionnaires were administered, the present study was able to obtain data significant for interpreting the attitude-behavior linkage. Consistencies and discrepancies between communication attitudes and behaviors became apparent as a result of the design.

In conclusion, this research design was found useful because it provided data indicating subtle but influential differences within two groups of people which lead to future action by management in the organization to improve attitudes of individual managers and general organizational communication climate. For consultants and researchers of organizational communication, this design is advantageous because it provides a method of assessing the communication attitude-behavior linkage and the overall organizational communication climate.

The construct "communication climate" will continue to be difficult to assess. However, the present questionnaire-interview design is a first step in creating an explanation of the communication climate construct.

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