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UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN GOAL AMBIGUITY, LATERAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICAITON, AND JOB SATISFACTION

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UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN GOAL AMBIGUITY, LATERAL
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICAITON, AND JOB SATISFACTION

By

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B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2009

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Public Administration

Department of Political Science
in the Graduate School
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MPA RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Dr. Randall Davis, Chair

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MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Randall Davis

Public management scholars consistently argue that clear goals increase employee effectiveness. As goals direct attention and effort toward a specific target, the knowledge of one's organizational connectedness has the potential to increase job satisfaction. While the positive correlations between clear goals and job satisfaction are also well known among management scholars, little research examines lateral organizational communication's importance for goal clarification, and further increasing job satisfaction. Findings from two regression models reveal that the while clearer goals indicate higher job satisfaction, employee job satisfaction is more pronounced in the presence of effective lateral organizational communication.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Organizational goals direct attention, effort, and action aimed to achieve a target with a specified time limit (Jung, 2012; Locke and Latham, 1990, 2002). Importantly clear goals that are specific, and difficult but achievable, enhance both individual and organizational performance (Chun & Rainey, 2005a, 2005b; Jung, 2012; Lock & Latham 1990, 2002). This is largely because goals serve as the reference point that shape myriad organizational behaviors (Locke & Latham, 2002) such as role conflict and ambiguity (House & Rizzo, 1972, Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970), organizational commitment (Chun & Rainey, 2005a), and job satisfaction (Jung, 2013), all of which have strong connections to performance. In sum, research examining organizational goals has burgeoned in organizational studies and public administration due to their relationships to agency effectiveness and individual performance. Importantly, research consistently indicates that clear goals directly contribute to a host of performance related behaviors (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Unfortunately, the problems associated with unclear goals may be more pronounced in the public sector. Public organizations often struggle to clarify organizational goals for at least two reasons. First, political compromise among competing demands from constituencies, interest groups, and authorities result in goals that are more numerous, vague, and contradictory (Chun and Rainey, 2005a,b; Davis & Stazyk, 2014a; Jung, 2012). Second, the complex services offered by public organizations do not lend well to economic exchange meaning that prices and profits cannot act as clarifying mechanisms for public organizational goals (Chun & Rainey, 2005a; Pandey & Wright, 2006). As such, the concept of goal ambiguity is widely researched in public management. Organizational goal ambiguity is defined as the extent to which an organizational goal, or set of goals, allows for interpretative leeway (Chun and Rainey, 2005a,

2005b). Job satisfaction is one mechanism through which goal ambiguity shapes organizational performance.

Job satisfaction's most commonly used definition is from Locke (1969), defined as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (Locke, 1976, p. 1300). When employees do not perceive their goals as specific, work motivation and satisfaction will decline and turnover intentions increase (Jung, 2012). The reductions in job satisfaction due to goal ambiguity likely occur because they compromise individual self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and challenge the extent to which one understands organizational expectations (Davis & Stazyk, 2014a; Pandey & Wright, 2006; Rizzo et al., 1970, Wright, 2004).

Given the political turbulence of public organizations' goals, many scholars question the degree to which goal-setting strategies will be effective in the public sector (Chun & Rainey, 2005a, 2005b). Thus, it is necessary to identify alternative mechanisms to mitigate the drawbacks of ambiguous organizational goals on job satisfaction. One potential mechanism may be the degree to which managers encourage communication and collaboration across work units. My specific focus is on lateral organizational communication that across work units within an organization. Managers who facilitate cross-unit, lateral communication are likely to mitigate the negative effects of unclear goals, or conversely enhance the favorable outcomes of clear goals, by creating cultures that coalesce around a common understanding of the organization's mission (*e.g.* Garnett, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2008). As such, the thesis I present is that managers who facilitate cross-unit collaboration facilitate conditions that accentuate the positive relationship between clear goals and job satisfaction.

The remainder of this paper is organized in three sections. I first discuss the importance of goal-setting for employee job satisfaction, to further examine the use of lateral communication for improving both goal clarity and job satisfaction. The second section tests the hypotheses suggested by the literature with consideration of over 600,000 federal employee survey responses. Findings suggest that goal clarity, as well as goals facilitated by effective lateral organizational communication, are beneficial to employees, as such tactics increase employee job satisfaction. Finally, I conclude this paper by addressing the importance of such findings for organizational effectiveness, suggesting more considerations be made for employee feedback.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESIS

Goal ambiguity, or alternatively goal clarity, refers to “the extent to which an organizational goal allows for leeway for interpretation” (Chun & Rainey, 2005b, p. 2). Unfortunately, ambiguous goals hamper task completion because they lack direction, explanation, and standards of reference that motivate goal-oriented behavior (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002). Moreover, allowing employees interpretative space in goals reduces the applicability and usefulness of performance measurement because required conditions are unmet and standards are unknown (Milkovich & Wigdor, 1991; Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003). Given the potential drawbacks of ambiguous organizational goals scholars have recommended that managers take steps, through goal-setting, to enhance the clarity of organizational goals (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002; Milkovich & Wigdor, 1991; Wright, 2001, 2004).

Unfortunately, given the inherently political environment of public agencies, many have questioned the effectiveness of goal-setting theory in public agencies (Chun & Rainey, 2005a). Goal-setting strategies may be less effective in public agencies for at least three reasons. First, the complex services delivered by public agencies are not well suited for economic exchange (Baldwin, 1987; Dahl & Lindblom, 1953; Davis & Stazyk, 2014b, Pandey & Wright, 2006; Rainey, 1983; Wilson, 1989). Second, the political environments that public organizations are exposed to are full of multiple and conflicting interests that require political compromise (Chun & Rainey, 2005b; Davis & Stazyk, 2014b; Lee, Rainey, & Chun, 2009, Lowi, 1979; Matland, 1995; Meier, 1997; Pandey & Wright, 2006; Rainey, 2003; Wildavsky, 1988, Wilson, 1989). Third, the increased usage of network governance found in public organizations introduces

greater ambiguity into the role of public management (Bogason & Musso, 2006; Davis & Stazyk, 2014b).

Difficulty in specifying goals and measuring achievement may cause public managers to evaluate performance through measures of inputs, processes, workloads, and outputs, rather than objective outcomes predominately used in the private sector (Chun & Rainey, 2005a).¹ However, research indicates that goal-setting tactics are possible in the public sector (Rainey & Thompson, 2006). Setting a specific high goal makes explicit organizational needs, enhances employee motivation, directs employee action, and ultimately increases organizational performance (Latham, 2004; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002; Wright, 2004). The main goal properties for effective goal setting are specificity and reasonable difficulty (Jung, 2012), contributing to employee response, individual performance, and organizational performance (Jung, 2014; Locke, 2004; Smith, Locke, & Barry, 1990). Ambiguity within goals challenges public managers to define employee roles as well as measures for effective role performance (Davis & Stazyk, 2014a, 2014b; Stazyk & Goerdel, 2011).

Importantly, enhancing the clarity of organizational goals leads to several favorable organizational outcomes, including increased job satisfaction (Jung, 2012). Job satisfaction has been defined as “the pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job” (Locke, 1976, p. 1300). When ambiguity is high, employees are less likely to understand important goal information, which negatively influences job satisfaction by increasing job-related tension or stress (Perrow, 1986; Jung, 2013). Goal clarity is also likely to enhance job

¹ While many public organizations must deal with ambiguity, such constraints are not necessarily a disadvantage (Davis & Stazyk, 2014a). Goal specificity in itself does not necessarily lead to high performance because specific goals vary in difficulty, however it does reduce variation in performance by reducing the ambiguity about what is to be attained (Locke & Latham, 2002).

satisfaction as employees with clear goals are more likely to become committed to realizing them (Davis & Stazyk, 2014; Locke & Latham, 2002), as well as through improvement of individuals' sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Davis & Stazyk, 2014a; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Unclear goals limit the likelihood an employee will accept it as legitimate, thus decreasing an employees' sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Davis & Stazyk, 2014a; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Self-efficacy is important to overall job satisfaction because it conveys a sense that one possesses agency, which drives performance (Bandura, 1982). As such, it is expected that:

Hypothesis 1: Increases in goal clarity lead to increases in job satisfaction.

Lateral Organizational Communication and Job Satisfaction Chester Barnard viewed, “[developing] and [maintaining] a system of communication” (1938, pg. 226), as one of the most important executive functions. Importantly, the search for clarity in ambiguous goals often depends on open lines of communication (Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003). This likely occurs because communication within the organization can lead to shared interpretations of organizational goals. As such, it may be useful to examine organizational goals through the lens of social constructionism. As Zucker (1977) noted over thirty years ago, “social knowledge, once institutionalized, exists as fact ...” (p. 726). Based on the tenets of social constructionism there are at least two reasons why open lines of communication likely influence the clarity of organizational goals. First, communication within organizations helps to reveal information needed to direct employee action toward goals (Quirke, 2008; Mishra et al, 2014). Second, communication and interaction among organizational members socially construct shared

definitions of organizational goals and expectations (Berger & Luckman, 1967). This suggests that interpretations of organizational goals can develop through reinforcing social meaning, which may serve to clarify organizational goals without changing content.

In addition to clarifying organizational goals, it is possible that the connection between goal clarity and job satisfaction is more pronounced in the face of effective communication. Previous research indicates that communication serves as a moderator between important organizational variables (Garnett, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2008). For example, Garnett, Marlowe, and Pandey (2008) find that communication serves to moderate the relationship between certain forms of organizational culture and organizational performance. Similarly, this paper looks at the extent to which lateral organizational communication moderates the relationship between goal clarity and job satisfaction. Based on the logic above, and previous research indicating that lateral communication moderates the connections between variables of interest in organizational behavior, I expect that:

Hypothesis 2: Increases in job satisfaction due to goal clarity will be more pronounced in the presence of effective lateral organizational communication.

CHAPTER 3

DATA AND MEASURES

This paper is based on information gathered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)'s 2012 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. Used to assess the extent in which federal employees believe that characteristics of successful organizations are present within their agency, surveys are distributed to full-time, permanent employees throughout various federal agencies. Of 1.6 million employee surveys dispersed, 687,000 responses were recorded yielding a 42% response rate. Of the seventy-eight items included within the OPM's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, this paper utilizes responses from thirteen measured items.

Three items were used to assess organizational goal clarity. Using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, 1 indicating, "Strongly disagree" to 5 indicating "strongly agree", federal employees were asked to assess their perceptions of organizational life by addressing the following questions.

Assessment of organizational goal clarity was indicated by a response to the following questions;

1) I know how my work relates to the agency's goals and priorities 2) Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization 3) Managers review and evaluate the organization's progress toward meeting its goals and objectives. Three items were used to measure employee job satisfactions. Scaled questions included; 1) Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job? 2) Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay? 3) Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization? Two items were used to measure lateral organizational communication. Questions included; 1) Managers promote communication among different work units (for example, about projects, goals, needed resources) 2) Managers support collaboration across work units to accomplish work objectives.

Five control variables; gender, age group, supervisory status, pay category, and tenure, were considered. . Employee age included and scaled such that 1 = 29 and under, 2 = 30-39, 3 = 40-49, 4 = 50-59, and 5 = 60 and over. Supervisory status, exhibited such that 1 = non-supervisor/team leader, 2 = supervisor, and 3 = manager/executive. Control variables for pay category was scaled as 1 = federal wage system, 2 = GS 1 through 12, 3 = GS 13 through 15, and 4 = SES or other. Lastly, tenure was measured as a categorical variable with seven categories: 1 = Less than 1 year, 2 = 1 to 3 years, 3 = 4 to 5 years 4 = 6 to 10 years, 5 = 11 to 14 years, 6 = 15 to 20 years, and 7 = More than 20 years.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology and Findings

In this paper, I employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to test the first hypothesis. To test the second hypothesis a second model includes an interactive term calculated by multiplying lateral organizational communication and goal clarity to estimate the joint effects of these variables on job satisfaction. Multiplicative, or interaction, terms are useful for testing how the nature of the relationship between two focal variables changes as a function of a third moderator variable. The results from both models are reported here in the standardized metric. Practically speaking this means that the connection between goal clarity and job satisfaction shifts as lateral organizational communication changes. First, the results from the OLS model indicate that goal clarity is a statistically significant predictor of job satisfaction ($\beta = .353$; $p < 0.001$). This finding supports hypothesis 1, and suggests that for every unit increase in goal clarity there is a corresponding 0.353 unit increase in job satisfaction. In sum, as goals become clearer employees are more satisfied with work. Hypotheses 2 is also partially supported by the results indicated by the OLS model, indicating that lateral organizational communication is a significant predictor of job satisfaction ($\beta=.361$; $p < 0.001$). This suggests that for every unit increase in lateral organizational communication there is a corresponding .361 unit increase in job satisfaction. Practically this means that as organizations become better at communicating laterally employees tend to be more satisfied with work.

In addition to the theoretical variables of interest, several control variables also serve as significant predictors of job satisfaction. Supervisory status, as well as pay category, indicated that for every one unit of increase (both measures are scaled accordingly) there was a significant increase in job satisfaction. Supervisory status ($\beta=.013$; $p<0.001$) yielded a .013 unit increase per

status increase. Pay category ($\beta = .032$; $p < 0.001$) indicates a .032 increase per unit of pay increase. Age group ($\beta = .004$; $p < 0.001$) also indicated statistically significant increases in job satisfaction with a .010 unit increase in job satisfaction for each additional year in employee age. Thus indicating the higher an employee's status, pay, and age the more practical it is to assume that they are satisfied with their work. Alternatively, tenure within the organization contributed to overall decreases in job satisfaction. Employee tenure ($\beta = -.003$; $p < 0.006$) indicated a decrease of .003 units per year increase of employment tenure. There was no evidence to claim that gender significantly influences job satisfaction. Table 1 illustrates the standardized coefficients for the OLS regression model.

Table 1: Standardized Parameter Estimates for OLS Model

	<i>EST</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>EST/S.E.</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Goal Clarity	0.353	0.002	232.394	0.000
2. Internal Communication	0.361	0.001	238.107	0.000
3. Gender	0.000	0.006	-0.358	0.721
4. Age	0.004	0.003	3.506	0.000
5. Supervisory Status	0.013	0.005	12.425	0.000
6. Pay Category	0.032	0.003	30.881	0.000
7. Employment Tenure	-0.003	0.002	-2.732	0.006

In an effort to more fully test hypothesis two I examined a second regression model including an interaction term. The findings I present here suggest that the relationship between goal clarity and job satisfaction becomes more pronounced at increased levels of lateral communication ($\beta = 0.097$; $p < 0.000$). . Practically speaking this means that the connection between goal clarity and job satisfaction shifts as lateral organizational communication is increased. See table 2 for the coefficients in the moderation model. These results fully support hypothesis 2. However, it is easiest to examine moderated relationships by plotting the

connection between two focal variables at conditional levels of the moderator (Aiken & West, 1991; Bauer & Curran, 2005). For the purposes of this analysis, I used a web utility designed to graph moderated effects (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). The graph depicted in figure 1 illustrates the nature of the relationship between goal clarity and job satisfaction at the mean level of lateral communication, as well as lateral communication at two standard deviation above and below the mean. The results of the interaction model are depicted graphically in figure 1.

Figure 1: 2-Way Interaction Plot

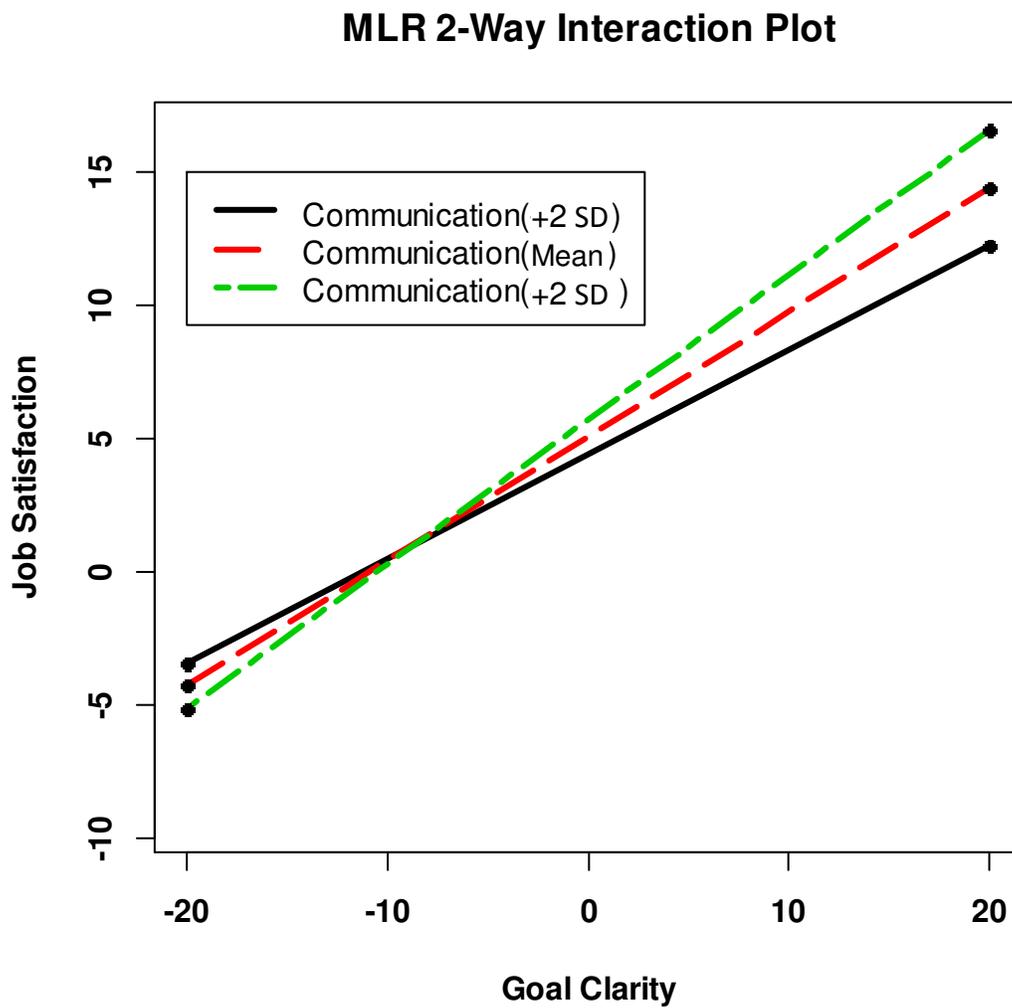


Table 2: Standardized Parameter Estimates for Moderation Model

	<i>EST</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>EST/S.E.</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Lateral Communication	0.097	0.005	29.779	0.000
2. Goal Clarity	0.363	0.003	121.208	0.000
3. Communication X Goal Clarity	0.135	0.000	40.698	0.000
4. Gender	-0.009	0.006	-12.180	0.000
5. Age Group	0.004	0.003	4.507	0.000
6. Supervisory Status	0.008	0.005	12.513	0.000
7. Pay Category	0.038	0.003	40.995	0.000
8. Employee Tenure	0.000	0.002	0.232	0.816

Practically, the interaction diagram illustrates two pieces of information. First, clearer goals always result in more satisfied employees. Second, clearer goals tend to exert a greater satisfying force in the face of more lateral organizational communication. This also means that lateral organizational communication and goal clarity jointly influence job satisfaction. Having one without the other presents only half the picture, and it is better if managers can pursue goal clarification and lateral organizational communication in unison.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper I have examined the relationship between goal clarity, lateral organizational communication, and job satisfaction. Moreover, the connection between these three variables is complex. The findings I presented indicate that the nature of the relationship between goal clarity and job satisfaction changes as a function of lateral organizational communication. This insight is important because it possesses the capacity to provide managers with a more robust understanding of the mechanisms through which they can cultivate employee job satisfaction. Research on goal setting theory presumes that managers can reap significant organizational benefits from generating goals measurable and difficult but attainable (Locke & Latham, 1990). Yet the primary form of communication referenced in goal-setting studies comes in the form of managerial feedback. However, this study focuses on the extent to which managers allow for open lines of communication across work groups. In essence, it appears that managers can enhance the benefits of goal clarity by allowing employees to discuss goal content throughout the course of work. Establishing clear goals *and* open lines of communication among work units may help to create a shared commitment toward achieving organizational expectations and culture that allows organizations to experiment with goals (Wilson, 1989).

In the context of public management, there are at least two important implications associated with these findings. First, management is a complex endeavor. Importantly, managerial behavior is not just about information collection and application; rather managers must interpret the information at their disposal in ways that contribute to organizational success (Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003). Since public organizations are inherently infused with some degree of ambiguity due to their political environment (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999), managers

cannot always rely on their ability to measure organizational goal attainment (Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003). Open lines of communication help generate conditions that can narrow the interpretive space of organizational goals. This is useful because it creates open and participative environments for effective goal setting. In order to increase the benefits of goal setting, a person must 1) have the ability to attain the goal, and 2) must be committed to the goal (Latham, 2004). Effective communication and joint understanding cultivated by culture allows employees to fully establish and understand the expectancies of their roles. Whether goals are assigned by others, externally established, or self- set, goals are effective at increasing performance (Locke & Latham, 2006).

Second, many public management scholars have questioned the efficacy of goal-setting theory as applied to public administration (Chun & Rainey, 2005a, 2005b). It is possible that the political nature of organizational goal creation in the public sector renders organizational objectives less amenable to managerial influence. If this is the case managers must find alternative avenues through which they can shape goal understanding, and by extension enhance organizational performance. What my findings highlight is that the opening lines of lateral organizational communication and collaboration has an important clarifying effect. To the extent that managers must implement goals derived externally, it would behoove them to encourage their employees to cultivate as shared understanding of expectations. One way to accomplish this is to allow for open dialogue among employees with potentially divergent understandings of goal demands.

The arguments I present here seek to articulate the conditions that give rise to organizational effectiveness. Feelings of success in the workplace occur to the extent that people psychologically grow and meet externally established challenges, as well as through the pursuit

of attaining goals that they deem important and meaningful (Locke & Latham, 2006). Job satisfaction is increased when such goals are not only understood, but are accompanied by facilitated lateral organizational communication.

While this paper does provide further evidence of goal clarity and lateral organizational communication's effects on employee satisfaction, the necessity of feedback should be considered. While open communication may help to facilitate the goals an organization or manager may establish, people need summary feedback to know their progress in relation to goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). However, even with quality managerial feedback allowing for communication and collaboration among work units is likely important. Goal-setting theory may overemphasize hierarchical communication regarding organizational goals at the expense of other lateral forms of organizational communication. This shortcoming seems an important avenue for future research.

Given the findings presented here, and the arguments outlined above, I believe there are two important recommendations for practice. First, managers need to create an environment that facilitates open and honest communication. The process of creating open and honest lines of communication includes taking steps to increase employee trust. Potentially facing information disconnect, the divergent understandings that lead to misinformation (not intentional misinformation), managers need to encourage employees to see the bigger picture. This requires managers to actively pursue and share information throughout organizational units. Serving as a mediator, the responsibility of sharing information with employees across units not only encourages organizational trust, but also allows employees to know what steps are being taken for effective goal attainment throughout the organization as a whole. Such open communication may also intervene in turf wars that lead to the intentional dishonesty or structuring goal

expectations that benefit one unit but not another. The encouragement of trust, facilitated by open communication, further allows the manager and staff to holistically understand organizational performance.

Second, managers should instigate employee engagement. While further promoted by effective lateral organizational communication, employee engagement is “the degree to which an individual is attentive and absorbed in the performance of their roles” (Saks, 2006, p. 602; Mishra et al, 2014). A higher degree of engagement not only increase an employee’s overall job satisfaction, but provides employees the opportunity to become organizational advocates. The allowance of such buy-in promotes the degree in which employees desire to succeed. The drive for such goal attainment promotes cross-unit collaboration, and further enhances the benefits of lateral organizational communication.

Managers should be cognizant of the benefits motivated by lateral organizational communication, and a conscious effort should be made by public managers to pursue organizational goal clarity and effective lateral organizational communication tactics. As this paper indicates, the effort put forth by managers to facilitate an environment of clarity and understanding will not only help to improve employee job satisfaction, but the longevity and effectiveness of the organization.

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APPENDIX

Appendix: Operational Definitions

Goal Clarity

Goal Clarity is assessed using three items on a five-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Higher values reflect greater goal clarity:

- I know how my work relates to the agency’s goals and priorities.
- Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization.
- Managers review and evaluate the organization’s progress toward meeting its goals and objectives.

Lateral Communication

Lateral communication is assessed using two items on five- point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Higher values reflect a greater sense of lateral communication:

- Managers promote communication among work units (for example, about projects, goals, and needed resources).
- Managers support collaboration across work units to accomplish work objectives.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is assess using three items on a five-point scale, ranging from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied”. Higher values reflect a great sense of job satisfaction:

- Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?
- Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?
- Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?

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