

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Trust is an essential aspect of healthy human relationships (Handy, 1999). Research has found that humans are more likely to engage in dialogue, share information, and build communities with persons that they trust (Bigley and Pearce, 1998; Flores and Solomon, 1998; McDermott, 1999; Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999). Trust evolves and individuals gain confidence in the exchange relationship as positive social interactions increase (Jones and George, 1998). Communication shapes social relationships by producing and reproducing the common understandings that are necessary for shared social value systems (Drake, Yuthas, and Dillard, 2000). Trust, according to Flores and Solomon, is the result of the verbal and nonverbal interactions within relationships. They wrote that, “There is a good deal of trust embodied in our mere physical presence to one another, in our gestures, looks smiles, handshakes and touches” (Flores and Solomon, 1998, p. 219). Body language and nonverbal behavior, including the “small but indicative acts of commitment,” are just as important in creating trust (Flores and Solomon, 1998, p. 222). Through interaction and in forming relationships, one learns to trust by trusting. Dialogue and talking through trust helps to create trust and mitigate distrust.

Routine acts of making promises, commitments, and gestures, as well as assuming postures indicating respect of one another’s space, are essential to fostering trust between people who work together (Flores and Solomon, 1998). In particular, sharing information and involving employees in running a business increases trust while affecting productivity and profitability (Reina and Reina, 1999). Communication can strengthen member identification because it provides organization members with an opportunity to create and share their subjective perceptions of the organization’s defining features—its norms, values, and culture. Knowledge of these facets of the organization may create a sense of shared meaning among employees. Communication helps create shared meaning because it provides social context cues (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991), which lead to the perception of social presence (Fulk and Boyd, 1991) and create a shared interpretive context among organization members. Shared meaning provides organization members with a clear sense of the organization’s identity and may strengthen member identification. Mishra’s (1996) organizational trust model showed that employees perceive trust within organizations that created work environments that encouraged open and honest communication among their members and a “sense of community.” The notion of

“community” serves to satisfy the basic human need to develop human connections and relationships with others.

In response to market demands for speed and efficiency, the modern work environment now incorporates new technologies to facilitate communication among its workforce. Electronic mail—known as e-mail—is a communication tool that has eased the flow of information sharing in organizations and has limited the need for employees to engage in face-to-face interactions where persons share the same physical space in the communication experience (Sarbough-Thompson and Feldman, 1998). While e-mail has many benefits for organizational members, such as the ability to communicate the same message to a dispersed audience, it also has many drawbacks that may influence the degree of trust and psychological sense of community that organizational members feel in a work environment. For example, e-mail provides mechanisms to forward messages to an unlimited number of recipients whom the original author may not have intended to see the correspondence. “Posting or forwarding private messages can be a breech of civility,” Drake et al. (2000, p. 55) wrote, and future communications patterns could be irrevocably damaged. Although most employees in major organizations use e-mail in day-to-day workplace communications, little is known about the relationship between this technology and employee’s feelings of trust and community in the work environment.

I.1 Background of the Problem

Many researchers have agreed that trust is a necessary element for healthy relationships (Bigley and Pearce, 1998). While debate continues in the literature about the specific meaning of trust (and distrust), the vast majority of trust scholars have viewed trust as the basic ingredient of social interactions (Bigley and Pearce, 1998). Flores and Solomon (1998) described trust as “...a dynamic aspect of human relationships” (p. 206). Trust—both trusting and being trustworthy—is related to the character of individuals and relationships. As a dynamic emotion, trust finds its significance in the bonds it creates—trust is not something that simply happens, it is created through interaction and in the making of relationships (Flores and Solomon, 1998).

Its importance in social relationships makes trust an essential aspect of business life as individuals come together to perform a variety of tasks. Working together often involves interdependence, and people must, therefore, depend on others to accomplish their personal and

organizational goals. Trust, according to Flores and Solomon, is created and damaged through dialogue. In addition to dialogue, Flores and Solomon pointed out the importance of nonverbal behaviors in determining the trustworthiness of another. They reported that body language and nonverbal behavior, including the “small but indicative acts of commitment,” were just as important in creating trust and fostering trust between people who work together (Flores and Solomon, 1998, p. 222).

Most scholars have found that trust enables cooperative behavior (Gambetta, 1998); promotes adaptive organizational forms, such as network relations (Miles and Snow, 1992); reduces harmful conflict; decreases transaction costs; facilitates rapid formation of ad hoc work groups (Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer, 1996); and promotes effective responses to crisis (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer, 1998). Regular communication and courtship are key processes in enhancing the trust relationship (Shapiro, Sheppard, and Cheraskin, 1992). According to Lewicki and Bunker (1996), without regular communication, one could “lose touch” with another person emotionally and with the ability to “think alike and predict the reactions of the other” (p. 121). An extension of regular communication is learning about one another through interviewing others, observing others in social situations, and experiencing the emotional variety of others. Through shared activities and beliefs, individuals develop a collective identity, fostering cooperation and trust as individual actions are aimed toward achieving the group goals. This “courtship” provides a forum for individuals to gather information and determine the trustworthiness of others.

Trust evolves and individuals gain confidence in the exchange relationship as positive social interactions increase (Jones and George, 1998). Positive and favorable attitudes among parties support future social and economic exchanges. According to Jones and George (1998), “If trust is to build over time, both parties must be able to take the role of the other and exchange and share the feelings and thoughts that structure the exchange relationship” (p. 536). Moods and emotions at each exchange influence the ongoing experience and meaning of the relationship (Jones and George, 1998). Positive emotions build trust as individuals recognize shared values and attitudes with others. In this state, individuals “feel secure that they will not be harmed or put at risk by the actions of the other,” and their desire to trust is transformed (Jones and George, 1998, p. 536). Conversely, negative emotions contribute to distrust because individuals feel insecure about the exchange relationship.

Unconditional trust develops as shared values structure the social situation and are reinforced through repeated behavioral interactions (Jones and George, 1998). In this form of trust, positive effect increases as positive moods and emotions strengthen the affective bonds between parties and enhance the experience of trust (Jones and George, 1998). When unconditional trust is present, “relationships become significant and often involve a sense of mutual identification” (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996, p. 537). While Jones and George (1998) stated that “conditional trust,” a form based on knowledge and positive expectation of others, was the most common form of trust in organizational settings, they suggested that the “unconditional” state of trust was “something to strive for in important social situations” (p. 537).

Organizational trust, as defined by Fukuyama (1995), is the “expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on the shared norms on the part of other members of that community” (p. 26). The nature of organizational trust, Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis, and Winograd (2000) wrote, “is complex, communication-based, dynamic, and multi-faceted” (p. 38). Shockley-Zalabak et al. (2000) found that, “Organizations with high levels of trust will be more successful, adaptive, and innovative than organizations with low levels of trust or persuasive distrust” (p. 42). Research in areas such as communication (Giffin, 1967), leadership (Atwater, 1988), management by objectives (Scott, 1980), negotiation (Bazerman, 1994), game theory (Milgrom and Roberts, 1992), performance appraisal (Cummings, 1983), labor-management relations (Taylor, 1989), and implementation of self-managed work teams (Lawler, 1992) all have highlighted the importance of trust in the work environment.

Trust and trusting relationships are not only important aspects of business, but are essential to the well-being of individuals (Flores and Solomon, 1998). Individuals in the workplace assume “physical safety on the job, at home, even on the streets, with only rare and mercifully brief exceptions” (Flores and Solomon, 1998, p. 215). Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1996) wrote, “At its best, business creates and manages dynamics and organizations that sustain livelihoods, provide goods and services, and foster fulfilling work on behalf of the well-being of society. At the heart of economic life, business is a primary force in the formation of the global commons” (p. 233).

Gibb (1991), a humanistic psychologist, believed that trust and fear were the keys to understanding persons and social systems. Trusting, Gibb (1991) wrote, was an “inter-flowing and interweaving of the processes of discovery and creation” rather than fear and control (p. 11). He defined the four processes of discovering and creating—known by the acronym “TORI”—as trusting (T); opening (O); realizing (R); and, inter-being (I). These four discovering processes, Gibb (1991) said, “grow best in internal, intrapersonal environments of trust, and in external environments of trust and low fear” (p. 10). A high-quality environment allows “people to be where they are, to join them in an attempt to see together what is, and to collaboratively look at what might be” (Gibb, 1991, p. 40). Within an organizational environment, higher degrees of trust enhance the discovering processes and, ultimately, the ability of groups and organizations to fully function. Simply, as trust increases, defensive and unproductive behaviors decrease.

Inter-being or inter-depending, the fourth dimension of TORI, emphasizes the human want of giving and receiving freedom within human relationships. Inter-depending or inter-being reflects the desire of each human to relate with others without losing oneself. In high trust environments, individuals seek community with others, while persons in climates of fear seek “privacy and aloneness” and “fantasies about loss of freedom and autonomy are heavy” (Gibb, 1991, p. 16). The human need to connect and the reliance on others to accomplish work tasks, according to Gibb, makes the work environment a good place to start building strong interbeing relationships.

Interaction and communication with others, Gibb stated, are fundamental to developing trust, and ultimately, inter-being relationships. Gibb posited that, as trust grew with interaction, people gradually learned to be personal and accepted attitudes and feelings in others. When trust increased, “people become more expressive, impulsive, frank, and spontaneous” (Gibb, 1991, p. 161). Deeper communication and involvement allowed groups to gather data quickly and make wise decisions (Gibb, 1991). Trust allowed groups to become “more informal, less structured, less controlled, less concerned with power and authority, less dependent upon leadership, and more flowing and fluid in form” (Gibb, 1991, p. 160).

The health of an organization depends on trusting relationships. Organizations with high levels of trust foster a “sense of community” in which everyone takes responsibility for the organization and its well-being (Gibb, 1991). “Community is many things,” Andrews (1997) stated, “but the underlying theme is the feeling of being valued, of feeling accepted, of being

cared for. Real community involves equality, participation, authenticity, and sharing—the sharing of values, of laughter, of problems, of food, of stories....It's important for no other reason that our own personal survival" (p. 118). Informal conversations and communication in the workplace provide an important social outlet for members to build community and build trusting relationships. Through relations with other organizational members, employees learn the appropriate social cues of the work environment and reinforce the common bonds that unite the organization as one.

As Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1996) wrote, "A sense of tribe is deeply embedded in the human soul. All of us are appropriately dependent upon and interdependent with networks of belonging....[T]he recognition of interdependence leads one to place high value on mutually nurturing relationships with others....All people are dependent upon relationships with others and most learn to value them" (p. 63). White (2001) concluded that community provided "a safe atmosphere that enables us to transcend our protective identities and learn, through increased personal responsibility, risk, and communication, to create an environment where self-discovery and shared understanding can flourish" (p. 54). Further, White (2001) stated that, "when an organization or culture engages the whole person: mind, body, and spirit, they enable individuals to find an orientation in life, and brings new impulses to all areas of their culture and civilization" (p. 52).

The human relations movement brought to light the importance of the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and perspectives of employees on organizational life. The findings of the Hawthorne studies, and subsequent research performed by a number of theorists, have underscored the significance of community in organizations—that is, the need of organizational members to feel connected to one another, to their working groups, and to the overriding purpose of their organization. The connection with others and the external environment is a fundamental social and psychological need of human beings.

The fundamental need for meaning, purpose, and community, has led to new studies in the field of adult learning centered on a transpersonal framework. Boucouvalas (1999), a researcher in transpersonal adult development, introduced the significance of a balance between autonomy (the sense of separateness) and homonomy (the sense of connection). White (2001) supported this notion by defining the human spirit as "the vital principle, the animating force traditionally believed to be within and the essential nature of every human being," which sought

community and meaningful work (p. 48). Organizations that engaged the whole person, White (2001) explained, "...can improve organizational performance by leading individuals to experience consciousness at a deeper level" (p. 53).

Recent organizational theory research in the areas of social capital and psychological contracts has underscored the importance of trust in creating community in organizational life. Social capital, defined as a "resource reflecting the character of social relations within the organization," is realized through members' levels of collective goal orientation and shared trust (Leana and Van Buren, 1999, p. 538). "Resilient trust," like acquaintanceship and shared membership, is an important aspect of sustaining community cohesion and collective action. Social interaction provides "certain advantages" as people use their personal contacts to "get jobs, to obtain information, or to access specific resources" (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1997, p. 243). Psychological contracts, defined as an "employee's beliefs about the reciprocal obligations between that employee and his or her organization," are considered the foundation of employment relationships (Morrison and Robinson, 1997, p. 226). Socialization, communication, and trust are three factors that can minimize incongruence and decrease violations of an employee's psychological contract. Employees learn to trust one another through observations and experiences. In turn, the amount of trust among employees increases socialization and communication in an organization. Edmondson (1999) found that team psychological safety facilitated learning behavior in work teams as it alleviated risks. Within this safe environment, team members were more likely to share information, engage in problem-solving activities, communicate opinions, and solicit feedback, thus contributing to the learning process (Edmondson, 1999).

The quest for a feeling of community, Gibb (1991) concluded, centered on three "romantic or utopian hopes" about life: (1) life should be more caring; (2) life should be more intimate; and, (3) life should have greater depth (p. 198). He found that modern life had heightened the search for community as feelings of "alienation, unconnectedness, and superficiality" pervaded modern society (Gibb, 1991, p. 198). Shockley-Zalabak et al. (2000) wrote, "Globalization, workplace diversity, increased awareness of cultural differences, downsizing, delayering, the call for increased workplace democracy, international networks, complex alliances, information technologies, and decentralized decision making are only some of the events and processes during which trust assumes significant importance" (p. 35). As the

work environment becomes unstable, and employees feel more uncertain about the future, trust can provide the glue that sustains an organization's membership. More importantly, trusting relationships allow employees to feel connected to one another and to the organization, thus instilling a sense of purpose and meaning to the work being performed and an overall sense of belonging.

The rise of the information age has increased the need for organizations to more rapidly acquire, capture, and disseminate knowledge in order to remain competitive in the global market. This urgency has forced many organizations to turn to information technology as one way to more rapidly and efficiently distribute knowledge to a dispersed workforce. However, organizations are finding that although the technology can enhance the interaction of existing communities, it cannot create community by itself (Shand, 1999). Communities within an organization build trust and share knowledge through informal learning and communication. Information technology enables trusted and established communities to establish new venues for sharing knowledge.

In the last decade or so, technological changes have reduced the need for face-to-face interaction (Hallowell, 1999). While computers once were the tools used to complete specific tasks, individuals now use computers to communicate with others and to work on a variety of tasks (Dryer, Eisbach, and Ark, 1999). Computers change our relationships not only with devices but with individuals as well. Increasingly, information technologies are becoming communication systems, requiring that social interaction between people be mediated by a computer system.

E-mail technology offers an ease of communication for organizations. In many ways, the access and ease of e-mail communication has provided organizations with the ability to more efficiently transmit information across dispersed communities. When people use e-mail, they can communicate even when they are not physically or temporally proximate. Thus, it is not surprising that most studies have reported that the use of e-mail increased organizational communication. However, some research has found that the "simple and instantaneous long-distance communication can increase the potential for misunderstanding by making the need for cultural adjustment less obvious" (Handy, 2000, p. 41). In fact, Handy (1999) argued that trust needed physical touch, and electronic communication was devoid of physical contact. The

absence of the “human moment” in an organization, Handy wrote, could “wreak havoc” as “good people leave,” and “those who remain are unhappy.”

I.2 Statement of the Problem

Socialization and communication in organizations offer opportunities for employees to learn trust, enhance psychological safety, and build community (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). The literature suggests that organizations that create a “sense of community” are more effective. Research has shown that communication technologies have eliminated key aspects of dialogue like non-verbal social cues (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000) and limited the amount of human contact within an organization. Thus far, limited research has been conducted on the influences of e-mail communication at an organizational level, specifically as it relates to organizational trust and the psychological sense of community in the workplace.

According to Gibb (1991), the feeling of community and connection with others in the work environment is an “underdeveloped area of organizational theory” (p. 186). The absence of the “human moment” at work, Hallowell (1999) concluded, could lead to increased anxiety and a reduced sense of cohesiveness. In spite of the link between socialization, communication, and trust, there is almost no research that specifically addresses the relationship between e-mail communication, organizational trust, and psychological sense of community in the workplace (Drake et al., 2000).

I.3 Purpose of the Study

This study has two purposes. First, the intent is to examine the relationship between physical proximity to others in the workplace, and the amount of communication received and sent through selected channels of communication, for specified employment levels within an organization. Second, the study is aimed at learning more about the relationship between e-mail communication, physical proximity to others, organizational trust, and the psychological sense of community in the workplace for specified employment levels within an organization.

I.4 Definition of Terms

In this study, four selected communication channels were examined: (1) face-to-face, (2) paper, (3) telephone, and (4) e-mail. Physical proximity to others in the workplace is represented by five categories: (1) Very Close; (2) Close; (3) Somewhat Close/Distant; (4) Distant; and, (5) Very Distant. The questionnaire provides a scale defining each physical proximity category. Three categories define specific employment levels within the organization: (1) Staff, (2) Management, and (3) Top Management. Responses provided in the demographic section of the questionnaire helped formulate the profile of the study sample.

I.5 Research Questions

This research was conducted to learn more about the relationships between e-mail, organizational trust, and psychological sense of community in the workplace. Specifically, two questions guided the inquiry: (1) Within the organization, how does physical proximity to others in the workplace relate to the amount of communication received from and sent to others through the selected channels, for specified employment levels? (2) Within the organization, how does the amount of e-mail communication received from and sent to others, and the physical proximity to others, relate to organizational trust and psychological sense of community in the workplace for specified employment levels? (a) What is the relationship between e-mail communication and organizational trust? (b) What is the relationship between e-mail communication and psychological sense of community in the workplace? Of course, individual characteristics and organizational environment could be important too.

I.6 Significance of the Research

Because more and more organizations use technology to communicate with their employees, the findings from this research will help determine the importance of the “human moment” and its influence on an individual’s perceived feelings of trust and community within the work environment. Research in the areas of trust and the psychological sense of community in the workplace, specifically as it relates to the use of technology, will help gain a deeper

understanding of the human condition within the work environment. The feeling of community and connection with others in the work environment, according to Gibb (1991), is an “underdeveloped area of organizational theory” (p. 186). Most research related to community has been performed in urban residential areas. This research will reveal important findings about community within the work environment. Also, understanding basic human needs may help organizations create a “sense of community” in organizations such that a balance of autonomy (the sense of separateness) and homonomy (the sense of connection) can co-exist (Boucouvalas, 1999). Finally, the results of the study will contribute to the field of adult learning and human resource development, fostering dialogue on the interrelationships and influence of trust, community, and technology in organizations and society at-large.

I.7 Chapter Summary

The literature suggests that trust is essential in human relationships. Individuals that trust one another are more likely to engage in dialogue, share information, and build communities. Trust evolves and individuals gain confidence in the exchange relationship as positive social interactions increase. The rise of the information age has increased the need for organizations to more rapidly acquire, capture, and disseminate knowledge in order to remain competitive in the global market. This urgency has forced many organizations to turn to information technology as one way to more rapidly and efficiently distribute knowledge to a dispersed workforce. Increasingly, information technologies are becoming communication systems.

E-mail technology offers an ease of communication for organizations. In many ways, the access and ease of e-mail communication has provided organizations with the ability to more efficiently transmit information across dispersed communities. While some studies have reported that the use of e-mail increases organizational communication, other research has found that the use of e-mail increases the potential for misunderstanding and distrust. Despite the link between socialization and communication to trust, limited research has been conducted to examine e-mail and its influence on trust at an organizational level. The purpose of this study is to learn more about e-mail and its relationship to feelings of trust and community in the workplace.