# Why Don't You Just Quit Already?

The effects of dissatisfactory managerial communication

on employee need-based commitment


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## Introduction

Since 1980 the low-skilled labor market has grown by 30%, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by economists and managerial researchers (Autor & Dorn, 2013). Concurrently, a greater level of understanding has arisen in complex workplace dynamics. This paper will focus its study on applying those developments in the understanding of workplace dynamics, particularly organizational commitment and managerial communication, to that low-skilled labor market. The question that will be answered is: how does manager-employee communication dissatisfaction affect need-related employee commitment?

The study will begin itself by reviewing commitment literature as well as managerial communication literature. Examples of previous studies will be given for both.

Businesses may prevent losses in productivity by understanding the role of employee dissatisfaction with managerial communication on continuance commitment businesses may prevent losses in productivity. Ahmed et al. (2010) confirm the role of communication satisfaction with immediate supervisors in promoting organizational productivity and output. With increasing educational disparities, the growing available low-skilled labor pool (Autor & Dorn, 2013) reduces hiring difficulties. However, regardless of a business' ability to hire new employees, a business must always remain concerned with the time and labor investment of training new employees, due to turnover.

The choice to investigate solely continuance commitment stems from the understanding that since Allen and Meyer's (1990) division of commitment into

affective, continuance, and normative commitment components, very little research

has peered into its antecedents. Significant amounts of research have conversely

explored the antecedents of affective and normative commitment.

With regard to managerial communication attention is not being given to motivation

for managerial communication style. As the following literature review will indicate

only employee satisfaction with managerial communication will be considered.

A qualitative approach is being utilized in the study to more descriptively

analyze the role of dissatisfaction with managerial communication on organizational

continuance commitment. Interviews will be scheduled following pre-screening

using a quantitative tool.

## Literature Review

In 1968 Rosabeth Kanter opened the field of commitment studies with her

article examining commitment mechanisms. The study was based largely off the

1960 article, "Notes on the concept of commitment" by Howard Becker. Howard

Becker stemmed his original work off of social theory and what he termed the "side-

bet". A side-bet occurs when an organizational member, in this case an employee,

weighs their choice to continue their participation against alternatives. Porter,

Mowday, and Steers (1979) yet again expanded the theory of commitment to

include feelings of obligation regardless of alternatives, out of emotional

attachment.

Recognizing the increasingly broad definition of commitment, Allen and

Meyer (1991) proposed three exclusive types of commitment: normative, affective,

and continuance commitments. Normative commitment can be thought of as the

moral responsibility an employee feels to stay. Affective commitment is so named because of the emotional affectivity of an organization to an employee and their decision to stay. And lastly, continuance commitment is a need to stay – most closely related to the negative results of leaving. Meyer is clear that an employee may have differing levels of commitment within each of these components at any given moment. Today, Allen and Meyer's three-component view is still widely accepted.

Perhaps the earliest mention of managerial communication comes from Vardaman and Halterman's (1968) book "Managerial control through communication: Systems for organizational diagnosis and design".  At that time managerial communication was seen as a tool, rudimentary in form, for managers to utilize in order to convey meaning to employees. Forty-five years later, Dasgupta, Suar, and Singh (2013) provide an extensive review of managerial communication styles since Vardaman and Halterman's pioneering publication. The number of communication style domains, discussed in that review, range from 10 styles to as low as three styles. It becomes clear then that unlike organizational commitment, managerial communication does not have a widely accepted construct within its discipline. For that reason, the present study will focus not on the form of managerial communication or its motivation, but on employee perception and satisfaction. There is a basis for this decision; a 1986 study (Pincus) of 364 nurses yielded a positive relationship between communication satisfaction and both job satisfaction and job performance.  The relationship has also been proven to operate in the opposite fashion. Employees who were subject to dissatisfying managerial

communication, and in extreme cases managerial workplace bullying, job satisfaction and performance decreased (Lutgen-Sandyik, 2006).

With an appropriately operable definition of organizational commitment and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with managerial communication we turn our attention to studies that previously relate the concepts. While Schaffer's 1953 study pre-dates the development of both managerial communication and organizational commitment fields of study, it nonetheless positively relates employee need satisfaction with job satisfaction. Of particular interest is the area of need satisfaction referred to as recognition and acknowledgement of effort. This area of need may be expected to make use of managerial communication for its fulfillment. It is also possible to thematically correlate many of the items of Schaffer's "need satisfaction" with items used to measure organizational commitment within Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1979) organizational commitment questionnaire.

The second study of interest comes from Trombetta and Jones' (1988) study of nurses commitment and satisfaction in relation to specific communication climates. By surveying over 1000 nurses from several differing hospitals Trombetta and Jones were able to identify managerial information adequacy as the greatest predictor of job satisfaction and commitment. The 1988 study however failed to relate organizational commitment and satisfaction.

While more directly related to organizational commitment than managerial communication, a 2006 study by Hayes et al. of the commitment of nurses to a hospital found that individual and economic determinants had the greatest effect on turnover. The study included several items closely related to Becker's (1960) side-

bet theory such as the potential loss of friends, the need for wages, and the ability to find another job. When examined using the Allen and Meyer (1991) components of commitment, the results of the Hayes et al. study seem to align with continuance commitment, suggesting the greatest predictor of turnover was a lack of continuance commitment. Other aspects of the study could also be related to the other components of Allen and Myer's commitment definition, but did not appear to so strongly predict turnover in their absence.

Together these three studies highlight the importance of satisfaction with managerial communication on global commitment, and the role of continuance commitment as the final predictor of commitment with an organization. Through these studies it may be predicted that dissatisfaction with managerial communication will produce job dissatisfaction and in turn decrease global commitment. In cases where continuance commitment, need, is high, dissatisfied employees will remain committed. However, in cases where continuance commitment, need, is low, dissatisfied employees will quit.

**Participants**

Study participants were selected by means of a screening survey in order to control pre-existing variables. These variables included age, current employment status, level of required training/certification/degree for the job in question, a question about financial independency, and whether or not they have ever been dissatisfied with managerial communication. The screening survey also collected basic contact information, for potential interview scheduling use, which was considered confidential and kept only by the researcher and assistant (described

below). Screening participants who indicated financial independence, an age range between 18-25 and current employment where no training/certification or degree was required with dissatisfaction with managerial communication were invited to interview for the study.

The screening survey was distributed electronically in a network method and in through a convenience method. By making use of online survey software, Google Forms, and social media networks the researcher maximized the networked participant pool. Screening participants were asked at the end of the screening to also share the screening survey link on their own social media pages. The researcher also convenience screened through a table in the student union of a Midwestern university (enrollment ~14,000). Both screening processes were continued until 12 potential participants were identified.

Screened potential participants were chosen based on their ability to be interviewed during one of the available interview times. Participants not chosen to participate in the study or not chosen through the screening process were thanked for their time.

**Procedure**

Data was collected using qualitative interviews of pre-screened participants. The screen and interview schedule are discussed.

Each participant was required to complete a consent form explaining the optional nature of their participation in the study as well as how their confidential information would be handled. For electronic screening the consent form was presented as a required statement before the participant could complete the

screening. An additional message was included in the electronic survey consent form, indicating that if a participant wished to skip any question or to no longer participate they simply needed to close the survey pane.

After completing the screening survey participants were told that they would be notified within 48 hours of the selection status. Every other day during the screening period, one of two emails were sent to the previous two-day's participants. All participants were blind carbon copied to the email to preserve confidentiality. The email either informed candidates that they were identified as a potential interview candidate or that they did not meet the study's conditions. Both emails thanked participants for taking the screening survey.

Potential interview candidates were also directed in their email to complete an anonymous scheduling assistant through Doodle.com to set up an interview time. Potential interview candidates who responded with no availability were thanked for their participation via blind carbon copy email. Those participants with availability were reminded of their upcoming interview one week, two days, and on the day of the interview via blind carbon copy email.

The screening survey was designed to take less than 10 minutes. Participants chosen to interview were explained that the interview would be 15 minutes long. In some cases the interview was completed in less time, but in no case was an interview permitted to go beyond the fifteen minute scheduled window. In total a full participant was not expected to contribute greater than 30 minutes to the study, this expectation was included in the consent form.

**Tools**

The screening survey collected information regarding participants' employment and demographic information. The screen included five questions.

*1. What is your current age?*

*2. Are you currently employed?*

   *If no, you may end the screening survey now.*

*3. Does your job require a degree/specialized education/advanced training?*

   *(ex. EMT training, Engineer, auto-technician)*

*4. Are your living expenses regularly covered by someone other than you?*

*5. At your current employment, have you ever been dissatisfied with communication from a supervisor or manager?*

The screen also included a request for contact information (First name and last name, email, and phone number). The screen selected participants for interview that met experimental conditions (18-24 years old, currently employed, no additional training, financial independence, and communication dissatisfaction). These conditions were selected in order to isolate independent variables for testing.

The goal of the qualitative interview was to descriptively identify the role of managerial communication on need based commitment – continuance commitment. The interview was limited to eight questions, each selected for their own experimental purpose. The intent was to not have greater than eight interview questions to expediently conduct the surveys and to ensure that each question was unique enough so as to prevent conflicting individual participant responses between non-unique questions. The eight questions are listed below. The source of each question is further discussed.

*1. Please describe a typical day at your job without naming your employer.*

*2. Please describe your worst communication interaction with a manager or supervisor.*

*3. Tell me about what you use your job related income for.*

*4. What would cause you to consider quitting your job?*

*5. Describe how not having your job would affect your life.*

*6. If there is a level of dissatisfactory managerial communication that would cause you to quit your job, please describe that communication now.*

*7. Why is managerial communication important or not important to you?*

*8. Please add any additional comments you may have regarding your choice to stay or leave a job that you financially need, in the presence of dissatisfactory managerial communication.*

Question 1 was selected as a validity check of the prescreen survey, to ensure that participants are actually employed in a low-skill job. The inclusion of trade specific terminology or specialized equipment would indicate skilled employment. Questions 2 and 7 deal directly with an individual's perception of managerial communication. Dasgupta, Suar, and Singh (2013) show the role of this perception on workplace employee outcomes. Question 3 again serves as a validity check for the screening survey. It also tests the financial need antecedent of continuance commitment as found by Allen and Meyer (1991). Question 4 was used to determine if an individual participant may place a differing weight on the global commitment importance of continuance commitment by causing the participant to have to self-evaluate the "breaking-point" of commitment. It was chosen to be asked

immediately following a finance related question in order to suggest a direction for answer along the continuance commitment dimension. When asked then to picture life without a job (Question 5), the stress on continuance commitment is clear and the relationship being tested has been adequately explained without suggesting a hypothesis. Question 6 is an operationalized version of the research question. Throughout the arrangement of the study this is the primary question desired by the researcher. Ultimately however, it is possible that an interview participant does not believe managerial communication is important. Participants who do not believe managerial communication is important are likely to perceive the impact of poor managerial communication differently than those participants who do find managerial communication important. Question 7 seeks to judge the weight a participant places on managerial communication, and to determine the effects they perceive managerial communication to have on a workplace. The last question, question 8, is saved for flexibility in the rigid interview schedule.

**Reliability/Validity**

In order to ensure the study was conducted with appropriate care, for both reliability and validity, a research course instructor supervised the construction and arrangement of the study. A recent communication studies graduate reviewed the materials and cross-coded the interview transcripts.

Following the transcription of the interview, the participant was sent a copy for validity checks. They were each given 24 hours to respond with clarifications if necessary. Clarifications were accepted by the researcher before use in the results

or discussion sections of this study. If more than two clarifications for any interview were made the interview was considered invalid and discarded.

Reliability was the chief concern of the research assistant, who independently thematically coded each interview. The researcher also independently thematically coded each interview. Their results were then cross-coded before use in the results or discussion sections of this study. The established codes then underwent a frequency analysis to determine major themes.

## Results Analysis

32 individuals completed the screening survey. 12 individuals met the study conditions, 10 were interviewed. One individual was unable to be contacted due to missing contact information in the screening survey and another was out of country during the available interview times. During screening survey participant recruitment, many more individuals were approached than ultimately took the survey screen. They often were not interested in taking the survey if they were previously informed that they did not meet the study's initial conditions, principally current employment. 100% of screened individuals were currently employed.

The survey items shared in the rigidity of the screen, each item (with exception to current employment) rejecting a minimum of 6 participants. The most rigid screening item was the third item, "Does your job require a degree/specialized education/advanced training?", rejecting 11 participants.

In meeting the needs of the qualitative interview participants, four of the ten interviews were conducted via telephone. All interviews were recorded for transcription. The transcripts were sent to the interview participants for validity-

checks and returned. Each transcription was then made anonymous before being sent to the research assistant for a dual-coding process. One week following the interviews the thematic codes were compared and cross-coded to establish a set of unified codes for the entire interview set. Unique codes as well as broad similar codes and super categories emerged, they are discussed below in relation to the research question.

## Findings

From the frequency analysis of the codes, major themes were established for each question, which contributed to the overall understanding of the role of managerial communication on continuance commitment. The themes for each question, both unique to a participant and shared between participants, are discussed after the broadest themes that presented themselves through the interviews.

Of the 10 interviews the reference of seeking another job was coded in total 13 times, across all but one interview. Of those 13 occurrences, 3 were in relation to finding a job with improved managerial communication, 4 were in relation to finding a job more closely related to a field of collegiate study, and 6 were in relation to finding a higher paying job. More directly put, when referencing seeking another job, it was least common to cite dissatisfactory managerial communication as the driving motivator.

While this was a qualitative study and should be understood to represent only the experiences of those individuals who were interviewed, some level of confirmation can be given to these results by the Meyer et. al (2002) study which

did not find a significant correlation between supervisor satisfaction and continuance commitment but that did find a correlation between pay satisfaction and continuance commitment. By interpreting supervisor satisfaction, as integrally involving managerial communication, it is possible to see the unfortunate answer to this study's research question: dissatisfaction with managerial communication is not adequately thematically related to continuance commitment in order to cause a substantial enough shift in self-reported global commitment to cause an employee to quit when the employee is satisfied with their pay, or they feel as though their employment satisfies an educational investment.

In this study a participant went so far as to say, "I think I would never leave a job unless I had another one set up." And when asked to describe how not having their job would effect their life, the same participant said, "I wouldn't have enough money to pay for rent and daily living expenses."

Besides examining the intent to quit with dissatisfactory managerial communication the study sought an understanding of the types of dissatisfactory managerial communication.

Two participants reported dissatisfactory managerial communication when two or more managers provided conflicting job instruction. Both of these participants also referenced a loss of efficiency in their workplace due to dissatisfactory managerial communication. This observation directly supports the work of Ahmed et. al (2010) who report that "Frontline managers that...utilize the

most effective forms of communication will find their employees responding positively (119)."

The most significant portion of interview participants however, reported dissatisfaction with managerial communication when managers did not provide clear enough initial instructions. Trombetta & Rogers (1988) found a similar result in a quantitative study done with 1000 nurses; Concluding that information adequacy was significant in predicting global commitment. Other aspects of managerial communication, such as decision participation and communication openness were not significant in predicting commitment, but were significant in predicting job satisfaction. A similar observation was made in this study while a participant spoke of instances where a manager spoke negatively in a social manner about subordinates in a secretive or closed manner. The instance led to workplace-wide dissatisfaction, but limited resignations.

In a more isolated incident of managerial communication dissatisfaction, a participant expressed frustration with being misconstrued. The participant reported often feeling as though the managers did not understand "…the angle [they] were coming from…" The participant's experiences are in line with results from Van Vuuren, De Long, and Seydel's (2006) study, which revealed the importance of managerial active listening and feedback in promoting a satisfied workforce.

It then becomes clear, that even within each of the individual instances of dissatisfactory managerial communication there is not a clear correlation to a predicted reduction in continuance commitment. At best, there could be a hypothesized negative correlation to affective commitment as suggested by Meyers

et al (2002). Future studies could investigate the qualitative interaction of the three sub-dimensions of organizational commitment in regards to dissatisfactory managerial communication; seeing this study as only involving continuance commitment.

Future studies might also consider utilizing a less scheduled interview. While the interview structure lent itself to easier thematic analysis, it limited the ability for probing into specific ideas or critical communication incidences hinted at by interview participants.

## Conclusion

Again, the use of qualitative interviews allows for descriptive investigation into specific experiences and limits the study's ability to generalize or predict trends, however, this study supported the findings of multiple large sample quantitative studies. Together this study and those studies answer the research question, "What role does dissatisfactory managerial communication have on commitment in the presence of financial need?". And while the study did not prove a strong relationship between dissatisfactory managerial communication and continuance commitment (the component of commitment most closely related to financial need) it did highlight the fact that there is a limit, "…if I ever felt like I was not satisfied with my manager's [communication] or…I felt like I would be better off without the job, then I would probably quit."

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