

## **Dimensions of Supervisory Communication and Organizational Commitment: A Case Study of a Malaysian Organization**

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*This research attempts to test the relationship between supervisory communication and organizational commitment based on a Malaysian organization setting. Further tests were conducted to identify which supervisory communication behaviour will be a significant predictor of organizational commitment. Two hundred and thirty one (231) respondents from a large semi-government corporation and its subsidiary in Northern Peninsular Malaysia were involved in this study. It reveals that there is significant positive relationship between superior-subordinate communication and organizational commitment. Further analysis indicates that negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication are significant predictors of organizational commitment.*

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### **Introduction**

Supervisory communication, also known as superior-subordinate communication, is a social system that works within a larger system of work groups. It is a form of dyadic communication. This type of communication focuses on how superiors communicate with their subordinates in order to maintain their relationship. A majority of scholars agree that superior-subordinate communication provides an overall picture of communication patterns in the organization (Jablin, 1987; Lee & Jablin, 1995). Schanke, Dumler, Cocharan and Barneet (1990) emphasize the importance of superior-subordinate communication in their research indicating that 50%-90% of a superior's time in office is used to communicate with his/her subordinates. Jablin (1979) defines superior-subordinate communication as an exchange of information and influence among organizational members, with at least one of them having formal authority to direct and evaluate the activities of other organizational members. Clampitt and Downs (1994) expand this definition with the

concept of upward and downward communication, whereby superiors are open to ideas from subordinates, how superiors listen and give attention to subordinates' ideas as well as much guidance they provide in solving job-related problems with subordinates. Miles, Patrick and King (1996), define superior-subordinate communication as a process and interaction that has been practised by the superior towards his or her subordinates in an organization with two main purposes, viz to achieve task objectives given to subordinates and to maintain their relationship. They described four superior-subordinate communication dimensions. Miles et al (1996) developed such dimensions based on those used by Huseman, Hatfield, Boulton and Gatewood (1980) to explain superior-subordinate communication. The four separate dimensions of communication are positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication. Miles et al. (1996), Gatewood, Boulton, Hatfield and Huseman (1981) report that these dimensions have been shown to predict significant job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

The concept of organizational commitment is one of the major factors in determining the relationship between individuals and organization (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982). Experts in the field of organizational commitment agree that two paired dimensions embrace the construct of organizational commitment. They are the affective dimension and the cognitive dimension (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Morrow, 1993). Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) defined affective commitment as, "a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization". The cognitive commitment dimension is based on the concept of exchange between the individual and the organization. This dimension is the outcome of an individual's decision to remain with an organization because of personal time and resources already devoted to the company and because of financial costs of changing jobs (Morrow, 1993).

A review of literature showed that there are various distinct approaches to define organizational commitment. A few scholars had defined organizational commitment as a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1979). Others defined organizational commitment as identification with goals and values between organizational member and organization (Buchanan, 1974) or

an exchange of behaviour to get benefits that can be appreciated by others (Meyer & Allen, 1984). However, most scholars studying organizational commitment examine the psychological relationships that individuals have with the organization. Generally, scholars of organizational commitment agree that the definition of organizational commitment can be identified through:

- High involvement of members of organization
- Members and organization goals and values
- Exchange of behaviour to receive benefits
- Psychological attachments of individual to organization

Based on the definition given by Mowday et al. (1982), they have define organizational commitment is specifically based on three factors. They are:

1. Belief and acceptance of value and organizational goals.
2. Willingness to exert an individual's effort to achieve organizational goals.
3. Strong desire to maintain membership in organization.

There is a stream of research that explores superior-subordinate communication and other organizational effectiveness variable such as organizational commitment. These researches were based on the LMX theory. Findings from such a line of inquiry showed that the quality of LMX affects subordinates and superiors communication in areas such as discourse patterns, upward influence, communication expectations, cooperative communication, perceived organizational justice and decision-making practices (Fairhurst, 1993; Krone, 1992; Lee 1997, 2001; Lee & Jablin, 1995). However, as Yrie, Hartman and Galle (2002) noted in general, the communication literature has historically taken a conventional approach to superior-subordinate communication and has identified the 'best' practices applied across situations. The management and perception literature, a number of comparable findings of perceptual distortions and the lack of superior-subordinate congruence have been reported. Moreover Page and Wiseman (1993) argued that very little research has attempted to empirically test the applicability of management theories developed in the United States of America to other nations in the world. They have suggested that research should test the effects of supervisory style and organizational influence in other countries.

Therefore, superior-subordinate communication and LMX research need to explore the dimension of superior-subordinate communication behaviour such as: positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication, especially in organizations outside the United States. It is important to pursue this study because managerial communication behaviours are shown to have a strong influence on job satisfaction (Goldhaber, Yates, Porter & Lesniak, 1978; Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). Differences in communication behaviors are likely to have a significant influence on members of organization commitment. Furthermore, with more organizations operating globally, it is important to identify a communication behaviour that is suitable across countries and cultures. For that reason, this research attempts to further test the relationship between supervisory communication and organizational commitment based on a Malaysian organization setting. Additional test will be conducted to identify the supervisory communication behaviour that can be considered as a significant predictor in organizational commitment.

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## **Review of Literature**

### **Superior-Subordinate Communication**

Superior-subordinate communication behaviours usually refer to processes and interactions that have been practised by superiors towards subordinates with the purpose of achieving task objectives and maintaining their relationships (Miles et al., 1996). In an organizational setting, superior-subordinate communication has been broadly defined as an exchange of information and influence among organizational members and one of those members have official authority to direct and evaluate activities of organizational members (Jablin, 1979). Clappitt and Downs (1993) refer to superior-subordinate communication as upward and downward communication with superiors, and these include being open to ideas and listening to problems. With regard to this, Katz and Khan (1978) provided a comprehensive categorization of the types of communication between the supervisor and the subordinate, such as job instruction, job rationale, procedures and practices, feedback and indoctrination of goals. Based on Katz and Khan's work, Huseman,

Hatfield, Boulton and Gatewood (1980), developed seven types of superior-subordinate communication behaviour which include: direction, information, rationale, feedback, positive expression, negative expression and participation. With regards to the work done by Huseman and his colleagues others like Miles et al. (1996) employ four separate dimensions of superior-subordinate communication behaviours namely positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication. Positive relationship communication focuses on superiors seeking suggestions from subordinates, being interested in them as people, relating to them in a casual manner, and allowing them to contribute input on important decisions. Upward openness communication is characterized by the opportunity to question a superior's instruction and to disagree with him/her. Negative relationship communication deals with superiors ridiculing subordinates and criticizing them in the presence of others. Job-relevant communication includes a superior's feedback on performances; information includes a superior's feedback on performance, information about rules and policies, job instructions, work assignments and schedules, and goals. These four dimensions according to Miles et al (1996) generally represent superior-subordinate communication in the organization and have been shown to predict both subordinate job satisfaction and subordinate performance (Alexander, Helms & Wilkins, 1989).

Most researches on superior-subordinate communication follow a multi-dimensional approach (Dansereau & Markham, 1987) and numerous studies have explored superior-subordinate communication as an outcome variable in the organizational communication process (Yarie et al., 2002). For example, several studies have demonstrated that superior communication has positive relationships with job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Goldhaber et al, 1978; Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). Whether measured as a direct influence on job satisfaction as an indirect influence operating through organizational processes such as performance appraisals (Nathan, Mohrman & Milliman, 1991), superior-subordinate communication behaviours have a strong influence on relationships between managers and workers (Page & Wiseman, 1993). For example, studies conducted by Miles et al show that four superior-subordinates communication behaviours, i.e positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative

relationship communication and job-relevant communication, indicate a significant relationship with job satisfaction. Reinsch (1997), also shows that all these four superior-subordinate communications have a significant relationship with working relationships. Furthermore, working relationships are positively affected by positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, and job-relevant communication while negative relationship communication has a negative effect on working relationships (Allinson, Armstrong & Hayes, 2001; Alexander et al., 1989; Miles et al., 1996; Yrie et al., 2002).

### **LMX and Superior-Subordinate Communication**

The Leader-Member Exchange model proposed by Graen (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen, 1976; Graen & Scandura, 1987) attempts to explain the relationship that develops between superiors and subordinates as a result of their workplace interaction. This model (earlier known as the vertical dyad linkage model) is concerned with the hierarchical relationship between a superior and his/her subordinates. The model speculates that because of time pressures, the leader can develop close relationships with only a few of his/her key subordinate(s) (the in-group), while, sustaining a formal relationship with the rest of his/her group (the out-group). This means that since the leader is ultimately responsible for the whole group's performance and productivity, he/she relies on formal authorities, rules, policies and procedures to obtain ample performance from the out-group (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Research has shown that the relationships developed in these dyads form rather quickly and tend to remain stable over time (Graen & Cashman, 1975), and that high quality relationships may result in higher levels of superior support and guidance, higher levels of subordinate satisfaction and performance, lower levels subordinate turnover and most importantly, better quality assignments. On the other hand, low quality relationships may result in simple contractual relations, higher levels supervisory control and directives, lower levels of subordinate satisfaction, higher levels of subordinate turnover and less desired assignments (Graen & Schiemann, 1978; Liden & Graen, 1980; Graen, Liden & Hoel, 1982). If this concept expanded on the effect of superior-subordinate communication behaviour, research suggests that supervisory communication patterns in high-quality LMXs demonstrate "open" communication exchanges in which subordinates are afforded greater amount of trust, confidence, attention, inside information, negotiating

latitude, and influence in supervisor decision. In contrast, low-quality LMXs are “closed” communication systems in which superiors use formal authority to force the members to comply with a given role (Mueller & Lee, 2002; Jablin, 1987). As a consequence, subordinates in low-quality LMXs are limited in their opportunities to influence decisions, and for this reason complain of their superior’s resistance, unresponsiveness, and languor in their attempts to affect change (Cashman, Dansereau, Grean & Haga, 1976).

Vast research has shown specific communication behaviours and activities that occur between superiors and subordinates in different LMXs. For example, superiors and subordinates engaged in different levels of LMX display distinctive in aligning, accommodating, and polarizing discourse patterns (Fairhurst, 1993), vary in the frequency of their communication (Krone, 1992; Johlke & Duhan, 2001), adopt different persuasive strategies, impressions of management, or ingratiation strategies to attempt upward influence (Krone, 1992). Besides that, research also reveals that superiors and subordinates of different levels of LMX engaged in varying relational maintenance and communication strategies (Lee & Jablin, 1995; Waldron, 1991), and form different attributions to explain and interpret critical performance incidents (Wilhelm, Herd & Stainer, 1993). To sum up, research supports the observation that the quality of LMX leads to different interactional patterns and attitudes between superiors and subordinates (Mueller & Lee, 2002).

### Hypotheses

Following the logic of LMX and its impact on the numerous outcomes, it is understandable that there should be a relationship between the supervisor communication behaviours and organizational commitment. Specifically, subordinates who received high quality communication from their supervisor would expect to have higher commitment towards organization (Krone, 1992; Johlke & Duhan, 2001; Muller & Lee, 2002; Varma & Stroh, 2001). Thus, the first hypothesis is:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Subordinates who report better quality of communication behaviour from their superiors will also report higher commitment.*

The communication behaviours are likely to affect the subordinates’ perception of working relationships. Findings from several studies suggest that subordinates’ perception of supervisor communication

behaviour will affect the quality of their working relationship (Miles et al., 1996; Yrie et al., 2002), which in turn will also affect their satisfaction and commitment towards the organization. For example, a study by Page and Wiseman, (1993) shows that superior-subordinate communication behaviours have a strong influence on relationships between managers and workers. A research by Miles and colleagues shows that four superior-subordinates communication behaviours (positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication) indicate a significant relationship with job satisfaction, and work by Reinsch (1997), also shows that all these four superior-subordinate communications have a significant relationship with the working relationship. Furthermore, a few other researches have also revealed that job satisfaction is positively affected by positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, and job-relevant communication while negative relationship communication has a negative effect on job satisfaction (Allinson et al., 2001; Miles et al., 1996; Yrie et al., 2002). Given this situation the following hypothesis was tested:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Superior-subordinate communication (positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication) will be a significant predictor of organizational commitment.*

## Method

In the following sections, data gathering procedures, respondents, and measurements of variables are detailed.

## Respondents

Primarily subjects for this research consisted of employees of a large semi-government corporation and its subsidiary in Northern Peninsular Malaysia. Survey packets were sent directly to three hundred and seventeen (317) management employees (under supporting staff categories). Two hundred thirty one (231) respondents (72.8% rate of return) returned the survey packet. Of the number approximately 64.5% (n = 149) were males and 35.5% (n = 82) were females. Majority of the respondents (80.1%, n = 185) were support staff and the rest (19.9%, n = 46) were under the management and professional categories. Approximately 8.3% (n = 19) respondents have worked with the



organization less than one year, 21.2% (n = 49) have worked for a duration of between one to three years, 25.5% (n = 59) have worked for between four to six years, 24.7% (n = 57) have worked for between seven to ten years and 20.3% (n = 47) have worked for more than ten years.

### Measurement Instrument

The instrument used to assess superior-subordinate communication behaviour included 24 items modified by Miles et al. (1996). These items represent eight types of messages developed by Husemen et al. (1980). The eight message types are feedback, rationale, information, direction, negative expression, positive expression, participation and upward openness. They are represented by three questions per type with each question being measured by a 5-point Likert type scale (see Appendix A). The Cronbach's alpha for positive relationship communication is .81, upward openness communication is .70, negative relationship communication is .69 and for job-relevant communication is .86.

The measurement of the organizational commitment in this study relied primarily on scales developed by Mowday et al. (1982). It is also known as OCQ. They characterized commitment as having three factors:

- A strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values.
- A willingness to use considerable effort on behalf of the organization.
- A strong desire to maintain membership in the organization.

There are 15 items to measure the organizational commitment. Each question is measured with a 5-point Likert type scale. Pre-test results for this measurement show that the Cronbach's alpha is .87.

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### Results

Data was analysed by using simple and multiple regressions to test the relationship between superior-subordinate communication and organizational commitment with regards to respondents' scores. The first hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) deals with the relationship between supervisory communication and organizational commitment, and a positive relationship is predicted. Results of a simple regression analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between supervisory communication behaviour and organizational commitment ( $r = .490$ ,  $p < .005$ ). Table 1 provides the findings of the relationship between supervisory

communication behaviour and organizational commitment. Specifically, it indicates that there is a direct relationship between supervisory communication behaviour and organizational commitment.

**Table 1**  
**Relationship Between Supervisory Communication And**  
**Organizational Commitment**

Superior-Subordinate Communication	.490*
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Notes: N = 231;  $p < .05$

Since the first test shows a positive relationship between superior-subordinate communication and organizational commitment, further tests are needed to reassure that the superior-subordinate communication dimension can also predict ( $H_2$ ) the other variables (in this case, organizational commitment). In order to do this, multiple regression tests were used. In each regression model, organizational commitment was regressed against the four communication dimensions, i.e. positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication. Regression weights and multiple correlations are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 2**  
**ANOVA For Predictor Positive Relationship Communication,**  
**Upward Openness Communication, Negative Relationship**  
**Communication, Job-Relevant Communication And**  
**Organizational Commitment**

Model	Sum of Square	Df	Mean of Square	Sig-F
Regression	1164.39	4	291.09	0.000*
Residual	2545.46	226	11.26	

Note: N = 231;  $p < .05$

The overall results pattern in Table 2 indicates a significant relationship between supervisory communication behaviour and organizational commitment. The result of ANOVA analysis revealed that all the four supervisory communication dimensions are significant predictors of organizational commitment  $F(4, 226) = 25.85, p < .05$ . These findings provide support for past research (Goldhaber et al., 1978; Jablin, 1979), as well as, providing support for the current hypothesis that communication from superiors is correlated with subordinate commitment.  $H_2$  is therefore accepted. This test reveals that all four superior-subordinate communication dimensions are significant predictors of organizational commitment. For this reason, analysis was continued to further explore which of the superior-subordinate communication dimensions will significantly predict organizational commitment.

**Table 3**  
**Coefficients of Predictor Variable and T-test Towards**  
**Organizational Commitment**

Predictor Variable	$\beta$	Sig-t
Positive Relationship Communication	.065	.960
Upward Openness Communication	.066	.173
Negative Relationship Communication	-.401	.000*
Job-Relevant Communication	.506	.000*
R = .560; $R^2 = .314$ and constant 19.094		

Note: N = 231;  $p < .05$

Results from Table 3 revealed that negative relationship communication  $t(229) = -6.660, p < .05$  and job-relevant communication  $t(229) = 5.727, p < .05$  are significant predictors for organizational commitment with almost 31.4% variance in organizational commitment.

### Discussion

This study suggests that supervisory communication behaviour plays an important role in developing and maintaining commitment among

organizational members. As can be seen in Table 1, the analyses show a significant positive relationship between supervisory communication behaviours and organizational commitment. These findings show an important aspect of communication behaviour and LMX. As noted by Yrie, Hartman and Galle (2002), the positive relationship between these two variables suggests that as subordinates perceive they are in higher-quality exchange relationships, they will also report that their supervisor coordinates (in a two-way fashion) their activities and that they have increased their ability to participate. This finding suggests that subordinates perceive that they are in higher-quality exchange relationships, which indicates that their superior seeks suggestions from subordinates, is interested in them as people, relate to them in a casual manner, and allow them to contribute input on important decisions in order to maintain their working relationship and consequently to accomplish their task objectives regardless of superior or subordinate gender. In other words, if a superior increases his or her communication behaviour (positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication) towards a subordinate, it will also increase his/her subordinate commitment.

The dimensions of superior-subordinate communication from the findings of this study are noteworthy for organizational research, for leader-member exchange theory and for management practice. The quality of relationship between superior and subordinate particularly the supervisory communication behaviour, continued to show strong predictive power in organizational effectiveness. In this case it is organizational commitment. It is, therefore important for managers to consider communication practices as part of any effort to improve their subordinate's commitment. For practising managers, these results indicate the communication relationship that they have with their subordinates is critical and perhaps it affects their working relationship. This in turn will give rise to subordinate commitment.

If this study is generalized, minimizing the negative relationship communication and increasing the job-relevant communication should have a positive effect on the subordinates' commitment. As the findings of Cashman et al. (1976) indicate, when subordinates receive a lot of job-relevant communication and a low negative relationship communication, as an exchange the superiors will receive loyalty and will contribute towards developing and maintaining their working

relationship. Most importantly, Miles et al. (1996) said that job relevant communication from superiors reduced subordinates' role ambiguity and with that effect it also reduced role conflict, as a result of a significant increase in working relationship between the superior and his/her subordinate.

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### **Conclusions And Suggestions**

The results of this study lead to the following conclusions. Firstly, there is a high quality relationship between superiors and subordinates. According to Lee (1997) a high quality relationship can be characterized as a high level of information exchange, mutual support, informal influence, trust and greater negotiating latitude, both from superior and subordinate, in order to maintain their relationship. Previous research has established that both superior-subordinate communication behaviour allied with working relationship, notably superior-subordinate communication behaviours, have an upshot on the relationship between such variables as ability and performance on organizational members (Frost, 1983). This situation also suggests that supportive communication has been practised in the organization. From the context of superior and subordinate communication, it will produce major effects on their relationships because at this level of communication, superior-subordinate will execute policies from the top management. Therefore, a harmonic relationship between superior and subordinates will lead to a smooth flow of information from top to bottom.

Superior-subordinate communication has a positive relationship on the organizational commitment based on U.S. management theories. This means that when superior-subordinate communication is highly practised in the organization, it will lead to a high organizational commitment. Specifically, it indicates that there is a direct relationship between superior-subordinate communication behaviour and organizational commitment. This finding supports the previous research conducted on LMX and communication behaviour (Jablin, 1987) based on U.S. management setting. Leaders tend to develop and maintain LMXs with their subordinates that vary in quality. The different qualities of LMX have been found to affect a variety of communication behaviours between superior and subordinates (Lee & Jablin, 1995). In addition to this, superiors use a variety of communication behaviour to maintain

relationships with their subordinates. Any increase in supportive communication behaviour from superiors will also lead to an increase in the subordinates' commitment.

Negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication are significant and major predictors of organizational commitment based on the Malaysian organization setting. Increasing opportunities to question or disagree with the supervisor's instructions, in addition to supervisor's feedback on performance, information about rules and policies, job instructions, work assignments, schedules and goals, combined with lesser ridiculing and criticizing in the presence of others, will develop a high quality working relationship with subordinates (Miles et al. 1996). For managers in any organization, these results indicate that the communication relationship they have with their subordinates is an important contribution affecting and effecting their working relationship with subordinates. This has an impact on the ability to improve subordinates' commitment towards organization.

The results of this study are encouraging. However, additional dimensions of superior communication behaviour need to be considered. Such additional research can play a vital role in developing understanding about when and whether a superior should deviate from 'best' communication behaviours. Further research should identify superior communication behaviour dimensions that have not been covered in this research. For example coordination, participation and expression, which may lead to information that could provide helpful indications of 'best' communication behaviour for superiors to develop in order to maintain their subordinates' commitment towards the organization. Besides, this study was conducted in a semi government corporation a further study needs to be conducted, especially in a private organization or a Multi National Corporation (MNC) that operating in Malaysia. Such a study will enlighten us as to whether managerial communication behaviour is applicable across countries.

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## Appendix A

### 24-item communication with supervisor scale

1. My supervisor gives recognition for good work.
2. My supervisor lets me know why changes are made in work assignments.
3. My supervisor keeps me informed about rules and policies.
4. My supervisor gives clear instructions to me.
5. I question my supervisor's instructions when I don't understand them.
6. My supervisor ridicules or makes fun of me.
7. My supervisor jokes good-naturedly with me.
8. My supervisor asks for my suggestions about how work should be done.
9. My supervisor lets me know when I've done a good job.
10. My supervisor tells me the reasons for work schedules.
11. My supervisor informs me about future plans for my work group.
12. My supervisor sets useful goals for me to meet.
13. I tell my supervisor when I think things are being done wrong.
14. My supervisor criticizes my work in front of others.
15. My supervisor asks me about my interests outside of work.
16. My supervisor seeks my input on important decisions.
17. My supervisor praises good work.
18. My supervisor tells me the reasons for rules and policies.
19. My supervisor keeps me informed about what's happening in the company.
20. My supervisor asks versus tells me to do things.
21. I question my supervisor's instructions when I think they are wrong.
22. My supervisor is critical of me as a person.
23. My supervisor strikes up causal conversations with me.
24. My supervisor asks me for suggestions for improvements in my department.

## **Appendix B**

### 15-item organizational commitment questionnaire

1. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful.
2. I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for.
3. I feel very loyal to this organization.
4. I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for this organization.
5. I find that my values and the organization's values are similar.
6. I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization
7. I could just as well be working for a different as long as the types of work were similar.
8. This organization really inspires the best in me in the way of job performance.
9. It would take very little change in my present circumstances to cause me to leave this organization.
10. I am extremely glad I chose this organization to work for over others I was considering at the time I joined.
11. There's much to be gained by sticking with this organization indefinitely.
12. Often, I find it difficult to agree with this organization's policies on important matters relating to its employee.
13. I really care about the fate of this organization.
14. For me, this is the best of all organizations for which to work.
15. Deciding to work for this organization was a definite mistake on my part.