# Shared Goal, Communication and Absence of Damaging Conflicts as Antecedents of Employee Relationship Strength at Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa

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*Abstract*

*Even though there is increasing awareness of organisational shared goals, effective communication, conflict management in organisations and cordial employee relations at workplace, research efforts focused on the investigation of the role of shared goals, communication and absence of damaging conflicts on employee relationship strength in the context of institutions of higher learning have largely remained scant, particularly in developing countries of Southern Africa. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to fill this void. Three research hypotheses are posited and a sample data of 151 collected from the Gauteng Province of South Africa is used to empirically test the hypotheses. The results of this study show that, institutional shared goals, institutional communication and absence of damaging conflict influences employee relationship strength at institutions of higher learning in a significant way. Managerial implications of the findings are discussed and limitations and future research directions are indicated.*

## 1. Introduction

Developing and strengthening relationships among employees at work is critical for knowledge sharing so that institutions can quickly respond to the dictates of today's dynamic business environment (Chen & Tjosvold, 2010). Although little research has been conducted to identify the factors that promote the creation and development of these relationships, studies have shown that institutional shared goals (Frankema, 2001; Kelly, 2007; Pollick, 2009), institutional communication (Fay, 2011; Tse & Troth, 2013) and the absence of damaging conflicts (Giebels & Jansssen, 2005; Brinket, 2010) are important antecedents for employee relationships. However, few studies have documented a comprehensive model that illustrates employee relationships in institution of higher learning. Having a clearly defined comprehensive model is an important theoretical and practical aspect. Practically, the model may help assist high learning institutions to create and sustain relationships among their employees. Theoretically, the study makes a contribution to people management literature by developing and testing a model that shows the influence of institutional shared goals, institutional communication and absence of damaging conflicts, on the employee relationships strength at institutions of higher learning.

### Literature Review

### 1.1 Institutional shared goals

The essence of a shared goal is that it is a reflection of connection among employees and management towards an important undertaking (Kantabutra & Avery, 2009). The coherence help employees understand how work is related across all the departments, levels and units in the institution as well as aligning the work of employees with the institution's strategic direction and priorities (Pulakos & O'Leary, 2011) . According to Koster, Stokman, Hodson and Sanders (2007) sharing common goals enables employees to direct their efforts to the achievement of that particular goal, but for that to happen there should be interdependence and collaboration among employees. Pulakos and O'Leary

(2011) recommend that for employees to know about the organizational goals, management need to encourage informal and simpler communication processes. This is done to make sure all the employees are aware of the goals in order to direct their efforts towards the attainment of that goal. Scholars believe that sharing common goals can positively impact on employee and organizational outcomes. For example, regarding organizational outcomes, Jing, Avery and Bergeteiner (2011) contend that organisations which share same goals with workers are likely to outperform their competitors across many business indicators and are able to attract and retain the best employees for a long time than those which do not have common goals. When it comes to employee outcomes, Jing *et al.* (2011) argue that shared goals lead to enhanced employee satisfaction and organizational commitment which ultimately result in customer satisfaction. In a similar vein, Jing and Avery (2010) state that the result of shared goals is trust within the organization, an essential ingredient that will connect employees and management towards a common goal. This corroborates Kelly's (2007) sentiments that sharing common goals is an important condition for knowledge sharing in the organization and this promotes continuous improvements that enable the business to timely respond to the changing needs of customers. The foregoing discussion therefore suggests that sharing common institutional goals can be a source of competitive advantage to institutions of high learning.

## 1.2 Institutional communication

According to Ng and Feldman (2012), communication in the institution refers to the extent to which the institution informs employees about important issues in the organization. Such important issues include business policies, values, mission, strategies, competitive performance, events, and changes that affect the institution and employees. According to Noordin, Omar, Sehan and Idrus (2010), communication in the organisation is important because employees well informed in order to perform well and share ideas with their colleagues. Institutional communication can be done either formally through formal structures or informally by means of unstructured procedures (Clmans, 2008). However informal communication is more credible than the formal one as it allows team flexibility, open discussion, better flow of ideas and greater efficiency and productivity (Clamns, 2008). Kelly (2007) and Chew and Entrekin (2011) assert that communication with employees strengthens their identification with the institution and creates institutional solidarity due to trust among employees or between different departments. Kelly (2007) therefore promotes open and clear lines of communication within the institution so that there is free flow of knowledge creation and sharing. Similarly, Mukherji, Francis and Mukherji (2009) state that useful information should be freely, frequently and informally shared in the institution. For Noordin *et al.* (2010) communication allows interaction among team members and this can happen in various ways that consist of face-to-face meetings, telephone, e-mails and others.

## 1.3 Absence of damaging conflicts

Conflicts at work happen when an employee experiences tension due to perceived differences with other employees (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). According to Brinkert (2010) conflicts between employees show the incompatibility between the values of employees that result in the possibility of interference in one's values. Landry and Vandenberghe (2009) distinguished between two types of conflicts which are relationship conflicts and task conflicts. The former relates to the interpersonal differences in styles, values and tastes that lead to tension, annoyance and animosity between employees. The latter relates to incompatibility in ideas, opinions and viewpoints about the job to be done for example how to distribute the resources, the interpretation of facts and the procedure of doing a task. Institutional conflicts threaten one's self and similarity with others, they reduce feelings of control and lead to increased uncertainty and hence stress among employees (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Brinkert (20100 warned that if conflicts are not attended to they result in litigation costs, loss of reputation, lost productivity, damaged team morale, decrease in job satisfaction, damaging work climate and high employee turnover. Employees therefore need to be liked by their colleagues in order to enhance their self-esteem (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). It indicates that institutions need to ensure there is harmony among the employees. The documented benefits of absence of damaging conflicts are: positive atmosphere that promotes reduction in stress, conflict related health problems, increased perceived fairness and job satisfaction, good social behaviours and fewer incidents of aggressive behavior such as theft and litigation (O'Grady 2004).

## 1.4 Employee relationship strength

Strong employee relationships occur when they have close working relationships and have positive feelings about

management and coworkers, when they assist each other and agree on many issues (Koster *et al.*, 2007; Ng & Feldman, 2012). Furthermore, Holtzhausen & Fourie (2009) stated that relationships are strengthened when all parties in the relationship have a desire to provide benefits to others because they are all willing to satisfy the needs of others. Strengthened relationships among employees create teamwork, improved decision making capacity, enhanced employee commitment and involvement, increased organizational collaboration and performance (Gilley, Morris, Waite, Coates & Voliquette, 2010). Similarly, Simon *et al.* (2010) have observed the benefits of strong interpersonal relationships which include: increased access to social support, creation of workplace friendship, sharing and celebrating achievements together, job satisfaction which spills over onto life satisfaction. In the light of these benefits, Chen and Tjosvold (2010) maintain that good relationships at work are critical as they help organisations to share knowledge that will enhance performance.

**Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses**

Based on review of literature, the conceptual model was developed as shown in Figure 1. Four basic constructs, which were discussed in the preceding section, make up the model. These constructs are institutional shared goals, institutional communication, absence of damaging conflict, and employee relationship strength at institutions of higher learning. The relationships between the proposed constructs in the conceptual model are as follows, common institutional goals, institutional communication and the absence of damaging conflicts positively impact on the relationship between employees of institutions of higher learning. The hypotheses that were developed explain the relationships among the constructs in detail.
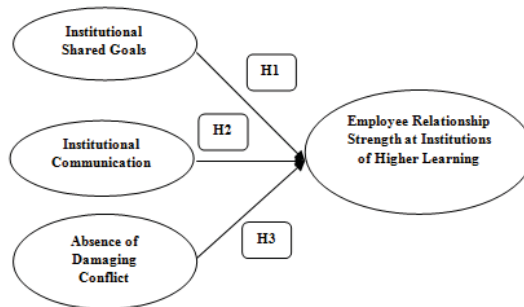


**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework

*1.5    Institutional shared goals and employee relationship strength at institutions of higher learning*

According to Simon, Judge and Ganepola (2010), shared goals indicate agreeableness among employees and the need to accomplish interdependent goals will form social bonds which lead to heightened need for employee interaction to achieve the shared goal. Koster *et al.* (2007) shared the same sentiments by stating that employee relationships are strong when employees share the same goals, assist each other, work closely, and agree on a number of issues. A study of shared rewards and goal interdependence among Chinese organisations by Chen and Tjosvold (2010) found that shared goals help to strengthen employees' relationships due to the open-minded discussions and cooperative relationships among employees. Kantabutra and Avery's (2009) study of Australian retailers found a positive association between a shared vision and organizational outcomes such as staff and customer satisfaction. This shows that staff who share a vision with the institution are satisfied with their job and this improves their relationship with management and with other employees as well. Similar results are also reported in Pollit's (2009) study which indicated that shared goals helped employees to understand that they share similar problems, do work towards same solutions and this increased employee morale and renewed team spirit. Pollock, Horn, Costanza and Sagre (2009) study found that shared goals help promote sustainability in academia because all members become active participants in all initiatives and this results in consensus among employees thereby avoiding divisions and polarization that may constrain open discussions at Universities. To this, Kelly (2009) argues that shared belief systems positively influence the development of trust and

employees become part of a network that has mutual reciprocal working relationship that thrives to achieve a common objective. Based on this the following hypothesis has been proposed;

*H1: Institutional shared goals positively influence the strength of the relationships among employees of institutions of higher learning.*

### 1.6 Institutional communication and employee relationships strength

Institutional communication creates trust and commitment which are the underlying elements in employer-employee relationships and this has an effect of strengthening the psychological contract between the two (Chew & Entrekin, 2011). A study of perceptions and emotional experiences in supervisor-subordinate relationships by Tse and Troth (2013) endorsed the relationship between institutional communication and employee relationships. The study showed that these relationships uplift positive emotions such as joy, interest, excitement and enthusiasm to work together. Mukherji *et al.* (2009) also indicated that communication is a predictor of employee relationships as it ensures trust among employees as well as commitment and consequently improves the joint action among employees. According to Jing *et al.* (2011), poor communication and strained interpersonal relationships may significantly lead to job dissatisfaction and therefore poor organizational performance. The authors further state that if there is communication within the organization, employees are able to work together because they have strong relationships. Fay (2011) asserted that communication assists in establishing and maintaining positive relationships with coworkers and this facilitates coordination and planning, social cohesion, reduce uncertainty, team problem solving, employee trust and fulfilling the need to belong. Thatcher and Brown (2010) also opine that communication facilitates creativity and collaborative working relationships among a diverse group of workers. Based on these arguments the study proposed that:

*H2: High levels of Institutional communication are positively related to strong relationships among their employees.*

### 1.7 Absence of damaging conflicts and employee relationship strength

The absence of conflicts in the institution lead to good relationships between employees as they begin to like each other and group membership satisfies employees' need to have positive and long term association with others (Giebels & Johnson, 2005). A study by Landry and Vandenberghe (2009) found a negative correlation between employee conflicts and the quality of their relationships with supervisors. This indicates that for good relationships to occur there should not be conflicts. Employee conflicts cause dysfunction in group work, diminishes team decision commitment, organizational commitment, raises communication problems and results in job dissatisfaction. Therefore, the absence of conflicts is a necessary condition for teamwork, communication and strong employee relationships. Persistent conflicts in the business damage work climate, employee morale and team performance (Brinkert, 2010). An important implication of the above discussion is that for employees to have strong relationships there should not be conflicts among employees. Therefore the following hypothesis was postulated:

*H3: The absence of damaging conflicts leads strong relationships among employees of high learning institution.*

## Research Methodology

### 1.8 Sample and data collection

The data for this research was collected from Gauteng Province – in particular, at Vaal University of Technology and North West University Campus in Vanderbijlpark. The research sampling frame was the list of registered academic staff members at Vaal University of Technology and North West University Campus in Vanderbijlpark. In order to ascertain the staff status, only research participants who are employed as academic staff after confirmation were considered for this research. Students from the Vaal University of Technology were recruited to distribute and collect the questionnaires. Of the total of 180 questionnaires distributed, 150 usable questionnaires were retrieved for the final data analysis, representing a response rate of 83.3 per cent.

### 1.9 Measurement Instrument and Questionnaire Design

Research scales were operationalized on the basis of previous work. Proper modifications were made in order to fit the current research context and purpose. "Institutional shared goals" measure used six-item scales adapted from Chow and

Chan (2008) and Tsai and Ghoshal (1998). "Institutional communication" used a five-item scale measure, "absence of damaging conflict" measure used four-item scales while "employee relationship strength" used "five-item scale measure all adapted from Herington, Johnson and Scott (2009). All the measurement items were measured on a five-point Likert-type scales that was anchored by 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree to express the degree of agreement.

### 1.10 Respondent Profile

The respondents were asked to report their demographic information, including gender, age, marital status and education. Out of a sample set of 151, the majority of the respondents females (59.5%). The median age group of the respondent was that of less than 36 years (55.4%). 58% of the respondents were single. About 79.4% of the respondents had either Masters' degree holders (53%) or Postgraduate Diploma holders (36.4%) and the remainder had Doctoral degrees (11.6).

### Data Analysis

### 1.11 Structural Equation Modelling Approach

In order to statistically analyze the measurement and structural models, this study used Smart PLS software for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique (Ringle, Wende & Will 2005). In SEM, the measurement model refers to the linkages between the latent variables and their manifest variables and the structural model captures the hypothesized causal relationships among the research constructs (Chin & Newsted, 1999). Unlike AMOS and LISREL which are covariance-based approaches, Smart PLS is a regression based technique that originates from path analysis. Smart PLS has emerged as a powerful approach to study causal models involving multiple constructs with multiple indicators (Chinomona & Surujal, 2012). Smart PLS - a component-based method, has an ability to model latent constructs that are uncontaminated by measurement error under conditions of non-normality. It has the ability to handle complex predictive models in small-to-medium sample sizes. Since the current study sample size is relatively small (150) Smart PLS was found more appropriate and befitting the purpose of the current study. In this respect, Bootstrapping resampling method was used to test the statistical significance of the relationships. This procedure entailed generating 200 sub-samples of cases randomly selected, with replacement, from the original data. Below is Table 2, presenting evidence on the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

### 1.12 Measurement Model

To ensure convergent validity, the researcher checked if items loaded on their respective (a priori) constructs with loadings greater than 0.6, while discriminant validity was checked by ensuring that there was no significant inter-research variables cross-loadings (Chin, 1998). As can be seen (Table 2), all items have loadings greater than 0.6 (i.e. ranging from 0.644 to 0.887), with no cross-loadings greater than 0.787, while t-statistics derived from bootstrapping (200 resamples) suggest all loadings are significant at pb0.001. As such, this confirms that all the measurement items converged well on their respective constructs and therefore are acceptable measures.

**Table 2.** Accuracy Analysis Statistics

| Research Construct | | LV Index Value | R-Squared Value | Cronbach's α value | C.R. Value | AVE Value | Communality | Factor Loading |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ISG | ISG1 | 4.395 | 0.000 | 0.840 | 0.882 | 0.556 | 0.556 | 0.730 |
| | ISG 2 | | | | | | | 0.794 |
| | ISG3 | | | | | | | 0.791 |
| | ISG4 | | | | | | | 0.754 |
| | ISG5 | | | | | | | 0.704 |
| | ISG6 | | | | | | | 0.695 |
| IC | IC1 | 4.445 | 0.000 | 0.861 | 0.899 | 0.640 | 0.640 | 0.801 |
| | IC2 | | | | | | | 0.791 |
| | IC3 | | | | | | | 0.805 |

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | IC4 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.794 |
|  | IC5 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.809 |
| **ADC** | ADC1 | 4.571 | 0.000 | 0.798 | 0.870 | 0.630 | 0.630 | 0.644 |
|  | ADC2 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.887 |
|  | ADC3 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.777 |
|  | ADC4 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.845 |
| **ERS** | ERS1 | 4.303 | 0.439 | 0.822 | 0.874 | 0.582 | 0.582 | 0.683 |
|  | ERS2 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.735 |
|  | ERS3 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.835 |
|  | ERS4 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.771 |
|  | ERS5 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.780 |

Note: ISG = Institutional Shared Goals; IC = Institutional Communication; ADC = Absence of Damaging Conflict; ERS = Employee Relationship Strength

According to Chin (1998), research variables should have an average variance extracted (AVE) of more than 0.5 and a composite reliability of more than 0.7 (convergent validity), and inter-construct correlations should be less than the square-root of the AVE (discriminant validity). As can be seen (Table 2), all constructs exceed these criteria, with AVE and CR generally equal or greater than 0.5 and 0.8, respectively. Furthermore, as indicated in Table 3, the square-root of the lowest AVE is 0.82 and is greater than the highest inter-construct correlation value (0.787). All in all, these results confirm the existence of discriminant validity of the measurement used in this study.

**Table 3:** Correlations between Constructs

| RESEARCH CONSTRUCTS | ISG | IC | ADC | ERS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Institutional Shared Goals (ISG)** | 1.000 |  |  |  |
| **Institutional Communication (IC)** | 0.637 | 1.000 |  |  |
| **Absence of Damaging Conflict (ADC)** | 0.518 | 0.684 | 1.000 |  |
| **Employee Relationship Strength (ERS)** | 0.553 | 0.554 | 0.590 | 1.000 |

Note:ISG = Institutional Shared Goals; IC = Institutional Communication; ADC = Absence of Damaging Conflict; ERS = Employee Relationship Strength

### 1.13 Path Model

PLS also generates the path coefficients for the relationships modeled among the constructs. The significance of these coefficients was assessed using the bootstrap procedure (with 200 sub-samples) that provided the t-values for each path estimate. Figure 2 and Table 4 presents the results of the PLS analysis on the structural model along with the path estimates and t-values. Support for the study hypotheses, which are labeled on their corresponding paths in Figure 2, could be ascertained by examining the directionality (positive or negative) of the path coefficients and the significance of the t-values. The standardized path coefficients are expected to be at least 0.2, and preferably greater than 0.3 (Chin 1998).
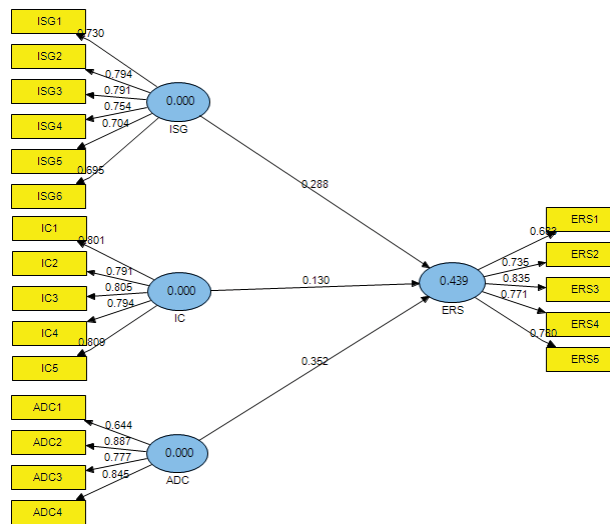
Note: ISG = Institutional Shared Goals; IC = Institutional Communication; ADC = Absence of Damaging Conflict; ERS = Employee Relationship Strength

**Figure 2:** Measurement and Structural Model Results

The results provide support for the proposed positive relationships between the five relationships (i.e. H1, H2 and H3). Figure 2 and Table 4 provide the path coefficients for H1, H2, and H3 (i.e. 0.288, 0.130, and 0.352 respectively).

**Table 4:** Results of Structural Equation Model Analysis

| Proposed Hypothesis Relationship | Hypothesis | Path Coefficients | T-Statistics | Rejected / Supported |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Institutional Shared Goals (ISG) → Employee Relationship Strength (ERS) | H1 | 0.288 | 2.548 | Supported |
| Institutional Communication (IC) → Employee Relationship Strength (ERS) | H2 | 0.130 | 1.058 | Supported |
| Absence of Damaging Conflict (ADC) → Employee Relationship Strength (ERS) | H5 | 0.352 | 3.378 | Supported |

Note: ISG = Institutional Shared Goals; IC = Institutional Communication; ADC = Absence of Damaging Conflict; ERS = Employee Relationship Strength

Overall, R² for ERS (0.439) in Figure 2, indicate that the research model explains more than 43% of the variance in the endogenous variables. Following formulae provided by Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin & Lauro, (2005), the global goodness-of-fit (GoF) statistic for the research model was calculated using the equation:

$$GoF = \sqrt{\overline{AVE} * \overline{R^2}}$$

The calculated global goodness of fit (GoF) is 0.47, which exceed the threshold of GoF>0.36 suggested by Wetzels, Odekerken-Schröder & van Oppen (2009). Thus, this study concludes that the research model has a good overall fit.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influences of institutional shared values, institutional communication and absence of damaging conflicts on employee relationship strength. In particular, three hypotheses were postulated. To test

the proposed hypotheses, data were collected from university employees in South Africa. The empirical results supported three posited research hypotheses.

Important to note about the study findings is the fact that the absence of damaging conflicts has strongest effects on employee relationships strength (0.352), followed by the institutional shared goals (0.288) and lastly by institutional communication (0.130). By implication, this finding indicates that the absence of damaging conflicts among employees strengthens their relationships more than what institutional communication and institutional shared goals do. Perhaps this could be due to the fact that the effects of the absence of damaging conflicts are likely to be felt by employees because they do interact closely and this immediately affects the way they work. Hence any change in the relationships immediately affects their working relationships. On the other hand, institutional shared goals and communication are not likely to affect immediately the relationships among employees– which sounds logical.

### 1.14 Implications of the study

The ever-increasing importance of the absence of damaging conflicts, institutional shared goals and communication to South African high educational institutions for employee relationships strength cannot be over-emphasised. In particular, the absence of damaging conflicts, institutional shared goals and communication have been used to improve relationships among employees enhance workforce stability in today's business environments characterised by high employee turnover and turnover costs.. The current study is an attempt to undertake a research in an often most neglected context but yet an important sector of the South African economy. Therefore, the findings of this empirical study are expected to have to provide fruitful implications to both practitioners and academicians.

On the academic side, this study makes a significant contribution to the organisational behaviour literature by systematically exploring the impact of absence of damaging conflicts, shared institutional goals and communication on employee relationships strength in the context of university staff members. In particular, the current study findings provide tentative support to the proposition that the absence of damaging conflicts as well as institutional shared beliefs and communication should be recognized as significant antecedents and tools to influence high education employees' desire to have harmonious relationships among themselves.

On the practitioners' side, important influential roles of the absence of damaging conflicts, institutional shared goals and institutional communication in South Africa's tertiary institutions are highlighted. This study therefore submits that educational leadership that formulates employee relationships improvement strategies should consider the absence of damaging conflicts, institutional shared goals and institutional communication when developing the tertiary education conditions of work. When the absence of damaging conflicts, shared goals and communication are perceived by employees, they are likely to desire improving their relationships and consequently create a pleasing working environment. Furthermore, practitioners – for instance, tertiary institutions that want to do the same at their institutions, they ought to target the absence of damaging conflicts, shared goals and communications to improve employee relationships.

### 1.15 Limitations and Future Research

In spite of the contribution of this study, it has its limitations which provide avenues for future researches. First and most significantly, the present research is conducted from the staff member perspective at two universities in South Africa. Perhaps if data collection is expanded to include other tertiary institutions employees, the research findings might be more insightful. Future studies should therefore consider this recommended research direction. Second, the current study was limited to students in South Africa's Gauteng Province. Subsequent research should contemplate replicating this study in other provinces of South Africa or even other African countries for results comparisons. All in all, these suggested future avenues of study stand to immensely contribute new knowledge to the existing body of social media and recreation activities literature, a context that happen to be less researched by some researchers in Africa.

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