

Summary

General Introduction

People often define themselves in terms of certain group memberships. These social identities are common in current life. People see themselves as being part of a country, gender, race, political movement, sports team or organization. In turn, these groups depend on their members to survive. Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as the individual's knowledge that he (or she) belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him (or her) of the group membership. A specific form of group identification is called organizational identification (OI). Organizational identification is a way to explain the relationship between individuals and the organization they work for. Organizational identification can be defined as the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member. Organizational identification has proven to be an important factor in organizational life. Research in the past thirty years has shown that employees who identify strongly with their organization demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours towards the organization for which they work.

Employees' attitudes and behaviours have become highly important for organizations. Many profit organizations are increasingly concerned with providing services. At the same time, non-profit organizations (e.g. universities, hospitals and police departments) are likewise becoming more service-oriented. Non-profit organizations are increasingly accountable for their results. Instead of just offering courses, performing surgery, or preserving the public order, these non-profit organizations must consider students, patients or civilians as customers who are not only affected by the organization's actions but also judge them. In these circumstances, managing employees' organizational identification appears to be a crucial success factor.

In this thesis, the relationship between employees and their organization is explored further by examining the link between employees' evaluations of organizational communication and their identification with the organization. It is assumed that effective organizational communication, in which the needs of individual employees are considered, may be an important instrument to manage their organizational identification.

Chapter 2

In order to investigate the development of organizational identification during a merger, a quasi-experimental case study was conducted on a pending merger of police organizations. The research was conducted among employees who would be directly involved in the merger and among indirectly involved employees. In contrast to earlier studies, organizational identification was measured as the expected identification prior to the merger. Five determinants were used to explain the employees' expected identification: (a) identification with the pre-merger organization, (b) sense of continuity, (c) expected utility of the merger, (d) communication climate before the merger, and (e) communication about the merger. The five determinants appeared to explain a considerable proportion of the variance of expected organizational identification. Results suggest that in order to obtain a strong identification with the soon to be merged organization, managers should pay extra attention to current departments with weaker social bonds as these are expected to identify the least with the new organization. The role of the communication variables differed between the two employee groups: communication about the merger only contributed to the organizational identification of directly

involved employees; and communication climate only affected the identification of indirectly involved employees.

Chapter 3

Earlier studies have shown that perceived external prestige and communication climate influence organizational identification. Chapter 3 presents the results of a study of the influence of communication climate and perceived external prestige on organizational identification at various organizational levels of a regional police organization. In total, 314 respondents filled out a questionnaire on communication climate, perceived external prestige and organizational identification. The results of this study show that communication climate has the strongest link with employees' identification with the daily workgroup and a weaker one with the organization as a whole. It also appears that perceived external prestige has a stronger influence on the identification with the organization as a whole than on the identification at the more concrete organizational levels (such as the department or workgroup). This research offers reasons to assume that organizational identification and communication climate are multiple constructs. If management wishes to influence organizational identification through a bottom-up process, it is wise to pay particular attention to the communication climate in the workgroups. Influencing organizational identification with the organization as a whole is better conducted through perceived external prestige.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 presents the results of a longitudinal study into the determinants of organizational identification at two organizational levels. The research was conducted in the context of a merging Dutch university. Respondents filled out a questionnaire on communication climate, perceived external prestige, job satisfaction and organizational identification four months before the merger (T1) and two years after the merger (T2). Results indicate that pre-merger identification primarily influences post-merger identification at the same organizational level. Furthermore, determinants of overall organizational identification differ from the determinants of employees' identification with a lower organizational level. Internal communication climate was especially important for the identification with the lower organizational level. Perceived external prestige only played a role in employees' identification with the overall organization. The results in this chapter underline the importance of measuring employees' identification at different organizational levels with longitudinal research designs.

Chapter 5

Chapter five presents the results of an exploratory study of the relationship between (professional and organizational) identification and (horizontal and vertical) communication. A study was carried out at a large hospital with multiple locations. Findings show that although employees identify more strongly with their profession than with their organization, there is a positive connection between professional and organizational identification. The added value of this study is the focus on the influence of the direction of the communication on professional and organizational identification respectively. Vertical communication is more strongly connected with organizational identification, whereas horizontal communication is more strongly connected with professional identification. Identification with the organization as a whole does not therefore depend first and foremost on the quality of contact with immediate colleagues within a workgroup or department, but more on the appreciation of the communication from and with top management.

General discussion

The conducted studies confirm the idea that organizations are not holistic entities but consist of several organizational units and sub-units. Members' identification with so-called lower-order identities (e.g. profession, workgroup or department) seems to

have different antecedents than their identification with higher-order identities (e.g. the overall organization). Internal communication variables seem to have more effect on lower-order identities, while external variables have a stronger connection with higher-order identities. In the discussion on how organizational members deal with competing identity claims, the current studies show that employees perceive several organizational identities as complementary. All studies showed that employees' identification with lower-order identities were positively related to their identification with higher-order identities. Apparently, employees who consider themselves to be part of a proximate workgroup may perceive more distal organizational identities as an extension of their workgroup. Employees' identification is multidimensional, develops over time and can be managed by communication. A stakeholder approach to organizational identities could be used to managing employees' multiple identifications.

It appears that communication variables play an important part in shaping all these kinds of different organizational identities. It does not seem to matter whether workgroup identities, professional identities, old identities or new identities are involved; perceptions of internal and external communication variables influence employees' identification. Three important communication strategies seem to emerge from the studies conducted. First, at organizational level explicit communication on the success of the organization could enhance employees' perceived external prestige, which in turn leads to stronger identification with the overall organization. Second, at a proximate level communication management should focus on the quality of internal relations between employees. Third, communicating on the process and outcomes of organizational change should be a constant activity which starts long before a merger takes place.

More in general, management should be continuously concerned with the balance between communicating about organizational mission, goals and values and perceptions of communication within and between organizational sub-units. A balanced combination of integral and differentiated communication strategies could be used as a tool to shape employees' expectations of the various organizational units and sub-units.

In sum, current organizational life has numerous short-term and long-term complex multiple relationships with several stakeholders. The notion of holistic organizations having corporate cultures and using these as guidelines for organizational members' identification seems to be too limited. It is therefore crucial to consider organizations as internal and external organizational identification environments with multiple stakeholders who may take a central or peripheral position in various organizational communication networks.