

Employee Voice and the Communication of Dissent in an Organisational Setting in Malaysia: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to look at employee voice and in particular, how dissent is expressed in an organisation in Malaysia. The study draws upon current theories on employee voice, dissent and whistle-blowing to report on the findings of a preliminary study that used the qualitative approach by analysing semi-structured interviews. Six members of staff took part in the study. Fundamental information contained in the interview questions included communication style, management style and the organisational culture that would encourage employee voice and freedom of speech within the organisation. The preliminary findings show that the staffs are restrictive in expressing dissent to the top management. This highlights the lack of a culture for employees to express dissatisfaction at work to higher authorities due to limited openness of the top management, which results in a low level of articulated dissent. Possible reasons include the unavailability of an employee voice mechanism within the organisation including the legal support and protection where proper channels for employees to express dissent are not in practice. This study highlights the importance of employee voice within an organisation and that proper mechanisms should be in place as a sign of respect and appreciation of employee voice at the workplace.

Keywords: Employee Voice, Workplace Communication, Employee Dissent, Whistle-blowing

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Communication is very important at work. Efficient management relies on proper communication among colleagues who are able to communicate with the top management personnel. Research has proven that proper communication, either upward (with the upper management) or horizontal (with co-workers) communications can render healthier working life and enhance employee engagement (e.g., Hynes, 2012; Hayase, 2009; Wang, 2011; Adelman, 2012). There is also research on barriers in communication addressed as employee silence by Miliken *et al.* (2003) indicating the reasons why employees do not communicate with the management which consequently lead to human resource

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problems such as turnover intention, poor organisational commitment and declining employee engagement (Lloyd, 2015; Fenn, 2000; Mustamil *et al.*, 2014; Uludag *et al.*, 2011). By promoting communication between staff and superiors, employee voice mechanism is an important framework at the workplace where messages from different level of people can be transmitted, heard and understood, and for subsequent actions that are necessary to be taken for improvements. Employee dissent represents the mainstream of employee voice where different points of views from the staff to the management are expressed (Kasssing, 1998: 183 - 4). It channels to and from all directions, upwardly, laterally, externally, and in various forms such as direct communication with the superior or management, informal talks between co-workers and the extremity as whistle-blowing which targets the public (*ibid*).

This study is motivated by an incident in expressing workplace dissent in the form of whistle-blowing which had happened at a local higher learning institution. In this case study, the Head (the president) had terminated the services of the vice president without prior warning, communication and/or appraisal, with a two-month salary payment and termination effective immediately. This led to a whistle-blowing action taken by the vice-president whereby a list of wrong-doings of the president was revealed in a press conference and reported widely. This incident subsequently led to intensive criticism and questioning from internal staff and external audiences. Issues in management and leadership ethics were discussed among staff and outsiders which subsequently affected the public image of the organisation and resulted in high turnover. Later an independent investigation to the wrong-doings of the management was demanded by the internal staff, students union and the community. A committee of this independent investigation was set up by the Board of Directors. However, the investigation report was not aired to the public and the staff. The employer filed a lawsuit against the ex-employee in defamation and rejected such claims in those allegations. Nevertheless, with the pressure from parties who questioned the management, but later the lawsuit was withdrawn. To date the management has remained silent and disregarded all the related allegations. This incident clearly evinces a lack of employee voice mechanism, as whistle-blowing is considered as a last resort to the lack of voice mechanism for employees. This study investigates employee voice and the communication of dissent within this organisation. It is thus timely as the institution has a high turnover rate which could also due to issues related to employee voice and dissent.

2.0 EMPLOYEE VOICE AND VOICE THEORY IN MANAGEMENT

This study looks at employee voice and dissent within an organization where a recent whistle-blowing incident had happened resulting in high turnover of employees. Employee voice is a term in human resource management and is deemed to be an effective mean for internal and upward communication. A Handbook of Research on Employee Voice compiled and edited by Wilkinson *et al.* (2014) has cited comprehensively the theories, rationales, issues and mechanism on employee voice. It includes the history of employees voice drawn back from the age of Industrial Revolution when trade unions were first formed, stating the rationale by recognising the importance that “workers know better than

manager how to do a job better” (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014: 6). Furthermore, it elaborates more on the perspectives on political sciences, economics, psychology and organisational behaviour in the issues of democratic humanism, industrial citizenship, legal protection for employees, transactional costs on turnover, effective management and productivity.

Employee voice framework can be traced from the studies of organisational behaviour demonstrating job satisfaction and dissatisfaction of employees in the workplace. The exit-voice-loyalty-neglect framework (Hirschman, 1970: 176) is one of the earliest theories addressing the importance of upward communication for proper management. Employees are desired to communicate with their superiors for improving their working conditions and environment when they experience dissatisfaction at work. Figure 1 indicates the model of this theory.

	<i>Destructive</i>	<i>Constructive</i>
<i>Active</i>	Exit	Voice
<i>Passive</i>	Neglect	Loyalty

Figure 1 The Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect Framework

Under this framework, employees demonstrate in 2 dimensions: constructive/ destructive and active/ passive with the responses below when facing job dissatisfaction. Exit is the behaviour to leave the organisation. Voice is the behaviour to attempt to communicate with superiors for improvement by discussing problems and giving suggestions or undertaking some forms of union activity. Loyalty is the behaviour waiting for the conditions to improve. Neglect is the behaviour to allow conditions to worsen and show poor performance such as absenteeism, lateness, reduced effort and increased error rate etc. (Robbins and Judge, 2015).

This model was further developed by Gorden (1988) into 4 quadrants showing in Figure 2. Different intensity in voice is noted. Active-constructive/destructive is characterised by increasing intensity whereas passive-constructive/destructive is ordered by decreasing intensity under this model. Employee voice is presented in the quadrant showing principled dissent, co-determination, protest, argument or dialective, making suggestions etc. to be actively communicated with the higher-ups. These communication traits suggested bolsterism and constructive change for the betterment of the organisation. In the contrary, employee would demonstrate exit behaviour coming along with destructive communication to the organisation such as being antagonistic, badmouthing, duplicity, ingratiation and complaining to the co-workers. Whistle-blowing and unionisation are positioned in the domain of both the constructive and destructive which means that these two communicative actions can bring along both positive and negative effect to the organisation.

		Active	
Destructive			Whistleblowing Unionization
	Antagonistic Exit	Principled Dissent	
	Badmouthing	Co-determination	
	Verbal Aggression	Protest	
	Duplicity	Participative Decision-Making	
	Ingratiation	Bolsterism	
	Complaining to Co-workers	Argument/ Dialectic	
		Giving/ Taking Task Information	
		Making Suggestions	
		Social Conversation/ Gossip	
	Attentive Listening		
	Quiet Non-verbal Support		
	Unobtrusive Compliance and Cooperation		
		Passive	
Constructive			

Figure 2 Range of Employee Voice (Gorden, 1988: 286)

Further from this model indicating voice intensity from the active and passive behaviour perspectives, silence of employees (where no voice is shown) is studied at the other counter-part of voice. It shows the passive employees’ behaviourism where no communication with the higher-ups occurs. Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) examined the motivations behind the voice when communication is broken down in between colleagues or superiors, and drew this model to show the verbal voice and non-verbal voice, as in Figure 3 below:

General Nature of Behaviour	Primary Employee Motive	Specific Type of Behaviour
Passive	Disengaged (Resignation)	Acquiescent Silence
		Acquiescent Voice
Proactive	Self-Protective (Fear)	Defensive Silence
		Defensive Voice
	Other-Oriented (Cooperation)	Prosocial Silence
		Prosocial Voice

Figure 3 Silence and Voice Model (VanDyne *et al.*, 2003)

The 3 types of voice and silence defined as acquiescent, defensive and prosocial are explained in Figure 4:

Acquiescent Voice	Verbal expression of information based on an employee's attitude that they cannot make a difference in the organisation
Defensive Voice	Verbal expression of information based on fear and protecting the self
ProSocial Voice	Verbal expressing information based on cooperative motives
Acquiescent Silence	Withholding of information due to a feeling of being unable to make a difference
Defensive Silence	Withholding of verbal information due to a personal fear of organisational consequences of speaking out
ProSocial Silence	Withholding of information based purely on altruistic motives with the goal of benefiting the organisation

Figure 4 Explanation of the Silence and Voice Model (VanDyne *et al.*, 2003)

Acquiescent voice is the loyalty behaviour where employees demonstrate unconditional support to the organisation without expecting good changes from the management for the employees. Therefore, employees show conformity to their boss and do not attempt to propose any constructive opinions to the management (Gorden, 1988: 288). Defensive voice is similar to the exit behaviour indicating in employees' communicative traits in gaining favour for them. ProSocial voice is where the actual voice of the employees showing constructive opinions to the management. Meanwhile, all of the three silences are the passive behaviour whereby withholding information and allowing no communication to the higher-ups are shown. It does not attempt to make changes to the organisation as well as for the employees' themselves. The motives provided in the table above stated the possible causes of communication breakdown in the workplace. When employees demonstrate silence behaviour, dissent occurs where employees realise that no communication can be made with the management for recognising their points of view. Employee dissent is further explained in the section below.

Employee Dissent, Employee Silence and Whistle-blowing

Based on the 2 theoretical frameworks above demonstrating the motives in communication, it can be concluded that employee voice is the result of employees' response to job dissatisfaction (Gorden, 1988: 283). Employee dissent is the main cause of voice and employee silence is the factor of communication breakdown. Whistle-blowing is presented in the form of expressed voice, the dissent, and it may be at a great degree caused by an unexpressed voice, the silence.

Employee Dissent and Whistle-blowing

The motive of voicing out can be seeking for improvements on both the individual and organizational at large. At individual basis, it expresses the desire to improve one's well-being such as better work conditions and working hours. At the organizational basis, it could be disagreeing and questioning with certain, normally unethical practices of the management. Channels for dissent expression come

in two ways, with the aiming audiences for internal and external. Boat-rocking is aimed for internally audience whereas whistle-blowing is the external (Kassing, 2000: 60). Kassing (2008: 346) also noted that the higher the position in management one holds in an organization, the more likelihood of upward dissent expression. Staff at non-management status express more to lateral dissent such as to co-workers, non-workers, friends and family. The extensive research on organisational dissent by Kassing (1997, 1998, 2000, and 2008) had drawn out the conceptual model of organisational dissent below to demonstrate the process of dissent expression (ibid: 321-7).

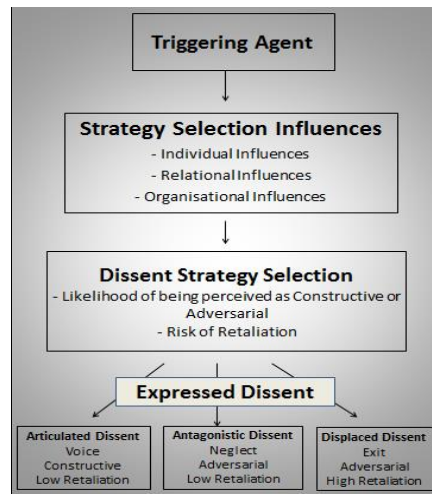


Figure 5 Model of Organizational Dissent (Kassing, 1997: 323)

Kassing (1997: 322 - 325) analyzed the factors that cause dissent including a triggering agent. This can be an event, a practice or a decision made by the superior that exceeds an individual's tolerance in their expectations, including the below possibilities:

- Ethical concerns such as clearly immoral, illegal or unethical practices or decision made
- Poor decision making in reflecting inefficient or impractical management
- Violating human rights showing insensitivity to human needs and feelings
- Questions of right and wrong
- The insane, the incredibly stupid or psychopathic
- The irritating or annoying

After the triggering agent, one will select a particular strategy for expressing dissent. This strategy will be influenced by several factors at different levels as in individual, relational and organizational concerns demonstrated below:

- Individual – individual's willingness to express dissent is strong when one feels a sense of powerlessness or has a sense of right and wrong.
- Relational – the extent of the relationship between people that one wishes to maintain within the organization and the concerns of wellbeing of their fellow workers or team members.

- Organizational - how strong one senses in their organizational identity and the climate in the organization in tolerating dissent will constitute the influence.

However, to apply in this case study, the factors affecting the choice of strategies in dissent expression are not only limited to what Kassing (1997) has shown, as the surveys were mainly done in US. It shall also include broader aspects such as the national culture and the legal system for employee voice in different countries. In the studies of national culture, certain countries would value highly to the right to freedom of speech such as US, whereas certain countries, mostly in Asia, would not see the culture of free speech as their social value (Brooks, 2008: 271). There are broader areas to further study on national culture, as shown in the Figure 6 below demonstrating the factors affecting national culture.

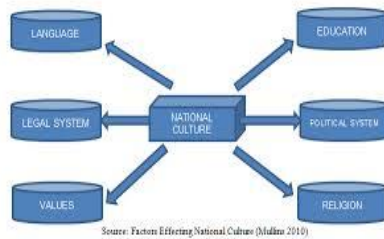


Figure 6 Factors Affecting National Culture (Brooks, 2008: 272)

Therefore, these two factors in national culture and legal system will be elaborated and analyzed further in the findings and discussion, particularly on the power perception of the people, known as power distance, which is rooted in the national culture and the legal status of employee voice mechanism in Malaysia. These 2 factors are significant to employee voice mechanism as the mainstream of employee voice in unionism needs legal eligibility for its enforcement. From it, we shall draw a revised Model of Organizational Dissent to include these 2 factors in analyzing how and why the choices of dissent strategies are used. The revised Model of Organizational Dissent for this case study is demonstrated below. Additional factors as the national influences are added as the Strategy Selection Influences (the national culture and the legal protection factors).

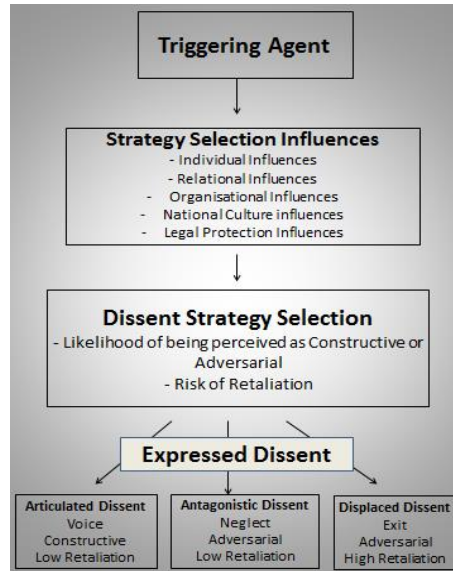


Figure 7 Revised Model of Organisational Dissent

Under Kassing's (1997) Model of Organizational Dissent, the ways of expressing dissent are identified as articulated, antagonistic and displaced showing the degree of retaliation perceived by individual for which mode they will choose to express dissent. Whistle-blowing is an extreme behavior in expressing upward dissent according to Kassing's analysis and is more likely to be expressed by exit staff. It is also found to be more with unethical issues and aimed at the external audience. By definition, whistle-blowing is an action "when an employee informs an outside person or organisation, such as a government agency or newspaper or television reporter, about an organisation's illegal or unethical behaviours (frequently on the part of its top managers)" (George and Jones, 2005: 556). However, this kind of behaviour is not rare in some countries where people are more open-minded and more prevalent in recognizing freedom of speech. Whistle-blowing is widely addressed in management textbooks particularly in the chapter about professional and leadership ethics. For example, Robbins and Judge (2015: 202) mentioned that the ethical criterion to make decisions "is to make decisions consistent with fundamental liberties and privileges, as set forth in documents such as the Bills of Rights. An emphasis on rights in decision making means respecting and protecting the basic rights of individuals, such as the right to privacy, free speech, and due process. This criterion protects whistle-blowers when they reveal an organization's unethical practices to the press or government agencies, using their right to free speech". Whistle-blowing as a dissent voice is subject to the expectation in regard to the potentiality for retaliation perceived by the employee (Klass *et al.*, 2012: 319). It is noted that (ibid: 272) the lower the position one holds in the organization, the higher the risk that will be incurred for retaliatory actions by the management. Research also found that whistle-blowers tend to have good job performance, to be more highly educated, and to hold higher-level or supervisory positions (Vadera *et al.*, 2009: 556). It is also noted that the extent of whistle-blowing disclosures is

positively associated with the permissibility of anonymous reporting and organizational support for whistle-blowing (Lee and Fargher, 2013: 283).

Employee Silence and Whistle-blowing

Employee silence could be caused by lack of proper communication or absence of information. Lack of information is not easily spotted by the employer and can be easily ignored. However, it is a common phenomenon in the workplace that either the upper or the lower management staff withhold communication and obstruct information flow. Employees who experience psychological stress and may cause silence (Robbins and Judge, 2015: 352). Workplace problems such as discrimination, harassment, corruption and misconduct are also found in resulting employee silence where employees do not know who and how to address the problems properly. It is also found that mistreatment without proper resolution by the management will result muted voice and resignation (Meares *et al.*, 2004). Research also found that an open communication where opinions and voice are treated with respect will less likely to cause silence as high workgroup identification and high procedural justice prevails (Robbins and Judge, 2015: 352). Moreover, silence is also the attitude of apathy where staff do not support certain practices or managerial decisions in showing in one's behavior in resistance to change (ibid: 568).

Miliken *et al.* (2003) addressed the reasons of employee silence where fear is predominantly viewed as the reason for not communicating in the workplace. From the studies it stated that employees are afraid of being tagged with different colors by the employer (mostly tagged as "trouble maker" or "difficult to work with") and being taken retaliatory actions after voicing out critical issues to the management. Other than that, employees wish to maintain good relationship with the superior in order to increase what called social capital (such as trust, goodwill) for career advancement and compensation. Employees choose to remain silence where negative and less open management are imposed to the employees. This can be categorized as a behavior known in a term in the study of organization behavior as "impressive management" where employees are taking part in organizational politicking and would apply a tactic by only projecting positive image to the management. Rather than arguing with the higher authorities, subordinates would remain silence with the motive of not being perceived by the boss as antagonistic (Robbins and Judge, 2015).

Further the framework by Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) on employee silence, all types of employee silence are the result of managerial problems, although some motives are good such as desire to help other and share the duties as described as pro-social silence. The protective or defensive silence is the like-mindedness behaviour addressed as conformity showing compliance attitude (Gorden, 1988: 286) with the purpose to maintain good relationship with the organisation by not "making trouble" but to support unconditionally due to the fear of not being trusted by the authority. Acquiescent silence is the passive and destructive behaviour showing negligence, psychic withdrawal and allowing conditions to worsen.

A phenomenon known as 'thunder in silence' has triggered employee whistle-blowing as voice to be an important issue in workplace communication. Employees who do not speak up and instead remain silent can engage in another type of protest which is described as active silence (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014: 13). It is where employee voice or dissent is suppressed to an extreme manner and it prompts

the employees to carry the message of discontent for demanding managerial solutions (ibid), especially against unethical business conducts and practices, which is seen in this case study.

Voice Mechanism

Wilkinson *et al.* (2014) explain that voice mechanism can be categorised (ibid: 227-342) as follow:

- Collective voice – It represents the interests of groups and normally in the forms of trade unions, work councils, joint consultative committees and non-union employee representatives. Unionism is one of the earliest forms of collective voice for collective bargaining. This kind of voice is normally regulated in the countries' legal system. Works Councils is a joint council or committee representing employer and employees that discusses working conditions, wages, etc., within a plant or business. (British Dictionary definitions for works council). It is aimed to increase employees' participation in the management for better employee commitment in contrast to compensating the diminishing union density of employee representation, main in Western countries (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014: 227-235). Joint Consultative Committees (JJC) first formed in the UK, with a group of people represent the management and employees of an organisation, and who meet for formal discussions before decisions are taken which affect the employees (Cambridge Business English Dictionary, 2016). Some forms of workplace partnership also happened where senior managers, trade unions or employee representative get together tackle big issues in a climate of openness and trust. Non-union employee representative are also organised in organisations for collective voice channel to the management. Some organisation would encourage voice in the mutual gains such as dialogues with their employees for constructive industrial relations (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014: 327-340).
- Individual voice – It represents only individual interests and mainly dealing with communication with the management within the organisations, such as grievance and other procedures. Furthermore, the resolution process by a 3rd party of organisational grievance is suggested below (McCabe and Lewin, 1992) for workplace disputes:
 - Ombudsman – a position created to receive and respond to inquiries, complaints, requests for policy clarifications, or allegations of wrongdoing from employees and to investigate such matters (Newstrom and Davis, 2002: 66).
 - Mediation – the reconciler of disputes between 2 parties (George and Jones, 2005: 426).
 - Arbitration – authority who makes final judgement and binding decision complying with employee standards, policies and procedures as lay in the handbook.
 - Tribunals and peer reviews – additional judges to fulfil employees' general preference in being judged by “jury of their peers” rather than an administrator or manager.
- Direct voice – It is task-based voice in team working, autonomy and performance and involves employee involvement and participation in the management of organisations. Voice in the mutual gains can also be included as in the forms of attitude survey, suggestion schemes etc.

- Indirect voice – It involves a 3rd party entity other than the employer and the employee and the form is normally in group representative in order to appeal for employees' interests such as pay, work conditions and job security. It represents very similarly to the collective voice.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Case Study

This study adopts a case study approach. According to Matthews and Ross (2010: 128), the subject to be chosen as case studies can be a person, an organisation, a situation or a country. There are some criteria for the selection of a case study and should include at least one in criticality, extremity or uniqueness, representativeness or typicality, revelation and longitudinal concerns (ibid). This case is selected as fulfilling as one of the criteria stated above, to be revelatory purpose. Furthermore, the case study is of a higher learning institution where a whistle-blowing incident had recently taken place. As whistle-blowing is identified as an extreme behaviour in dissent expression, this study will focus on organisational dissent, particularly on dissent expression to the management. It is dissent between the employees and the management that leads to whistle-blowing incident, as whistle-blowing is the extreme mode of dissent communication. In addition to be these two purposes in revelation and extremity, case study can be a test-site for theory (Denscombe, 2007: 40). This case is selected for predicting a previous theory, the Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework by Hirschman (1970), on the outcomes if the theory holds true. This theory is in the notion that staff will demonstrate exit behaviour if voice is resisted in workplaces. This case study is in line with the voice theory revealing that how the exit staff's communication behaviors bring out dissent in an organisation and subsequently to be the possible cause to quit the organization showing dissatisfaction at work.

Data and Respondents

We used the purposive sampling method whereby three current staff and three exit staff from this organisation were selected for the semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling is particularly suitable for a case study where it has no attempt to create a sample that shall draw generalisation on the topic studied (Matthews and Ross, 2010: 167 – 170). This type of sampling is concerned more in identifying and exploring theoretical ideas from the data collected (ibid: 154). The purpose of this sampling is based on gathering qualitative data and focusing on the exploration and interpretation of experiences and perceptions (ibid: 167). The number in this sampling is relatively small and more focused on selecting the samples that are “strongly representing the phenomena of interest” (ibid). The three exit staff have fulfilled this condition to be selected as the respondents for demonstrating behaviour responding to the phenomenon in this case study, the turnover intention. They can reveal better the dissent they face in the organisation. Two of the exit staff provided information thru email correspondence with the interviewer by filling up the answers in the questions asked in the semi-structure interview form. Although email interview has the disadvantage of lacking spontaneity of probing and chasing down interesting topics, it allows the interviewees to answer the interview

questions in their own time and literally across different locations without committing to reply the interview questions promptly (Berg and Lune, 2014: 134). Respondents are allowed to have more time to ponder more thoroughly in answering the interview questions. The rest of the respondents were interviewed in a less formal setting including one exit staff and three current staff. The three current staff are selected to compare and counter check the data obtained from the three exit staff for the purpose of data validation. When data show constant outcomes or results, it will indicate that it has reached data saturation without the need to further collect more data for validation.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Content Analysis

Content analysis was utilised for the data analysis. This method enables the analysis of the information collected from the interviews to understand more in-depth on the issues and problems in the organisation (Matthews and Ross, 2010: 315). This approach is appropriate for collecting straightforward factual information and it is therefore being applied in the interpretation of the data collected in the interview. The interviews with three exit staff and three current staff were transcribed and coded into categories with respondents 1, 2 and 3 represent the exit staff and respondents 4, 5 and 6 represent the current staff. Two themes emerged in relation to the problems faced in dissent expression in this organisation i.e. communication style and management style. Drawing on the management theories discussed in the previous section, themes were identified via linguistic analysis based on the lexical choice and structure. After that, the content will be “quantified” by segmenting, categorising and relinking the information obtained in the interviews for data interpretation (Matthews and Ross, 2010: 373).

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the findings show that employee voice is not supported by the management and dissent leads to high turnover in this organisation. Two main themes emerge that relate to the lack of employee voice mechanism within this organisation, i.e. communication style and management style of the management personnel in this organisation. Further subcategories explain how these factors could lead to high turnover in this organisation. This section will discuss these two styles with extracts from the interviews.

Communication Style

Communication style of the upper management in this organisation is discussed based on three aspects, i.e. allowing freedom of speech, effectiveness in upward communication and dissent expression. The findings show that all three aspects are interrelated and greatly influence the employee voice mechanism and dissent communication within this organisation.

Freedom of Speech

Freedom of speech is the extent whether staffs are allowed to express their points of view or opinions regarding issues or suggestions to the organisation. Based on the respondents' answers, the staffs are able to voice their concerns, thus we can say that they have 'freedom of speech', however caution is practiced. It is noted that when employees perceive the communication between the employees and the employers as less open, this is more likely to cause silence as employees do not feel that their voice is treated with respect (Robbins and Judge, 2015: 352). The following are excerpts from the interviews.

Extract 1:

- Respondent 1 – “*The freedom to express is allowed* but the management is still cautious about staff's voice. I was advised by the HR before not to evoke dissent issues, but I am still allowed to send email to the staff. Although the management don't stop staff's voice, there is still a lot of staff who don't dare to express, mainly due to job security reason.”
- Respondent 2 – “*You can express anything you want but the top management just don't listen to you. So there is freedom of speech in that sense.*”
- Respondent 3 – “*No. I don't believe that there is freedom of speech in the organisation. For example, I rose out unfairness among the employees to the supervisor, the supervisor mentioned that this is the company policy and we can't do anything.*”
- Respondent 4 – “*There are only a few people talking in the meeting. If it is open, everyone is motivated to participate in the topic discussed.*”
- Respondent 5 – “*The management is not open to accept opinions.* For example, I have ever proposed to apply a free software to upgrade the system in the library but it is not accepted. The reason they rejected my opinion is that this software needs regular maintenance and will increase work load.”
- Respondent 6 – “*The management style is very conservative and always one man says.*”

The respondents stated that while there is freedom of speech, e.g. ‘*freedom to express is allowed*’, ‘*you can express anything*’, it is however not encouraged and even disregarded or ignored by the management, e.g. ‘*the top management just don't listen to you. So there is freedom of speech in that sense*’, ‘*I don't believe that there is freedom of speech in the organisation*’. This shows that the management does not really respect employee voice by accepting their input although employees are allowed to voice their opinions, e.g. ‘*There are only a few people talking in the meeting. If it is open, everyone is motivated to participate in the topic discussed*’, ‘*The management is not open to accept opinions*’ and ‘*always one man says*’. It can be said that employees are allowed to have their say about work related issues, but the matters are not taken any further actions by the top management. The top management completely disregards what employees say and shows a lack of respect of employee voice and communication of dissent. Therefore, it discourages employees in empowering them the decision making power from their input on organisational related issues and therefore renders employees' apathy in their works and cause silence.

Upward Communication

Upward communication is where communication flows to a higher level in the group or organisation by giving feedbacks, reflecting problems and providing suggestions for improvement to the management, normally shows an open-door policy applied by the organisation (Robbins and Judges, 2015: 334). It can be said that the upward communication in this organisation is found to be ineffective. Respondents described the authority as '*ineffective communicator*', '*not willing to listen and accept inferiors' input*', '*not open to suggestions*' indicating that rapport is not built between the employees and the management. Furthermore, '*vague, general and not specific in the instruction given*', as the comment from the respondent shows that the president in the organisation, who is referred specifically in the extract, cannot communicate effectively with the colleagues, particularly with the staff at middle and the lower management in the organisation. Fear is also another factor to stop upward communication as there could be repercussions. As stated by the respondents '*be afraid of misunderstanding of word perceived by people*' and '*afraid to be taken revenge*'. It can be seen in the following extracts:

Extract 2:

- Respondent 2 – "*He is ineffective communicator. Firstly he has no experience in university management as he has not joined any university in terms of teaching and management. He just does what he thinks is appropriate. He refuses to consult those who have this kind of experience. He cannot express well and what he said is vague and general. He can't make decisions and often delay his decisions until BOD agreed.*"
- Respondent 2 – "*Generally feel frustrated as constructive suggestions were ignored. You have to bargain with the president all the time before you can get things done. Time wasted on negotiation. Instructions from top management are vague and not specific. If you ask for specific, he can't give you examples.*"
- Respondent 3 – "*Normally, people seldom voice out their opinions in the meeting. Most of the time, it is downward communication. Lower level employees will do as per instruct. Communication will be effective if both parties (higher level or lower level) are open to give and receive feedback. However, due to organisational culture, top management/ bosses are too self-centred to own interest in the company. Example: during meeting, the boss would like the listen to the opinion from the employees on departmental issues. However, the employees are unlikely to share because those opinions will not be implemented and approved by top management. This makes them unwilling to share their views.*"
- Respondent 5 – "*I'm afraid of that my words are understood by others differently and being twisted in different stories.*"
- Respondent 5 – "*I'm afraid of to be taken revenge.*"
- Respondent 6 – "*It is easier to communicate with my boss rather than with the top management as the top management is not really open to suggestions. They seem more likely to listen to certain staff who are his preference or those messages that he prefers to listen or the BODs prefer.*"

- Respondent 6 – “After a few times making *ineffective communication with the top management* I feel tired to talk to them anymore.”

While the top management has demonstrated incompetence in communicating with the employees, the channel of upward communication is obstructed because ideas and constructive suggestions cannot be effectively reached to the top management for improvements. Incompetence in communication of the top management is shown in the lack of understanding in the open-door policy that can bring constructive effect to the management. It has negatively affected staff's morale from their perception in the competency of the top management's willingness in communication by demonstrating fear and apathy to communicate with the top management. When constructive suggestions are turned down, employees will change to be passive behaviour either keeping silence or murmuring of dissatisfaction that can be demonstrated in Gordon's Range of Voice (1988: 286). Two types of silence are identified in this analysis, acquiescent silence and defensive silence in the current staff. It is according to VanDyne *et al.* (2003)'s Silence and Voice Model when staff feel tired to talk to the management, they will start to disengage in the organisational activities demonstrated in acquiescent silence that can be seen respondent 6 and also germinate intention to resign. When staffs perceive the retaliation is high when speaking up, they will demonstrate in defensive silence to withhold information due to fear that can be seen in respondent 5.

Dissent Expression

Dissent expression is where disagreement or contradiction of opinions about organisational practices and policies are brought to the management (Kassing, 2002: 189). Those disagreements or contradiction of opinions are not welcome by the top management. Respondents described the top management as ‘*The management doesn't block your voice but they give no feedback to your words and opinions*’, ‘*the management will not respond to that*’, ‘*they close their ears*’, ‘*will not be taken into consideration*’, ‘*Top management will not appreciate because you have created a new ‘problem’ to them*’. Staffs also suffer from humiliation when they express disagreement to the management that can be seen in ‘*When I express my disagreement to top management, I was either being scolded or insulted by him with bad words. And he is really not respecting staffs who work with him.*’

Extract 3:

- Respondent 1 – “Due to the smaller size in this university, there is no difficulty to talk to the president. *The management doesn't block your voice but they give no feedback to your words and opinions*. Many staffs have given suggestions to the management and end up resigning. The management don't see this phenomenon seriously. You can publish your opinions in the Press but not inside the school openly. The school allows no union activities for the staff to go against the management. SWA (Staff Welfare Association) is a channel to express staff's voice and communication with the management, *but the management don't respond to that.*”
- Respondent 2 – “They allow you to speak but *they close their ears*. They are not capable to deal with issues. They just follow what the BOD want.”

- Respondent 3 – “I voice out my opinion during meeting. After I know that my opinions *will not be taken into consideration*. I stop giving any feedback.”
- Respondent 4 – “*Top management will not appreciate because you have created a new ‘problem’ to them*. After several attempts then I stopped.”
- Respondent 6 – “*When I express my disagreement to top management, I was either being scolded or insulted by him with bad words. And he is really not respecting staffs who work with him.*”

In this organisation, dissent is allowed as in allowing freedom of speech, but issues are ignored. Management is found having the “Deaf-Ear Syndrome” (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014: 6) where management gives little attention for the workers who would like to exercise employee voice. It also shows deliberate negligence of employees concerns and resolving issues that the management is supposed to deal with and to put into changing actions (ibid). This is also evident in relation to freedom of speech and upward communication discussed previously.

Management Style

Three distinct features are found in the management in projecting its willingness in allowing employee voice, i.e., power sharing, openness and organisational culture.

Power Sharing

Power is found to be centralised and autocratic in the upper management. This is related by the respondents’ descriptions that ‘*the power structure of this organisation is lopsided*’, ‘*the president is wielded with a lot of power (mainly because he can access to the Board of Directors and there is not check balances in the power structure*’, ‘*power is dominant by the top management*’, ‘*few top management hold power for all matters, no auditing on the power give to them*’, ‘*power is held in one person’s hand*’. From those excerpts, it does not show a power monitoring system in this organisation by different level of employees.

Extract 5:

- Respondent 2 – “*The power structure of this organization is lopsided. The president is wielded with a lot of power (mainly because he can access to the Board of Directors and there is no check and balances in the power structure so that he can interpret whatever the BOD’s directives in his personal interest) but incompetent. He can’t make his decision and rely on BOD as he does not want to bear any responsibility if something goes wrong.*”
- Respondent 3 – “*Power is dominant by the top management. The power did not delegate to middle management.*”
- Respondent 3 – “*Poor organisation structure, few top managements hold power for all matters, no auditing on the power given to them, unable to make complaints.*”
- Respondent 6 – “*I don’t like the power structure as power is held in one person’s hand.*”

From it, this organisation demonstrates a less democratic management style. This style is not welcome by the staff by showing their comments to the power structure as poor organisation structure and disliking of the power structure in this organisation.

Openness

Openness reflects how transparent is in the management. There is limited openness within this organisation. Based on the respondents answers, some of the terms and phrases used that show limited openness in management include description of upper management as ‘*conservative*’, ‘*top-down approach*’, ‘*recruiting staff who has a close relationship with them, they keep quiet if no staff makes any complaint*’, ‘*the top management refused to listen and insisted that he is right even it is a wrong judgement*’. This shows that the management practise a ‘close-door policy’ and no transparency. Questioning to the top management’s decisions is not allowed.

Extract 6:

- Respondent 2 – “*Conservative, unorganised and top-down approach.*”
- Respondent 3 – “*They recruit a person who has a close relationship with them. They keep quiet if no staff makes any complaint.*”
- Respondent 6 – “*My boss listened to my suggestion and even provided me a better solution. However, the top management refused to listen and insisted that he is right even it is wrong judgement.*”

Demonstrated in a less openness in the management style in this organisation, it shows power domination and disallow staff in participating decision making process. It also indicates power abuse by committing wrong decision without openly listening to staff’s constructive opinions for a better and rightful decision.

Organisational Culture

When asking about the organisation culture and structure from the respondents, poor organisational structure and culture are perceived in providing conducive atmosphere for employees’ voice, as stated by respondents via phrases such as ‘*unorganised*’, ‘*top management/ bosses are too self-centred to own interest in the company*’, ‘*opinions will not be implemented and approved by top management*’, ‘*poor organisation structure*’, ‘*staff are treated unfairly*’. These comments from the respondents show that the top management does not follow strict organisational structure but allow the organisation to be structured in disorderliness. It also shows no proper procedures for staff’s voice to be channelled therefore it allows staff’s concerns to be managed in an ineffective way.

Extract 7:

- Respondent 2 – “*Conservative, unorganised and top-down approach.*”
- Respondent 3 – “*Normally, people seldom voice out their opinions in the meeting. Most of the time, it is downward communication. Lower level employees will do as per instruct. Communication will be effective if both parties (higher level or lower level) are open to give and receive feedback. However, due to organisational culture, top management/ bosses are too self-centred to own interest in the company. Example: during meeting, the boss would like the listen to the opinion from the employees on departmental issues. However, the employees are*

unlikely to share because those *opinions will not be implemented and approved by top management*. This makes them unwilling to share their views.”

- Respondent 4 – “*Poor organisation structure.*”
- Respondent 6 – “I am neither feel proud nor having a sense of belonging or feel that I am respected in this organisation, simply because *the management treats staff unfairly.*”

From the above excerpts, the organisation is perceived having negative culture and poor structure due to management disorderliness. Staffs generally do not feel a sense of belonging in this organisation and showing their disappointment to the management.

Employee Voice Mechanism in the Organisation

Based on the above analysis on communication style and management style, this organisation does not show a conducive environment for employee voice mechanism. Furthermore, evidence from all the respondents show that there is no proper voice mechanism for the employees in this organisation. A proper voice mechanism shall provide channels for staff's inputs, feedback and also grievances when facing problems in communication with either the colleagues or the superiors. It is found that there are no collective voice channel in this organisation such as trade union and other forms of statutory entities for staff to discuss with the management. Staff's voice is more in individual and direct basis in reaching the top management. Staff's opinions are not easily accepted but their concerns are always ignored. This is shown in the comments as *'the management totally ignore staff's voice and opinions'*, *'no respect of staff voice'*, *'employees' view is normally ignored'*, *'I don't think this company measure the effectiveness of communication'*, *'staff left the company when they feel that the management do not appreciate their work'*, *'management normally take for granted'*. These comments show that there is no employee voice mechanism in this organisation. Another important point brought out in one of the respondents' comment is that, staff quit because they perceive their opinions and inputs are not respected, but their efforts to improve at work are taken for granted by the management. It indicates that the organisation does not provide its employees a proper internal channel for grievance procedures. Therefore, staffs either channel their grievances to their co-workers or leave the organisation after getting indecent treatments from the management. It is particularly important to show how employee voice can affect staff's morale and engagement in the organisation.

Extract 8:

- Respondent 1 – “No respect at all. *The management totally ignore staff's voice and opinions.*”
- Respondent 2 – “No. What the president interested is how to curry favour of BOD. Employees' view is normally ignored.”
- Respondent 3 – “*I don't think this company measure the effectiveness of communication. They don't like to listen to negative feedback. Staff left the company when they feel that the management do not appreciate their work. Management normally take for granted.*”
- Respondent 3 – “I voice out my opinion during meeting. After I know that my opinions will not be taken into consideration. I stop giving any feedback”

- Respondent 4 – “If staff’s input are respected, staff will talk freely about the matters and issues in the meeting”
- Respondent 6 – “Since staff are unable to voice up in the meeting, most of the share their emotion to those having the same experience in the organisation. It seems the only way to express our concerns to the organisation”
- Respondent 6 – “*I don’t think the management respect staff’s voice.* The reason is always that if a staff is not in his preference list, good suggestions from employees are turned down although suggestions are good for the organisation”

From this analysis, it gives a signal that employee voice mechanism plays an essential part in proper communication in the workplace. If staffs find no channel to voice out their concerns, they will withhold information and not to express freely to the management. It will cause more dissent and silence amongst staff without proper channel for emotional grievances and dissatisfaction. These emotional grievances and dissatisfaction also show no output channel due to the unavailability of an ombudsman system for resolving disputes in the organisation. As a consequence, these negative emotions will trigger employees’ intention to leave the organisation.

The findings of this study can be further elaborated and justified by referring to the perspectives of national culture and the country’s statutory system which can give better insights into the management and communication styles found in some workplaces in Malaysia, which are also evident in this case study.

The Influences of National Culture

While voice is the expression of organisational change expected by employees, experts in researching organisational development have identified national culture as one of the significant factors for a change success. National culture can be the guideline to show values, beliefs, norms and behaviour, including communication traits of people in the society as well as the workplace (George and Jones, 200:13). It includes how people react to phenomena having to do with power, conflicts, ambiguity, time and change, as shaping the customs and practices that occurs within organisations (Cummings and Worley, 2015: 164). These factors can be seen in the findings such as power domination in management style and conflicts that happen in communication style. In examining the national cultural aspects of Malaysia, the following factors shed more light on why the vague and ineffective communication style and the less open and power-centralised management style occur.

Context

According to Cummings and Worley (2015: 166) the national culture of Asian countries, including Malaysia, have been identified as high-context culture. In high-context culture, relationship is emphasized more than tasks and hidden meanings are reflected in communication. Communication traits reflected in high-context culture are indirect in words and phrases, as well as less precise and less specific usage of words in expressing the meanings. The words used could not reflect the message in a more effective way and it usually takes a longer time to get a message transmitted and understood. This can be seen in the comments of the respondents about the management’s communicational

competency. “Vague, unspecific, general” instructions given by the upper management would give a clue on the inconcise language use in communication. In addition, the management is perceived as having their preference list for whom they prefer in getting support and favours from the management, through close relationship with the top management personnel.

Power Distance

Power distance as one of the factors influencing national culture is also noted for the freedom level of upward communication. Superiors are not seen in equal position to discuss and accept opinions freely from the staff from lower hierarchical levels. Malaysia has shown the highest among other countries in power distance in its national culture (Robbins and Judge, 2015: 173-5). A high power distance culture tends to accept unequal distributions of power and influence, and consequently autocratic and paternalistic decision-making practices are the norm. Organisations in high power-distance cultures tend to have power centralised. Subordinates in these organisations represent a lower social class and they are expected to be supervised closely and believe that power holders are entitled to special privileges. Therefore, workers are normally not given equal opportunities to voice their concerns to the management and taking part in the decision making process in Malaysia workplace in general. With this kind of power structure, employees are restricted to bring more of their true voice to the higher-ups and it will result in unsatisfied communication at work. When they experience dissatisfaction caused by communication breakdown and feel that they are unable to bring about a change in the situation, they will opt to exit the job and it causes turnover. It is also evidently shown in this organisation that the lower management staffs are rendered lower level of freedom to express dissent to the management as reflected in their communication traits. Not only would the lower management staff, employees at the upper management who have explicitly communicated with the higher-ups also demonstrate exit behaviour. It is due to their perception that their concerns are ignored by the relevant authority. Employees when facing power distance at work would have to accept but not challenge the power holders to change for a more equal distribution of power, as seen in this case study.

Assertiveness

The level of assertiveness shows an important communicative factor in dissent expression. The studies of assertiveness is based on individual's beliefs that one possesses the power to control and subjugate their surrounding environment or one has to maintain harmony and subjugate themselves to their surrounding environment (Rachagan and Kuppusamy, 2013: 375). The former represents an active attitude in communication with people and vice versa. Active communicators will demonstrate their knowledge in about the laws of the Universe and apply it in controlling their surroundings by speaking out of the “self” (ibid). On the contrary, passive communicators will subjugate themselves with the consideration of maintaining harmony in their surroundings (ibid) and favour avoidance to conflicts to the people around them. In the studies of assertiveness, most of the Asian societies fall into the category of passive communication where people believe that maintaining peace and harmony with their surroundings is more important than asserting themselves whereby assertiveness

is believed to be an aggressive mannerism (ibid). Malaysia with the score of 3.87, falling below average score of 4.17 in the studies of assertiveness (House *et al.*, 2004), would rather “hide” dissent than show it to the people and the management. It can also be seen in this organisation that the lower management staff shows hesitation in their communication traits when expressing dissent. They do not want to be perceived as antagonistic by assertively expressing themselves but rather choose to be silent and maintain harmony in their workplace relationships and suffer silently until a time when they act by exiting the company thus causing turnover.

The Statutory System for Employee Voice in Malaysia

Lack of systematic support offered by the legal system is identified as another reason in suppressing voices to protect employee interests at large (Kumar *et al.*, 2013). Under the current legal system in Malaysia, it is not conducive for employees to form trade unions due to structural barriers (ibid), including cumbersome procedures in getting recognition and renewal for the registration of trade unions. Unionism and any form of mandated employee bargaining or negotiation body, as representing the mainstream of the voice mechanism, are not strongly regulated under the Malaysia legal system. It is also noted that the Malaysian trade union movement is under numerous challenges, particularly from the law-makers who shall legitimate rather than hinder to protect employees’ interests (Rose *et al.*, 2011). The statutory entitlement is restricted by the state, in a great extent with many interventions by the ministry in controlling the formation of trade union rather than allowing freedom of industrial democracy. It is evidently shown in the two main legislations for trade union provisions in Malaysia, the *Trade Union Act 1959* and the *Industrial Relations Act 1967*, which are found not supportive but difficult for registration and recognition of trade union and allowing managerial dominance for trade union movement in organisations (ibid). Not only in the recognition process but also in the collective bargaining, the statute has rendered trade unions ineffective power. Under Section 13 (3), collective bargaining does not include the matters in promotion, transfer, filling up vacancies in the organisations, termination of contract, dismissal, reinstatement, assignment and allocation of duties and task for an employment. In other words, trade unions have no power to fight for workers if their termed contracts are terminated without prior warning or written agreement. Neither is it entitled to strive for the ever increased workload of an employee without giving extra allowance or increment in the pay scale nor mediates, arbitrates and negotiates contractual disputes with the employer as seen in the whistle-blowing incident in this organisation. It impairs the bargaining power of the employees if unreasonable working or contractual conditions are imposed on them such as workload and termination of contract. Collective voice as presented as the bargaining entity with the employer is weak as employees in the workplace are in the state of disunity for the voice mechanism to be formed. Without a strong collective bargaining body for personal protection, employees would somehow hesitate to express critical issues in mismanagement and to avoid dealing with such issues as seen in one of the respondent’s comment to the management. The facts of the weakness in the statute and lack of trade unions in the country can be the reasons to allow such blatant power assertions to happen as in the case of this institution. Employees who show grievances find no way to express their complaints to the management and therefore can only talk to the co-workers who have the similar experiences in encountering domineering management. In spite of the whistle blowing incident, there was hardly any changes brought about to the voice mechanism, and

due to job insecurities on the part of the employees, the management gets away with such poor styles of management and suppression of employee voice in this organization.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, employees in this organisation are generally not satisfied with their status quo and also the communication modes with the upper management. They find no proper channels in expressing their concerns and issues to the ultimate decision maker who can change and improve their status quo and working conditions. Therefore, having expressed of dissent within the organization, the staff found that their concerns are not heard and handled, they consider the exit option and result in high turnover. However, this does not necessarily result in whistle-blowing. Most of the staff at the middle to lower management levels would talk to their co-workers instead of the higher authorities, showing their worries in the retaliation by the management. This kind of behaviour is also the reflection in the influences of national culture and the weak legal protection framework for employee voice to take place. Lack of job security is one of the reasons for staff who fear the retaliation by the management if they were to voice out issues at the workplace. It can be shown from the findings through analysis in the communication style and management style. Staff has perceived the top management's communication style as not open to suggestions, conservative, disrespecting and ignoring staff's concerns. This communication style has also reflected in the management style showing autocratic and centralized power in dominating the decision making process for the management's preference rather than empowering staff's participation in decision making process. Such blatant power domination can also be shown in the national culture of Malaysia through the analysis in high-context culture, power distance and a non-assertive style in communication. Furthermore, the imperfect legal protection for workers in trade unionism has also fostered such culture in impairing employees' voice and interests in general.

In relation to the Exit-Voice-Loyalty theory, if employees' attempts in voice fail to reach the management, they will demonstrate exit behaviour, that is, to leave the organisation. This behaviour is rationalised as employees' frustration towards ineffective management and increasing dissatisfaction at work (Harlo, 2001). When staffs demonstrate exit behaviour, it shall be noted as a significant problem for the organisation as it will cause losses for the organisation in employees' knowledge, skills and abilities (Robbins and Judge, 2015: 110). The exit behaviour would also justify the behaviour of the active and enthusiastic employees who express their voice to the management for any actions in improving the working conditions, or else, exiting the organisation is their choice. All of the above stress the importance of employee voice to be the communicative indicator for organisational health, employees' well-being and engagement which can directly impact on organisational management and its efficiency (Kassing *et al.*, 2012: 249). Building up a perfect mechanism for employee voice with effective channels for employees' dissent to be addressed is suggested for faulty organisational management and to avoid employees' mistreatment (*ibid*).

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