

Research Paper

## Superior-Subordinate Communication and Employee Work Engagement: The Case of Adama Science and Technology University, Ethiopia

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### Abstract

Organizational communication in general and superior-subordinate communication, in particular, are among the factors that determine the level of employees' work engagement. Though there are studies across the world, this issue has not been addressed at least in the context of the current study. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to examine the association between organizational communication and employee work engagement. To this end, quantitative data were collected from 302 participants including 47 managers and 255 non-manager staff of Adama Science and Technology University using standardized Likert scales. Results of the study show that superior-subordinate communication and the opportunity to communicate with the upper manager have a statistically significant moderate positive association with employee work engagement. Nevertheless, results of standard regression analysis revealed that only positive superior communication has significantly contributed to the variation in the level of employee work engagement. Implications of the study include the need to strengthen and maintain positive superior communication while addressing other variables which could affect employee work engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Organizational communication (OC) is often defined as the process of sending and receiving a message through formal or informal networks among members of a given organization or between an organization and its external stakeholders (Semren, 2017; Proctor, 2014; Ince and Gül, 2011; Arons, 2010; Hayase, 2009). OC in general and internal organizational communication, in particular, play crucial roles in improving organizational leadership and performance by creating common understanding, shared vision, and collaboration among employees (Semren, 2017; Blazenaite, 2011; Arons, 2010). Emphasizing its importance, Kuria (2008, p.3) describes organizational communication as the

“backbone of good organizational performance” while Hanson (as cited in Kuria, 2008, p.3) refers to it as the “glue that holds an organization together”. The metaphors ‘backbone’ and ‘glue’ indicate the roles that organizational communication plays in linking parts of an organization to form a strong whole. In short, the proper functioning of an organization largely relies on its effective internal communication.

Organizational communication can be categorized in terms of the direction of information flow, the network of communication, the means of communication, and the medium of encoding messages (Semren, 2017; Blazenaite, 2011). Based on the direction of the flow of

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information, it is described as vertical (bottom-up and top-down), lateral, diagonal, one-way, and two-way communication (Semren, 2017). Again, OC is categorized as formal and informal based on the type of network and as oral and written or verbal and non-verbal based on the medium of encoding the message. Most of these dichotomies are the attributes of mainly internal communication.

OC is also classified as internal and external based on the scope of communication, (Gustafsson, Nässlin, and Åman, 2018; Blazenaite, 2011). External communication includes all forms of communication that an organization makes with its external stakeholders and other organizations whereas internal communication refers to all forms of interaction that take place within an organization (Gustafsson et al., 2018). This study focuses on examining internal communication practices of the target institution focusing particularly on superior-subordinate communication and its impact on employee engagement.

Superior-subordinate communication is broadly conceived as the exchange of information between those members with the vested authority of giving direction and those who obey instructions and execute tasks. It is often considered as an upward and downward flow of information within an organization with the ultimate goal of achieving the mission and vision of the organization (Babalola, Gbadegesin, and Patience, 2014; Bakar, Mohamad & Mustafa, 2007).

Superior-subordinate communication is often described as a variable with several dimensions (Bakar et al., 2007; Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013). However, this study relies on the classifications of superior-subordinate communication forwarded by Dennis. Considering it as a supportive relationship, Dennis (1974) (as cited in Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013, p.4) suggested three constructs of superior-subordinate communication: *positive superior communication*, *open communication with supervisor*, and *superior-subordinate understanding*. Positive superior communication behavior is manifested in the form of encouragement, understanding, and fairness between the two bodies. Open communication with the supervisor refers to subordinates' feeling of support and freedom in sharing information with their superiors. Superior-subordinate understanding is all about the

feeling and beliefs of both parties to understand each other's feelings.

Employee work engagement, on the other hand, is an important factor that determines the success of an organization. It largely affects the productivity and attrition rate of employee which in turn affect the reputation and profitability of any organization (Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, and Lings, 2014; Osborne and Hammoud, 2017; Veshne, 2017). Although several other factors determine the level of employee work engagement, the role that internal organizational communication in general and superior-subordinate communication in particular play in this regard is incomparable. Hence, the success of any organization largely relies on the ability of its leadership in creating and maintaining effective organizational communication and employee work engagement.

Employee work engagement is often conceived as the willingness and passion or unrestricted commitment that an employee exerts towards the successful accomplishment of his/her organizational goals. It is the degree of physical, cognitive, and positive emotional bond that employees have with their organization and their degree of involvement in executing their roles and responsibilities (Karanges et al., 2014; Veshne, 2017; Reyneke, 2019).

Employee work engagement can be manifested in the form of attitude and observable personal deeds. It is realized in the form of loyalty, excitement, enthusiasm, and productivity (Balakrishnan and Masthan, 2013). In this study, employee work engagement is considered as a variable of three constructs: *vigor*, *dedication*, and *absorption* as it has been conceptualized by Schaufeli et al. (2002). Vigour refers to the amount of energy and mental resilience that an employee exerts on his/her work regardless of encountered difficulties. An employee with a higher level of *vigor* is likely to take personal initiative and proactively respond to what their job demands. The second construct, *dedication*, stands for strong involvement in one's work with a sense of pride, enthusiasm, inspiration, personal discipline, and readiness to face a challenge. *Absorption* is the state of work engagement in one's work with full concentration and attention to the extent that one could not easily detach himself from his work (Reyneke, 2019).

Scholars reiterate that effective organizational communication largely determines employee work engagement and this in turn determines the extent to which an organization successfully meets its mission. The more frequently and positively a supervisor communicates with his/her employees, the better the motivation and work engagement of the employees will be (Hayase, 2009; Iyer and Israel, 2012; Karanges *et al.*, 2014). Not only the actual practice but also the perception that employees have about the communication climate of their organization determines the level of their work engagement. If employees have a positive perception of the communication climate of their organization, they are more likely to share the vision and missions of their organization and commit themselves to their achievement. On the contrary, employees who have negative perceptions about their organization's communication climate could be counter-productive (Reyneke, 2019).

Several researchers have explored and found the association between superior-subordinate communication and various organizational variables such as job satisfaction (Bakar *et al.*, 2007), organizational commitment (Hayase, 2009; Babalola *et al.*, 2014), employee work engagement (Hayase, 2009; Iyer and Israel, 2012; Karanges *et al.*, 2014) and working relationships between superior and subordinate (Bakar *et al.*, 2007). Consistent with these studies, the current study has explored the role that superior-subordinate communication play as independent variables in determining the level of employee work engagement in the working context of higher learning institution in Ethiopia.

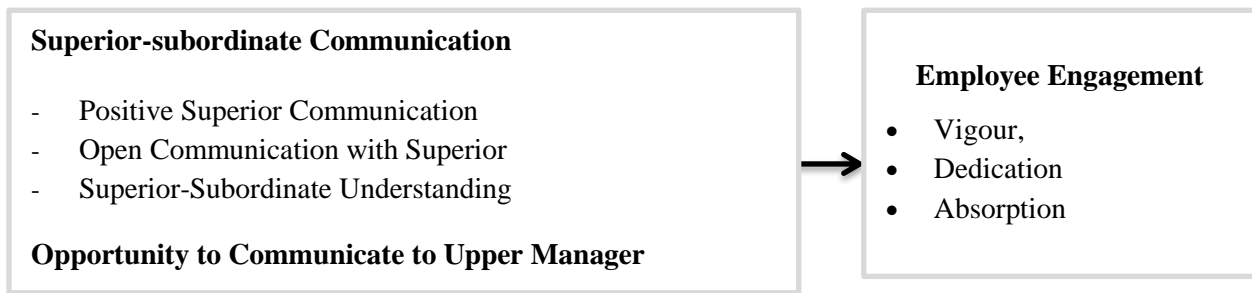
Though several studies have been conducted to examine the impact of organizational communication on employee work engagement and address the gaps to improve the level of employee engagement, the challenge in this regard seems to still prevail across the world. The trend across the world shows a rapid decline in employee work engagement (Motyka, 2018; Suthers, 2017). For instance, according to Osborne and Hammoud (2017, p. 50), "Disengaged employees typically cost U.S. corporations \$350 billion annually". Hence, given the crucial roles that organizational communication and employee work engagement play in determining the effectiveness of organizational leadership and productivity, conducting further studies in the area could help alleviate the problem. Scholars such as Motyka

(2018) and Reyneke (2019) call for further research in the area to draw lessons that could improve the internal communication practices of an organization.

In the context of Ethiopia, though several local researchers have studied organizational communication from various perspectives and in different organizational settings (Andualem Assefa, 2015; Asfaw Gedamu, 2015; Fikru Negewo, 2014; Teshome Bekele, 2017), none of these studies have addressed the association between superior-subordinate communication and employee work engagement. In other words, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no scientific study has been conducted on superior-subordinate communication practices of Ethiopian higher learning institutions particularly focusing on the association it can have with employee work engagement. Again, as I have already explained elsewhere in the preceding paragraphs, superior-subordinate communication is not the only variable that determines employees' work engagement. So, the share of this variable in determining employee work engagement could vary across socio-cultural and economic contexts. This calls for conducting similar studies in various socio-cultural contexts. Hence, the main objective of this study is to examine the degree of the association between superior-subordinate communication and employee work engagement focusing on Adama Science and Technology University (ASTU), one of the two science and technology universities in Ethiopia.

### 1.1 Conceptual Model

In research, a conceptual model is used to briefly show the variable under investigation and the relationship that is supposed to happen among them. There are several conceptual models which have been developed in the area of organizational communication studies. In the current study, the researcher has conceptualized the relationship of the variables of the study as indicated in the following model based on the extensive review of related literature. The model is mainly based on the assumption that organizational communication is a two ways communication that involves feedback practices and organization as "a system composed of a set of subsystem components that each serves certain functions and that each in interaction with the other subsystems" (Kuria, 2008, p.30).



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Model of the Study

According to this model, effective superior-subordinate communication and the opportunity to communicate with upper managers have a significant positive relationship with the level of employee work engagement. All the dimensions of superior-subordinate communication can have some degree of association with the overall level of employee work engagement and its various dimensions. In general, if they are empowered and have open and constructive interaction with their supervisor, employees can develop a positive perception of their job and can have better work engagement, and become productive (Veshne, 2017).

### Hypotheses

Based on the review of the previous studies and the conceptual model indicated above, the following hypotheses have been formulated.

- H11:** Superior-subordinate communication predicts employee work engagement.
- H10:** Superior-subordinate communication does not predict employee work engagement.
- H21:** Opportunity to communicate to the upper managers predicts employee work engagement.
- H20:** Opportunity to communicate to the upper managers does not predict employee work engagement.

## 2. Materials and Method

### 2.1. Participants

A correlational survey research design has been used to address the hypotheses of the current study. Data were collected from the academic and admin staff of Adama Science and Technology University. The university was selected mainly for the convenience of data collection since the researcher is from the same university. Besides, compared to the other Science and Technology in the country, ASTU follows a more

decentralized administration system that demands effective organizational communication. According to the human resource directorate of the university, there were a total of 495 full-time academic staff and 1672 administrative staff in the university by the time this study was conducted (in October 2021). The samples of the current study involved all middle-level managers (Deans, Directors, Associate Deans, and Heads of Registrar) and non-manager subordinates selected from both the admin and academic staff. Accordingly, a total of 58 middle-level managers and 336 non-managers were selected. All middle-level managers were selected as respondents while the sample size of the non-managers was calculated using Yamane (1967) at a 95% confidence level, .05 degrees of error. The total population of non-managers was 2099. So, the sample size of non-managers was (n=336) out of which 72 were academic staff and 264 were administrative staff. Once the total sample size for the non-managers had been determined using the above formula, 15% to 16 % of representative samples were selected from each work unit proportionally based on their total population size to ensure equal participation of staff from all units of the university.

### 2.2. Instruments

Standardized self-administered survey scales were used to collect relevant data. Staff perception of their organization's internal superior-subordinate communication climate was measured by using Dennis' Communication Climate Survey (DCC) which was created to examine how employees perceive the nature and state of organizational communication in their institution (Reyneke, 2019). Dennis (1975) developed a five-point Likert scale where *one* and *five* represent "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree" respectively. This scale covers five dimensions of

organizational communication: (1) superior-subordinate communication, (2) quality of information, (3) superior openness, (4) opportunities to communicate to the upper manager, and (5) reliability of the information. However, for this study, only items on two dimensions of DCC: superior-subordinate communication and opportunities to communicate to the upper manager were utilized because the target of the study was to explore the superior-subordinate communication practices of the target university. The items in the scale of superior-subordinate communication were designed to elicit information on three constructs: *positive superior communication*, *open communication with superior* and *superior-subordinate understanding*. Three items with a similar rating scale were also used to elicit data regarding employees' opportunities to communicate with upper managers. Therefore, out of the 44 items of DCC, only 24 items (21 for superior-subordinate communication and 3 items for the opportunity to communicate with upper manager) were used in this study.

Employee work engagement was measured by using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) which was developed by Schaufeli and Bakker of Utrecht University (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The scale measures three dimensions of work engagement: *vigor*, *dedication*, and *absorption* on a seven-point Likert scale where zero means "never" and six means "always" (Motyka, 2018). There are two versions of UWES, but the UWES-9 which includes nine items (three for each dimension of employee work engagement) has been most frequently used by scholars across the world (Motyka, 2018). Hence, the researcher decided to use this widely used version of UWES in the current study.

The questionnaire was translated back and forth into the Amharic language by two language experts to help respondents, particularly those admin staff, understand the intent of the items and give their genuine responses. The results of the Cronbach Alpha reliability test of the Amharic version of the scales were found to be 0.96 for Superior-subordinate Communication items (21), 0.74 for Opportunity to Communicate to Upper Manager, and 0.92 for Employee Work Engagement. Hence, the questionnaire has an acceptable reliability coefficient and can effectively measure similar constructs according to Nunnally (1978). The research topic has been approved by the Ethical Review Board of the

School of Humanities and Social Science while respondents were made to express their consent by ticking one of the options given in the instruction section of the questionnaire under the subtitle "Participant Consent."

### 2.3. Data analysis

Before starting the analysis, the data were cleaned. Each returned questionnaire was checked for completeness and those with a significant number of incomplete items were discarded. Accordingly, out of the 386 questionnaires distributed to the respondents, 315 were filled and returned (81.6 % *response rate*), and 13 were discarded. Then the cleaned data were entered into SPSS version 20 and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. For the simplicity of conducting the analysis and interpretation, the items that belong to a similar sub-scale were added using the "transform" tool from SPSS and reentered with a different variable name.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Results

#### 3.1.1. Demographic information

The data show that more than half (54.9%) of the respondents are male while the remaining 45.1% are female. This shows a fair representation of both genders in the current study. The majority of the respondents (76.9%) were married. The mean of the respondents' age was 38.6 and of the total respondents, 66.4% were administrative staff while the remaining 33.6% were academic staff. With regards to their organizational level, 15.6% of the respondents were managers while 84.4% were non-managers. More than half of the respondents (54.2%) have 11 to 20 years of work experience, while 30.9% have 1 to 10, years and the remaining 15% have above 20 years of work experience. The majority of the respondents (66.4%), had attended bachelor's degree and above. These show that the respondents have ample work experience have a good educational background. In general, it can be deduced from the above demographic information that the current study involved a fair number of respondents from different sections and groups in the university. This in turn has helped in obtaining more reliable data that could reflect the existing reality in ASTU.

**3.1.2. Perception of superior-subordinate communication**

As can be seen from Table 1, the mean values of superior-superior communication ( $M=82.25$ ,  $SD=16.08$ ) and its sub-scales: positive superior communication ( $M=55.05$ ,  $SD=11.07$ ), open communication with superior ( $M=35.18$ ,  $SD=6.98$ ), superior-subordinate understanding ( $M=15.87$ ,  $SD=3.38$ ) show that the participants of the study “agree” with all positively phrased items of the scale. Similarly, the mean value ( $M=11.04$ ,  $SD=2.59$ ) indicates the presence of a good opportunity to communicate with the upper manager. These indicate that the staffs of ASTU perceive the existing communication climate of the university as positive and smooth.

**3.1.3. Perception of Employee engagement**

As can be seen from Table 2, the mean values of the overall employee work engagement ( $M=45.35$ ,  $SD=8.15$ ) and its dimensions: absorption ( $M=15.01$ ,  $SD=3.01$ ), dedication ( $M=15.16$ ,  $SD=3.08$ ), and vigor ( $M=15.08$ ,  $SD=2.76$ ) indicate that the participants of the study reported having a higher level of work engagement. This result could be attributable to the presence of positive

superior-subordinate communication in the university as has been indicated in the preceding table 2.

**3.1.4. Correlation analysis**

Two hypotheses were formulated to predict the possible relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Employee work engagement has been considered as a dependent variable while the independent variables include superior-subordinate communication and opportunity to communicate to upper management. Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation statistic was used to determine the associations between the dependent variable and the independent variables and their dimensions. Table 3 presents the results of the correlation analysis.

As can be seen from Table 3, a moderate degree of statistically significant positive association was found between superior-subordinate communication (SSC) and employee work engagement (EE) ( $r=.36$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Superior-subordinate communication has also a moderate degree of statistically significant positive association with two constructs of EE: absorption (EEA) ( $r=.36$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and dedication (EED) ( $r=.31$ ,  $p<.01$ ), but a weak positive relationship with vigor (EEV) ( $r=.27$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

**Table 1:** Staff Perception of Superior-Subordinate Communication in ASTU

Items (Aggregate)	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Superior-Subordinate Communication	289	21.00	105.00	82.58	16.08
<i>Positive superior communication</i>	292	14.00	70.00	55.05	11.07
<i>Open communication with superiors</i>	297	9.00	45.00	35.18	6.98
<i>Superior-subordinate understanding</i>	300	4.00	20.00	15.87	3.38
Opportunity to Communicate to Upper Manger	301	3.00	16.00	11.04	2.59

**Table 2:** Response (mean) on the Employee Work Engagement Scale

Items	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Employee Engagement	294	.00	54.00	45.35	8.14647
<i>Absorption</i>	298	.00	18.00	15.01	3.08956
<i>Dedication</i>	298	.00	18.00	15.16	3.09861
<i>Vigour</i>	302	.00	18.00	15.08	2.76102

**Table 3:** Pearson’s Correlation Co-efficient between Dependent Variable and Independent Variables

	SSC	OCS	SSU	PSC	OCUM	EE	EEV	EED	EEA
SSC	1								
OCS	.966**	1							
SSU	.909**	.835**	1						
PSC	.985**	.950**	.846**	1					
OCUM	.538**	.512**	.496**	.520**	1				
EE	.360**	.315**	.325**	.366**	.254**	1			
EEV	.276**	.242**	.232**	.288**	.239**	.861**	1		
EED	.314**	.273**	.290**	.318**	.216**	.937**	.687**	1	
EEA	.365**	.320**	.347**	.366**	.246**	.936**	.674**	.861**	1

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results in Table 3 also revealed a statistically significant association between dimensions of superior-subordinate communication and employee work engagement. Positive superiors’ communication (PSC) has a statistically significant moderate positive association with EEA ( $r=.37, p<0.01$ ), EED ( $r=.32, p<.01$ ), but a weak relationship with EEV ( $r=.29, p<0.01$ ).

Similarly, pen communication with superior (OCS) has a statistically significant moderate positive association with EEA ( $r=.32, p<0.01$ ), but a weaker association with EEV ( $r=.23, p<0.01$ ) and EED ( $r=.26, p<0.01$ ). Superior subordinate understanding has also a statistically significant moderate positive association with EEA ( $r=.35, p<0.01$ ), but weak associations with EED ( $r=.29, p<0.01$ ) and EEV ( $r=.23, p<0.01$ ).

As can be seen from the same table, weak positive relationships were found between the opportunity to communicate to the upper manager OCUM and the overall level of EE ( $r=.24, p<0.01$ ) and the three

constructs of EE: EED ( $r=.21, p<0.01$ ), EEA ( $r=.25, p<0.01$ ), and EEV ( $r=.24, p<0.01$ ).

**3.1.5. Multiple regression analysis**

A multiple regression analysis has been conducted to test whether the independent variables could significantly predict employee work engagement. Since all predictor variables are dynamic and it is difficult to determine their causal priority, the researcher has used standard multiple regression analysis. Besides, the three dimensions of superior-subordinate communication have been used in the model to see their contribution to determining employee work engagement.

As can be seen from Table 4, the model was found to be a significant predictor of employee work engagement  $F(4,277) = 12.185, p<.001$ , with  $R^2=0.150$ , suggesting that 15 % of the variation in employee work engagement can be accounted for by the independent variables collectively. H11 and H20 were therefore supported whereas H10 and H21 were not supported.

**Table 4:** Model Summary

Model Summary <sup>b</sup>				
Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	A R <sup>2</sup>	SE
1	.387 <sup>a</sup>	.150	.138	7.65897

a. Predictors: (Constant), Superior-subordinate understanding, Open communication with superior, Positive superior communication, and Opportunity to communicate with the upper manager,  
 b. Dependent variable: Employee work engagement

**Table 5: ANOVA**

ANOVA <sup>b</sup>						
Model		SS	df	MS	F	P.
1	Regression	2859.019	4	714.755	12.185	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	16190.120	276	58.660		
	Total	19049.139	280			

**Table 6: Coefficient**

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	SE	β	t	p
1	(Constant)	29.460	2.490		11.832	.000
	Open communication with superiors	-.444	.239	-.342	-1.858	.064
	Superior-subordinate understanding	.224	.256	.092	.872	.384
	Positive superior communication	.432	.144	.580	2.989	.003
	Opportunity to communicate with upper manager	.206	.209	.065	.984	.326

a. Dependent Variable: *Employee work engagement*

Looking at the unique individual contribution of the predictors, the results in Table 6 show that only one of the dimensions of superior-subordinate communication, i.e. positive superior communication ( $\beta=.58, t=2.989, p=.003$ ) significantly contributed to the model. The remaining two dimensions of superior-subordinate communication and the opportunity to communicate with upper managers had no significant contribution to the model.

### 3.2. Discussion

The current study revealed that employees perceive the superior-subordinate communication climate of ASTU as positive and effective. This may be partly attributable to the decentralized organizational structure of the university and the nature of the services being delivered. In the academic environment, the power distance between superior and subordinate could be smooth mainly because of the temporary nature of the positions held by the superior or may be due to the equivalence in academic ranks of the two bodies.

Results of the current study also revealed that employees of ASTU have a higher level of work

engagement. This could be attributable to the presence of a favorable superior-subordinate communication climate in the university. Previous studies in the area revealed that the presence of effective internal communication in general and that of superior-subordinate communication, in particular, can enhance employee work engagement (Hayase, 2009; Iyer and Israel, 2012; Karanges et al., 2014; Nautiyal, 2020). However, the total mean value of the respondents indicates that there are differences in employees' level of work engagement on the three constructs of employee work engagement. Compared to their level of *absorption* and *dedication*, employees' level of *vigor* is below average. This indicates that, although employees of ASTU have enthusiasm, inspiration, and personal discipline, their readiness to execute their duties proactively or without being told by others is still minimal.

Results of Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis revealed a moderate degree of a statistically significant positive association between employee work engagement and the overall superior-subordinate communication climate. Superior-subordinate communication



climate has also a moderate degree of positive associations with two of the constructs of employee work engagement: *absorption* and *dedication*, but a weak relationship with *vigor*. This indicates that the presence of smooth superior-subordinate communication could encourage employees to work with full concentration and attention, but has little association with employees' proactive work engagement or engagement with one's initiative and perseverance.

The three constructs of superior-subordinate communication: positive superior communication, superior-subordinate understanding, and open communication with superiors had also a statistically significant positive association with employee work engagement. Compared to the rest two constructs, positive superior communication had a higher degree of association with the overall level of employee work engagement and its constructs. Again, although the result of the multiple regression analysis revealed that 15 % of the variation in employee work engagement can be accounted for by the independent variables collectively, a detailed examination of the unique individual contribution of the predictor variables shows that only positive superior communication had significantly contributed to the model. This indicates that the mere presence of opportunities for open communication between superiors and subordinates has little contribution to creating energy among the employees.

The weaker association between the variable opportunity to communicate to the upper manager and the overall level of employee work engagement and each construct of employee work engagement also indicates that the communication that subordinates or frontline workers make with the top managers has a less significant association with their level of work engagement. This could be again due to the nature of the contents of the communication that occurs between the two. When they interact with employees, top managers usually focus on strategic issues which may have less association with encouraging employees for immediate action compared to the job-related instructions and feedback that they frequently receive from their immediate superiors. Hence, in superior-subordinate communication, what matters is the nature of the contents of the communication rather than the mere

presence of communication opportunities. When their superiors encourage, understand, and treat them fairly, subordinates are more likely to be concerned and initiated to accomplish their institutional duties and become ready to listen to the orders of their superiors.

The results of the current study are partly in congruence with the findings of previous studies which confirmed the presence of a positive association between employee work engagement and superior-subordinate communication (Balakrishnan and Masthan, 2013; Karanges et al., 2014; Reyneke, 2019; Veshne, 2017; Wyatt, 2006). Veshne (2017) found out that "managers who focus on employee strengths are one-third more likely to manage actively engaged workers compared with managers who focus on weaknesses." A study by Karanges et al. (2014) also revealed that "Internal supervisor communication accounted for 32% of the variance in employee work engagement". Nevertheless, compared to previous studies, the contribution of superior-subordinate communication in promoting employee work engagement seems to be minimal in the context of the current study.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is possible to conclude from the current study that although there was a positive association between superior-subordinate communication and employee work engagement in general, a detailed investigation of the relationship of each construct of superior-subordinate communication reveals that only positive superior communication significantly contributed to the level of employee work engagement. Hence, when superiors encourage their subordinates, understand their feeling, and treat them fairly, they later develop a better level of work engagement. So, during superior-subordinate communication, what matters most for the employee is not the mere presence of free and frank communication, but the way they are positioned by their superiors in the interaction.

Based on the results of this study, one can also conclude that the communication that employees make with top managers has a less significant association with their level of work engagement compared to the communication they make with their immediate supervisors. This again is attributable to the content of

the communication that takes place between the two bodies.

To summarize, it is possible to conclude from the current study that superior-subordinate communication and opportunity to communicate with upper managers as a predictor variable had a statistically significant positive association with employee work engagement, though the real association of the predictors on employee work engagement was found to be minimal in the context of the current study. Hence, concerning the association of some of the constructs of superior-subordinate communication with employee work engagement, the results of the current study are partly different from the previous studies conducted in the area.

### Implication

This study revealed that positive superior communication has a significant association with the level of employee work engagement. Hence, to properly harness the manpower of their organizations, superiors need to establish a positive communication climate in which they treat their subordinates with care, sympathy, and fairness.

However, in the current study and many other previous studies, the association of superior-subordinate communication with employee work engagement was found to be moderate although statistically significant and positive. Especially in the context of the study site, the contribution of superior-subordinate communication as a determinant of employee work engagement seems to be very minimal. This implies that although creating

a smooth superior-subordinate communication climate could improve employee work engagement, still other variables which could affect employee work engagement need to be addressed. Hence, particularly, in the context of Ethiopia, the impact of other variables on employees' work engagement needs to be investigated with a broader scope to identify the most important determinants that need to be addressed to improve employees' work engagement.

### Limitations

Given the knowledge gap in the area in the world at large and in Ethiopia in particular, the current study has a substantive contribution. Yet the study is not without limitations. Though the sample size of the current study could suffice to test the formulated hypotheses of the study, limiting the scope of the study to one organization may affect the generalizability of the results of the study. Besides, the cross-sectional survey research design used in the current study is not sufficient for the researcher to establish causality among variables. This means that the suggested associations among the variables should not be interpreted as causal relationships, but as associations that suggest causal ordering, which needs to be confirmed by longitudinal research.

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