Chapter 11. Conclusion

One of the premier journals in the field of business studies, the ‘Human Recoupment Management’ (HRM) recently came up with its fiftieth anniversary edition. Fifty years is no less when one compares it to the relatively younger field of business studies (as compared to other academic fields). The field of business education itself is hardly more than a century old. In the fiftieth anniversary edition of HRM, Theresa M. Welbourne (2011), the editor, recalled the following words from one of the earliest articles (‘Listening is good business’: second issue of the first volume of HRM):

“Communicative efficiency down through the levels of management is terribly poor, and we are only beginning to appreciate the enormity of the problem. But I am much more concerned about another kind of communication. I am much more excited about the efficiency or inefficiency of upward communication than of that which passes downward through the channels. Why? Because I hold the deep conviction that the efficiency of downward communication is going to be improved significantly only when top management better understands the attitudes, the opinions, the ideas and the suggestions of the people at the bottom of the whole structure.”

The words were those of Late Prof. Emeritus Ralph G. Nichols’s (1962): as Floyd (2006) recalls, Nichols was a prophet, pioneer and a visionary. What Nichols wrote in an article more than fifty years back remains important till date: the words, the thoughts, and the idea of giving an ear to those who occupy the bottom of the whole structure remains a burning topic. It is to this topic that the present study tried to contribute.

While listening is indeed an important topic, decoding the reasons why some employees keep to themselves is an exciting area of research and would help us demolish the walls that separate members of an organization from communicating with one-another. The walls could be of different nature, sizes, and strength: we need to identify them, measure their strength and find out how to destroy them. And if their destruction is a distant possibility, then we should examine how to minimize their constraining effect. The present study tried identifying some of the organizational variables that play an important role in subordinate-subordinate communication. These variables, as the study found out, have different nature and strengths: to some extent aiding, but mostly
restraining. For instance, the present study found that while the expert power of the superior has a positive effect on the subordinate’s willingness to communicate with their superior, coercive power has a negative effect. Many other variables were examined; it was found that some of them gain liberating or restraining power in particular situations. To cite an example, while political climate has constraining effect on subordinate-superior communication, the very political climate takes the form of a ‘conducive environment for upward communication’ provided employees possess the ‘necessary’ politicking skills: though it is easy to guess that a politically charged atmosphere is more likely to be exploited for personal gains than for organizational growth.

Subordinate-Superior communication has wide implications for both the individual as well as the organization; since a large percentage of people have been found less willing to communicate in an organizational environment, it becomes important to understand why some people prefer to talk while others remain silent (Richmond & Roach, 1992). It is quite logical to argue that only in the presence of a conducive environment would employees be willing to indulge in ‘upward communication’. The present study tried exploring some of the elements of this environment. I do not intend to stress that the present study has been able to explore the most important variables of such an environment, nor do I intend to emphasize that I have been able to touch upon a large number of such variables. The present study, has only contributed in small terms – some important variables were identified, their nature was also decoded, and their strength was measured. To add up to it, their effect on employee stress was also charted. This way, the present study has been able to provide some reasonable outcomes for both the practitioners and the researchers alike.

In terms of management practice, the present study contributes by providing information about the organizational variables that not only affect the subordinate-superior communication relationship but also contribute to employee stress. To the field of academic research, the present study helps in terms of research advancement by furthering our understanding of the personality-situation interaction. It is my sincere hope that the present study would help build a better understanding of the organizational factors (situations) and their effect on the trait-state relationship in the context of subordinate-superior communication.
11.1. Managerial and Research Implications

Employee communication acts as the primary means for organizational members to process information, reduce ambiguity, and coordinate their actions (Johnson, 1993), but employees who are low on WTC are reluctant to engage in the necessary communication required. This way, it becomes necessary to decode the reasons why some people prefer to keep to themselves. Not only is upward communication necessary for coordination and reduction of ambiguity, it is also important for alerting the decision makers to key areas of needed change and adjustment in organizational policy and strategy (Glauser, 1984); thus, the present study may help in improving organizational strategy at large. Furthermore, the outcome of the present study can help both organizations as well as employees to be better informed about the organizational contextual factors and their effect on the subordinate-superior communication relationship.

11.1.1. Importance of Individual’s level of WTC

In response to the first question, the present study found a prevalent but a weak link between employee’s trait-like and state-like communication behavior. This finding raises an important question: if an organization desires to recruit employees for a high communication based job, should it focus more on selecting employees who are high on WTC or should it focus more on providing a conducive environment where flow of communication is eased and aided? The results of the present study suggest the later, i.e. it is the organizational variables that matter the most. Moreover, during recruitment process, interviewers may make an error of judgment in differentiating between low and high WTC as the WTC that they might be evaluating could be context and/or receiver specific. Employees may present a very different image of their real self for the purpose of an interview. What is more, interview processes, by their very nature can only assess the state-like communication behavior of an employee in a given situation; it may fail to provide how the employee would behave once she/he faces a different communication situation.

11.1.2. Importance of Organizational Variables

In the last section I argued that organizational might be better placed if they focus more on managing organizational variables than focusing on matching employees’ WTC to communication requirements of a given job. I do not intend to emphasize that the investment of resources in matching employees to their jobs is ill-conceived, rather, I
intend to emphasize that in relative terms, it is better to focus on management of organizational variables than individual variables.

When it comes to organizational variables, the present study examined the relative effect of multiple organizational variables that could be grouped under five broad factors: perception of fairness (Interactional Justice); a working relationship with the superior (Leader-Member Exchange); perceived power of the superior (Perceived Supervisory Power); perception of the prevalence of negative politicking activities (Perceived Organizational Politics); and an open, trustworthy, participative, and supportive organizational space (Communication Climate). While all the five organizational contextual factors were found to play a key role in influencing the trait-state communication behavior, perception of negative politicking behavior emerged as a highly critical factor. As the results of the present study suggest, if organizations could put a lid on negative politicking activities, they might boast of having a more communicative and less stressed workforce.

Taking another organizational factor, that of perceived power of the superior, the present study found out the two widely utilized powers: the power to reward (Reward Power) and the power to punish (Coercive Power), to be lesser effective in comparison to another base of power: the legitimate power of the superiors. The present study, in a way, suggests that organizations should rather focus on improving the legitimate power of superiors than authorizing them to use rewarding or punitive powers.

The results of the present study also suggested that perception of fair treatment by the superior and a general sense of open, trustworthy, participative, and supportive organizational space has a positive effect on state-like communication behavior of employees. Thus, organizations who desire to improve the state-like communication behavior of their employees may like to improve the sense of justice prevalent in the minds of employees and seek to provide positive and conducive climatic conditions to their employees. The onus of providing a positive and conducive environment rests not only with the top management, but also with the immediate superior, who might be seen as a representative of the organization.

The results of the present study also indicate that a working relationship between the subordinate and her/his immediate superior can do away with possible apprehensions that an employee may have and help improve state-like WTC of subordinates. In
summary, while both individual (i.e. self) and organizational variables determine state-like WTC of employees, organizations are better guided if they focus on improving the organizational conditions: after all, they come under their direct purview and are also easy to manage. On their part, the employees may like to discard their communication related apprehensions by indulging in an open discussion with either their immediate superiors or the top management of the organization. It is my sincere belief that efforts from both the employees and the organizations would lead to a workplace wherein upward communication would be encouraged.

11.1.3. Contribution to the field of Person-Situation Interaction Studies
Apart from the managerial implications, the present study also contributes in terms of research advancements as its outcomes would help in better comprehension of the “Trait × Situation = State” equation in the context of subordinate-superior communication. Moreover, the present study demonstrated the importance of exploring three way interactions. For instance, arguments regarding three way interactions among individual predispositions, organizational politics, and an individual’s politicking skills were presented: the results evidenced that examining three way interactions can yield deeper insights relate to person-situation interaction phenomena. Further, three way interactions among individual predispositions, organizational politics, and superior’s power showed that some bases of power gain importance in specific situations: two way interactions would have failed to capture such phenomena.

11.2. Limitations and Future Directions
Even though the findings of the present study can make significant contributions to research and practice, the study has its own set of limitations that need attention.

11.2.1. Focus on a Single Organization and Sector
To answer the research questions, the present study used data from a single organization (Prabhat Khabar) that belonged to a specific sector (Media). Such a selective sample may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Even though I included a large number of respondents from five different cities spread across a wide geographical and culturally diverse area, the sample may still fall short of representing the highly diverse population targeted. While this cannot be termed as a serious limitation, future research can take care of such issues by attempting an even larger sample or spreading the sample base to include respondents from different organizations.
Nonetheless, in my informal interactions with the respondents, the employees of Prabhat Khabar had suggested that the workplace of the media houses rarely differed. To quote one respondent: "the work culture is more or less same across all media houses, more so in print media. Moreover, you do not have choices, either you work in X (name of organization) or in Y (name of organization)". The current experience and overall work experience of employees also suggested that on an average employees gained half of their overall experience outside their current organization. Moreover, I did not observe noticeable differences in the work culture of the six different media organizations that I had surveyed for Phase I interview data. Notwithstanding, future studies that focus on other media houses would help increase the generalizability of the outcomes of the present study.

Furthermore, it can be reasoned that the work culture of other organization, say, a manufacturing based organizations, could be different. In such cases, researchers may find some new organizational variables that were not examined in the present study but which may play an important role in affecting the trait-state communication relationship inside organizational space. In such cases, the moderating strength of the organizational variables may also differ. Replicating the present study, whether in part or full, with respondents belonging to other sectors, would help increase the generalizability of the findings. While subordinate-superior communication is very important in the field of media, there are other fields, like tourism or hospitality, where communication requirements are high. These fields may offer new insights in terms of other organizational variables and can be very helpful in coming up with a comprehensive model of the trait and state characteristics of subordinate-superior communication.

11.2.2. Focus on a Single Receiver

The present study was focused on only one receiver: the immediate superior. The focus of the present study restricted me to cover any other receiver but the immediate superior; however, other receivers are also important in an organizational context. For instance, researchers may like to probe subordinate-superior communication wherein the focus is employee’s willingness to communicate extra-role communication to the top management. The present study focused on only vertical communication (i.e. upward communication): future studies may like to examine the effect of organizational variables on trait-state communication relationship in cases of horizontal
communication, i.e. employee’s willingness to initiate communication with her/his colleagues.

Future studies can also focus on other contexts (for example: interpersonal communication with colleagues or clients) whether in the field of new media or any other field. However, researchers may like to note that it is only when we restrict the context that we are able to capture the state-like form of a trait-like behavior.

11.2.3. Use of Self-Report Scales

Another limitation may arise out of the nature of the scales used in this study: only self-report scales were used. However, the nature of the study required that the ‘perceptions’ of the respondents were taken into account. I discuss first the independent and the dependent variables: both of which have been designed to measure willingness of an employee to initiate communication across a variety of contexts.

Willingness falls in the realm of cognition and one’s cognitive abilities are best measured in a practical way through self-report measures. For instance, the scale designed to measure trait-like WTC requested the respondents to provide information about their willingness to initiate communication across a variety of contexts and receivers. Observational enquiries of such a construct would not only be practically unattainable but would also fail to capture the essence of the construct. The independent variable (trait-like WTC) in the present study dealt with cognitive predispositions: a quintessential case wherein self-report measures have been argued to be most suitable (McCroskey, 1997; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987).

Even though state behavior can be readily observed and one can apply other-reports to measure state-behavior, the suitability of other-measure for capturing state-behavior in the present study is debatable and possibly improbable. The present study focused on analyzing the trait-state relationship with respect to communication behavior of employees in an organizational context. Any study that analyzes the trait-state relationship is better placed if it focuses on similar types of measures: it might not be a good idea to use self-report measures for trait behavior and observational (other-reports) measure for state behavior. Furthermore, scholars who have worked in the field of employee voice, one of the state-like forms of trait-like willingness to communicate, have found self-reports of voice intention to be stable over time and positively related to supervisory ratings of voice behavior (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998); these findings are
in line with assertions by Ajzen and colleagues (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Ajzen & Madden, 1986) that attitude or intention to act is usually a good predictor of actual behavior.

Turning now to the application of self-reports measures to capture organizational variables. It might be reasoned that one’s perception of organizational situations would affect the trait-state relationship than their real presence, therefore, perceptual measures are best suited for measuring organizational variables. For instance, an employee’s ‘perception’ about presence of a political environment would matter more than its ‘real’ presence. Moreover, it would be a real challenge for researchers to measure the ‘real’ presence of political environment inside an organizational space as level of politics could be different across different departments, verticals, or groups.

11.2.4. Use of Shortened Version of Scales
Another limitation may arise because of the shortened version of the scales used. For instance, I have used the shortened version of the perceived politicking organizational politics scale whereas there is a longer version available. This may not be considered a major limitation as the study was focused on measuring multiple organizational variables. As Hinkin (1995) notes, while measures must adequately sample the domain of interest, they should also maintain parsimony. Longer scales, as in the case of present study, may produce response biases and respondent fatigue. Therefore, as suggested by Hinkin (1995), parsimonious scales were used in the present study. Nonetheless, in future studies, where researchers focus on a very limited number of variables, longer version of the scales may still be a better option.

11.2.5. Dimensionality of Attitudinal and Personality based Constructs
A small limitation could also arise out of the nature of the behavioral constructs: as the readers may note, the behavior based constructs were found to be multidimensional in nature, yet, the responses were summarized to arrive at a grand score: in short, the supposedly multidimensional constructs were taken as being unidimensional in nature. There was a strong reason for this: the present study followed the reasoning of Epstein (1979, 1980) in measuring attitudinal and personality based constructs. Epstein (1979, 1980) has reasoned that the correct criterion for measuring attitudinal and personality based variables is to aggregate thematically related behaviors across time and situations. Therefore, even though the items related to some themes (in case of
attitudinal and personality based construct of trait-like WTC and state-like in-role communication behavior) and suggested the existence of possible sub-factors, they were not counted as such. Moreover, statistical enquiries suggested high correlations among the sub-factors, suggesting validity of a global construct. Thus, any limitation arising out of non-differentiation of sub-factors of the trait-like WTC scale and the state-like in-role WTC scale can be safely discounted.

11.2.6. Common-Method Bias

Another limitation may arise because of the common method biases (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, the design of the present study was such that the biases could be minimized to a greater extent. To minimize biases arising out of a common source, the questionnaire set was divided into three parts. The dependent and the independent variables belonged to two different parts: measures for organizational variables were divided among the three parts. The respondents were first briefed about the purpose of the research and convinced that their responses would remain confidential. They were also informed that their participation was totally voluntary and they could refuse to participate in the study at any point of time. A printed page containing complete contact details of the researcher (i.e. myself) and the research committee was also provided to the respondents (see Appendix). The questionnaire sets did not contain the name of the respondent: as all the items needed objective responses, there was no possibility of identifying a respondent through her/his handwriting as well. The only identification mark was a six digit randomly generated number, the key to which rested only with the researcher (i.e. myself). Prior to filling the questionnaire sets the respondents were also informed that the questionnaires were designed to elicit individual perceptions or preferences and that there were no right or wrong answers. These processes helped minimize social desirability biases. Once the respondent agreed to participate in the study, she/he was provided the consent form that would authorize the researcher to use the data given by the respondent to be used for research purpose.

While filling the questionnaire sets, the respondent was required to take three breaks: two major breaks for getting her/his blood pressure measured and one short break for measuring her/his body temperature. This helped in temporally isolating the respondent from the study and reducing common source bias. Once the respondent had filled the first part of the questionnaire set, her/his blood pressure measurement was taken for the first time. The blood pressure measurement required that the respondent took her/his
mind off the questionnaire and sit in a relaxing position. It so happened that respondents preferred to discuss their blood pressure measurements with the respondent – this helped in psychologically isolating the respondent from the study, thus reducing the common source bias to a great extent. Post measurement and the brief discussion, the respondent returned back to the questionnaire; after a few minutes the second measurement was taken, the third measurement was taken in the end. In the meantime, the body temperature of the respondent was also taken. The whole process took on an average 30-45 minutes per respondent.

Use of self-report scales to measure both criterion and predictor variables have been argued to lead to biases (Organ & Ryan, 1995), though in many cases (like the present one), they are the most suitable methods available for measuring the variables in question. Self-report scales, as scholars have reasoned are not inherently prone to biases (Conway & Lance, 2010; Spector, 2006), rather, when used in appropriate contexts, they are not only valid but practical and appropriate measurement tools available to the researcher.

11.2.7. Focus on a Single Outcome

The present study focused on two forms of a single outcome (i.e. two forms of stress, viz. psychological and physiological stress) as a resultant of P-E fit in cases of trait-state communication behavior mismatch. Future studies can explore other outcomes when subordinate’s trait-like communication predispositions come in conflict with their state-like communication behavior at the workplace: a possible outcome could be in terms of a drop in the level of job satisfaction. The present study thus offers new avenues for scholars interested in studying the relationship between employees’ trait-like and state-like communication behavior, and analyzing their possible effects.