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# How it Feels to Work here: Improving Organisational Climate

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*Abstract: Modern lifestyles ~ or workstyles ~ have tended to separate work into an isolated compartment of our lives and, very often, into a special location; which is a quite recent development in the history of our species. But people don't leave their social needs behind when they enter the workplace, especially since we spend a high proportion of our time "at work". Our subjective impressions of how well our work environment seems to provide for these deep-seated psychological needs determine the organisation's climate. A significant body of research shows a consistent correlation between organisational climates perceived as favourable or benign by employees and positive performance outcomes. Managers can improve their organisation's climate by working on its component factors: by acting to reduce the negative influence of the perception of threat, and by reinforcing the positive factors which make work a rewarding (in the widest sense) experience. If managers work to improve the positive climate factors, and to reduce or eliminate the negative ones, then they can expect not only to see improvements in performance, but also an improvement in the happiness and wellbeing of the people who work with them: a win-win outcome.*

Keywords: Organisational Climate, Change, Productivity, Wellbeing, Quality of Working Life

**T**HE CONCEPT OF organisational climate is closely related to that of culture, but takes a rather different perspective. Culture has been summarised as "the way we do things around here". Seemingly flippant, this summary is actually both rigorous and profound, because the way we do things is the product of many and varied drives and constraints: formal and informal, spoken and tacit, conscious and unconscious. These drives and constraints, as Schein (1985) has pointed out, are largely inaccessible to the external observer and, often, to the participants in the culture themselves, but "the way we do things" is observable. We can see "what", but "why?" is subject to conjecture and enquiry.

Climate describes characteristics of the organisation from the perspective of the individual participant. It is concerned less with objective reports or explanations of what is done, or why, than with the subjective impressions of participants about how it feels to be a member of the organisation, to which we might add, at that time and in that place.

Originally, the terms organisational culture and organisational climate were used almost interchangeably in the management literature (see, for example, Porter, Lawler & Hackman, 1975: "... organisational climate or 'culture' — a set of customs and typical patterns of ways of doing things"). By the late 1980s, though, the terminology had settled, so that studies which talked about climate in the 1970s would by then be thought of as addressing culture (Denison, 1996). The distinction is important because climate is much more susceptible to management influence than culture, which is notoriously resistant to con-

trolled change: "After countless research studies there's precious little evidence that it can be manipulated, no clear guidelines showing how to do it, and no real proof that a new culture leads to better business results" (Manning, 1990). Whereas: "climate is held to be a summary perception of how an organisation deals with its members and environments, and thus develops from factors primarily under managerial influence" (Wallace, Hunt & Richards, 1999). The reference to "a summary perception" here is significant because although "how it feels to work here" is a subjective perception by an individual, the climate which we can perceive and, perhaps, change in positive ways is a construct of the aggregated individual perceptions of the people involved, "a synthesis of perceptions" (Sparrow, 2001).

Acceptance that organisational climate may be, to some extent, subject to management control leads inevitably to the question: why does it matter?

Watkin & Hubbard (2003) assert that "research has ... consistently shown how an organisational climate can directly account for up to 30 per cent of the variance in key business performance measures" and indeed there is extensive research evidence into "the relationship between how employees describe their work environments and the relative performance success of those work environments" which strongly "suggests that the more present certain organisational or leadership practices are in a given work environment, the more energized and productive the workforce" (Wiley & Brooks, 2000), an observation strongly supported by many years of longitudinal studies by Patterson and colleagues (Patterson et al, 1997). The precise nature of the relationship between



such “leadership practices” and performance outcomes is harder to define.

The climate of an organisation is determined for each participant by a variety of factors, and climate research has tended to focus on isolating these factors in order to make them available for considered manipulation by management. At first sight, the lists of factors various authors identify may seem disparate, and therefore rather unhelpful, but closer analysis shows a high degree of commonality in underlying meaning, if not in the terminology used, which has persisted over some forty years of research. This commonality is explored at greater length in Gray (2007).

After analysing the factors identified by a range of authors it is possible to identify some fifteen distinct elements that have been considered to make up the totality of an organisation’s climate. However, some of these may appear to describe things which might well be consequences of climate, rather than components of it. For example, several writers mention motivation as an element in climate. “However, when we look more closely at the psychological, social and economic bases of workplace motivation it becomes apparent that the concept of ‘motivation’ is too high-level to be very useful. There’s not much a manager can actually do directly with the knowledge that someone is highly motivated, moderately motivated, or hardly motivated at all. The useful information in this case would be found at a deeper level; what is the background to the observed motivation level and what can be done to facilitate a more positive attitude towards the work that needs to be done” (Gray, 2007). Similarly, “clarity”, meaning having a clear understanding of what is expected of an employee, features in the literature as a component of climate, but, again, clarity in this sense is the outcome of a process. The imposition of targets, however clear, would produce very different feelings about the organisation and relationships within it, than would the mutual determination of workplace goals (Gray, 2004).

In order to get closer to the roots of climate perceptions Gray (2000) drew on a range of subjects which might be likely to influence how someone would feel about their organisation. Amongst these were: individual and group processes of perception; social learning theory; attitude formation; leadership theory; the psychological and physiological effects of fear, anger, and stress; hostile and extreme work regimes, such as slavery; threat and coercion; motivation; organisational culture; the psychological contract; authority, power and influence; conflict; and attribution theory. This produced a shortlist of factors which were tested for significance in extensive semi-structured interviews with forty-four managers from seventeen organisations, all major, well-known

names in the UK and/or internationally, in a total of seven industry sectors, public and private. They were asked to discuss the last completed project in which they were involved, and from their comments an analysis was made of the organisational climate in which the work took place, and of how successful the project had been. The interviews were quite probing; statements were not accepted at face value, and the subsequent analysis was rigorous. Eight factors survived this process:

Six are positive factors largely associated with individual autonomy, responsibility and control. Broadly, the stronger the perception of these factors the better the climate will feel to most people in a workplace. They are:

- Free expression of ideas
- Free expression of concerns
- Freedom to question (especially decisions and policies determined by more senior people)
- Participation: genuine participation in defining goals and objectives
- Intrinsic satisfactions derived from the work itself
- Innovation (freedom to try new concepts and approaches)

The remaining two factors are negative and require some explanation.

- Purposive threat

These are threats which are directed quite consciously at people, usually with the intention of making them do (or stop doing) something specific. Nearly fifty years ago Douglas McGregor wrote that “the principles of organization which comprise the bulk of the literature of management could only have been derived from assumptions such as those of Theory X. Other beliefs about human nature would have led inevitably to quite different organizational principles”. Theory X supposes that people dislike work and will only do what’s required of them if they are “coerced, controlled, directed, threatened with punishment” (McGregor, 1960). It should be noted that the use of purposive threats is still considered to be a normal management technique in many organisations, for example, when it is understood that penalties may be imposed for infringements of rules or failure to meet targets. They are also frequently applied in an inverse form, such as performance-related pay or other forms of reward which come to be anticipated by employees but may be withheld if targets are not met.

- Environmental threat

This term covers natural events, forces or changes in society which are not being controlled by anyone,

or from macro-political causes or policies that are decided so remotely from the people they affect that for all practical purposes they can be regarded as undirected. Examples might be changes in regulation or other governmental policy, the advent of serious competition which threatens the viability of the employer, takeovers, downsizing, “re-engineering”, changes in markets addressed, or new technology which devalues old skills.

In the research, a coefficient was calculated based on the six positive factors, modified by the two negative ones, as described by the informants. This was compared with a similar coefficient of project success, again based on a rigorous assessment derived from the informants’ accounts. This produced an unexpectedly high correlation of +.74, which is illustrated in the graph below.

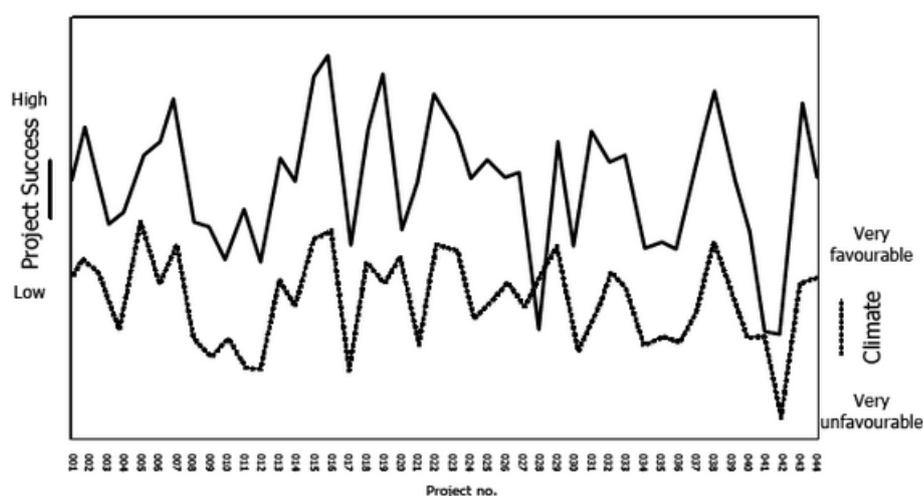


Figure 1: Organisational Climate and Project Success

From this evidence, which supports earlier and subsequent results from other researchers, a clear correlation emerges between an organisational climate which is high in autonomy and low in threat, and successful work outcomes.

In some ways these results seem natural enough. Human beings are social animals. We have developed to co-operate within relatively small groups, with each individual contributing different strengths and talents so that the group is enabled to survive and dominate its environment. As a result, individually we have a need to participate in group activities, and to have our participation recognised by others. In the 1940s Abraham Maslow identified these needs as a hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). Evidence for the hierarchical dominance of the various needs has been elusive (Lawler & Suttle, 1972) but as a set of criteria for social coherence Maslow’s taxonomy is robust. The needs he defines are: the need for basic requirements such as food, water, shelter; the need to feel secure and protected against danger and deprivation; the need to belong, to be accepted and to both give and receive friendship and love; the need for self esteem, self-confidence, achievement and independence, and for the deserved esteem, respect and recognition of others. Finally, the need to achieve “self-actualisation”, meaning the need to become whatever one is capable of being. As well as the five needs of his hierarchy, Maslow also considered that the need

“to know” and the need “to understand” were important to human wellbeing.

All these needs are met, if indeed they are met, through our social context; without interactions with other people they can at best be only partially fulfilled. Historically there would have been little or no distinction between “work” and “non work” activities and the social context of both would have been the same for most of the time. Modern humans, though, are likely to go “to work” and enter a distinct social context from that in which other aspects of their lives are set. Work in this sense may take up a significant proportion of people’s lives: quite enough for them to feel badly deprived if the social context of their workplace fails to provide for their basic needs. It is how satisfactory the workplace seems as a social context that determines its climate. In this sense, the eight elements of organisational climate identified in Gray’s (2000) research correspond fairly closely to Maslow’s seven categories of need, applied to and interpreted for the modern workplace. It therefore follows that by paying attention to the climate elements; reinforcing and augmenting the positive ones and ameliorating the negative ones, managers have it in their power to make significant improvements both to the psychological, and therefore also the physical, wellbeing of employees and at the same time to improve the quality and quantity of the work that’s performed.

Employees' perceptions of their organisations' climate are strongly influenced by the actions of senior people, and especially those of their immediate supervisors (McGregor, 1960; Reichers & Schneider, 1990). This means that individual managers have the capability of triggering improvements by making changes in their own behaviour. This isn't necessarily easy to do: "like losing weight or giving up smoking, changing our workplace behaviour needs willpower, determination and constant self-observation to avoid slipping back into the old habits" (Gray, 2007). Corrective action, in this as in many other contexts, is easier if begun early, when the first warning signs of something wrong are detected.

Unfortunately, for those inside an organisation it can be all too easy for climate problems to go unnoticed until they become too serious to ignore. Ideal states can be imagined, and expressed in the form of vision and mission statements, but these are of little use without a realistic assessment of the current situation; to plan a journey one must know not only the intended destination but one's current location, as well.

Perhaps the simplest way to make an assessment of an organisation's climate is to ask an outsider to observe and provide feedback. Often, an experienced observer will notice a prevailing atmosphere of which insiders, who live with it every day, are not consciously aware. Such feedback can be useful, even though it will inevitably be superficial and probably inaccurate. Once it's been pointed out, managers may be able to take action to put things right, or at least to clarify the issues. This attention, which may be seen as evidence of good will and the desire to make things better, can sometimes be all that's needed for quite major improvements in climate to follow.

Often, though, this kind of "quick and dirty" approach isn't enough and more formal investigation is needed. The research which isolated and validated the eight climate factors mentioned above (Gray, 2000) involved extended interviews which were then analysed in the context of an eclectic body of literature and earlier research findings. This kind of research, common in academia, is likely to be too resource-hungry to be economically viable in most commercial settings.

A useful and cost-effective compromise is to carry out a survey in which people answer questions about their perceptions of the various climate factors, eg, Gray's (2001, 2002) Organizational Climate Assessment instrument, or OCA, in which respondents are asked how strongly they agree or disagree that various statements are "true of my organisation". This allows analysis at two levels. First, it produces a simple overall "climate index" which gives a broad indication of how the people who work in the organ-

isation, or smaller group, perceive its climate. A low index suggests that some attention is needed to improve the climate or, of course, to prevent things getting worse. If it's very low it means that something is going badly wrong and needs immediate corrective action.

At a deeper level, the OCA shows how people responded to questions about each of the eight climate factors individually. An organisation's climate is a system, in which each of the elements continually interacts with all the others. This works to maintain a rough organisational homeostasis, so normally one would expect all eight factors to produce roughly similar results. If they don't, for example, if one or more seem to be out of step with the others, it's very likely that the other factors will come into line before long. The six positive factors interact very rapidly, so changes in one or more of these seldom last very long. Of the two negative factors, purposive threat has strong interactions with the other factors, because "it's an intrinsic characteristic of particular attitudes and ways of behaving associated with managers or others who are in constant interaction with the people who are affected by it, and therefore its influence on other factors ... is direct and immediate" (Gray, 2007). If any individual factor seems to be out of step with the overall pattern it may mean that something is changing; a new situation is developing or perhaps the influence of a new manager with a different style is beginning to be felt.

Environmental threat, is rather different because it originates outside the organisational system. How much and how quickly it affects the climate obviously depends to some extent on the specific nature of the threat. However, organisations which already had a positive climate and in which employees feel they can trust communications from management and have confidence that the welfare of employees is likely to be taken into account in decision-making seem to develop "healthier immune systems" which can help them to withstand problems from outside more robustly. "Conversely, where the climate is not perceived to be benign, the perception of environmental threat can seem more menacing and people may feel more helpless and isolated" (Gray, 2007).

Experience of analysing climate in a variety of organisations, and of observing positive (and sometimes negative) change, provides some broad suggestions about actions managers can take once they become aware of the desirability and the possibility of improvement.

The freedom to express ideas is suppressed when managers make it obvious that they don't value what employees have to say about their jobs or the way the organisation tries to fulfil its purpose. People almost always have ideas about what they do for a living, but if no-one is listening or worse, if the ex-

pression of ideas is discouraged, they are likely to begin to feel that they themselves aren't valued. This inevitably affects the climate. The key to improving the perception of this freedom is to open channels of communication through which ideas can be communicated to those who are in a position to acknowledge them and, if appropriate, make use of them. Formal suggestions schemes can have a place, if they meet certain defined criteria for effectiveness (see, for example, Charlton, 2005; Fowler, 1994) and, depending on circumstances, less formal approaches can work just as well, so long as people's ideas get through to someone who will listen and respond positively to them.

There are many organisations in which people feel that it's unacceptable to tell the boss they're worried about something, or that there's something about the current situation that they don't feel comfortable about. If people's freedom to express concerns is suppressed in this way the concerns don't just go away. It's more likely that they will fester until they grow into something serious. A more positive approach is to make it clear that properly thought out expressions of concern will be treated as useful inputs to good management. This is often best done through formal channels by which concerns can be expressed safely and in confidence. Of course, these channels have to be seen to work if they're to be of any real value. Again, formal mechanisms may not be needed if there's a genuine willingness on the part of all managers to listen to people's concerns whilst they are minor and easily addressed.

The freedom to question can seem threatening to a manager who is insecure or working at the boundaries of his or her competence. However it should be seen as a positive management tool. Questioning helps people to understand what their managers are trying to achieve, which means they can contribute more effectively to successful outcomes. It can also draw timely attention to risks and problems.

Participation in defining goals and objectives has been shown to lead to improved results (eg, Baker, Murphy & Fisher, 1988; Deloitte Touche, 1998). It's also good for people's health, reducing stress-related problems, improving self-esteem and job satisfaction (Sauter, Murphy & Hurrell, 1992) and "allowing employees to improve their adjustment to the demands of the job" (French, Caplan & van Harrison, 1982). Karasek & Theorell (1990) have shown clear links between "low decision latitude" and increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

If participation in decision making is low, managers need to address the issue quickly. "The key demand on managers is that they try, continually, to extend the amount of participation by their people, but respect individuals' comfort levels. This requires observation and active listening, and flexibility,

which is all quite hard work, but the effort is well worthwhile" (Gray, 2007).

Intrinsic satisfaction from the work itself is a key factor in people's motivation at work (Lawler, 1973; Kanfer, 1994), which has a direct effect on performance. The negative side of this is that if work isn't satisfying people may become frustrated and resentful, and they may suffer from stress-related health problems. Good job design can help here, using the tried and tested principles set out by Hackman & Oldham (1980). They advised that jobs should have the following characteristics:

- "skill variety"; the job utilises several different skills or abilities, or involves a number of different tasks,
- "task identity"; the worker sees a task through from beginning to end, and can see an identifiable product or outcome,
- "task significance"; other people are affected by how well the task is done,
- "autonomy"; allowing the worker to plan his or her own work and choose how to do it,
- "feedback", so that the worker receives clear, direct information about how well he or she is doing.

Innovation; the freedom to try new concepts and approaches, is a basic need most people have, and it's essential to foster it for the organisation's own sake: "no organisation can survive without innovation. There must be an adaptive process that allows the organisation to take on board new ideas and translate them into practical results" (Cox, 1998). For individuals it's important to be free to try things out in relation to their own work. But innovation is risky; new things don't always work. Managers need to be willing to take that risk on board, set boundaries and within those boundaries allow people to do things their own way, trying out new things from time to time. This gives people a sense of ownership of what they do and boosts commitment and motivation.

Purposive threats, in their various guises, have been shown to be negatively correlated with performance (Deming, 1986; Handy, 1990; Gray, 2000). Coercion, and the fear of penalties, are unlikely, at the very best, to secure more than bare compliance. This is because people who threaten us become, almost by definition, our enemies, and few people would work willingly and enthusiastically to further an enemy's objectives. To alleviate the perception of purposive threat is, in principle, quite simple: just stop doing it. In practice substituting an habitual management style with something more positive may require a gentle process, rather than a sudden change.

Inverse forms of threat, such as withholding bonuses, pay rises or promotion prospects, can be par-

ticularly insidious because they are very likely to be regarded with ambivalence by the recipients. Incentives are always subject to some level of risk of unintended consequences (Deci, 1972; Guzzo, Jette, & Katzell, 1985; Freedman, Cunningham & Krismer, 1992).

Environmental threat is the climate factor which is most difficult for managers to influence. Gray (2000) found that organizational change was the commonest source of such perceived threat, especially where people feel that they have no control or input to the changes. The damage can be mitigated if people are consulted and informed. Climates which are otherwise perceived as benign may resist the negative effects of environmental threat better than those which are less satisfactory, perhaps because the strength of trust and commitment which are characteristics of benign environments strengthen

the climate's "immune system" and enable people to handle change more positively.

Fifty years of research have shown beyond reasonable doubt that organisational performance is likely to benefit measurably from an organisational climate that fosters the six positive factors identified in this paper, and minimises the two kinds of threat. Such a climate can also provide a social context in which people can feel secure, committed to organisational goals, and personally fulfilled. Contrary to the perspective identified in the 1950s and 1960s by Douglas McGregor as "Theory X", which still persists into the modern world of work, there is a strong compatibility between people's individual needs and the needs of their employing organisations for high performance. An understanding of this and a willingness to incorporate the lessons of research into everyday management practice will result in benefits to all stakeholders.

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Roderic Gray is a consultant, writer and management coach, with a particular interest in the relationships between individuals and their organisations. He has published two full length books: *A Climate of Success* (2007) and *How People Work* (2004), which has recently been translated into Chinese (2008) as well as a number of articles on organizational climate and other management topics, including *The Padua Paradigm: assessing organisational climate*, *Organisational Climate and Project Success* and *Organisational Climate and the Competitive Edge*. His career involved a variety of practical, hands-on management roles before becoming a senior internal consultant in a major UK blue-chip company. Since 1997 he has worked in his own consulting practice. He also holds a visiting Senior Lecturer appointment at Anglia Ruskin University, UK, where he currently supervises doctoral researchers in the UK and abroad. He has a PhD in organisational behaviour and an MSc in human resource management, and is a Chartered Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, as well as a Member of the Association for Project Management and the Chartered Management Institute.



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