

School of Education

**A phenomenological study of the influence of middle level
management on upward feedback in a service organisation**

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

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Date: 20th November 2013

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Abstract

The purpose of this empirical phenomenological study was to examine the influence that middle level management has on the upward feedback process for decision making purposes. The study revealed four themes relating to the role of middle managers in the upward feedback process. These comprised of middle managers as conduits, filters, inhibitors and advocates. The results suggested that middle managers influenced upward feedback positively by advocating subordinate ideas and by passing subordinate information upwards accurately to superordinates. Middle managers were also seen as negatively influencing the upward feedback process because of their filtering role and the inhibitive behaviours that they displayed that discouraged upward feedback. The findings also revealed that physical distance which resulted in a lack of visibility, availability and accessibility of managers; discrepancies in the manner in which subordinate initiated and manager initiated feedback were handled; the inappropriateness of some voice mechanisms to elicit upward feedback; and managers' inability to close the feedback loop also acted as deterrents to upward feedback. Findings in this study addressed a gap in the literature and provided insight into the critical role that middle managers have on upward feedback. These findings are valuable to scholars, subordinates, middle managers and superordinates of service organisations.

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CHAPTER 1

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Overview

This thesis explored the impact that middle management's role has on the provision of upward feedback for decision making purposes in a service organisation. This chapter provides an overview of the content of the entire study. The chapter commences with the background of the study, the statement of the problem and the purpose of the study. Thereafter, the research questions, the significance and nature of the study and the scope and limitations of the study are discussed. A list of terms used throughout the study is also provided. The chapter concludes by outlining the manner in which thesis is organised.

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 Organisational Structure, Leadership and Management

Organisational structures exercise a critical and unequivocal role in governing employee conduct in the workplace (Luthans, 1992). While the study of organisational behaviour seeks to explain the way in which people behave in the workplace (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter, 2001), the study of organisational structures attempts to understand how to manage and control the conduct of employees in the workplace with the purpose of achieving organisational objectives (Robbins et al., 2001; Robbins, Water-Marsh, Cacioppe & Millet, 1994).

In the 1960s, organisational theorists identified employee behaviours that were not associated with formal operations. They coined the term 'informal organisation' to differentiate these more personal behaviours from what was expected from persons as employees. Contrasting informal organisations were formal structures. Formal structures use detailed organisational policies to designate ways in which employees are expected to perform their duties (Greenleaf, 1977). Further, formal structures also demarcate reporting lines, delineate responsibilities and define actions that employees should take in anticipated situations (Greenleaf, 1977).

Apart from being formal or informal, organisational structures can also be classified as being mechanistic or organic. Mechanistic structures which are identical to pyramid-shaped organisations are “highly specialised in nature, with tall hierarchies, rigid departments, a clear chain of command, narrow spans of control and are highly centralised and formalised” (Robbins et al., 2001, p.361). In contrast, organic structures are characterised by “cross functional teams, cross-hierarchical teams, free flow of information, wide spans of control, decentralisation and low formalisation” (Robbins, et al., 2001, p. 361).

Although organisational structures and designs can differ greatly, Robbins and Mukerji (1994) pointed out, that these depend on an organisation’s strategy, size, technology and environment as well as what can make the organisation most effective. In general, the form of an organisation (the structure) should derive from the function of the organisation (the reason for the organisation’s existence).

An examination of the attributes of these structures is fundamental to the provision of upward feedback as an organisation’s structure has the ability to either impede or facilitate the flow of communication within an organisation (Robbins et al., 2001). Robbins et al. (2001) contended for example that mechanistic structures are seen as favouring a downward flow of communication with limited opportunities for lower level employees to be involved in decision making. Conversely, Knowles (2002) observed organic structures as using a free flow of information to access employees’ intellectual capacity to resolve organisational problems.

1.1.2 Communication, Feedback and Middle Managers

Communication is a basic organisational function which is critical for achieving organisational objectives (Luthans, 1992). As Orpen (1997) suggested, communication plays such a critical role that it can result in the success or failure of an organisation.

Communication has several functions within an organisation. Of importance to this research however, is how communication can be used to control employee behaviour within the organisation through the use of “authority hierarchies and formal guidelines” which all employees are required to adhere to; and also how communication can be used to assist decision making through the provision of information to those who are required to provide input into the decision (Robbins et al., 1994, p. 421).

Kandlousi, Ali and Abdollahi (2010), suggested that two forms of communication, formal and informal, can exist in an organisation. Formal communication is typified by vertical communication, while informal communication often displays itself in the form of horizontal communication between employees at similar levels (for example, between middle level managers). Vertical communication allows the flow of work-related information from the top to the bottom and from the bottom to the top of the organisation's hierarchy. Information transmitted from the top to the bottom usually relates to "the organisation's strategy or objectives and current developments" (Bartels, Peters, de Jong, Pruyn & van der Molen, 2010, p. 213). Bottom-up communication on the other hand involves providing feedback on task progress, current problems and also encompasses opportunities for subordinates to participate in decision making (Bartels et al., 2010; Robbins et al., 1994).

To be effective, communication is highly dependent on feedback (Luthans, 1992). Feedback not only enables organisational learning and effectiveness but also assists organisations in discovering better ways to work (Ulrich, Jix & Von Glinow, 1993). Although vertical communication and feedback are supposed to comprise both a downward and upward flow of information, Luthans (1992) found that the downward flow of information dominates upward communication. Luthans (1992, p. 484) noted that subordinates have the ability to provide "personal information about ideas, attitudes and performance" as well as "more technical feedback information about performance, a vital factor for the control of any organisation". He therefore proposed that feedback needed to be a two-way process. Further, Luthans noted that upward feedback which is often suppressed, overlooked and misrepresented by managers, is essential if the organisation is to endure (1992). Middle managers in particular, are expected to have a crucial function in the upwards and downwards flow of information and feedback.

As communication is a necessary element for the implementation of strategic objectives, middle level managers use their influence across social networks to execute objectives. Therefore, while top managers are responsible for organisational change, strategies can only be implemented effectively with the support of managers who communicate information to subordinates who implement the changes (Embertson, 2006). Middle level managers therefore "play an integrative role for downward and upward communication about strategy formulation and implementation" (Ekaterini, 2011, p. 553). To be effective in their communication across the organisation therefore it is necessary for these managers

to stimulate communication and create communication climates that encourage the sharing of information (Potthoff, 2004).

1.1.3 Upward Feedback and the Effects of Feedback

Upward feedback occurs when subordinates share information with those who hold higher ranking positions within the organisation's hierarchy (Kilburn, 2007). Information regarding a plethora of issues from grievances, problems, expectations, finances, to suggestions for improvement can be passed upwards making it extremely beneficial to organisations (Kilburn, 2007).

While subordinates have the ability to provide valuable feedback, that is, feedback which leaders will find useful for decision making, Kilburn (2007) and Tourish (2005) found that subordinates are seldom given the opportunity to provide feedback on strategies formulated by management. Tourish (2005) highlighted the tendency of leaders to undertake external environmental scans prior to making strategic decisions as well as their failure to carry out internal scans to determine their organisation's climate and the direction in which the organisation should be heading. By this omission, it appeared that senior management disregarded the ability of subordinates to provide crucial feedback in response to external threats and opportunities (Tourish, 2005). Tourish also posited that subordinates are often expected to accept, implement and be committed to initiatives that are communicated from above without being given the opportunity to discuss or debate decisions that are presented by top management (2005). The danger with this according to Tourish (2005), is that management could formulate inferior strategies that otherwise could have been enhanced by a continuous exchange of ideas. Walker and Smither (1999) summed up the importance of requesting upward feedback by stating that leaders needed to make sure that channels for the provision of upward feedback existed outside formalised feedback systems, thereby ensuring that leaders have all the information they need to make behavioural modifications and improvements. Whatever the form of feedback (formal versus informal), what is evident is that leaders or organisations that do not create forums for the provision of both positive and negative feedback put their organisation at risk of failure (Tourish & Robson, 2003).

Kilburn (2007) and London and Smither (2002), suggested that a leader's ability to accept formal or informal feedback however, depended on the follower's attitude and prior experience of having given upward feedback, and to a large extent on the leader's

behaviour and attitude. Tourish (2005, p. 485) also found, that leaders are often “suspicious of any feedback” that will affect their “behaviour or decisions” and therefore react adversely in what is called “*automatic vigilance effect*”. Subordinates on the other hand were seen as being reluctant to share critical information in a bid to avoid negative repercussions and would therefore instead inflate how much they agreed with those who held senior positions in what is termed the “*ingratiation effect*” (Tourish, 2005, p. 485).

While the preceding examination of organisational structure, leadership and management presents a complex view of organisations and their leadership, it assists in the preliminary conceptualisation of middle-management. These managers, who are positioned between the bottom and top levels of the organisational hierarchy, may exercise leadership roles, and operate within both the formal and informal organisation. The specification of their roles will also depend on the characteristics of the organisation in which they work.

Due to their position in the organisation’s hierarchy, middle level managers play a pivotal role in identifying new ideas and are also well-placed to influence upward feedback due to the communication and support function aspect of their role (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009). As such, middle level managers have the potential to champion subordinate ideas to top managers for inclusion in the organisation’s strategic agenda which can impact on organisational effectiveness (Floyd & Woodridge, 1996).

To conclude, “the actions of middle managers affect organisational actions through their effect on what, when and how issues claim top management’s attention” (Dutton & Ashford, 1993, p.420). As today’s environments become more complex and dynamic, leaders at the top are unable to have all of the information that they require to make informed decisions. Often in this situation, top managers rely on middle level managers who are closest to the action to inform them of what they need to know prior to making strategic decisions (Dutton, Ashford, O’Neill, Hayes & Wierba, 1997).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

An organisation’s performance and success relies on a variety of internal and external factors. One factor contributing to organisational effectiveness or to the successful selection of an organisation’s strategy and the implementation of that strategic vision is feedback. Feedback is an important element of an organisation’s internal communication.

Evidence in the literature suggests that an organisation can become highly successful by improving its internal communication (Robson & Tourish, 2005). Subordinates who are key keepers of critical information can provide vital information to senior personnel in what is termed upward feedback. As senior managers have significant workloads, they do not always have the time to ensure that their employees have all of the information that they require to do their jobs and equally, that staff are providing the information needed for senior managers to do their job effectively. Neglecting an organisations internal communication can therefore have detrimental effects for the whole organisation as it can lead to inferior decision making by senior managers (Robson & Tourish, 2005). As Robson and Tourish (2005, p. 220) postulated “this becomes a source of communication problem, in that low awareness precludes accurate diagnosis and the crafting of effective action plans”.

Not only does a lack of upward feedback in an organisation cause the quality of decision making to deteriorate (Tourish & Robson, 2003) but it also has the potential to result in subordinates subverting or not implementing strategies that they had no part in formulating or that they perceive aren't in their best interests (Tourish, 2005).

The preceding analysis of the need for senior managers to have accurate information to make informed decisions, as well as the requirement for subordinates to participate in decision making foreshadows the need for middle managers to function as a conduit of upward feedback between subordinates and superordinates.

Consequently, the research problem emerged from a gap in the literature regarding middle management's role in the upward feedback process, in particular, the impact that middle managers have on upward feedback provided by subordinates directed at decision makers in the organisation. Due to their position in an organisation's hierarchy, middle managers have access to more precise information from subordinates who are closest to the action (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). They therefore have the ability to inform top managers of issues which could consequently change the organisation's strategic direction (Westley, 1990) as well as enhance organisational performance (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). As Bower (1970, p. 297-298) stipulated, middle managers are the only people in the organisation who have the ability to determine “whether strategic issues are being considered in the proper context”. Wooldrige and Floyd (1990) therefore proposed a theoretical model which showed that middle managers could increase organisational performance in one of two ways. First, through their involvement in the strategy process middle managers can

contribute toward improving decision making which would consequently lead to superior strategies. Second, middle managers involvement in strategy can lead to higher strategic consensus and improved implementation of the strategy. The premise of this study is that middle managers' contribution towards decision making would be as a result of cumulative feedback from their subordinates.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this empirical phenomenological research was to examine how middle managers influence the upward feedback process directed at decision making. The study did not define a specific purpose for decision making. Decision making therefore could relate to organisational effectiveness; performance, or strategic decision making. Of interest to the study instead was whether the provision of upward feedback for decision making purposes occurred more as a result of manager initiated upward feedback (reactive voice) versus unsolicited follower voice (active voice).

1.4 Research Questions

Section 3.1 outlines the rationale behind selecting the research questions that guided the study. The research questions were:

1. What are subordinates' personal experiences of providing upward feedback, and how do they perceive the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation?
2. What are superordinates' and middle level managers' personal experiences of upward feedback, and how do they perceive the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation?
3. How does middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process?
4. How can the participation of middle-level management in upward feedback be enhanced?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Numerous researchers have focussed on the importance of upward feedback in organisations including its ability to improve decision making (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tourish, 2005) however, with the exception of a few researchers (for example, Kopland, 2012; Lam, 2009) there is currently very little research which examines the critical function that middle managers play in the upward feedback process. This study sought to address this gap in the literature and in so doing, extend the research in the area of upward feedback. This study was unique and differed from previous studies in the type of methodology that it employed, as well as in the type of organisation (a national service organisation) in which the research was undertaken.

This study will be significant to superordinates, middle level managers and subordinates in service organisations. Superordinates will be able to utilise the information to select and design organisation structures that facilitate upward feedback which can consequently improve decision making. Middle level managers will be made aware of useful strategies to employ to elicit upward feedback from subordinates. The study will also be significant to subordinates as it informs them of the importance that management can place on their input into the decision making process which can in turn eliminate any doubts subordinates hold about the value of providing upward feedback.

1.6 Nature of the Study

The research method chosen for the study was of a qualitative nature. Creswell (2008) proposed that qualitative research was best suited for research problems in which little was known about the phenomena. As the literature yielded very little information on the influence that middle level management have on upward feedback for decision making purposes, it was necessary to undertake research of a qualitative nature to explore this phenomenon in greater depth.

The research design used for the study was phenomenology. A phenomenological study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). In a phenomenological study, researchers seek to investigate, understand, identify and describe the “various reactions to, or perceptions”

toward a phenomenon (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012, p. 432). Since the intention of the research was to examine the manifold perceptions of upward feedback “as experienced by different people ... to determine what is common to these perceptions and reactions” phenomenology was seen as being the most appropriate method for this research (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 432).

Of the various streams of phenomenology discussed in Section 3.4, the empirical phenomenological research method was seen as being appropriate because the aim of the research was to develop a general structured description that expresses the common aspects of middle level management’s influence on upward feedback as experienced by all participants within the organisation.

The sampling strategy used for the study was maximal variation sampling. Creswell (2008, p. 214) defined maximal variation sampling as “a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait”. As the participants differed on the characteristic of their organisational role, maximal variation sampling was appropriate. The appropriateness of this sampling strategy is discussed further in Section 3.6.

An organisation that provides educational services in schools based in low socioeconomic status areas was the focus of the study. This organisation was selected because it was accessible and its staff met the criteria of having experienced upward feedback. The organisation is located in five Perth metropolitan area precincts and three Western Australian regional areas. Those individuals invited to participate in the study consisted of two superordinates, three middle level managers and five subordinates. The manner in which the sample size was determined is presented in Section 3.6.

The research was undertaken in two non-sequential empirical phases respectively aligned with the first three research questions. The fourth research question required the use of inductive data analysis to synthesise key findings from the previous phases.

Phase One – In depth interviews: All subordinates, middle managers and superordinates were invited to attend a one-on-one in-depth interview. Interviews were undertaken face to face with those based in the metropolitan area and via phone with those located in regional areas. Three recording techniques were used: note taking during interviews; audio recording the interviews; and making notes after the session. Interview questions were open ended and semi-structured in nature. All participants were given an opportunity to

review their verbatim transcripts for accuracy. Interview transcripts were analysed by coding, classifying and categorising data using NVivo 10 software. Emergent themes were subject to secondary analysis and interpretation. Following analysis, each participant was emailed a summary of their textural-structural experience for verification.

Phase Two – Document review and analysis: Document analysis was an essential component of gaining insight into the process of upward feedback in the organisation. Used in conjunction with the information gathered from the in-depth interview, the document analysis provided a means of verifying and expanding upon the information gathered in the interview process (Sanders, 1982). Further, the document analysis served as a substitute to participant observation as the researcher was unable to observe the participants in the area of upward feedback.

Prior to undertaking the main study, the researcher conducted a pilot study with two purposes in mind. First, to ensure that the interview questions elicited sufficient data to answer the research questions, and second to refine and validate the interview questions that were originally informed by the literature review and theory on upward feedback. The refined questions were then used in the main study.

The credibility of the study was ensured by triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, rich thick description and researcher bias. Dependability of the study was established by audio recording the interviews and by taking down field notes. To establish confirmability of the study all raw data were stored including interview field notes, audio recordings, and notes pertaining to data reduction, analysis, reconstruction and synthesis. Further details as to how the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the study were achieved are discussed in Section 3.9.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study was determined by the research questions and the areas outlined in the conceptual framework (Figure 2.1). Due to the research being a Master's thesis there were a number of factors which contributed to the study's limitation. These are discussed overleaf.

The first limitation pertained to the decision to undertake the study with one organisation based in one region (Western Australia) which contributed to the inability to generalise the findings beyond the West Australian division.

The second limitation related to the necessity to use a purposeful sampling strategy. As there were a few subordinates in the organisation that reported to a middle manager who could be invited to participate in the study (all those invited held the same role and job title), the results of the study could not be generalised beyond this cohort within the organisation.

Third, leaders and followers behaviours and attitudes play a critical, key role in the provision or lack thereof, of upward feedback. While the study examined these briefly, a more in-depth analysis would have obtained a clearer understanding of how these behaviours and the power dynamics between these two groups, affect upward feedback.

Fourth, like leader and follower behaviour, organisational culture also determines (to a great extent) how people behave in an organisation, including what is and is not acceptable. Examining upward feedback in light of the organisation's culture would have been worthwhile.

1.8 Definition of Terms

Authority structure – “organisational structure that defines members positions and member roles, determining to a great extent the superior's relationship to, and authority over, the subordinate” (Athanassiades, 1973, p. 212).

Autonomous structures – structures that afford its members a greater degree of autonomy of authority and responsibility in the formulation and implementation of “goals, standards and performance criteria” (Athanassiades, 1973, p. 212).

Communication - The “transferring and understanding of meaning” (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter, 2001, p. 633).

Critical upward feedback - Feedback that is “critical of organisational goals and management behaviour which is transmitted by those without managerial power to those with such power” (Tourish & Robson, 2006, p. 711).

Distortion of upward feedback – “the difference between upward feedback *as it occurs* and upward communication *as it would occur* if the subordinate were not distorting” (Athanassiades, 1973, p. 212).

Employee silence – the withholding of important information that has the ability to impact on an organisation’s success or the withholding of thoughts that people wish they could express (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Employee voice – the choice to provide information to those with the power to effect change with the intent to improve organisational functioning (Detert & Burris, 2007).

Feedback loop – the final stage of the communication process which checks for understanding of meaning (Robbins, Waters-Marsh, Cacioppe & Millet, 1994).

Formal communication – the transmission of official information between organisational members (Price, 1997).

Heteronomous organisations – organisations where subordinates are closely managed by their superiors using strict rules and guidelines, with very little room for deviation or “individual initiative and responsibility” (Athanassiades, 1973, p. 212).

Horizontal communication – communication between employees in similar positions and at a similar level of the organisation (Bartels, Peters, de Jong, Pruyn & van der Morlen, 2010).

Informal communication – information that is transmitted unofficially between organisation members (Price, 1997).

Informal feedback - feedback provided in the day to day routine of work (Baron, 1996).

Interpersonal communication - transmitting information from one individual to another (Luthans, 1992).

Leaders – those who either have formal power (authority) or power derived from aspects of the informal organisation (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter, 2001).

Managers – those who have rightful power and influence as a result of their role and authority (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter, 2001).

MUM effect – withholding undesirable information from leaders (Rosen & Tesser, 1970).

Organisation's climate – a set of perceptions that organisational members share about the way the organisation does things (Anderson & West, 1998).

Organisational effectiveness - the ability of an organisation to achieve its objectives (Luthans, 1992).

Organisational structure - “a formal framework by which job tasks are divided, grouped and coordinated” (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter, 2001, p. 351).

Strategy formation – “the organisational learning processes associated with the accumulation and deployment of organisational capabilities” (Floyd & Wooldrigde, 1996, p. 35).

1.9 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into five sections.

Chapter 1 presented the background of the study, outlined the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study and presented the research questions, significance, nature and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 reviews literature of central importance to the study including organisational structures, organisational roles, communication theory and upward feedback.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the methodology used in the study. The rationale for choosing a qualitative study, in particular an empirical phenomenological approach is discussed. The sampling approach, collection, analysis, validity and reliability of the data are then discussed.

Chapter 4 introduces the findings of the data. Common and non-common themes in the data are presented together with verbatim examples.

The final Chapter (5) discusses the implications and significance of the findings and makes recommendations to the organisation under research. The chapter also proposes areas for future research.

1.10 Summary

Organisational structures exist to control and manage subordinate behaviour in order for organisational objectives to be achieved. Organisational structures are a medium for communication and these can either facilitate or impede the flow of information. Feedback is an important element of communication. Upward feedback in particular is seen as being of significance to an organisation's continued existence and success. Leaders who do not invest the time and energy to encourage their employees to contribute in this way to the decision making process, put their organisation at risk by not developing strategies that align with organisational goals and priorities. The involvement of middle managers in communication and two-way feedback is an important element in the provision of upward feedback.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant literature relating to upward feedback. Literature pertaining to organisational structures, organisational roles, communication and feedback are all analysed in light of their relevance to the study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Overview

This chapter provides a review of literature pertinent to the study. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section commences with an examination of literature concerning organisational structures including an examination of formal and informal structures, structural designs and culture. The second section focuses on literature concerned with organisational roles. Given the vastness of leadership, management and follower theory, only literature that relates to the provision of upward feedback is critiqued. For the purposes of the review, the terms superordinate, superior, senior management, top managers are used interchangeably with leaders and the terms followers and employees are used interchangeably with subordinates. The term managers refer to middle management. In this section, specific attention is given to the distribution of authority, power and influence between leaders, managers and followers. Leader behavioural approaches, leadership styles and types of followers are also considered in light of their ability to impact upon upward feedback. The third section reviews literature on communication theory. Communication literature is scrutinised with the flow and types of communication being explored in depth. The final section of the review introduces the concept of feedback as part of the communication process. In particular, special attention is given to upward feedback, including its potential benefits, the consequences of not seeking this form of feedback and why subordinates choose not to provide upward feedback. The distortion of upward feedback and the ways in which this form of feedback can be facilitated in an organisation are also discussed in this section. Interwoven in each section of the review is an explanation of why each of these elements is vital to the research and the role that middle manager's play in influencing upward feedback.

2.1 Organisational Structures

Organisational structures exercise a critical and unequivocal role in governing employee conduct in the workplace (Luthans, 1992). While the study of organisational behaviour

seeks to explain the way in which people behave in the workplace (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter, 2001), the study of organisational structures attempts to understand how to manage and control the conduct of employees in the workplace with the purpose of achieving organisational objectives (Robbins et al., 2001; Robbins, Water-Marsh, Cacioppe & Millet, 1994).

The concept of managing employee behaviour through the use of organisational structures dates back to the late eighteenth century when classical theorists such as Adam Smith (1776), Fredrick Taylor (1911), Henri Fayol (1911) and Max Weber (1949) all sought to develop organisational principles that would assist managers in making fundamental decisions (Robbins et al., 1994). These theorists hoped to identify structures and management principles that would lead to increased organisational efficiency. Of the many theories each developed the most pertinent to this study was the principle of the unity of command which, for the sake of clarity, emphasises the need for subordinates to be responsible to only one manager. The potential downside to the unity of command principle according to Robbins et al., (1994) was that it could result in organisations becoming more hierarchical in nature which would in turn lead to communication becoming highly formalised and frustrating for employees. As the unity of command principle has the ability to impact on the provision of upward feedback it is relevant to this research.

Robbins et al., (1994) posited that it was possible to analyse and predict employee behaviour in the workplace by observing the interior structure of an organisation. Robbins and colleagues (1994) believed that while an organisation's structure could be used to shape employee attitudes and behaviours the use of formal structures could also assist with constraining and controlling what employees did in the workplace.

2.1.1 Formal and Informal Structures

Formal structures differ from informal structures in two ways. Formal structures use detailed organisational policies to designate ways in which employees are expected to perform their duties (Greenleaf, 1977). Further, formal structures also demarcate reporting lines, delineate responsibilities and define actions that employees should take in anticipated situations (Greenleaf, 1977). In the 1960s, organisational theorists identified employee behaviours that were not associated with formal operations. They coined the term 'informal organisation' to differentiate these more personal behaviours from what

was expected from persons as employees. In informal structures employees tend to organise themselves around the work and in so doing develop networks with other organisational members (Knowles, 2002). The function of informal structures therefore depends on employees not only establishing relationships, interdependence and trust but also on employees developing a shared organisational identity, all of which occur through the continuous sharing of information (Knowles, 2002).

Apart from being formal or informal, organisational structures can also be classified as being mechanistic or organic. Mechanistic structures which are identical to pyramid-shaped organisations are “highly specialised in nature, with tall hierarchies, rigid departments, a clear chain of command, narrow spans of control and are highly centralised and formalised” (Robbins et al., 2001, p.361). These structures rely on “authority and a well-defined hierarchy to facilitate coordination” (Robbins et al., 1994, p. 644). Because of their formal format, mechanistic structures are seen as being more suited to managers than leaders as they offer a measure of stability and direction with which managers work best (Kotter, 1990).

In contrast, organic structures are characterised by “cross-functional teams, cross-hierarchical teams, free flow of information, wide spans of control, decentralisation and low formalisation” (Robbins, et al., 2001, p. 361). Unlike mechanistic structures, coordination in this structure is achieved by continual communication and modification of processes and procedures (Robbins et al., 1994). As this structure requires continual adaptation to changing circumstances, it is seen as being most suited to leaders than managers (Kotter, 1990).

An examination of the attributes of these structures is fundamental as an organisation’s structure has the ability to either impede or facilitate the flow of communication within an organisation (Robbins et al., 2001). Robbins et al. (2001) contended for example that mechanistic structures are seen as favouring a downward flow of communication with limited opportunities for lower level employees to be involved in decision making. Conversely, Knowles (2002) observed that organic structures used a free flow of information to access employees’ intellectual capacity to resolve organisational problems.

The approach that managers use to design their organisational structures depends on the blending together of the three structural components of complexity, formalisation and centralisation (Robbins et al., 1994). An understanding of these three structural components is particularly pertinent to this research as the manner in they are used to

design an organisation's structure has the ability to impact upon the flow of communication within an organisation.

The first component *complexity* indicates the degree to which activities vary and are segmented in the organisation. This component encompasses three types of differentiation. Horizontal differentiation represents how diverse units are from one another within the organisation. Vertical differentiation considers the distance between the top and bottom of the organisation's hierarchy and lastly, spatial differentiation considers the geographical distance between organisational locations (Robbins et al., 1994).

The second component *formalisation* refers to the extent to which processes and regulations are used by the organisation. This component of the organisation's structure determines the level to which jobs are highly standardised and formalised on the one hand and flexible and non-programmed on the other (Robbins et al., 1994).

The last component *centralisation* examines where decision-making authority lies in the organisation. In highly centralised organisations superordinates make all of the decisions with those at the lower level of the hierarchy being expected to carry out instructions as prescribed from above. Conversely, in decentralised structures, decision making is made by those at the frontline of the organisation (Robbins et al., 1994).

All three components have the potential to cause a number of organisational communication problems due to diverse horizontal differentiation or spatial differentiation. Of particular relevance to this research, is the potential for 'communication distortion' to occur as information passes up 'taller' organisational hierarchies in vertical differentiation. Further, it can be anticipated that the higher the levels of job formalisation within an organisation, the less likely it would be that employees would have the ability to provide upward feedback relating to their role, especially where it deviates from the organisation's standardised rules and procedures.

Of key relevance to this research is the component of centralisation as it shows where the majority of the decision making lies within an organisation as well as who is responsible for making decisions. High levels of centralisation have the ability to negatively impact upon the provision of upward feedback.

2.1.2 Structural Designs

Considering the structural components of complexity, formalisation and centralisation, Robbins and Mukerji, (1994) proposed that mechanistic structures could be designed in one of two ways: either as a functional structure or a divisional structure and that organic structures could be designed in three ways comprising of the simple structure, the matrix structure or the network structure. Being conversant with the designs under each structure including the advantages and disadvantages of each design, is pivotal to this research as it depicts the manner in which communication could potentially flow in each design thereby exposing the types of design that facilitate or impede upward feedback. Further, the structural design of an organisation can also impact on the quality of decision making. For example, certain designs insulate subordinates from the rest of the organisation thereby limiting their input into decision making from a partisan point of view, while other designs allow subordinates to be cognisant of what is occurring in the whole organisation thereby allowing them to provide input from a more holistic perspective. A summary of each of these designs is provided below.

2.1.2.1 Mechanistic designs.

The functional structure seeks to create organisational efficiency by grouping similar roles and departments together. The advantage of this structure is specialisation. The main weakness of this structure is that functional goals take priority over organisational goals. As functions are isolated from one and another there is a tendency for them to operate independently of each other. As such, only top managers have a holistic picture of what is occurring at the organisational level (Robbins & Mukerji, 1994).

The divisional structure comprises of independent units who report to a divisional manager. The divisional manager is fully responsible for making all of the organisation's strategic and operational decisions. Divisions work autonomously from one another and report to a head office. The advantage of this form of structure is that it concentrates on final outcomes. Also as each division focusses on its day to day operations, the head office is freed up to focus on strategic decision making. The greatest disadvantage of this structure is the replication of roles across divisions which escalates costs and decreases efficiency (Robbins & Mukerji, 1994).

2.1.2.2 Organic designs.

The simple structure is a structure that is "low in complexity and formalisation but high in centralisation" (Robbins & Mukerji, 1994, p. 229). Decision making in this structure is

informal and all critical decisions are centralised and made by top management. Advantages of this structure are that it is adaptable, economical, fast and accountability is unambiguous. Weaknesses include its suitability to small organisations only. As the organisation grows centralised decision making at the top can stagnate due to information overload (Robbins & Mukerji, 1994).

The matrix structure clusters experts from functional departments to work together on various projects under the leadership of a project manager. This structure has a double reporting line as it incorporates elements of both functional and product departmentalisation. One of the main advantages of this structure is its ability to facilitate the coordination of various projects while maintaining its functional department intact. The main disadvantage of this structure is the confusion when it comes to reporting lines and the increased potential for 'power' disputes between functional and project managers (Robbins & Mukerji, 1994).

The network structure is "a small centralised organisation that relies on other organisations to perform its basic business functions" (Robbins & Mukerji, 1994, p. 234). Managers in this structure spend a substantial amount of time managing and monitoring external affairs. The advantage of this structure is that it is highly flexible and can respond quickly to changes. Disadvantages include the lack of control of operations due to the unpredictability of supplies (Robbins & Mukerji, 1994).

Although organisational structures and designs can differ greatly, Robbins and Mukerji (1994) pointed out that these depend on an organisation's strategy, size, technology and environment. Further, Robbins and Mukerji (1994) contended that structures and designs would also vary as organisations sought formations that would increase efficiency and effectiveness. This review will only focus on the element of organisational size as this customarily determines the number of hierarchal levels an organisation would consist of which would in turn impact on the provision of upward feedback.

Robbins et al. (1994) purported that the larger an organisation grew, the more decision making would become decentralised, and the more formalised the organisation was likely to be as managers were less likely to directly supervise or control employee behaviour. Further, these authors asserted that vertical differentiation was also likely to increase as more layers of employees were added to the organisation's hierarchy (Robbins et al., 1994).

Robbins and colleagues (1994) supposition for decentralised decision making, prefigures the need for middle managers to facilitate decision making from subordinates in larger, decentralised organisations. As such, it can be anticipated that in decentralised organisations subordinates would be given more opportunities to participate in decision making through the provision of upward feedback as they work more closely with middle manager's than top managers. Further, it can be expected that participative decision making would typically be more prominent in larger rather than smaller organisations that have centralised decision making. Apart from an organisation's structure however, a number of other variables such as a leader or follower's behaviour (as is discussed in Sections 2.2.1, 2.2.3 and 2.4.4.5 and 2.4.4.6 of this review) and an organisation's culture can also impact on the provision of upward feedback within organisations.

2.1.3 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is defined as a set of mutual values and beliefs which influence the manner in which organisational members behave in the workplace (Robbins et al., 2001). As an informal part of an organisation's structure, culture is learnt through the sharing of stories, rituals, material symbols and language (Robbins et al., 2001). Organisations therefore use culture to achieve a shared organisational identity as well as to highlight what the organisation values (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; Robbins et al., 1994).

Culture is said to exist at three levels in an organisation. On the exterior, culture is visible through artefacts which are all things that can be seen, heard or detected from organisational members. Beneath the exterior are the values and beliefs which can be perceived from conversations with organisational members. At the deepest level are fundamental suppositions which organisational members hold subconsciously (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

An organisation's culture can be considered to be strong or weak depending on how strongly and widely shared the organisational values are (Robbins et al., 1994). Organisations with strong cultures can increase behavioural consistency and accomplish the same result that written formalised rules and regulations achieve (Robbins et al., 1994). Culture plays two important roles in an organisation. First, it outlines how goals are to be met; how customers are to be dealt with and assists the organisation to adjust to its external environment. Second, it outlines working relationships, the manner of communication, the allocation of power, desirable and undesirable behaviours and

assimilates organisational members so they know how to interact with each other (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). Organisational cultures can impact on the provision of upward feedback as some cultures are more encouraging of the provision of upward feedback than others.

2.1.4 Relevance of Organisational Structures to this Research

The preceding examination of organisational theory provides an understanding of how structures emerged and how they are used to control employee behaviour and consequently the provision of upward feedback in the workplace. Knowledge of the components of mechanistic and organic structures as well as the implications of structural designs provides a framework against which the organisation being researched can be described and analysed.

Further, understanding the different designs under each structure can assist in gaining insight into which design is more suited to a free flow of communication which is of particular relevance to this research.

Consideration also needs to be given to the impact that the unity of command principle can have on upward feedback. It can be anticipated that the more reporting levels that exist between the bottom and top of an organisation's hierarchy, the more difficult it would be for subordinates to provide upward feedback as information would have to pass through numerous levels to reach superordinates. Further, it is also expected that the integrity of the subordinate's message would not remain intact by the time it reached superordinates due to the filtering that would occur at each level of the hierarchy. Moreover, middle managers (who subordinates are most likely to report to) can either facilitate or impede upon the provision of upward feedback as discussed in Section 2.4.2 of this review.

While this study will not investigate the impact of culture on the provision of upward feedback it would be remiss to not acknowledge the crucial role that culture plays in driving behaviour in organisations.

In addition to scrutinising the impact of structure and culture on employee behaviour it is also vital to examine the effect that organisational roles, authority, power and influence have on the provision of upward feedback in an organisation.

2.2 Organisational Roles

Organisations comprise of members who exercise varying roles. The manner in which roles are organised will depend to a great extent on the organisation's structure, design and culture. While an organisation can consist of many roles, this section of the review will focus on three roles namely the roles of leaders, managers and followers.

Organisational members hold varying degrees of authority, power and influence depending on their role within the organisation's hierarchy. The disparity in power and influence between leaders, managers and followers has the ability to impact upon the level to which upward feedback is provided and can either fuel ingratiation practices or cause employees to suppress their views as seen in Sections 2.4.4.4 and 2.4.5 of this review.

Before examining the implications of organisational roles on upward feedback, it is necessary to discuss the differences between authority, influence and power. Authority refers to the 'positional' right of management to give directives and expect employees to comply with those directives (Robbins et al., 2001). Power relates to the ability of an individual to influence others to achieve desired results (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). Formal position power represents an individual's capacity to use the rights inherent in their role (including the use of coercive or reward behaviours) to achieve outcomes (Rost, 1993). Finally, influence refers to the ability of a person's behaviour to impact upon the actions or belief systems of others (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

Organisational members can have three forms of power: positional power, personal power or political power. Legitimate, reward and coercive power denote forms of positional power; and expert and referent power refer to forms of personal power (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). Legitimate power arises from the authority that comes with the position. Coercive power arises where managers either create a psychologically unsafe environment for employees or where they withhold or threaten to withhold an employee's physiological needs (Robbins et al., 2001). Reward power is power in which directives are followed so as to gain positive benefits. Coercive and reward power can be used together. Expert power arises from expertise, skill or specialist knowledge. Finally referent power arises where a person is recognised as possessing desired qualities or resources (Robbins et al., 2001).

Another form of power that is present amongst organisational members is political behaviour. Political behaviours are those activities outside a person's formal role that can or have the ability to impact upon the allocation or withholding of rewards in the

organisation (Robbins et al., 1994). Political behaviour can either be positive or negative. Leaders for instance use politics to increase their personal power while subordinates can use political power to impact on goals or decision making by withholding critical information (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; Robbins et al., 1994).

A variable that is said to affect power is dependency. Dependency can increase the power of power holders in organisations. “Dependency in organisations is related to a person’s control over resources ... such as jobs, rewards, financial support, expertise, knowledge, materials, information and time” (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 385). The greater the dependence, the more power the person being depended upon has. Both leaders and followers are able to hold and use dependency power, depending on the circumstances. Leaders for example can use their positional power for rewards and punishments; thus followers would be dependent on leaders to provide or withhold certain resources. Subordinates on the other hand can use dependency power where skill shortages exist and they hold the needed skill. As such leaders or followers are able to gain more dependency power if resources are vital, in short supply and are irreplaceable (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

Examining the different forms of power that organisational members hold is essential to this research as it assists in gaining an awareness of the possible ways in which leaders or managers can use power to reward or punish certain behaviours. Therefore, if upward feedback or dissent is seen as being undesirable in the organisation, leaders or managers can use coercive or dependency power to discourage this form of behaviour from the subordinates. Inversely, leaders can also use reward power to encourage other behaviours, such as ingratiation. The danger of this is discussed further in Section 2.4.4.

In the past power was seen as something that was used by leaders to control subordinates to achieve organisational objectives. Organisations were structured in a way that reflected the power difference between those at the top and bottom of the hierarchy. Contemporary leaders however have recognised that this old way of distributing power is no longer valid and have moved away from hoarding power to sharing it with others (by involving employees in decision making) in the organisation in a bid to increase the intellectual capacity of the organisation (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958).

As a result, of this mutual co-dependency between top managers and subordinates, subordinates now also hold upward influence power which can affect an organisation

(Schilit, 1986). Of the seven sources of follower power identified by Daft and Pirola-Merlo (2009) this review will only discuss knowledge, expertise, persuasion, information and access forms of power as these have the ability to affect the provision of upward feedback.

Followers who hold knowledge power are skilled, talented and valued by the organisation as the knowledge they possess is a source of upward influence that organisations do not want to lose. Followers with expertise can position themselves as source of valuable information. Due to their previous experience and successful accomplishments these followers have the ability to affect decisions and thus hold expertise power. Followers who are honest and can speak openly with their leaders gain a source of persuasion power. Followers who hold roles that are central to the flow of information hold power over those who require the information. Finally, followers who have access to both people and information are not only positioned to influence others but also have the ability to offer suggestions on various organisational processes (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

Being cognisant of the way in which followers use their power is critical to this research. Of key importance is how followers use political power to impact on organisational goals or decision making by withholding critical information. This lack of upward feedback has the ability to negatively impact on the quality of superordinate's decision making and can have severe strategic consequences. This is discussed further in Sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.1.2 of this review.

In addition to authority, power and influence another element that can affect the provision of upward feedback is a leader's behaviour and style of leadership. As this research focusses on the provision of upward feedback to leaders, an understanding of leadership is therefore essential.

2.2.1 Leaders, Leadership Behaviours, Styles and Types

Leaders are defined as those who have formal authority as well as the power to influence others beyond their positional authority (Robbins et al., 2001). A key aspect of leadership therefore involves influencing followers to achieve a shared organisational vision (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

While the research has identified an extensive array of complex leadership behaviours, there was consistent agreement in the literature that leaders could display one of two types of leadership behavioural approaches. Daft and Pirola-Merlo (2009) labelled these

approaches as being autocratic or democratic leadership. Autocratic leaders are those who make all of the decisions in the organisation and obtain power by using authoritative, reward and coercive power initiatives. Conversely, democratic leaders are those who involve organisational members by delegating authority, promoting participation in decision making and trust in their subordinate's ability to complete tasks. Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958), believed that leaders autocratic and democratic behaviours lay on a continuum and that it was therefore possible for leaders to display a third behavioural approach which was a mix of both. From the definitions above it would be reasonable to assume that democratic leaders would be more likely than autocratic leaders to receive upward feedback from subordinates due to their participative leadership style.

In addition to autocratic and democratic leadership styles studies undertaken by Ohio State University, The University of Michigan and The University of Texas also identified two forms of leader behaviour which they classed as either focussing on employees or on tasks. Task oriented leaders are seen as being more concerned with organisational results while employee oriented leaders are more focussed on building relationships with their employees (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). The Leadership Grid Theory which arose out of the study undertaken by The University of Texas suggested that leaders who were high in both types of behaviour (that is, were both people and task oriented) were more likely to be the most effective (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). Leadership effectiveness as defined by Kilburn (2007) is the ability of a leader to guide others to undertake their roles competently thereby achieving organisational objectives.

Research into leadership however found that while some behaviours were effective in some situations, they were ineffective in others. This gave rise to the contingency approach of leadership which sought to define the most effective leadership styles to use with different followers in different situations (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). Although outside the scope of this study, of the four different types of contingency models that were developed (Fielder's contingency model, Hersey and Blanchard's situational theory, Path-Goal theory and the Vroom-Jago contingency model) the most relevant model to this study was the Vroom-Jago contingency model which prescribed guidance on how much participation leaders should allow subordinates in specific decisions (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). This model differs from the other contingency models because it specifically focusses on "varying degrees of participative leadership and how each level of participation influences the quality and accountability of decisions" (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 68). The Vroom-Jago model comprises of three elements: "leader participation styles, a set of

diagnostic questions with which to analyse a decision situation and a series of decision rules” (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 68).

The contingency theories specified the need for leaders to employ a variety of leadership styles in the organisation. Two of the most prominent leadership styles discussed in the literature were transactional and transformational leadership. Transactional leaders are those who engage in the process of identifying their follower’s needs and desires and define how these will be rewarded if subordinates meet the organisational objectives set out by the leader (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). Contrariwise, transformational leadership is typified by the capacity of leaders to revolutionize followers. Transformational leaders differ from transactional leaders because they have the ability to mould followers into leaders; encourage altruism among followers; paint a vision that makes the hard work and effort seem worth it; and encourage followers to reach their full potential (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

In addition to the different styles of leadership, leaders can choose different forms of leadership. Of relevance to this research are stewardship and servant leadership as these forms of leadership encourage participation in decision making which equates to the provision of upward feedback.

Stewardship is a form of leadership in which followers are given the opportunity to make decisions as well as take control of the manner in which they undertake their roles. In this form of leadership, followers are given “power to influence goals, systems and structures and become leaders themselves” (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 171).

In servant leadership leaders put the needs of their subordinates above their own in a bid to assist subordinates to advance both materially and emotionally (Greenleaf, 1977). The emphasis in this type of leadership is “empowerment, participation, shared authority and building a community of trust” (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 172).

The implications of leader behaviours, styles and types on upward feedback are discussed in more detail in Section 2.4.4.5 of this review.

2.2.2 Middle Managers and Management Styles

Managers are defined as those who organise and integrate the work of organisational members (Robbins et al., 2001). Through their functions of planning, organising, leading

and controlling, managers seek to efficiently and effectively accomplish organisational objectives (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

Middle managers are those who work at the intermediate level of an organisation's hierarchy and are responsible for supervising others while they themselves have supervisors (Uyterhoeven, 1989). Uyterhoeven (1989) described a middle manager's role as being three-fold consisting of being a subordinate, a peer and a superior. According to Uyterhoeven (1989), middle managers reported upwards to their superiors as a subordinate, horizontally to their colleagues as equals and gave orders downwards to their subordinates. Van Cauwenbergh and Cool (1982), highlighted this unique role further, by observing the role middle managers play in connecting both activities and ideas across technical and institutional departments in the organisation.

A middle manager's role consists of administrative, technical and managerial aspects. Of these three aspects, the managerial role is seen as being the most important because middle managers have to convince others to espouse to certain points of view or implement certain actions (Embertson, 2006). Due to their position in the organisation's hierarchy, middle managers are privy to problems at the front line of the organisation and consequently are able to respond faster than top management. Further, middle managers are able to identify where problems lie within the organisation due to ongoing contact with their subordinates, who share information with them. As such, these managers use their intimate knowledge of issues to create solutions or make adjustments after which time they pass the information upwards to top managers (Embertson, 2006). As they are able to make decisions more quickly, middle managers are also in a position to observe whether or not a decision is having an impact and is being implemented correctly (Uyterhoeven, 1989).

Middle managers can display one of two types of management styles. Authoritarian management reflects the autocratic behavioural leadership approach discussed earlier in which leaders make all of the decisions and hand them down to subordinates for implementation. This top-down approach is a means of creating "organisational stability and efficiency" by controlling subordinates and treating them in the same manner as machines and other organisational resources (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 171).

Conversely, participative management is management in which employees are given a voice in the organisation. Although not viewed as equal partners, subordinates are expected to be engaged in the organisation and to offer suggestions on better ways of

doing things, while top leaders determine the vision for the organisation (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

In addition to a manager's style impacting upon the provision of upward feedback, followers also have the ability to either impede or facilitate the upward feedback process in the workplace.

2.2.3 Followers and Follower Types

Followers are defined as those to "whom leadership is directed" (Northouse, 2010, p. 3). Followers are as equally important as leaders in organisations. Kilburn (2007) recognised the importance of followers by stating that leaders only exist and have power because subordinates choose to follow. Concurring and adding a further dimension, Daft and Pirola-Merlo (2009) asserted that everyone in an organisation becomes a follower at some point in time as leaders are also responsible to their superiors. Daft and Pirola-Merlo (2009) suggested the possibility of organisational members shifting into the role of leader or follower under different circumstances.

The work of Kelley recognised five styles of followership. Kelley (1992) classified followers in terms of the two elements of: (1) "independent, critical thinking" versus dependent, uncritical thinking (p.93); and (2) "active versus passive behaviour" (p. 94). According to Kelly (1992) independent, critical thinkers are cognisant of how their own and others behaviour can impact on attaining organisational objectives. These followers have the ability to offer useful feedback by determining how a decision will impact upon the organisation's vision. In contrast dependent, uncritical thinkers carry out instructions or tasks as prescribed without questioning their leaders and do not offer up suggestions for improvement.

In the second element, Kelley (1992) classified followers in terms of having active or passive behaviours. Active followers were seen as those who were engaged and fully participated in the organisation by doing more than was required in their position. These followers not only assumed ownership but were also viewed as being conscientious employees. On the other hand, followers who demonstrated passive behaviours undertook only what their role required. These passive followers were seen as requiring continuous prompting and supervision by managers.

The above two elements of followers thinking and behaviour determined the extent to which followers were classed as being an alienated follower, a conformist follower, a pragmatic survivor, a passive follower or an effective follower.

Although categorised as independent, critical thinkers, alienated followers are passive and often concentrate on the organisation's inadequacies. Alienation is said to arise from prior problems, unmet expectations, organisational goals that the follower does not agree with or a lack of trust in management. Even though they are able to identify problems in the organisation, these followers do not participate in finding solutions or making recommendations (Kelley, 1992).

Conformist followers are followers who are actively engaged in the organisation but do not use their independent thinking skills. These followers are obedient and submit to their leader's authority. Because conformists appreciate structure and predictability they get distressed when they are given the freedom to make decisions. Conformist followers are said to arise from societies that encourage conformity as well as from authoritarian workplaces (Kelley, 1992).

Pragmatic survivors are followers that do whatever it takes to circumvent risks, maintain the status quo and survive the situation in the organisation often for political reasons. These followers are said to arise from organisations that are going through difficult times (Kelley, 1992).

Passive followers are those followers who do not use their critical, independent thinking nor engage with the organisation. These followers are indifferent and carry out directives as they handed down from above. These followers require constant supervision and are said to arise in organisations where leaders are controlling or punish mistakes or do not reward initiative (Kelley, 1992).

The effective follower exhibits both the elements of independent, critical thinking and engagement in the organisation. These followers are not afraid to stand up for what they believe will be beneficial for the organisation. As such they do not avoid risk or conflict with colleagues or superiors. These followers are committed to organisational goals over self-interest. Seen as being both "mindful and willing to act" these followers are critical to the success of an organisation (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 199). According to Daft and Pirola-Merlo, (2009) effective followers have the capacity to develop effective leaders as well impact upon a leader's behaviour and style. Given their characteristics, it can therefore be

expected that effective followers would be the most likely type of follower to provide upward feedback for the purposes of affecting decision making in the workplace.

The effects of the different types of followers on the provision of upward feedback are analysed more fully in Section 2.4.4.6 of this review.

2.2.4 Relevance of Organisational Roles to this Study

The discussion of organisational roles, authority, power and influence accentuate the importance of understanding the distribution of power in organisations. Even though contemporary leaders are now sharing power, this distribution of power and the use of the different types of power by leaders, managers and followers have the ability to impact on the flow of upward feedback in an organisation. Leaders or managers may use certain types of power (for example coercive or reward power) to either facilitate or impede this form of feedback. So as to have a framework against which to analyse the organisation under research it is therefore important to have an understanding of the different types of power that leaders and managers can utilise to prescribe what behaviours are and are not acceptable in the organisation.

Analysing the varying types of leader behaviour, leadership styles and followership styles is also critical to this research. For example understanding how authoritarian leadership or management can create conformist followers in the organisations could possibly account for the lack of provision of upward feedback. Knowledge of both leader and follower behaviour sets the context against which the organisation under research will be examined.

In light of the above, the next section of this review analyses communication and feedback between leaders and followers within the organisational context.

2.3 Organisational Communication

Communication is a basic organisational function which is critical for achieving organisational objectives (Luthans, 1992). Robbins et al. (2001) proffered that communication within an organisation constitutes more than just passing on information but instead also involves the message being heard and understood by the recipient. As Orpen (1997) suggested, communication plays such a critical role that it can result in the success or failure of an organisation. Communication is therefore fundamental to a

manager's role of planning, organising, leading and controlling as all of these functions involve communication (Robbins et al., 2001).

Communication has several functions within an organisation. Of importance to this research however, is how communication can be used to control employee behaviour within the organisation through the use of "authority hierarchies and formal guidelines" which all employees are required to adhere to; and how communication can be used to assist decision making through the provision of information to those who are required to provide input into the decision (Robbins et al., 1994, p. 421).

Communication can be verbal and non-verbal. The verbal communication process consists of seven stages: (1) the communication source; (2) encoding; (3) the message; (4) the channel; (5) decoding; (6) the receiver; and (7) feedback. Due to the many stages of the communication process there is potential for the distortion of communication (Robbins et al., 1994).

Although not a focus of this research, consideration also needs to be given to non-verbal communication. This form of communication is conveyed through body movements, facial expressions, physical distance, tone of voice or the way in which certain words are emphasised. Non-verbal signals are sometimes seen as being as more powerful than verbal communication as they more accurately reflect the message the sender is sending. At times, non-verbal cues contradict verbal communication. As such the receiver is required to be alert to non-verbal signals and take them into consideration when interpreting the message (Robbins et al., 1994).

Communication channels can be formal or informal in nature. A variety of communication channels exist including face to face, telephone, electronic or written mail, memos, flyers, bulletins and reports. Each channel differs in its ability to convey a message. Rich channels are those that are able to handle various cues at the same time; enable prompt feedback and can be very personal (Robbins et al., 1994). As such face to face communication is deemed to be the richest of all communication channels as it conveys all three cues. The choice of which channel to use depends to a great extent on whether the message is simple and to the point or complex with the potential for misunderstanding. Managers tend to convey the former type of messages via channels that are lower in richness and the latter type of messages using several channels (Robbins et al., 1994).

2.3.1 Flow and Types of Communication in Organisations

Kandlousi, Ali and Abdollahi (2010), suggested that formal and informal communication could exist in an organisation. Formal communication can flow in three directions within the organisation namely upwards, downwards and across the organisation (Kandlousi et al., 2010). Formal communication channels are recognised as authoritative communication channels and the flow of information and instruction usually follows the hierarchical structure of the organisation making the direction of the flow of information predictable (Kandlousi et al., 2010). Dow (1988) asserted that managers deliberately structure their organisations in ways that reflect the manner in which they expect things to happen in their organisation. By using an organisational chart which shows who is in charge, managers assume that information will flow in the direction of the organisational chart without any obstacles or disruptions and that messages will reach their intended recipients (Axley, 1984).

Informal communication channels allow employees to talk about a variety of issues relating to their job, their problems and attitudes (Kandlousi et al., 2010). Informal communication is unavoidable in organisations as employees interact with one another socially. This form of communication is a great source of information into how employees are feeling and subsequently enables managers to manage their employees effectively (Guffy, Rhoddes, & Rogin, 2005 cited in Kandlousi et al., 2010). Where formal information is lacking or uncertainty exists in an organisation, informal channels such as the grapevine tend to help identify unresolved problems and can decrease employee stress (Crampton, Hodge & Mishra, 1998). Informal communication therefore plays a part in fulfilling employee's informational needs (Crampton, Hodge & Mishra, 1998; Kandlousi et al., 2010).

The most common direction of the flow of informal communication is horizontally and vertically for formal communication (Bartels et al., 2010). Horizontal communication is mostly task-related and relates to the exchange of task information (Robbins et al., 1994). Horizontal communication also includes an aspect of informal communication focussed on employee support for one another not particularly related to task performance (Bartels et al., 2010). Horizontal communication assists with cohesiveness within work groups and also increases sense of belonging for those within the work group (Levine & Moreland, 1990).

A study undertaken by Postmes, Tanis, and de Wit (2001) found that vertical communication was a stronger predictor of organisational commitment than horizontal

communication. Consequently Bartels et al. (2010, p. 220) suggested that “communicating about the strategy and goals of the organisation, encouraging participation in decision-making, and supplying adequate information can contribute to making employees identify more strongly with the organisation as a whole”. Along the same lines Guzley’s (1992) study found that employees are more likely to be committed to the organisation if they perceived management as sharing honest information with them and if they were allowed to make recommendations and participate in decision making.

Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) proposed that the embodiment of an organisation as well as its vision can be conveyed through vertical communication. Various types of top-down vertical communication such as the organisation’s strategic direction, its objectives and current developments assist employees in understanding where they fit in within the organisation (Bartels et al., 2010). Information transmitted from the top to the bottom about the organisation’s strategy usually comprises aspects of the communication climate such as “adequate information provision, support of top management and reliability of top management” (Bartels et al., 2010, p. 213). Vertical communication also enables top management to assign duties, raise problems that require solutions, inform its employees of policies and procedures and also inform employees of how their organisation differs from other organisations (Robbins et al., 1994; Smidts, Pruyn & van Riel, 2001). Bottom-up communication on the other hand involves providing feedback on task progress, current problems and also encompasses opportunities for subordinates to participate in decision making (Bartels et al., 2010; Robbins et al., 1994).

As communication is a necessary element for the implementation of strategic objectives, middle level managers use their influence across social networks to execute objectives (Emberston, 2006). Therefore, while top managers are responsible for organisational change, strategies can only be implemented effectively with the support of managers who communicate information to subordinates who implement the changes (Embertson, 2006). Middle level managers therefore “play an integrative role for downward and upward communication about strategy formulation and implementation” (Ekaterini, 2011, p. 553). To be effective in their communication across the organisation therefore it is necessary for these managers to stimulate communication and create communication climates that encourage the sharing of information (Potthoff, 2004). Bartels and colleagues (2010, p. 212) described an organisation’s communication climate as concerning “the collective communication components of the work environment, such as the perceived accessibility

of management to employees and the reliability of information circulated within the organisation”.

2.3.2 Relevance of Communication to this Research

As the focus of this research is on both the formal and vertical aspects of communication that occur in an organisation, reviewing communication theory is significant as it sets the foundation for understanding feedback as a component of organisational communication.

Reviewing the channels of communication assists in understanding how information is passed up and down an organisation’s hierarchy. Moreover, comprehending the functions and formats that communication can take assists in gaining an awareness of the different areas in which communication can breakdown or become distorted in the provision of upward feedback. Of distinct relevance is the focus and content of vertical communication in an organisation as this form of communication comprises both downward and upward communications. As the main purpose of bottom up communication is to participate in decision making, this provides a framework against which to evaluate the organisation under research.

Finally, the preceding examination of communication assists in the preliminary conceptualisation of the middle manager’s role as a conduit between subordinates and superordinates in the provision of upward feedback. As an organisation’s communication climate includes subordinates perceptions of accessibility to top managers, middle managers can play a role in impeding or facilitating this form of feedback.

2.4 Feedback as an Element of Organisational Communication

To be effective, communication is highly dependent on feedback (Luthans, 1992). Feedback not only enables organisational learning and effectiveness but also assists organisations in discovering better ways to work (Ulrich, Jix & Von Glinow, 1993). Feedback is therefore always initiated by a situation, action or inaction and can either be prompted or unprompted (Roebuck, 1996). Feedback can also be constructive, impartial or critical in nature (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Grellar (2003, p.651) defined feedback as “information stimulated by performance directed to those who could alter future performance”.

Offering a complementary definition Robbins et al. (1994) proposed that feedback was a means by which a sender could determine whether or not their intended message had been received and was understood by the recipient. Both definitions are equally valid as the recipient has to understand the message and then alter performance for change to occur.

Roebuck (1996) identified two forms of feedback both of which are critical for management to be able to do their job effectively. Hard feedback relates to information pertaining to accounts, stock levels, production and sales figures while soft feedback relates to “areas such as employee morale, views of management, employee commitment and effectiveness of training” (p. 329). Roebuck (1996, p. 329) posited that soft organisational feedback could be provided for four reasons, two of which are significant to this study: to provide information on the “individual perceptions and attitudes relating to the organisation”; and to provide information on “ideas to improve organisational effectiveness”. These points are of relevance to this study as an individual’s perceptions of where the organisation should be heading, or opinions on how things could be improved can affect the manner in which upward feedback is provided to top managers. If subordinates perceive information as being negative for instance, there is the potential for the distortion of feedback or for employee silence to occur as discussed in Sections 2.4.4.1 and 2.4.5 of this review.

While communication is supposed to be central to leadership and the literature often depicts leaders as being great communicators, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) noted the tendency of leaders to do more talking than listening. Concurring, Luthans (1992) also observed that the downward flow of information usually dominated upward communication in organisations. Managers justified this imbalance by asserting that it was necessary for organisational members to “share a common set of values, have the same appreciation of events, display a common commitment to managerial goals, and accept that managers are the people most capable of accurately understanding the organisation’s external and internal environments” (Tourish & Robson, 2006, p. 713). This preceding idea is pivotal to this research, because it could reflect managers’ attitude towards upward feedback. If managers perceive that they are the only ones who are equipped to accurately assess both the external and internal organisational environment, it can be anticipated that these managers would not encourage upward feedback from their subordinates.

Criticising this approach Detert and Burrell (2007) suggested that in today’s highly competitive environment, top leaders could not figure it all out from the top, but rather

need to involve their employees in decision making as it is not only critical to performance but also improves the manner in which the organisation functions. Of critical relevance to this study was Ashford, Sutcliffe and Christianson's (2009), argument that giving employees a voice increases the information input from which management can make informed decisions as managers do not know everything that their subordinates know. The importance of this was demonstrated by studies undertaken by Starbuck (1983) which found that stakeholders viewed organisations differently from senior managers who often viewed their organisations unrealistically. Further, results from Starbuck's (1983) study also exposed the problem of senior managers seeing fewer flaws in their organisation than their subordinates. These findings emphasized the need for senior managers to seek information from diverse sources within their organisation so as to gain insight into the true state of their organisation's climate. This information gap according to Argyris (1980), could be filled by accessing information from subordinates.

In support, Luthans (1992, p. 484) pointed out that subordinates not only have the ability to provide "personal information about ideas, attitudes and performance" but also "more technical feedback information about performance, a vital factor for the control of any organisation". He therefore proposed that feedback needed to be more of a two-way process. Further, Luthans (1992) noted that upward feedback which is often suppressed overlooked and misrepresented by managers is essential if an organisation is to endure.

2.4.1 Upward Feedback

Upward feedback occurs when subordinates share information with those who hold higher ranking positions within the organisation's hierarchy (Kilburn, 2007). Information regarding a plethora of issues from grievances, problems, expectations, finances to suggestions for improvement can be passed upwards making it extremely beneficial to organisations (Kilburn, 2007). As this form of feedback can provide significant insight into organisational issues, management is reliant on upward feedback to improve its decision making and thus the success of the organisation (Glauser, 1984; Kilburn, 2007; Sharma 1979).

While feedback is a valuable source of information, not all feedback is useful to leaders (Kilburn, 2007). Kilburn and Jones (2005) argued that valuable feedback would comprise of the three characteristics of relevance, accuracy and timeliness (cited in Kilburn 2007). Feedback that is provided to leaders must be of relevance and relate to issues over which the leader has influence. The other two characteristics of accuracy and timeliness depend

on this first characteristic. Information provided to leaders must be accurate in nature so that leaders are able to base their decisions on correct information. Finally, if the feedback is both relevant and accurate, it needs to be provided to the leader in a timely fashion so that action can be taken (Kilburn, 2007). Together these three elements comprise what is considered to be valuable feedback upon which leaders can base their decisions (Kilburn, 2007).

The provision of upward feedback has two purposes. First, it is an essential criterion for the improved performance and the development of leaders. Second, it can assist leaders with strategic decision making (Kilburn, 2007; Tourish, 2005). While both are of importance and can impact on the provision of upward feedback, this review will only address upward feedback aimed at improving decision making within an organisation. As Tourish and Robson (2003, p. 151) posited, lack of upward communication in an organisation can cause the “quality of decision making by the top management team” to deteriorate. This in turn can have adverse consequences for the organisation (Tourish & Robson, 2003) if leaders formulate strategies that are misaligned with the perceptions of their employees (Tourish, 2005). Consequently there is a link between provision of accurate upward feedback and strategic decision making in organisations.

Kilburn (2007) and Tourish (2005) found that while subordinates have the ability to provide valuable feedback they are seldom given the opportunity to provide feedback on strategies formulated by management. Tourish (2005) further indicated that leaders often undertake external environmental scans prior to making strategic decisions but fail to carry out internal scans to determine their organisation’s climate and the direction in which the organisation should be heading. By this omission it appeared that senior management disregarded the ability of subordinates to provide crucial feedback in response to external threats and opportunities (Tourish, 2005).

Tourish also posited that subordinates are often expected to accept, implement and be committed to initiatives that are communicated from above without being given the opportunity to discuss or debate decisions that are presented by top management (2005). The danger with this according to Tourish (2005) is that management could formulate inferior strategies that could have been enhanced by a continuous exchange of ideas. Further, Tourish highlighted the possibility of subordinates to subvert or not implement strategies they had no part in formulating in what he termed as a ‘silent killer’ of organisational strategy (2005, p. 488). This was especially the case where there was a

misalignment of goals and purposes between individuals and the organisation. Leaders seemed to disregard that for their strategy to be effective they needed to engage those employees who were responsible for bringing the plan into action (Tourish, 2005). It appeared that leaders often overlooked the fact that their employees could impact the organisation and act as causal agents by controlling outcomes through their actions or inactions (Tannenbaum, 1986).

Continuing in this vein Dutton and Ashford (1993) provided a different but complementary rationale for undertaking an internal scan. They suggested that there were significant advantages in involving middle managers in the identification of critical issues. Some of the advantages they listed included top managers having access to more accurate information from those who were closest to the action; keeping middle managers committed to the organisation's strategic decision by involving them in decision making; and "enhancing the ability to move issues rapidly to the organisation's agenda" (p. 399). In agreement, Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) asserted that involving middle level managers in strategy formulation improved decision making, led to superior strategies and consequently enhanced organisational performance. Moreover, as middle level managers were seen to have access to vital information they were in a position to inform top managers of issues they might not have thought of which would consequently change the organisation's strategic direction as well as initiate organisational action (Westley, 1990). Bower (1970) pointed out the instrumental role that middle managers played in strategic decision making.

In view of the above, Tourish (2005, p. 488) therefore stressed the importance of leaders understanding that subordinates could not be viewed merely as "conduits for information" but instead, were "active, and questioning agents in the process of decision making". Consequently he emphasised the importance of using upward feedback "as a step on the escalator of participation" (Tourish, 2005, p. 488).

2.4.1.1 Benefits of seeking upward feedback.

Table 2.1 lists some of the impacts and benefits of encouraging upward feedback in organisations as proposed by Tourish (2005).

Table 2.1. The impact and benefits of upward feedback in organisations (Tourish, 2005, p. 488)

| |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The promotion of shared leadership, and an enhanced willingness by managers to act on employee suggestions2. A greater tendency by employees to report positive changes in their managers' behaviour3. Actual rather than perceived improvements in management behaviour following on from feedback, beyond what could be attributed to regression to the mean4. A reduced gap between managers' self-ratings and those of their subordinates5. The creation of improved forums for obtaining information, garnering suggestions, defusing conflict and facilitating the expression of discontent6. An enhancement of organisational learning7. Better decision making – currently, it is estimated that about half of decisions in organisations fail, largely because of insufficient participation and a failure to carry out an unrestricted search for solutions8. Enhanced participation |
|--|

While all of the points Tourish raises are valuable, of relevance to this study are points 1, 5, 6, 7 and 8 which emphasise the effects and advantages of managers requesting upward feedback from their subordinates for decision making purposes.

Walker and Smither (1999), summed up the importance of requesting upward feedback by stating that leaders needed to ensure that channels for the provision of upward feedback existed outside formalised feedback systems, to ensure that leaders had all the information they need to make behavioural modifications and improvements. Whatever the form of feedback (formal versus informal), what is evident is that leaders or organisations that do not create forums for the provision of both positive and negative feedback put their organisation at risk of failure (Tourish & Robson, 2003).

2.4.1.2 Consequences and barriers to not seeking upward feedback.

Instead of viewing subordinate feedback as being valuable, managers often perceive opposition as something that needs to be surmounted (Tourish, 2005). As more feedback flows from the top of the organisation to the bottom of the organisation there is a tendency for managers to believe that the best way in which to overcome opposition and control power is to create a homogeneous organisational culture (Tourish & Pinnington,

2002). As such, “differences, dissent, debate and critical feedback” are seen as something to be eliminated (Tourish, 2005, p. 494). Managers at times do not see that such actions can cause them to be out of touch with the reality of what is occurring within their organisation (Tourish, 2005).

One of the main barriers to seeking feedback is fear. Most people prefer to receive feedback that aligns with their own perceptions of how they behave in both their personal and professional lives. Negative feedback can therefore be unwelcoming and upsetting. Any feedback that fails to support a prized decision is viewed as being undesirable (Tourish, 2005). Consequently, people at all levels of an organisation’s hierarchy are likely to be fearful about seeking feedback on both “their performance or on the quality of their decisions” (Tourish, 2005, p. 489). Argyris and Schon (1978) stated that this was particularly the case where managers felt a strong need to avoid humiliation, liability, opposition or looking incompetent. Therefore, when these managers received negative feedback, their response was to ignore it, view it as being erroneous or criticise the credibility of the source (Illgen, Fisher & Taylor, 1979). Such managers also saw feedback as being more authentic and appropriate if it came from higher levels of the organisation hierarchy than from lower levels (Illgen, Fisher & Taylor, 1979).

Tourish and Robson (2003) identified a number of consequences of top leaders not seeking upward feedback. These are presented in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Consequences of not seeking upward feedback in organisations (Tourish & Robson, 2003, p. 151 - 152)

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The quality of decision making deteriorates which ultimately has negative implications for the whole organisation.• Managers impose solutions, limit the search for alternatives and use power rather than influence/persuasion to implement their plans (Nutt, 1999)• There is a tendency for group think to occur which ignores all outside criticism thereby leading to poor decision making (Janis, 1982)• Lack of critical input leads to a false sense of the organisation’s climate (Janis, 1982) |
|---|

Table 2.2 highlights the importance of managers requesting upward feedback from their subordinates. Where decisions are made in isolation of subordinate participation, decisions

can be based on a parochial view of the organisation's climate and can lead to inferior strategies that could potentially be subverted at the front line of the organisation.

Citing further consequences of not seeking upward feedback Vakola and Bouradas (2005) also suggested that not only could the withholding of information prohibit the detection of errors, weaken decision making and impede organisational learning, but it also had the ability to impact negatively on subordinate trust, morale and motivation. These findings were supported by Morrison and Milliken (2000) and Ryan and Oestreich (1998) who posited that employee silence had the ability to impact on work by influencing employee wellbeing as the suppression of vital information had the ability to increase stress levels which in turn led to psychological and physiological problems as well as lower levels of engagement in the organisation. With this in mind, it is important to consider if subordinates are more likely to provide feedback if they have an intermediary, that is a middle level manager to pass this vital information onto.

2.4.2 The Role of Middle Level Managers in Upward Feedback

Due to their position in the organisation's hierarchy, middle level managers, play a pivotal role in identifying new ideas and are also well-placed to influence upward feedback due to the communication and support function aspect of their role (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009). As such, middle level managers have the potential to champion subordinate ideas to top managers for inclusion in the organisation's strategic agenda which can impact on organisational effectiveness (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1996). As today's environments become more complex and dynamic, leaders at the top are unable to have all of the information that they require to make informed decisions. Often in this situation, top managers rely on middle level managers who are closest to the action to inform them of what they need to know prior to making strategic decisions (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997).

As a result, middle managers play a key role in influencing strategy by determining where, when and how to alert top management of issues in what is termed issue selling (Dutton et al., 1997). Dutton and Ashford (1993, p. 398) defined issue selling as "individuals' behaviours that are directed toward affecting others' attention to and understanding of issues". Dutton and Ashford (1993) posited that issue selling is especially critical in the preliminary phases of an organisation's decision making. In accord, Roebuck (1996) suggested that not only should top management be open to receiving accurate feedback,

acting on the feedback and closing the feedback loop but that it was also essential for middle management to encourage the process.

Understanding the role middle level manager's play in the flow of upward feedback is of critical importance to this study as it sets the scene for understanding what issues are passed upwards to top managers and how middle managers decide this. For example, Morrison and Milliken (2000) stated that where top management did not appreciate upward feedback, this had the potential to affect how middle managers responded to subordinate feedback. Where this was the case middle managers would impede feedback by encouraging silence and sending cues to subordinates that upward feedback was undesirable. If subordinates still chose to provide negative upward feedback that top management would not appreciate middle managers would then deliberately filter out the negative information prior to passing it upwards. Subsequently this made subordinates believe that their supervisor was not responsive to their feedback (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

On the other hand, Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) argued that middle managers had the ability to arouse an organisation's strategic thinking as well as its competitive advantage through issue selling. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) believed that top managers could improve organisational performance by being aware of what strategies to employ to elicit issue selling from middle managers. Dutton et al. (1997, p. 409) identified two things that middle managers consider prior to issue selling. The first, impression management, concerns middle manager's need to "portray a positive self-image" and a level of competence; thus where they do not have the opportunity to make a right impression, managers would avoid issue selling. In the second, upward influence, middle managers consider both the organisation context as well as the characteristics of top management, (for example whether or not top management are open to suggestions), before issue selling subordinates ideas. In addition to these two areas, Dutton and Ashford (1993) perceived that middle managers would also consider whether or not they were viewed as being credible in the eyes of top management before they decided whether or not to issue sell.

Furthermore, the work of Schilit and Paine (1987) found that middle level managers were more likely to provide upward information to top managers if it was useful or relevant to their functional area. Middle managers would first assess their perceived level of influence and their probable success rate prior to providing upward feedback to top managers. Understandably so, top managers would also consider the source's expertise and credibility

before taking suggestions on board (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Middle managers could be viewed in a positive light and yield benefits for themselves and their teams if they issue sold critical information to top managers. Conversely, inappropriate or negative information with little or no relevance could yield negative consequences for middle managers (Dutton et al., 1997). Therefore, the structural hierarchical location of the manager played a role as to what information, relating to what functions of the organisation they could provide to top management. Information seen as being outside the manager's domain would not be taken on board by top managers (Dutton & Ashford, 1993).

Having a knowledge of what sort of information as well as what middle managers consider prior to passing upward feedback is vital to this research as it will enable an understanding of why middle managers may at times impede or facilitate upward feedback. Of particular relevance is whether or not middle managers perceive that the provision of upward feedback will have negative consequences for their team and for them personally in terms of being viewed as being incompetent in the eyes of top management.

A study undertaken by Dutton et al. (1997) posited that middle managers were more likely to issue sell if they felt psychological safety (consisting of the characteristics of top management and organisational culture) and windows of opportunity were available (greater competitive and economic pressures). The organisation's culture as well as possible threats within and external to the organisation were seen as situations that were unfavourable for issue selling. In sum, the organisation's culture, top management and context were seen as a determining factor of whether or not to issue sell.

Another area relevant to this study is how middle managers package issues to sell to top managers. Dutton and Ashford (1993) asserted that middle level managers have a choice in how they present information to top management. "Middle managers can attempt to direct top management's attention by providing or concealing information about issues, by framing the issues in particular ways, and by mobilising resources and routines that direct top managers' attention to some issues and not others" (Dutton & Ashford, 1993, p. 398). Thus, middle managers can choose what information to highlight or downplay. According to Cowan (1991) issues can be framed as strategic, operating, human resource or technical issues. Further, issues can be framed in a way that top managers perceive its importance and complexity (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). The way in which the issue is framed determines who is responsible for the action, what information is important and how it needs to be handled. The more an issue is seen as involving "bigger stakes, or is more of a threat, more

urgent, more uncertain, the more attention will be devoted to the issue” by top management (Dutton & Ashford, 1993, p. 411).

2.4.3 Employee Voice in the Upward Feedback Process

2.4.3.1 Acquiescent, defensive and prosocial voice.

Employee voice is defined as the voluntary communication of “work-related ideas, information, and opinions” (Van Dyne, Soon & Batero, 2003, p. 1370). The work of Van Dyne, Soon, and Batero (2003) conceptualised employee voice as consisting of two approaches. In the first approach, employee voice was described as behaviour in which employees spoke up and took the initiative to offer up suggestions for organisational change (Farrell & Rusbult, 1992). In the second approach, voice was described as consisting of procedural justice processes that enabled subordinates to participate in decision making (Bies & Shapiro, 1988).

Van Dyne et al. (2003, p. 1370) suggested that the motivation for speaking up in the work place stemmed from one of three motives: “other-oriented based on cooperation, self-protective based on fear or disengaged based on resignation”. As such, Van Dyne and colleagues coined the terms, prosocial, defensive and acquiescent voice to reflect these three different motives (2003).

Employees who exhibit prosocial voice offer up voluntary suggestions for workplace changes based on collaborative motives. This voice behaviour is proactive and is focussed on benefitting the organisation and its members (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Defensive voice occurs when employees communicate suggestions for workplace change. These suggestions are actuated by fear and are centred on the employee’s need to protect themselves (Van Dyne et al., 2003). According to Schlenker and Weigold (1989, p. 28) self-protective behaviour is characterized by “safe, secure decisions; taking less personal responsibility;” and attributing outcomes to external influences. Some of the strategies used in defensive voice include shifting the blame to others, using excuses and justifications. The final form of voice, acquiescent voice occurs when subordinates feel that they are unable to have an impact on the organisation. In this voice behaviour employees communicate work-related ideas based on resignation (Van Dyne et al., 2003). In a similar way to prosocial and defensive voice, acquiescent voice is the purposeful expression of ideas, information and opinions relating to work; the variation is that acquiescent voice is

less proactive. In this type of voice people agree with others without expressing their personal thoughts or opinions on a matter (Van Dyne et al., 2003).

2.4.3.2 Reactive and active voice.

Differentiating between manager initiated upward feedback and unsolicited follower voice, was Locke (2008) who proposed two different types of follower voice. According to Locke (2008) reactive voice occurs when managers initiate feedback by asking for input into a decision. In contrast, active voice occurs when followers proactively offer up voluntary information to their leaders.

It is axiomatic that every organisation will have some form of upward feedback from subordinates to their superiors. In most cases, upward feedback would be job-related and would involve employees reporting on role specific key performance indicators which impact upon the organisation's goals and strategy. As such, using Locke's terminology, all upward feedback in organisations would comprise of reactive voice.

As all organisations would have manager initiated upward feedback, the focal point of this research is therefore to investigate whether upward feedback for decision making purposes occurs mostly as a result of reactive voice as opposed to active voice. Irrespective of the form of 'voice' that organisations use to obtain this type of upward feedback however, it is evident that organisations would be required to engage in a process that involves their employees in decision making. For this reason, it is therefore critical to review and understand the theory relating to participative decision making in the workplace.

2.4.3.3 Participative decision making.

Participative Decision Making (PDM) is defined as the process by which managers share their decision making responsibility with their subordinates (Russ, 2011). Russ (2011, p. 827) posited that in deciding whether or not to include employees in decision making, managers often consider "situational factors such as employees' expertise and work maturity; urgency of the decision; availability of information related to a decision; potential conflicts associated with the decision; impact of proposed solutions on procedures and policies; and so forth".

Parnell and Bell (1994) suggested that a manager's proclivity to use PDM in the workplace depended on the anticipated impact of two factors: organisational effectiveness and power. These authors asserted that if a manager believed that PDM would lead to increased organisational effectiveness by achieving superior decisions and improved

productivity they would be more likely to implement PDM (Parnell & Bell, 1994). Further, Parnell and Bell (1994) proposed that managers, who perceived PDM as resulting in a loss of power, were less likely to implement it in the workplace. Conversely, their work also highlighted how some managers were seen as being willing to 'lose' this power through the implementation of PDM so as to gain influence with their subordinates (Parnell & Bell, 1994).

Building upon Parnell and Bell's earlier work, Russ (2011) undertook a study using McGregor's X/Y theory of managers. Russ sought to investigate whether X/Y theory managers were likely to use PDM in the workplace. Results from his study showed that Y managers who were seen as being democratic managers were more likely to implement PDM in the workplace than X managers who were seen as being autocratic managers. Further, Russ's study found that Y leaders viewed PDM as leading to more positive outcomes for the organisation resulting from better quality decisions and higher productivity. Russ's (2011) study also found that X managers associated using PDM with a loss of power. This differed from the Y managers who viewed this 'loss' of power as gaining something greater by the way of increased influence with their employees.

Theory on which managers are more likely to implement PDM assists in the setting a framework against which to examine the organisation under research. Of importance for analysis purposes as well is an understanding of the dimensions of PDM.

Theorists have identified six dimensions in the area of PDM consisting of the rationale, structure, form, decision issues, decision processes and degree of involvement (Black & Gregersen, 1997). Each of these are discussed extensively in the literature, however, this review provides a brief summary of each dimension.

The first dimension *rationale*, examines the justification for involving employees in decision making. The second dimension *structure*, discusses whether organisations use formal or informal processes for PDM. The third dimension *form*, discusses whether employees are involved directly in PDM or whether they use representatives to put forward their views and opinions. The *decision issues* dimension examines which areas employees are allowed to participate in and range from work and task design, working conditions to strategic and investment issues. The *decision making* dimension pertains to ways in which problems are identified, solutions generated, selected, implemented and finally evaluated. The final dimension, *the degree of involvement* relates to the degree to which employees are given information concerning a decision and ranges on a continuum from "no advance

information concerning a decision” to the decision being “completely in the hands of employees” (Black & Gregersen, 1997, p. 862).

Scott-Ladd and Marshall (2004) suggested that although employees contribute information using PDM, it is critical for them to understand that they do not always have the ability to impact upon the final decisions made by managers who often have to act on conflicting suggestions or information. Citing the advantages of using PDM in the workplace, Knoop’s (1991, p.779) research found that PDM gave employees a perception of achievement, security and independence in the workplace. His research also showed that PDM satisfied the “needs for responsibility and ... recognition” and supported subordinates work as being meaningful. In support, Anderson and McDaniel (1999) theorised that letting employees have a ‘voice’ or ‘say’ in decisions that affect them in the workplace would lead to improved communication and also increase the sources of information from which management could make better-quality decisions . In sum, Connell (1998) highlighted the benefits of including employees in decision making citing that it was not only beneficial for employees but also for workplace productivity.

2.4.4 Why Subordinates choose not to Provide Upward Feedback

2.4.4.1 Employee silence and fear.

While there are innumerable benefits to giving employees a voice, Morrison and Milliken (2003) observed that employees often have to determine whether it is preferable for them to voice their thoughts and concerns or whether it is better for them to remain silent. Sharma (1979) provided four reasons as to why employees may choose to remain silent. The first reason related to subordinates concealing their thoughts by choosing to agree with management’s decisions in a bid to avoid negative repercussions. The second reason was linked to subordinates’ belief that management were not interested in their opinions. This was especially the case where supervisors created barriers to upward feedback because they did not want to look incompetent in the eyes of top management. The third reason related to the inability of organisations to offer subordinates rewards for the provision of upward feedback. The final reason stemmed from subordinates feeling that their managers were inaccessible and non-responsive to feedback (Sharma, 1979).

Approaching the subject differently Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) suggested that employee silence resulted from subordinates feeling uncomfortable to share adverse or alarming information with their managers. Although withholding such information had the

potential to lead to erroneous decision making, employees felt that keeping their job was more important than what might be perceived as undermining their manager. Continuing in the same vein, Argyris (1980) proposed that subordinates tended to avoid discussing issues that threatened the organisation's underlying norms and policies. Classifying anything that was considered threatening or risky as being 'undiscussable' in nature, Argyris (1980, p. 205) suggested that acculturation and socialisation had led to individuals instinctively responding to threatening issues by "easing in", "appropriately covering", or by "being civilized". Rosen and Tesser (1970) and Conlee and Tesser (1973) contended that employees kept silent by withholding undesirable information from leaders in what psychologist's term as the 'mum effect'. Conlee and Tesser (1973) supposed that subordinates apprehension in providing negative information resulted from an uncertainty about whether or not their leader desired to hear bad news. Milliken et al. (2003) therefore found that the 'mum effect' became worse as the hierarchal distance between the subordinate and the manager increased.

Highlighting the 'mum effect' further, Argyris (1980) also observed the tendency of people to believe that telling the truth in real life was only advantageous when it was nonthreatening. Consequently, Argyris suggested that people would choose to lie or modify facts when providing feedback and then pretend as if that is not the case. Concurring, Roebuck (1996) advanced that individuals will only offer up honest feedback if they believe that the benefits far outweigh the costs involved.

Summarising the differing points of view Morrison and Milliken (2003, p. 1353) pointed out that silence could therefore result from a number of factors, including fear, "the desire to avoid conveying bad news or unwelcome ideas, and also by normative and social pressures that exist in groups". This silence could therefore manifest itself in three types of silence namely, acquiescent, defensive or prosocial silence.

2.4.4.2 Acquiescent silence, defensive silence and prosocial silence.

Van Dyne et al. (2003) contended that employee silence was not the opposite of employee voice. In a similar way to the three types of employee voice, Van Dyne et al. (2003) proffered three types of silence that subordinates could display in the workplace stating that these would arise from the same three motives of voice which were: other-orientation, self-preservation or disengagement. The first type of silence, acquiescent silence arises when subordinates are disengaged and "withhold relevant ideas, information, or opinions, based on resignation" (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1366). These employees according to Van

Dyne et al. (2003) are accepting of the current situation in the organisation and are reluctant to be involved or participate in conversation that seeks to change the circumstances. In analysing this type of silence, it can be argued that Kelley's description of an alienated follower would be the most likely follower to display acquiescent silence in the workplace.

Defensive silence on the other hand is actuated by fear and is the purposeful suppression of "relevant ideas, information, or opinions as a form of self-protection" (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p.1367). This form of silence is deliberate and pre-emptive behaviour as an act of self-preservation from external threats (Schlenker & Weigold, 1989). Defensive silence differs from acquiescent silence in that rather than being resigned, subordinates do not speak up out of fear. It would be reasonable to assume that pragmatic survivors and conformist followers would be the most likely to render this type of silence in an organisation.

The final form of silence known as prosocial silence arises when subordinates withhold "work-related ideas, information, or opinions with the goal of benefiting other people or the organization - based on altruism or cooperative motives" (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1368). In a similar way to defensive silence this behaviour is deliberate and pre-emptive and cannot be commanded by the organisation. In contrast to defensive silence however, prosocial silence is "motivated by concern for others, rather than by fear of negative personal consequences that might occur from speaking up". Examples of this type of behaviour would be withholding complaints, or putting other-oriented objectives before personal interests (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1368). As effective followers are aware of how their behaviour can affect others, it can be expected that this type of follower would be the most likely to display this form of silence in an organisation if they believed that it would have negative consequences for, or would implicate colleagues.

2.4.4.3 Group cohesiveness/other subordinates.

Another reason that employees remain silent is because they wish to maintain cohesiveness and accord within the work group (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Morrison and Milliken (2000) noted that through their social interactions subordinates form common beliefs about the danger or pointlessness of speaking up in the workplace. Further, Morrison and Milliken (2000) suggested that through discussions with colleagues, subordinates would consequently form mental maps of what they would and would not discuss with their managers.

Likewise, Bowen and Blackmon (2003) observed that to avoid isolation subordinates were not likely to speak up unless they had the backing of their colleagues. If they felt unsure of their colleagues support, they were more likely to remain silent or distort the truth. Wood and Bandura (1989) also offered similar findings and noted that subordinates observe their colleagues and learn vicariously from their successes and failures before pursuing similar actions.

2.4.4.4 Imbalance of power.

A further reason for employee silence is the imbalance of power in organisations. As discussed earlier in Section 2.2 of this review, the imbalance of power within organisations can increase the tendency of ingratiation practices and of subordinates suppressing their points of view. Assertive subordinates who choose to provide critical upward or negative feedback run the risk of losing their job if their manager values compliance over dissent (Tourish, 2005).

2.4.4.5 Leader's behaviour and attitude.

Tourish and Robson (2006) posited that critical upward feedback is often lacking in organisations as leaders display behaviours that discourage the communication of this sort of feedback. Tourish (2005) suggested that the manner in which top managers respond to critical feedback would affect the extent to which subordinates provide future upward feedback. Kilburn (2007) and London and Smither (2002), found that a leader's ability to accept formal or informal upward feedback depends to a large extent on that leader's behaviour and attitude. Leaders that are "suspicious of any feedback" that will affect their "behaviour or decisions" will react adversely in what is called "*automatic vigilance effect*" (Tourish, 2005, p. 485). The effects of this can be seen in a study carried out by Tourish (2005, p. 493) which found that where leaders had reacted negatively to critical feedback, subordinates would then censor future communications by making them more "formal, superficial, task-oriented and devoid of personal messages (e.g. self-disclosures)". Moreover, Tourish's study found that senior management had the inclination to only encourage feedback that they valued and would instead reprimand subordinates for information that was seen as being unfavourable. Understandably, this gave leaders an inaccurate picture of their organisations climate (2005).

The type of leader also has an impact on whether or not subordinates provide upward feedback. Autocratic leaders for example tend to separate themselves from their followers and are therefore not approachable (Robbins et al., 2001). In contrast democratic leaders

use communication and participative leadership to facilitate and maintain relationships (Robbins et al., 2001). Consequently Kilburn's (2007) research showed that leaders with a high task and low relationship orientation were less likely to receive upward feedback from their subordinates while those who promoted a relationship between themselves and their subordinates were more likely to receive unsolicited upward feedback.

Finally, Detret and Burris (2007, p. 881) found that "both openness and transformational leader behaviours are consistently positively related to voice, but openness behaviours clearly send the stronger signal that voice is welcome". They further went on to state that it was critical for organisations to create a psychologically safe climate for subordinates to voice their opinions by displaying leadership behaviours that assist employees in making the decision about whether or not to speak up (Detret & Burris, 2007; Milliken et al., 2003).

2.4.4.6 Subordinate's behaviour and attitude.

Subordinates behaviours and attitudes can also be affected by a leader's behaviours and attitudes. As seen above a leader's task or relationship behaviour orientation has the potential to impact on how subordinates respond (Kilburn, 2007). According to social exchange theory, subordinates behaviours will mirror those of their leaders (Kilburn, 2007). In examining the role of reciprocity, Gouldner (1960) suggested that individuals or groups were more likely to provide upward feedback to a leader or organisation that provided benefits as opposed to one that did not. These benefits according to Blau (1964) could either be extrinsic or intrinsic in nature. Consequently the more open a leader is, the more open subordinates would be to providing feedback (Kilburn 2007).

Showing the interplay between power and the provision of upward feedback were Roberts and Reilly (1974) who found that while the distortion of information and withholding of information of subordinates were mostly attitudinal, a subordinate's trust in a superior and the ability of a superior to impact the subordinate's future and career aspirations were further factors impacting on the provision of upward feedback. Roberts and O'Reilly's findings showed that of the three variables, trust was the most important factor for the provision of "open and accurate" upward feedback (1974, p. 214).

Given that subordinates are fearful of providing feedback most instead, choose to distort the feedback where they have to provide it to leaders.

2.4.5 Distortion of Upward Feedback

While upward feedback can be of great benefit to an organisation, Tourish and Robson (2003) postulated that it can also have serious consequences for an organisation because subordinates can be overly positive when providing feedback. For one thing, Tourish (2005) found that to avoid negative repercussions subordinates had the tendency to inflate how much they agreed with those who held 'higher positions' in what is termed the "*ingratiation effect*" (p. 485). The purpose behind subordinates employing these 'politeness strategies' resulted from subordinates either trying to win influence with those in higher positions (Baxter, 1984) or seeking ascendancy in the organisation (Read, 1962). A study undertaken by Baron (1996) found that where subordinates provided feedback they tended to provide more positive than negative feedback. An interesting finding in Baron's study however was that managers perceived receiving more negative feedback than their subordinates believed they had given. Further, both managers and subordinates perceived identical levels of positive feedback (Baron, 1996). Offering a possible explanation, Tourish suggested that the reason for the differences in perception could have resulted from leaders being "suspicious of any feedback" that would affect their "behaviour or decisions" and thus they react adversely in what is called "*automatic vigilance effect*" (2005, p.485).

Offering a different view was Athanassiades (1973) who linked the distortion of upward communication to motivation theory. His research found that subordinates were more likely to distort information if they were motivated by the need to ascend within the organisation's hierarchy. Driven by their need to ascend, such a subordinate would distort upward communication because of their belief that it was necessary for them to achieve their goal. Classified as moderate risk takers these subordinates would therefore only moderately distort the truth. This distortion was seen as lessening more under autonomous than heteronomous authority structures because subordinates would feel less "coerced, defensive, and therefore less inclined to perceive distortion" as a requirement of attaining their goal (Athanassiades, 1973, p. 211).

Another group of subordinates, seeking security in their job was seen as being more likely to distort upward communication but were instead higher risk takers. Similar to those motivated by ascending within the organisation, these subordinates would behave in a similar manner under autonomous and heteronomous authority structures (Athanassiades, 1973). Athanassiades (1973, p. 223) asserted therefore "to the extent that hierarchical

organisations fostered conditions of insecurity and ascendancy, they tend to be powerful generators of insecure-ascenders; that is of high distortion” of upward feedback.

Looking at it differently Robbins et al. (1994) suggested that information could be distorted as it passed up the organisation’s hierarchy due to the seven stages of communication discussed in Section 2.3. In addition to the potential for distortion to occur through careless encoding and decoding of messages, the receiver’s prejudice, knowledge and perceptual skills can also impact the information being passed upwards (Robbins et al., 1994). Consequently the taller the organisation’s hierarchy the greater the chances are that inaccurate information will be passed upwards.

A further element that affects the distortion of upward communication is self-efficacy. Tourish (2005) observed that most people always rate their behaviour higher than they really are. Consequently, leaders are more prone to believe positive upward feedback as being accurate and truthful and in line with their self-efficacy prejudice. Leaders, who view critical or negative feedback as being inaccurate, are less likely to implement strategies to facilitate this form of feedback. These findings are consistent with Robbins et al. (1994) proposition that receivers of messages hear or see what they want based on their “needs, motivations, experience, background and other personal characteristics” and therefore filter messages through their own interests and expectations (p. 434). In a similar vein, research undertaken by Tourish and Robson’s (2003) found that managers believed all of the positive feedback that they had received, but instead either reinterpreted or argued against negative feedback provided by subordinates. Vonk (2002) determined that people who received flattery or had others agree with them were inclined to like the ingratiation as well as accept their comments uncritically. Tourish (2005, p. 491) emphasized the risk in this by asserting that leaders “peripheral and close range vision could become tainted, and lead to poor decisions”. To avoid poor decision making, it is therefore necessary for leaders to consider ways in which to facilitate upward feedback.

2.4.6 Facilitating Upward Feedback

To increase the potential of employee voice, Milliken et al. (2003) proposed that organisations need to create environments in which employees feel safe to voice vital information. They suggested that organisations should select designs and structures that reduce the need for hierarchies which tend to impede upward feedback. Further, they suggested that creating a formal system, such as an organisational ombudsman role which

lay outside the traditional hierarchy to whom subordinates could pass information. Likewise, Dutton et al. (1997) suggested that employees were more likely to speak up if they believed that the context was favourable, top managers were willing to listen, there were no perceived threats and that the organisation's culture was encouraging of upward feedback.

Ryan and Oestreich (1998) also recommended a number of strategies that managers could implement that both reduced fear in the workplace and created high trust environments that encouraged upward feedback. They recommended that managers 'hear' the subordinate's message; keep an open attitude; seek further information; share prior mistakes they had made which led to learning opportunities; share feedback and plans with subordinates; reward subordinates; create changes based on feedback and close the feedback loop. Further, Ryan and Oestreich (1998) advocated discussing the undiscussables by creating a safe and blame free environment; accepting any undiscussables that subordinates raised; identifying appropriate settings for discussing the undiscussables and following through by resolving undiscussables that were raised. Finally, they suggested that leaders reduce any ambiguous behaviours by making the time; informing subordinates of how they feel; using common courtesy and making subordinates feel welcome (Ryan & Oestreich, 1998).

In a bid to assist managers in determining how much input to request from their subordinates when making decisions Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) proposed a simple decision making model which consists of a range of options to facilitate feedback. With the exception of the first option, all of the other options permit employees to be involved in decision making: (1) the leader makes the decision alone; (2) the leader requests limited input from subordinates; (3) the leader presents a preliminary decision which subordinates can influence; (4) the leader presents the problem, requests input and then makes his decision; (5) the leader presents the problem, sets the parameters and asks the group to make the decision; and (6) the leader allows the group to "make decisions within prescribed limits" (p.97).

In what he termed as the Ten Commandments for improving upward feedback, Tourish (2005) suggested additional ways in which organisations could improve upward feedback. These are presented in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3. The Ten Commandments for improving upward feedback (Tourish, 2005, p. 499)

1. Experiment with both upward and 360-degree appraisal.

Can lead to further self-development, but requires patience, determination and a supportive atmosphere.

2. Managers should familiarise themselves with the basics of ingratiation theory.

Appreciate that no-one is impervious to flattery including/especially you!

3. Positive feedback should be subject to the same, or greater scrutiny, than negative feedback.

Seek a balance between positive and negative feedback. Instinctively mistrust positive feedback, and concentrate on problems and criticisms, their validity and solution

4. Managers should seek out opportunities for regular formal and informal contact with staff at all levels.

Seek honest, two-way communication by establishing informal contact with staff at subordinate levels of your organisation

5. Promote systems for greater participation in decision-making.

A suggestion scheme, with worth-having rewards, should be first-base and then something more systematic can follow

6. Create 'red flag' mechanisms for the upward transmission of information that cannot be ignored.

There must be some mechanism to ensure important or urgent problems are flagged up to the highest level. Whistle blowing is evidence of the complete failure of upward communication. But unless managers make functioning upward communication channels available, it is likely to occur with disastrous public relations consequences.

7. Existing communication processes should be reviewed to ensure that they include requirements to produce critical feedback.

Communication systems should allow information to travel in both directions, and should enable responsive action. They should be constantly reviewed, to ensure critical as well as positive feedback reaches the top.

8. Train supervisors to be open, receptive and responsive to employee dissent.

Give them the vital communication tools, encourage them to do the job, and reward them when they do.

9. Power and status differentials should be eliminated or, where that is impossible, at least reduced.

Open upward communication cannot coexist with penal appraisal systems, and will be discouraged by a culture in which status differentials are overtly displayed.

10. The CEO, in particular, needs to openly model a different approach to the receipt of critical communication, and ensure that senior colleagues emulate this openness.

The CEO must 'walk the talk', and personify what s/he wishes to foster.

The suggestions that Tourish (2005) presents above are likely to not only facilitate and promote accurate upward feedback (where power differentials are removed and ingratiation is recognised), but will also enable managers to be aware of the actual state of their organisation's climate. This in turn can lead to superior decisions and higher chances of strategy implementation by subordinates.

As the focus of this research was on the role that middle manager's play in influencing the upward feedback process, it would be fitting to investigate whether the methods they use to facilitate this valuable source of feedback aligns with the recommendations found in the literature presented above.

2.4.7 Relevance of Upward Feedback to this Study

Reviewing and analysing the literature that exists on upward feedback, in particular the benefits of and consequences of not seeking upward feedback are the focal point of this research. If upward feedback is lacking in the organisation under investigation, possessing knowledge of the reasons that employees keep silent in an organisation is fundamental as it would assist in identifying some of the possible reasons that upward feedback might be deficient. Further, having a handle on the different types of silence assists in foreshadowing which followers might display what type of silence and for what possible reason.

To be able to critique the organisation being researched accurately, it is necessary to have an understanding of group dynamics, the imbalance of power as well as the leader's and follower's behaviour and attitudes as these all influence the provision of upward feedback for decision making purposes. Of interest, will be whether or not subordinates reflect leader's behaviours and attitudes as suggested by social exchange theory.

Also, understanding the factors that cause the distortion of feedback is of relevance as it can have negative implications for an organisation's decision making capabilities. Based on the research, it would be anticipated that subordinates would be more likely to distort information or employ politeness strategies if they deem the feedback as being 'undiscussable' in nature, or if they have a need for job security or ascendancy or are an ingratiation.

Finally, examining some of the ways in which feedback can be facilitated is of key importance as it provides a guide against which the organisation being researched can be analysed.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has critiqued literature relating to the provision of upward feedback. The research highlighted how an organisation's structure and design can impact on whether or not subordinates are asked to participate in decision making as well as how freely information flows within the organisation's hierarchy.

The power that different organisational members hold was examined. In particular, the chapter focussed on how power has the ability to impact on whether or not upward feedback is encouraged as well as on whether or not followers choose to provide this critical information upwards. Implicit in the literature was that certain types of organisational structures generate particular types of leader behaviour which consequently produce certain types of followers.

While communication can flow horizontally and vertically in an organisation, the most common flow of information was seen as being from the top to the bottom of the organisation's hierarchy. Although upward feedback was seen as being critical to an organisation's continued success and existence, the literature highlighted a number of factors as to why this source of information was not encouraged from a leadership point of view or volunteered by followers.

The integrative role that middle managers play in an organisation in particular in the process of upward feedback was also discussed. Reasons as to why middle managers might choose not to provide upward feedback from subordinates to top managers was also explored. The chapter concluded by examining ways to facilitate upward feedback.

Figure 2.1 shows the conceptual framework that guided the study. The framework was developed following the literature review and highlights the main concepts that delineated the scope of this study.

As can be seen in the framework, there are four main elements that can impact upon the provision of upward feedback. These comprise of the organisation's structure, the leader or manager's style and behaviour, the follower's behaviour and the organisation's communication environment. These four elements have the ability to either create barriers to, or opportunities for the provision of upward feedback. An organisation's structure, for example has the ability to impact upon the provision of upward feedback by distorting the feedback as it passes up several layers of an organisation's hierarchy. Additional barriers created by these four elements (individually or collectively) arise out of an imbalance of power, employee fear and silence, group cohesiveness, the automatic vigilance effect and ingratiation practices. Specific barriers to upward feedback displayed by middle managers result from impression management and middle management's perception regarding their level of upward influence with superiors.

Where barriers to upward feedback exist, subordinates do not feel comfortable to volunteer up information and instead use their reactive voice to provide upward feedback. Subordinates are therefore limited in terms of what they can provide upward feedback on as they respond to specific requests from their middle managers. Due to inadequate information leaders can end up with inferior strategies, decreased organisational effectiveness or performance. Further, in situations where subordinates are not asked to participate decision making, this can result in employees subverting or not implementing strategies that they had no part in formulating.

Where opportunities to provide upward feedback exist, employee voice is heard in one of two ways. Reactive voice occurs when managers initiate feedback by requesting input from their employees. Active voice occurs when followers volunteer up information without being asked to provide feedback. In these circumstances subordinates provide their feedback through their middle manager which culminates in top leaders having a plethora of information from which to make higher quality and more informed decisions. Giving followers an opportunity to express both their reactive voice and active voice could therefore increase organisational effectiveness or performance, result in enhanced strategies and improve chances of strategy implementation where employees have had the opportunity to participate in decision making.

While all four elements can positively or negatively impact upon the provision of upward feedback, the conceptual framework highlights the key role that middle managers play in the provision of upward feedback. Middle managers operate as a conduit between subordinates and superordinates and therefore have the ability to influence the provision of upward feedback. The emphasis of this research therefore, is on this critical aspect of the middle manager's role in the upward feedback process. The findings of the research will be examined against this conceptual framework.

While the research investigates how middle managers influence upward feedback for decision making purposes, the research does not limit decision making to any one specific purpose as decision making could relate to range of things.

The next section of this thesis describes various research methods and rationalizes the method and design chosen for this study.

Organisation Context

Internal Communication Dynamics impacting upward feedback

Outcomes

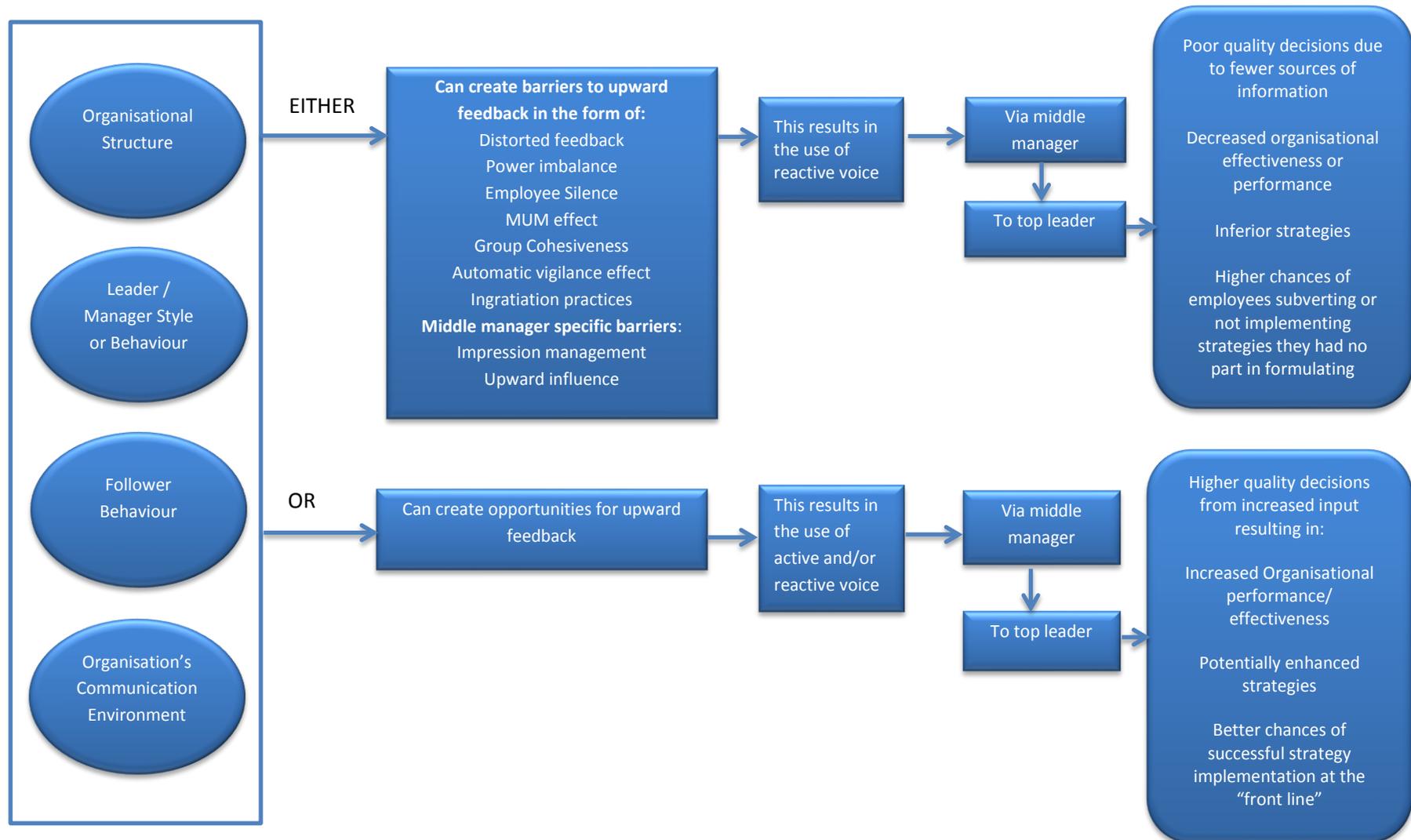


Figure 2.1. Conceptual framework

CHAPTER 3

THE METHOD

Overview

This chapter reviews research methodology literature pertinent to the study. The chapter commences by revisiting the research problem and then briefly examines a number of qualitative research approaches that were considered relevant to the research focus and the specific research questions. The rationale for choosing a qualitative study, in particular an empirical phenomenological approach is then discussed. Thereafter, justification for using a purposive maximal variation sampling is provided. Next, the chapter provides a description of how the data collection instrument was designed, developed, validated and then administered. The manner in which the credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability of the study were achieved is then discussed. Subsequently, the chapter provides a comprehensive description of the processes that were used to analyse the data. The chapter concludes by discussing the approaches used to ensure that the study adhered to ethical standards.

3.1 Restatement of the Research Problem

The research problem underpinning the study emerged from a lack of evidence in the literature about the influence that middle level managers have on the upward feedback process, specifically in decision making in a service industry. Due to their position within an organisation's hierarchy, middle managers frequently have access to more accurate information from those who are closest to the action (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Middle managers therefore have the ability to inform senior managers of issues which could consequently change the organisation's strategic direction (Westley, 1990) as well as enhance organisational performance (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990).

The study comprised of three research questions. Frankel, Wallen and Hyun (2012) proposed that in formulating research questions, the researcher should (a) seek to advance knowledge in their field of study, (b) improve practice, or (c) improve the human condition. As there was a gap in the literature regarding middle level managers influence on upward

feedback the primary goal of this research was to advance knowledge in this area and in so doing also provide organisations and scholars with information that could potentially improve practice.

The purpose of the research determined an epistemological perspective as the research sought to understand the relationship between the 'knower' and the phenomenon of upward feedback. Accordingly therefore, the research questions were designed to investigate the multiple thoughts, experiences and perceptions that organisational members had relating to the influence that middle management have on upward feedback. As the questions required participants to describe their experiences and perceptions, the study dictated a qualitative research design. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are subordinates' personal experiences of providing upward feedback, and how do they perceive the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation?
2. What are superordinates' and middle level managers' personal experiences of upward feedback, and how do they perceive the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation?
3. How does middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process?
4. How can the participation of middle-level management in upward feedback be enhanced?

3.2 Research Approaches

Creswell (2008) proposed that qualitative research was best suited for research problems in which little was known about the phenomena under focus. He asserted that this was particularly the case in situations where the literature did not generate enough information about the phenomena under study and thus the researcher needed to use exploration to delve into participants' knowledge and prior experiences (Creswell, 2008). As the literature reviewed yielded very little information about the influence middle level management have on upward feedback for decision making purposes, it was deemed necessary to undertake research of a qualitative nature to explore this phenomenon in greater depth.

Qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore social or human problems. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports, detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Qualitative research provides researchers with a way of examining and understanding the meanings that people attach to the phenomena being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Although qualitative researchers can subscribe to different worldviews such as positivist, postpositivism, constructivist-interpretive, critical or feminist-poststructural paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), the general view exists that researchers who adopt a qualitative approach believe in the existence of multiple realities (Creswell, 2007). Correspondingly, a qualitative researcher’s ontological stance is that reality is subjective, manifold and that each participant’s experience can increase the understanding of the phenomena being studied. To be able to understand these multiple realities qualitative researchers therefore advocate the epistemological stance of minimising the distance between themselves and the phenomena being researched.

Creswell (2007) identified five approaches to qualitative research designs which include narrative research, ethnography, grounded research theory, case studies and phenomenology each of which were considered in terms of their appropriateness for this study. Although all of these five approaches use comparable data collection techniques, such as interviews, observations and document analysis, they differ in the foci or objectives of the study. Data collection differs in terms of emphasis as well as the amount of data that is collected. Further, differences can also be seen at the data analysis stage around the levels and steps required to analyse data. Finally, the written report also indicates the design approach that was taken with the writing describing or highlighting whether the research was narrative, ethnographic, phenomenological, grounded theory or a case study (Creswell, 2007).

While each of these five approaches was examined closely in terms of their appropriateness for this research, the first four approaches were discounted in favour of a phenomenological approach. The justification for this can be seen in the brief description and analysis of each of the methods below.

Narrative research is the study of an individual’s life experiences either as discovered in documents and archival material or as conveyed to the researcher. In this approach the participant provides the researcher with a detailed description of a special event in their

life. The researcher then documents the individual's experience using narrative description (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). This method of research was not considered to be appropriate for the study as the current research was focussed on more than one individual's experiences.

Ethnography involves the process of observing and interviewing participants and then documenting the experiences of the participants under study (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Ethnography seeks to place "specific encounters, events and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context" and is focussed on constant field work rather than on documenting prior experiences in the field (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). As the research being undertaken did not include observation, this method was not applicable.

Grounded research theory is research in which researchers use the experiences of participants to generate a theory that is 'grounded' in the phenomenon under study (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012). Data collection is an ongoing process and is collected primarily through interviews and observation. Data are analysed, a theory suggested, more data collected the theory revised and the process continues until the theory is developed (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Smith and colleagues (2012) suggested that grounded theory was best suited to researchers who had the time and space to deal with volumes of data. Grounded theory was deemed less relevant for the purposes of this study because (a) the purpose of the study was not to generate new theory in the area of upward feedback; (b) the researcher was unable to observe participants; and (c) due to the time constraints associated with a Master's degree the researcher would not have sufficient time to undertake the extensive and continual data collection and analysis that this approach requires.

Case studies explore issues of research through one or more cases in a confined system based on extensive data collection (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Three types of case studies exist. In an intrinsic case study the researcher is concerned with understanding a specific individual or situation. In an instrumental case study the researcher is focussed on uncovering something beyond the case and uses the case as a means to acquiring this knowledge. In a collective case study, the researcher undertakes research with multiple cases simultaneously which form part of the overall study (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Stake, 1995). The case study method was deemed less appropriate for this research as the purpose of a case study is to obtain descriptions and activities of a group while the purpose

of this study was to identify mutual behaviours or experiences that the group shared (Creswell, 2008).

A phenomenology study “investigates various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 432). Smith (2003, p. 2) proffered that through the use of phenomenology, researchers are able to study various types of experience including “perception, imagination, thought, emotion, desire, volition, and action”. As the phenomenon under study was the lived experiences and perceptions of organisational members’ views of middle managements’ influence on upward feedback, phenomenology was considered the most appropriate method.

3.3 Research Method and Rationale

Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997, p. 28) defined phenomenology as “a determinate method of interviewing” used to “attain a rigorous and significant description of the world of everyday human experience as it is lived and described by specific individuals in specific circumstances”. As such, phenomenology seeks to reveal the hidden elements that make up human experience (Sanders, 1982).

Phenomenology has its foundations in the philosophical perspectives of Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938). Husserl and other philosophers such as Heidegger (1962, 1971), Sartre (1953, 1968) and Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968) all made different contributions to the field of phenomenology. Their contributions resulted in two main approaches to phenomenology. The first approach, descriptive phenomenology (Connelly, 2010) also referred to as empirical, transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas 1994), phenomenology (Lavery, 2003) or empirical phenomenology (Von Eckartsberg, 1986; Hein & Austin, 2001; Klein & Westcott, 1994) originated with Husserl (Creswell, 2007; Lavery, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). The second approach, interpretative phenomenology which is often referred to as hermeneutic or existential phenomenology was founded by Heidegger (Lavery, 2003; Smith et al., 2012) and later extended by Gadamer (Lavery, 2003).

Like Husserl, Heidegger shared a similar interest in exploring ‘lived experience’. Although Heidegger was Husserl’s student, he disagreed with the way in which ‘lived experience’ could be investigated (Lavery, 2003). Husserl for instance, believed that it was possible for the researcher to ‘bracket’ their prior experience so as to view a phenomenon from an

objective and untainted point of view. This idea of ‘bracketing’ prior experiences is what constituted the ‘transcendental’ aspect of Husserlian phenomenology (Creswell, 2007).

Heidegger however, did not believe that it was possible for a researcher to achieve an understanding of the world objectively, but rather that the researcher would be influenced by their background and history which would cause them to interpret the phenomena being studied in light of their experiences (Laverty, 2003; Smith et al., 2012). This latter theme was a point of contention between Husserl and Heidegger which resulted in Heidegger disassociating himself from the work of Husserl. Apart from their methodological differences Husserl and Heidegger’s ontological and epistemological assumptions caused further separation in their approaches. While Husserl’s focus was more epistemological (i.e. on the relationship between the phenomena and the ‘knower’), Heidegger was more concerned with the ontological question of the “nature of reality” (Laverty, 2003, p. 27). The differences in these approaches are discussed further under the research design section of this chapter (Section 3.4).

In Husserl’s phenomenology it is necessary for the researcher to detach themselves from their prior experiences, knowledge, judgements and prejudices of the phenomena (in a process called *epoche*) and in an open and naïve way, ‘hear’ the participants’ experience for what it was (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl closely linked phenomenology to the concept of intentionality which he described as “consciousness to the internal experience of being conscious of something; thus the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). Sanders therefore summed up intentionality as the structure underlying experience or consciousness (1982).

Moustakas (1994) proposed that every intentionality consisted of a *noema* and *noesis*. The *noema* is the *what* of experience and that which is experienced, while the *noesis* is the manner in which the phenomena is experienced (Husserl, 2012). Using Husserl’s philosophical tenets, Creswell (1998) suggested four principles that underlie a phenomenological study. By analysing the essential structures of experience and *intentionality of conscious*, the researcher unearths the *essence* of the experience. Through the use of phenomenological *data reduction* the researcher analyses non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements and themes for all probable meanings. The researcher refrains from judgements by *bracketing* his or her experiences (in what is termed *epoche*) and instead relies on “intuition, imagination and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52).

As phenomenology is concerned with uncovering the essential structures of consciousness or experience, it is not possible to discover the underlying essences of an experience through observation (Sanders, 1982). It is therefore necessary for individuals involved in the study to describe their 'lived experiences' about a concept or the phenomenon in detail (Creswell, 1998) to enable the researcher to unearth an untainted description of what the experience means to the participant (Sanders, 1982).

Phenomenologists believe that there are numerous ways in which to explicate experiences and that it is the meaning that people attach to their experiences that makes up reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As "realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions" (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 429) perceptions are regarded as being the principal source of information in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Consequently, phenomenologists seek to identify, understand and describe the similarities in perceptions and experiences between people in what is referred to as the essence of the experience (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Creswell (2007) posited that the first advantage of undertaking a phenomenological study is that it affords the researcher the opportunity to study a phenomenon in-depth from the point of view of several individuals which could be useful to a variety of groups interested in the phenomenon under study. Second, undertaking a phenomenological study is an efficient means of gathering data, as it usually consists of single or multiple interviews with participants. The final advantage of undertaking a phenomenological study according to Creswell is the structured approach to data analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1994) which is particularly useful to new researchers. Although there are several advantages to undertaking a phenomenological study, Creswell (2007) also highlighted numerous challenges of a phenomenological approach. First, it is necessary for the researcher to understand the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology and be able to identify these. Second, it is necessary for the researcher to identify participants who have all experienced the phenomenon to be able to ascertain what is common to their experience. This can be a challenge if the researcher is unable to find suitable participants that meet this criterion. Third, it is necessary for the researcher to bracket their personal opinions of the phenomenon under study which can prove to be challenging. For this latter reason, Creswell suggested that researchers needed to determine the best way in which to introduce their personal knowledge and experience of the phenomena in the study (2007). The researcher introduced her experience of the phenomena in her textural-structural description which can be found in Appendix 9.

3.4 Research Design

In the process of determining which phenomenological method to use, consideration was given to the methods of existential, hermeneutic and empirical phenomenology with the latter method seen as being the most suitable for the purpose of this study.

Existential phenomenology which was founded on the work of Heidegger (1962, 1971), Sartre (1953, 1968) and Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968) proposed that people do not exist separately or independently from the world and that people get to know about how the world operates by being engaged and participating in it (Hein & Austin, 2001). Hein and Austin (2001) asserted that in this approach the researcher would have to reflect upon their own prior experiences of the phenomena as it was not sufficient for the researcher to study the phenomena objectively. As the objective of this research was to explore upward feedback from the perspective of the participants rather than as a reflection of the researcher's own experience in the area of upward feedback, existential phenomenology was deemed inappropriate.

Hermeneutic phenomenology "involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 9). Through reflective interpretation the researcher sets aside their prejudices to uncover the hidden meaning behind the text (Gadamer, 1976/2008). As this research focussed not only on analysing text but also on interviewing people to gain insight into their perceptions and experiences of upward feedback, this method was not considered as being adequate to fully capture the essence of the phenomenon under study.

Empirical phenomenology which was the method chosen for this study is an approach that requires participants to recall their prior experience in order to provide a comprehensive description of the phenomenon by reflecting on the essence of the experience. Using the original descriptions provided by participants the researcher uncovers the core structures underlying the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Further reasons for choosing an empirical phenomenological approach are discussed in Section 3.4.1.

3.4.1 Steps in conducting an Empirical Phenomenological Study

Von Eckartsberg (1986, p. 27) outlined the following steps in conducting an empirical phenomenological study:

Step 1: The Problem and Question Formulation – The phenomenon. The researcher delineates a focus of investigation . . . formulates a question in such a way that it is understandable to others

Step 2: The Data Generating Situation – The Protocol Life Text . . . researchers start with descriptive narrative provided by subjects who are viewed as co-researchers... We query the person... engage in dialogue, or we combine the two

Step 3: The Data Analysis – Explication and interpretation. Once collected, the data are read and scrutinized so as to reveal... their structure, meaning configuration, coherence, and the circumstances of their occurrence and clustering . . . emphasis is on the study of configuration of meaning . . . involving both the structure of meaning and how it is created.

While the empirical phenomenological research method allows the researcher to develop a general structured description that expresses the common aspects of the phenomenon as it was experienced by all participants in the organisation, this design was also chosen for a number of other reasons which are listed below.

First, the empirical phenomenological method enables the researcher to gather information from multiple perspectives regarding the same phenomenon with the intention of highlighting the commonalities in the many different manifestations of the phenomenon (Hein & Austin, 2001). As superordinates, middle managers and subordinates were all interviewed regarding upward feedback, the researcher was able to gather information on the phenomenon from multiple perspectives within the organisation.

Second, as all of the participants who were invited to participate in the study had to have experienced the phenomenon of upward feedback, full descriptions were gathered from participants in interviews regarding their personal experiences of upward feedback as well as their perceptions toward the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation. From this original data, the researcher was able to determine (after reflective analysis and interpretation) the structure of the phenomenon which revealed “*what* the phenomenon essentially is as a lived human meaning” (von Eckartsberg, 1986, p.20). It is important to note that to be able to determine and describe the meaning of the experience the researcher had to utilise interpretation. The empirical phenomenological design suggests that, like in hermeneutic phenomenology, interpretation is a fundamental element of the research process (Hein & Austin, 2001). Because of the ability to use

participant's descriptions as well as the opportunity for the researcher to reflect on and interpret the phenomenon, this design was chosen.

Third, as the empirical phenomenological design relies on objective data collected from the participants and tends to use the actual words participants use to describe their experience (Klein & Westcott, 1994) the design was viewed as being relevant as all of the interviews were audio-recorded, transcripts read and re-read and then analysed for thematic content which was used to describe the experience and perceptions of upward feedback from the participant's point of view and in the participant's words.

Finally, as the emphasis is on the precision of the approach which requires researchers to be explicit about their research design, data collection and analysis for replicability and verifiability purposes (Hein & Austin, 2001) the design was considered as being the most suitable.

To conclude, justification for using the empirical phenomenological design can be seen in Moustakas' (1994, p. 13) description which aligns with the purpose of this study. Moustakas stated:

The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience.

"The understanding of the meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge (1994, p. 14).

3.5 Site Selection

Creswell (1998) suggested that when choosing the individual or site in a phenomenological study, it was not necessary for all of the participants to be located in a single location. Of importance instead was that the participants should have experienced the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 1998).

An organisation that provides educational services in schools based in low socioeconomic status areas was the focus of this study. The organisation was selected because it was

accessible (due to the researcher having previously worked with the organisation) and its staff met the criteria of having experienced upward feedback.

The organisation is located in five Perth metropolitan area precincts and three Western Australian regional areas. The Western Australian division forms part of a national organisation. However, due to the complexities of data collection, only the Western Australian division was part of the study.

Appendix 1 shows the organisational structure of the Western Australian division. Under the national umbrella of the organisation the state manager would normally be considered a middle manager, however as the focus of this study was only on the Western Australian division and the state manager's position is the highest within the state's organisation hierarchy, the state manager was considered a superordinate for the purpose of this study. Further, although the senior manager would also be considered a middle manager in terms of the state's organisational hierarchy, for the purposes of this study the senior manager was classed as a superordinate as three team leaders (hereafter referred to as middle managers) reported to that position. To protect the privacy of the organisation and the participants the researcher renamed the role positions to state manager, senior manager and middle manager as the original role names were very specific and identifiable.

An understanding of the locations and set up was necessary as it could be an influencing factor on the provision of upward feedback.

3.6 Sampling

Creswell (2008, p. 152) defined a target population of a study as "a group of individuals ... with some common defining characteristic that the researcher can identify and study". The population in this study consisted of two superordinates, three middle level managers and five subordinates who had all experienced the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process.

In determining how many participants to interview, the researcher considered Sanders (1982), rule of a phenomenological study which stated that having more participants did not necessarily yield more data and that it is instead necessary for the researcher to undertake in-depth interviews with preferably three to six individuals. Concurring with Sanders, Creswell (1998) also suggested that interviews with up to 10 people was sufficient

for a phenomenological study. As such, the researcher interviewed a maximum of 10 participants.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested that to convince readers that the research was not biased, it was necessary for the researcher to interview diverse participants who were likely to have different perspectives. Rubin and Rubin (2005) contended that it was essential for the interviewees to be experienced and knowledgeable about the phenomenon under research. For this reason subordinates, middle managers and superordinates were invited to participate in the study as it was anticipated that they would have different views regarding the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process.

As those invited to participate in the study were required to possess the characteristics of having experienced the phenomenon of upward feedback so as to be able articulate their conscious experiences and provide reliable information for the study (Creswell, 1998; Sanders, 1982) it was necessary to use a non-random sampling technique. As with most qualitative research, sampling was required to be of a purposive nature because the researcher needed to obtain a sample of individuals “that was uniquely suited to the intent of the study” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 430). As there were very few organisational members in the organisation under study who reported to a middle level manager, the subordinates and their middle level managers were purposefully selected.

Purposeful sampling is a non-random sampling approach in which researchers deliberately select participants and sites who will provide insight into the phenomenon being examined (Creswell, 2008). As one of the features of qualitative research is to offer various persons’ perspectives to highlight the intricacy of our world, the sampling strategy selected for the study was maximal variation sampling (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2008, p. 214) defined maximal variation sampling as a purposeful sampling strategy in “which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait”. Since participants differed on the characteristic of their organisational role, maximal variation sampling was appropriate. In its entirety the study sought to gain insight into the various perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon of upward feedback as viewed from various organisational roles.

To be eligible to participate in the study the researcher ensured that participants met the essential criteria outlined by Moustakas (1994, p. 107) which included:

The research participant has experienced the phenomena, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, is willing to participate in a lengthy interview and (perhaps a follow-up interview), grants the investigator the right to tape-record, possibly videotape the interview, and publish the data in a dissertation and other publications.

As such, participants who had prior experience of either providing or receiving upward feedback through a middle manager (depending on their role in the organisation) as well as middle managers who were a conduit to this type of communication were invited to participate in the study.

Organisation members invited to voluntarily participate in the study consisted of sixteen subordinates, three middle managers and two superordinates.

Middle level manager one, had six subordinates reporting to her, four of which were based in the same metropolitan office as their manager and two of which were based in a regional location approximately three hundred kilometres away.

Middle level manager two, had seven subordinates reporting to her, all of which were based in the metropolitan area, however across three different locations. This middle level manager shared an office with two of her subordinates in the one location.

Middle level manager three who was based in a regional area had three subordinates reporting to her, two of which were based in the same office as their manager and the other which was based in another regional location approximately four hundred kilometres from their manager (see Appendix 1).

Further information relating to the chosen sampling approach has been presented under data collection in Section 3.8.1.

3.7 Instrumentation and the Role of the Researcher

Data were collected through document analysis and the use of in-depth semi-structured open ended interviews with superordinates, middle level managers and subordinates. Prior to generating the research questions, the researcher undertook an extensive literature review (Chapter 2) in the area of upward feedback and established a conceptual

framework. The lack of theory on middle manager's influence on upward feedback informed the development of the research questions.

3.7.1 Developing and Refining the Instrument - Pilot study

Prior to undertaking data collection the researcher conducted a pilot study to (a) determine how long each interview would last, and (b) trial whether the questions designed elicited sufficient responses to answer the research questions. In this stage, the researcher sought to identify in a comprehensive way the sorts of questions that needed to be asked to obtain responses to the research questions. The researcher designed questions that were to be used in a focus group setting for subordinates, and developed one-on-one interview questions for middle manager and superordinate interviews. The reason behind wanting to undertake a focus group interview with subordinates was to provide a forum that would stimulate a large amount of discussion. The pilot study enabled the researcher to refine, develop and validate previously designed questions that resulted from the literature and theory on upward feedback. As Fraenkel et al., (2012) suggested, undertaking a pilot study would enable the researcher to detect any problems which can then be rectified before undertaking the main study.

As volunteers were sought from amongst the researcher's friends and colleagues the researcher was not able to conduct the pilot with members of one organisation. The subordinate participants of the focus group interview consisted of three individuals who worked for an educational organisation and reported to the same middle manager. The middle manager interview questions were tested on one middle manager who worked in a regional area for a mining company. The researcher took this opportunity to conduct a Skype interview with the regional middle manager to ensure that Skype would suffice for remote participants in the main study. The superordinate interview questions were tested with a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an organisation that provides educational services.

All participants were asked to provide feedback on the content, length and clarity of the questions, as well as on the researcher's interview approach, so that these could be refined for the main study.

The first pilot interview was conducted with the CEO and was audio recorded. Following the interview and feedback from the CEO interview, the researcher transcribed all of the data. Being the first pilot, the interview highlighted the repetitive nature of the questions as well

as the areas in which the researcher needed to include further probes to elicit the information required to answer the research questions. The interview also highlighted the tendency of the researcher to move onto other questions without seeking clarification or depth of responses as well as the researcher's inclination to inappropriately lead the interviewee to certain answers by asking directional questions. Further, the pilot highlighted the researcher's proclivity to complete the interviewee's sentences and also how the researcher's non-verbal cues (such as a look of shock) influenced responses.

Based on direct feedback from the participant as well as on self-reflection (following the interview) the researcher revised the directional and repetitive questions. As the questions were similar to the middle manager questions (with the exception of a few), the researcher tested the revised questions on the middle manager in the second pilot interview to check both for clarity as well as the ability of the interview questions to elicit the answers required to respond to the research questions. Prior to undertaking the second interview, the researcher reflected on her interview style and being self-aware of her experience in the first pilot interview, the researcher this time did not complete any of the interviewee's sentences. Instead the researcher probed and sought clarification where it was required and, by bracketing all preconceptions regarding upward feedback, the researcher ensured that non-verbal cues did not influence the interview. Like the first interview, the second pilot interview was also audio recorded.

In a similar way to the first interview, the researcher transcribed the data and once again checked to see if the questions were producing responses required to answer the research questions. Satisfied that the interview questions were no longer repetitive and were relevant, the researcher then conducted a third pilot interview. This time the interview questions were used in a focus group situation. The interview with the focus group was different to the one-on-one in depth interviews. The researcher found that as she was interviewing three people at the same time, the direction that the interview took and the ordering of the questions changed due to participant responses. The researcher was concerned that she would not be able to cover all of the questions during the session due to the participants passionately sharing their experiences (which was the original intention of running the focus group). The researcher made it a point to regularly refer to a copy of the interview questions to ensure that she did not become side-tracked or forget the purpose of the interview. The researcher was then able to link in the interview questions on the back of relevant themes where appropriate or to bring participants back to previous comments so as to seek clarification and further information. The discussion flowed a lot

more like a conversation in the focus group situation with all participants enthusiastically wanting to add to what their co-participants had shared. As such the researcher did not take notes (but instead relied on the audio recording) so that she was fully engaged in the process and did not miss anything. As the participants consisted of two females and one male, all of different ethnicities and with different accents, it was easy to identify who the speaker was on the audio recording.

While the interview questions generated responses to answer the research questions, the researcher found that acquiring depth of responses was more difficult in a focus group situation due to the presence of multiple participants. The researcher found that where one participant spent some time sharing their experiences, other participants had to wait and listen in. By the time that participant was done and the second participant had contributed their experiences, the interview would often take a new direction when the researcher sought clarification or probed further. This then meant that the third participant would not have an opportunity to share their experiences on the matter previously discussed as the interview would have taken another direction based on issues raised. In light of this, the researcher decided that it would be most appropriate if the subordinate focus group interview questions were instead used as one-on-one in-depth interview questions in the main study so as to achieve depth of responses as well as to provide each participant adequate time to describe their experiences in the area of upward feedback. Subsequently, the researcher tested the subordinate research questions in a one-on-one informal interview with another volunteer. The interview was conducted over the phone and was audio recorded. The interview was not transcribed as the researcher had already previously determined that the questions were obtaining relevant responses. The main intention of the interview therefore, was to determine the length of a one-on-one subordinate interview in order to inform the state manager when requesting consent to undertake interviews with his employees.

Following the completion of all of the pilot interviews the researcher then undertook member-checking of all transcripts (with the exception of the last informal interview) by emailing each participant their verbatim transcript. All five participants acknowledged in writing that the transcripts were an accurate reflection of the interview and that no changes were required.

After receiving confirmation of accuracy the researcher then spent two weeks immersing herself in the data, once again to ensure that the questions were obtaining the required

responses. In reviewing the responses, the researcher noticed that the interview questions needed to include a specific focus for the provision of upward feedback which was based on the literature review and the purpose of the research. The interview questions were then once again refined this time concentrating the provision of upward feedback questions on decision making.

The pilot assisted in identifying a priori themes that were likely to occur during the interview process in the main study. While the researcher was aware of these a priori themes they were not imposed on and did not influence the analysis in the main study. The researcher was open to new themes arising in the main study. The information gathered from the pilot study was not included in the research findings or results.

3.7.2 Role of the Researcher

The researcher was the principal investigator in the study and the main instrument used for data collection. To avoid bias by either leading or directing the interview in anyway, it was necessary to engage in *epoche* prior to and during any interviews (Moustakas, 1994; Sanders, 1982). According to Husserl (2012) it is necessary for the researcher to 'bracket' their prior judgements, understanding or experiences so as to be able to obtain the purity of the experience. Prior to each interview, the researcher spent a considerable amount of time (between 20 to 30 minutes) being aware of her presuppositions and personal experiences of upward feedback. The researcher then took the time to mentally set these presuppositions and experiences aside so that they did not influence the interview. During the interview, the researcher continued to engage in *epoche* by listening, withholding all personal comments and non-verbal cues that could direct the study and by probing further (instead of making assumptions from prior experience) where clarification was required during the interview.

3.8 Data Collection

Creswell (2007) posited that qualitative researchers often collect multiple forms of data as opposed to relying on a single source of data. Sanders (1982) identified three forms of data collection in phenomenology consisting of in-depth semi-structured interviews, a documentary analysis and participant observation.

Data collection in this study was undertaken using interviews and document analysis as the researcher was (a) unable to physically observe the participants involved in the study due to them being situated in various locations, and (b) unable to observe the immediate impact of upward feedback on the decision making process. Data were collected using the refined interview questions that were previously piloted.

3.8.1 The Main Study

The main research was undertaken in two non-sequential empirical phases respectively aligned with the first three research questions which were presented in Section 3.1.

The fourth research question ‘how can the participation of middle-level management in upward feedback be enhanced?’ required the use of inductive data analysis to synthesise key findings from the previous phases.

3.8.1.1 Phase one, in-depth interviews: Response to research questions 1, 2 and 3.

The purpose behind interviewing people is to discover “what they think or how they feel about something” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p.451). Through qualitative interviewing it is possible for the researcher to understand experiences as well as re-enact experiences they had no part in (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Rubin and Rubin (2005) proposed that one of the best ways to get people to describe their experiences regarding something was to undertake an in-depth interview as it enabled the researcher to view the phenomena from a multitude of viewpoints. As the purpose of this study was to gain insight into the multiple perspectives of upward feedback, interviewing was an essential component of data collection.

The type of interviews selected for the study were in-depth, semi structured, open-ended oral history interviews (see Appendices 2 – 4b). Oral history interviews explore past events and can focus on ordinary people and their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Rubin and Rubin (2005) classified oral interviews as falling within the category of topical interviews. Topical interviews seek to explore what happens in specific circumstances. “The goal of topical interviews is to work out a coherent explanation by piecing together what different people have said, while recognising that each person might have his or her own construction of events. The researcher sorts, balances, and analyses what he or she heard, creating his or her own narrative” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 13).

To be able to gather a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of upward feedback and to enable a free flow of information, it was necessary for the researcher to ask the participants open ended questions (Creswell, 2008). Simultaneously however, it was also necessary for the interviewer to ask semi-structured questions so as to elicit specific answers related to the research questions (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Prior to requesting consent, the researcher met with the state manager to inform him of the purposes of the study and to ask if he had any questions. The researcher also provided the state manager with an organisation information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 5). The state manager was particularly interested in the study as it aligned with the organisation's staff engagement policy. He therefore, sought permission from the national office for the researcher to undertake the study. Once consent had been granted the state manager sent out an email to twenty one employees (based within in Western Australia) who met the criteria of having either provided or received upward feedback. In his email the state manager invited and encouraged his staff to participate in the study and provided them with a brief overview of the study, as well as a copy of the participant information sheet and consent form. Employees were asked to contact the researcher if they were interested in taking part in the study.

After the email had been sent out, three employees expressed immediate interest. As the researcher did not hear back from other staff members the researcher had to individually contact the remaining employees to see if they would be interested in participating in the study. This approach proved beneficial because of those contacted another seven employees chose to participate in the study thereby making up the recommended total of 10 participants as suggested by Creswell (1998). The researcher collected interview data over a five week period commencing on the 14th of November 2012 and concluding on the 20th of December 2012. The researcher used the relevant interview questions for each participant (see Appendices 2 – 4b).

Following similar procedures to those used in the pilot study, prior to in-depth interviews with each participant the researcher emailed each participant an interview confirmation letter, a participant information sheet and consent form. Participants were advised to contact the researcher if they had any questions, concerns or if anything was unclear. In addition to the interview confirmation letter, the researcher also sent each participant an Outlook calendar meeting request (which was set for one hour in case the interview went over time), so that participants would have the interview in their diary.

To make the process as convenient as possible for the participants, the researcher interviewed participants at a location of their choice which consisted of either their Metropolitan Office or the organisation's Head Office. The researcher chose to conduct no more than one interview per day so as to ensure that she was able to be fully engaged in the epoche process. Nine of the ten interviews were conducted face to face in meeting rooms at the organisation's offices, with one interview being conducted over the telephone due to the participant being located in a regional area.

As suggested by Fraelich (1989), prior to undertaking any interviews, the researcher read a prepared statement to each participant with the intention of inviting them to be co-researchers in the quest of the knowledge of upward feedback and also to encourage them to reflect on, discover and share their prior experiences in areas that related to the interview. The researcher also engaged in a process of epoche, prior to and during the interviews. This involved a process of "invalidating", "inhibiting", and "disqualifying" all previous assumptions and knowledge in the area of upward feedback (Schmitt, 1959, p. 239). Although challenging to achieve perfect epoche, the researcher sought to identify and be aware of her presuppositions and biases in the area of upward feedback. Being conscious to these biases and presuppositions, the researcher attempted to set them aside wherever they came up during the interview process. The researcher made it a point prior to each interview to meditate upon and eliminate her presumptions, so as to enter the interview process with a clear mind in a bid to hear what the participants said without colouring the participants' communications with her own assumptions. The researcher endeavoured to "perceive and know" the phenomenon of upward feedback "from its appearance and presence" as experienced by the participants (Moustakas, 1994, p.89).

The in-depth, one-on-one interviews allowed participants the opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions of the presence of upward feedback in their organisation. Each interview was different with some participants speaking longer than others and some being more able to describe their experience in greater depth than others. Overall, subordinate interviews lasted an average of forty minutes, middle manager interviews an average of an hour and superordinate interviews an average of forty-five minutes in length. Due to the duality of their role, middle manager interviews lasted the longest as they were asked more questions than subordinates and superordinates (see Appendix 3).

Although the researcher took the interview questions into each interview, the researcher also tried to memorise all of the interview questions to ensure that the interviews flowed

more like a conversation. The disadvantage with this method was that the researcher would not always use the exact wording of the interview questions, and at times if a word was omitted or the order changed, it would alter the question slightly.

Three recording techniques were used: note taking during the interview; audio recording the interview; and making field notes after the session. Prior to beginning each interview the researcher asked the participant for permission to audio-record the interview and collected the signed consent form. In the first part, the researcher welcomed the participant, invited the participant to be a co-researcher in the topic being researched, covered the purpose, context and asked the participant if they had any questions prior to beginning the interview. In the middle part, the researcher asked the participant the semi-structured, open ended interview questions (see Appendices 2 – 4b). In the final part the researcher thanked the participant and advised them they would receive a verbatim transcript so that they could verify that their experiences and perceptions had been adequately and accurately captured.

Following each interview the researcher typed out field notes that related to how the researcher felt prior to or during the interview, how the participant responded to the questions, the room in which the interview was held and any other notes about the interview that the researcher believed would assist with the data analysis. Thereafter, the researcher then transcribed each interview verbatim from the audio recordings. After transcribing each interview, the researcher listened to the interview again while reviewing the transcript to ensure that the transcript did not contain any errors. Once the researcher was satisfied that the transcript was an accurate reflection of the audio recording, the researcher emailed each participant a letter (see Appendix 7) that thanked them for sharing their unique insights and experiences. The letter asked participants to review the transcript to ensure that it had captured what they had intended to say. The letter gave the participant a date by which to respond back to the researcher with any changes or additions. The letter also advised participants that if the researcher had not heard back from the participant by the nominated date, that the researcher would assume that the transcript was a true and accurate reflection of the interview.

Eight of the participants wrote back and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts. Even though the researcher followed up the remaining two participants, they did not respond, although one of them responded to some follow up questions regarding the interview.

3.8.1.2 Phase two: Document review and analysis.

As a focus of the research was on examining formal vertical communication in the form of upward feedback, document analysis was an essential component of gaining insight into the process of upward feedback in the organisation. Used in conjunction with the information gathered from the in-depth interview, the documentary analysis provided a means of verifying and expanding upon the information gathered in the interview process (Sanders, 1982). Further, the document analysis served as a substitute to participant observation as the researcher was unable to observe the participants in the area of upward feedback. During document analysis a variety of documents were reviewed including the organisation's chart.

Barnacle (2001) posited that one of the challenges of phenomenology was that the research method was not limited to interviewing participants, but that instead could also comprise of the analysis of written text or other phenomena that contributed to gaining an understanding of the subject under inquiry. As Van Manen (1990, p. 79) proposed "making something of a text or of lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery, or disclosure—grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning". According to Barnacle (2001, p. viii) it is necessary for the researcher to "open up and be receptive toward the voice of the text" as "the text remains dynamic and living, such that with each interpretation new insights and understandings are gleaned about the world of the phenomenon under inquiry".

As the purpose of undertaking a document analysis of the organisation's communication documents was to validate information provided in the interviews the researcher looked out for the elements displayed in table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1. Evidence of upward feedback during document analysis

| |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How does communication flow in the organisation? (with consideration being given to the organisation's structure)2. How do superordinates and middle level managers encourage the upward feedback process?3. How do subordinates provide upward feedback? |
|--|

Document analysis consisted of an examination of nine documents (provided by the senior manager) which consisted of agendas, an email attachment, the organisational chart, notes

from meetings, and power point slides of meetings. The researcher examined each document in terms of its relevancy and usefulness in answering the research questions (Creswell, 2008). Each document was considered in terms of the questions listed in Table 3.1 and was also used to triangulate data from the interviews. Information relating to the analysis can be found in Appendix 10.

3.9 Validity and Reliability

In order to verify whether or not their research is valid qualitative researchers “need to look to themselves, the participants, and to the readers” (Creswell, 2007, p. 201). Numerous perceptions exist regarding the significance of validation in qualitative research with different authors using diverse terms comparable to traditional quantitative approaches to validation (Creswell, 2007). Authors such as LeCompte and Goetz (1982) used the terms internal validity, external validity, reliability and credibility while others such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) have used more interpretivist terms like credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. According to Stake (1995) and Thomas (1993), qualitative researchers undertake validity tests during or after they have completed their research to verify that they ‘got it right’ and have published an accurate account of the participants views.

While there are numerous ways in which to check the accuracy of the data collected, the researcher viewed triangulation, member checking, rich thick description and addressing researcher bias as being the most relevant to this study to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that triangulation was required to establish credibility. While they are four different types of triangulation the two that were considered pertinent to this study were triangulation of sources and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell (2007) suggested that by triangulating information, researchers are able to verify a theme or perspective by substantiating evidence from different sources. As the researcher undertook in-depth interviews with subordinates, middle level managers and superordinates using questions which were similar in nature, it provided a means for a more thorough and systematic comparison. Further, the use of document analysis to collect data offered an additional method to compare interview responses with written formalised processes and therefore triangulate the data.

Member checking was also necessary as “in member checking, the researcher solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that member checking was one of the most important ways in which to establish credibility. It was therefore necessary for the researcher to not only take the transcribed data to the participants, but was also for the researcher to ask participants to look over any preliminary analysis, interpretations and conclusions the researcher had made so that they could verify the correctness and trustworthiness of the data (Stake, 1995). Member checking according to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314) provides a means for participants to correct any misconceptions, volunteer more information, verify that they intended to provide certain information, assess the “overall adequacy in addition to confirming individual data points”. It also puts the participant “on record as having said certain things and having agreed to the correctness of the investigator’s recording of them thereby making it more difficult later for the respondent to claim misunderstanding or investigator error” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

As the researcher had advised all participants in the information sheet and at the interview stage that they would be given an opportunity to look over the data to verify its accurateness, this form of validation was seen as being relevant to the study. The researcher emailed participants complete verbatim transcripts following the interview and asked them to email back any corrections or additional information they wanted added to the study. Using a similar process, the researcher also emailed all participants a synthesis of their textural-structural description of upward feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 316) proposed that it is “*not* the naturalist’s task to provide an *index* of transferability; it *is* his or her responsibility to provide the *data base* that makes transferability judgements possible on the part of potential appliers”. Consequently, by using thick description, the researcher described the study in depth, including the participants and the setting under which the study was undertaken so as to enable readers to make a decision as to whether or not the findings could be transferred to similar settings based on common characteristics (Creswell, 2007). As the researcher detailed every element of the research using thick description, this validation strategy was seen as being appropriate for the study.

Finally, the researcher outlined her past experiences (in Appendix 9) in the area of upward feedback so that those reading the research were able to make a decision on whether or

not the researcher perspectives and biases could potentially impact upon the research (Creswell, 2007).

The dependability (reliability) of the study was achieved in two main ways. First, the researcher ensured that all of the interviews were audio recorded. This enabled the researcher to acquire detailed information from the interviews which were transcribed verbatim during the transcription stage. To ensure dependability and to accurately capture the tone of the interviews, overlaps were also transcribed. Second, to understand the context of the interview, the researcher recorded field notes after each interview. Bogdan and Bilken (1992) suggested that researchers use field notes to supplement interviews. According to Bogdan and Bilken (1992, p. 107), field notes are “a written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study”. Field notes capture more fully the context of the interview and can be used in addition to other data collection methods (Bodgan & Bilken, 1992). Based on these recommendations, the researcher kept field notes which included detailed observations of the interview process with particular self-reflection on the researcher’s interview approach, reactions and responses to the participants. Further, the field notes detailed the room in which the interview was held, and the level of comfort as displayed by participants’ body language and any interruptions during the interview process.

To establish confirmability of the study the researcher stored all raw data including interview field notes and audio recordings electronically. Copies of paper based consent forms and transcripts from both the pilot and the main study were also stored for auditing purposes. The researcher also stored information pertaining to data reduction and analysis, data reconstruction and synthesis, document analysis and process notes as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

3.10 Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) contended that phenomenology was more concerned with narrating the experiences of participants rather than with explanations or analyses. According to Moustakas (1994), it is therefore necessary for researchers to provide descriptions that preserve the unique content of the experience as relayed by the participant. The analysis of the data therefore consisted of three main steps (a) phenomenological reduction to

achieve a textural description (b) imaginative variation to arrive at a structural description and (c) a synthesis of meanings and essences so as to gain textural and structural descriptions of the influence that middle management have on the upward feedback process.

Textural descriptions seek to answer questions such as “what is the nature of the phenomenon? What are its qualities? What appears at different times and under varying conditions?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78). Textural descriptions therefore seek to describe the ‘what’ of experience. In textural descriptions no experience is neglected, every perception is granted equal worth and included. Phenomenological reduction therefore enables researchers to construct a comprehensive textural description of the experience as described by the participant (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994, p. 96) *“in the process of explicating the phenomenon, qualities are recognised and described; every perception is granted equal value, non-repetitive constituents of the experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived”*.

The steps involved in undertaking phenomenological reduction therefore consisted of (Moustakas, 1994):

- (a) Bracketing the entirety of the research with the exception of the research topic and the research questions
- (b) Horizontalizing: by initially giving each statement equal worth and thereafter deleting repetitive or overlapping statements, “leaving only the horizons” (p. 97)
- (c) Grouping horizons into themes
- (d) “Organising the horizons and themes into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

Moustakas (1994) suggested that following phenomenological reduction the next step to obtain a structural description of the phenomenon was to undertake imaginative variation. Structural description seeks to address the question of ‘how’ the phenomenon was experienced by focussing on “the feelings, sense experiences, and thoughts, the structures that underlie textures and are intimately bound within them” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78). Moustakas (1994, p. 97) proposed that through imaginative variation, the researcher “seeks possible meaning through the utilization of imagination, varying frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions and functions” to arrive at a structural description that accounts for “what is being experienced”.

The steps of undertaking an imaginative variation included (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99):

- (a) Methodically applying various meanings to determine the structures that underlie textural meanings
- (b) Explaining the occurrence of the phenomenon through the identification of themes or contexts
- (c) “Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others;”
- (d) Using examples to demonstrate “the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon”

By employing Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colazzi-Keen method, the researcher undertook data analysis as described below.

First, using a phenomenological approach the researcher obtained a full description of her own experience relating to the influence that middle management have on the upward feedback process (see synthesis in Appendix 9). Creswell (2007) suggested that this was a necessary step so as to enable the researcher to focus on the participants in the study instead of the researcher’s prior experiences.

Once the data was transcribed, data was managed by organising data into individual participant folders. The transcripts were then printed off, read, and re-read several times for understanding. Each transcript was read at least a minimum of five times. Before analysis, coding or classification began the researcher immersed herself in the details “trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (Agar, 1980, p.103 cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 150). As the researcher read, she wrote notes in the margin of the transcripts and notes where major themes were identified.

Following this the researcher imported all ten transcripts into NVivo10 and developed nodes for each participant. Using Husserl’s (2012) recommendation the researcher treated each statement as having equal worth, and developed a list of significant non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements for each participant. Gurwitsch (1966, p. 122) observed that “throughout the perceptual process, the thing in question appears under a multiplicity of varying aspects which are not only compatible but also fit into one another”. Gurwitsch (1966) proposed therefore that it was not possible to exhaust perceptions of things experienced and that instead each perception added insight into an experience. Using

Husserl's horizontalization of perceptions therefore Moustakas (1994, p. 53) suggested that in doing data analysis it was necessary for the researcher to consider every perception, as it augmented the understanding of the experience.

Prior to grouping the statements into themes the researcher coded the data using open coding, axial coding and selective coding. According to Neuman (2003, p. 441), qualitative researchers organise "raw data into conceptual categories and create themes or concepts" which are used to analyse data. Coding is seen as central part of the analysis process. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 56) defined codes as "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to 'chunks' of varying size – words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting".

Strauss (1987) identified three kinds of data coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding is undertaken when data is first collected. The researcher looks for common themes and assigns initial codes in an attempt to reduce the volume of data into categories. Following this, the researcher creates a primary label and "highlights it with brightly coloured ink or in some similar way on the transcripts". Researchers usually develop lists of themes after open coding (Neuman, 2003, p. 442).

The second form of coding known as axial coding occurs when the researcher goes through the data a second time. In this form of coding, the researcher focuses more on the themes first identified rather than on the data. During this stage, further codes or ideas may emerge and the researcher looks out for "causes and consequences, conditions and interactions, strategies and processes and looks for categories or concepts that cluster together" (Neuman, 2003, p. 444). Axial coding assists the researcher in making linkages between concepts or themes, raises new questions and can also suggest which themes require more in-depth analysis or dropping. Further, axial coding assists with the reliability of the data if evidence of core themes appears in many places.

In the last form of coding known as selective coding, the researcher looks through the data for the last time after identifying the major themes of the research. In this stage, the researcher scans the data and previous codes and begins to organise analysis around key ideas. The researcher then "reorganises specific themes identified in earlier coding and elaborates more than one major theme" (Neuman, 2003, p. 444).

After the coding of each participant's statements was completed, the researcher created a coding list and repeated the entire process again, this time using with a freshly printed set of significant non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements for each participant. The researcher did this to ensure that the same codes had been applied to similar chunks of information across the transcripts.

With the research questions in mind, the researcher then classified codes into themes. The researcher looked for the individual experiences of the participant and the context of their experiences when classifying the data.

The researcher then wrote up textural descriptions of what each participant had experienced as well as structural descriptions that focussed on participants' feelings, experiences and thoughts (Moustakas, 1994). Thereafter the researcher wrote up a synthesis of each individual participant's experience using their textural and structural descriptions (see Appendix 9). The textural-structural descriptions were then reviewed at least three times to ensure that every element of each participant's experience had been captured.

Following this the researcher emailed each participant a summary of their experience for verification using the letter presented in Appendix 8. The summary included the researcher's interpretations and conclusions. Eight of the ten participants responded to the summaries and confirmed the accuracy of their descriptions. Two of the eight participants added clarifying statements and one of the participants changed two words in their description.

Subsequently the researcher answered each research question by discussing the common and non-common themes across participants' descriptions. Thereafter, the researcher integrated all subordinate and middle manager textural-structural descriptions to arrive at the essence of the experience of providing upward feedback. This description included participant's views on how middle managers influence the upward feedback process. In a similar way to the latter description the researcher also combined all middle manager and superordinate descriptions to arrive at a composite description of the experience of receiving upward feedback.

Lastly, the researcher then undertook a document analysis by considering nine of the organisation's documents in terms of the questions listed in Table 3.1 (in Section 3.8.1.2) as

well as in light of the interviews held. The information relating to the document analysis can be found in Appendix 10.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

“It is the fundamental responsibility of every researcher to do all in his or her power to ensure that participants in a research study are protected from physical or psychological harm, discomfort, or danger that may arise due to research procedures” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 63). To accomplish this, the researcher developed a four page participant information sheet which provided participants with an overview of the nature and purpose of the study, why they had been invited to participate in the study, the potential risks involved, how the data was to be collected, stored and used. The participant information sheet also assured participants that all of the information that they provided would remain confidential and that where the information they provided was used, a participant identification number would be used in lieu of their name so that they could not be identified. Further, the participant information sheet and the consent form also outlined participants’ right to voluntarily participate and withdraw from the study at any point in time without any disadvantage to them (see Appendix 6).

Prior to their interview, each participant was again given a brief overview of the study and given another opportunity to ask any questions they might have. Before commencing the interview, participants were asked for permission to audio record the interview. The researcher made sure that she was sensitive to participants’ responses and predetermined that where she detected any discomfort or reluctance on the part of the participant to answer a question she would not pursue the question further. As there was very minimal risk in terms of physical or psychological harm, there were no instances where the interviews were terminated or participants refused to answer any questions.

To ensure that all participants were protected, participants were also given an opportunity to review, edit and examine their verbatim transcripts and their textural-structural synthesis before the publication of the thesis.

All original data collected from interviews was retained by the School of Education. The researcher stored copies of all collected data (including USBs) in a secure locked cabinet in the researcher’s work office. All electronic data was saved on a computer which was

password protected and only accessible by the researcher. All information will be stored for a period of five years after which it will be destroyed.

3.12 Summary

This chapter has reviewed an assortment of literature relating to qualitative research with a particular focus being paid to phenomenology. The chapter comprised of eleven main sections relating to the statement of the problem, research approaches, research method, research design, site selection, sampling, instrumentation and the role of the researcher, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations.

The chapter highlighted the reason for undertaking an empirical phenomenological design. Data collection in the study comprised of interviews and document analysis. The validity of the study was achieved by member checking, triangulation, thick rich description and addressing researcher bias. The dependability of the study was attained by audio recording all interviews, by keeping field notes and by retaining all original documentation pertaining to data and data analysis.

Data analysis consisted of horizontalization, reduction of data into themes and the development of textural and structural descriptions which resulted in a comprehensive description of the essence of how middle managers influence upward feedback in a service organisation.

The final section of the chapter discussed the ethical precautions that the researcher took during the study.

The next chapter of this thesis presents the research findings from the interviews and document analysis in light of the research questions.

CHAPTER 4

THE RESULTS

Overview

This chapter presents the findings from the interview data. The chapter is organised into six sections. The chapter begins by discussing the demographics of the participants and provides a summary of the data analysis procedures utilised. Thereafter the chapter presents the findings of the data by answering each of the four research questions. Subsequently the chapter discusses the findings of the document analysis. The chapter concludes by providing a composite description of the experience of providing upward feedback and a composite description of the experience of receiving upward feedback.

4.1 Demographics of Participants

As discussed in Sections 3.5 and 3.8 data were collected from five subordinates, three middle managers and two superordinates. The demographics of the participants are presented below.

4.1.1 Gender

Of the 10 participants who took part in the study, 30% were males ($n = 3$) and 70% were females ($n = 7$). See Figure 4.1 below.

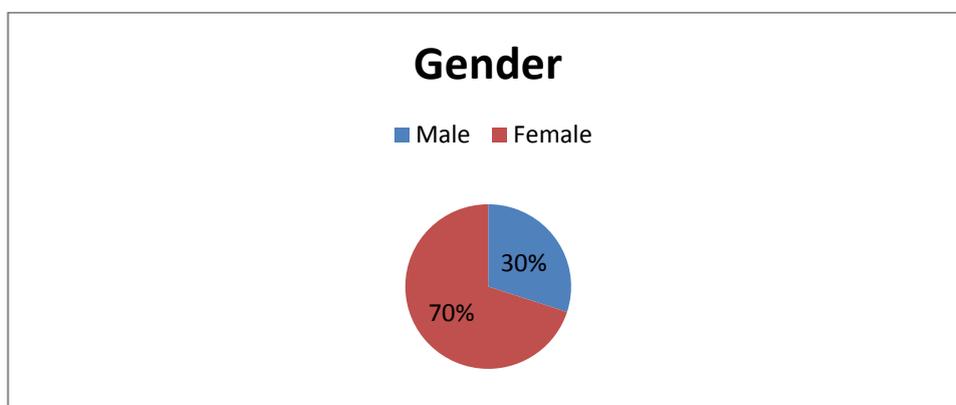


Figure 4.1. Gender of participants

4.1.2 Age

Participants' ages ranged from 26 – 62 years of age with eighty per cent of the participants being over 40 years of age. Figure 4.2 below shows the breakdown of participants ages by age range.

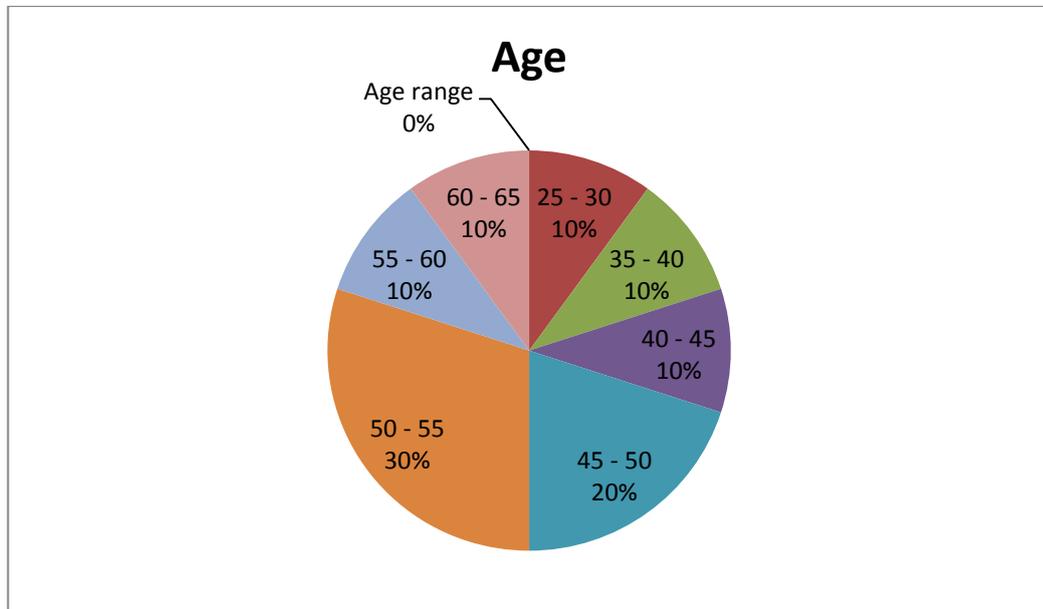


Figure 4.2. Age of participants

4.1.3 Length of Service with Organisation

The majority of the participants (80%) in the study had worked with the organisation for over one year. Participants' length of service which ranged from 6 months to 7 years is displayed in Figure 4.3 below.

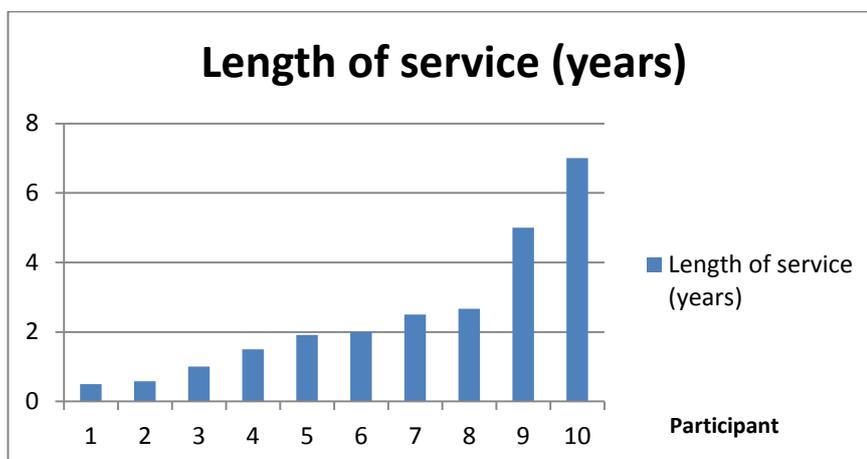


Figure 4.3 Length of service of participants

4.2 Data Analysis Procedures

As discussed in Section 3.10, data analysis consisted of three main steps relating to (a) phenomenological reduction to achieve a textural description (b) imaginative variation to arrive at a structural description, and (c) a synthesis of meanings and essences so as to gain textural and structural descriptions of the influence that middle management have on the upward feedback process.

4.3 Findings

This section of the chapter presents findings from the interview data and document analysis. The findings related to participant responses to questions about (a) their personal experiences of providing and/or receiving upward feedback, (b) their perceptions of the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation, and (c) their perceptions about how middle level management participate in the upward feedback process.

Although these findings are presented herein, the researcher heeded Moustakas' (1994, p.100) warning that the essences of experience could not be entirely exhausted and that the synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions reflected "the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon".

To avoid participant's being identified, the researcher ensured that each synthesis was purposefully indistinguishable, so as to protect participants' anonymity. Further, where there was a potential for a participant to be identified either by their quotation, or their job title, the researcher did not include the participant's number beside the quote but instead replaced the participant's number with the letter "X". Where two or more participants were being quoted consecutively, this was clearly demarcated and participant numbers were replaced with a "Y" and a "Z" respectively. The pseudonyms participant X, Y and Z did not therefore refer to any one participant and were used where required.

A summary of each participant's textural-structural description can be found in Appendix 9. Although the researcher's textural-structural description has also been included in Appendix 9 (as discussed in Sections 3.9 and 3.10) the researcher's experience was not

included in the discussion of the common themes and non-common themes but was instead only included in the composite description of the experience of providing upward feedback as suggested by Moustakas (1994).

4.3.1 Research Question 1

Findings pertaining to the first research question “what are subordinates’ personal experiences of providing upward feedback, and how do they perceive the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation?” revealed three common themes which related to (a) deterrents to upward feedback (b) enablers of upward feedback and (c) the feedback environment. These themes, their sub-themes and their defining characteristics are presented in Table 4.1.

4.3.1.1 Common themes.

Table 4.1. Common themes of subordinates’ personal experiences of providing upward feedback and their perceptions of the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|---|--|
| <p>Deterrents to upward feedback</p> <p><i>Physical distance</i></p> <p><i>Discrepancy in feedback response</i></p> <p><i>Mode of feedback</i></p> | <p>Referred to a lack of visibility, accessibility and availability of managers who were located in different offices to subordinates</p> <p>Referred to manager initiated feedback achieving more outcomes than subordinate initiated feedback. Also referred to manager initiated feedback being perceived as more valuable than subordinate initiated feedback.</p> <p>Referred to the perceived inappropriateness of mediums and structures for eliciting feedback</p> |

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|---|--|
| <p>Deterrents to upward feedback continued</p> <p><i>Not being heard</i></p> | <p>Referred to subordinates perceiving that their managers did not listen to, or consider subordinate input due to differences in opinions. Also referred to the inability of managers to close the feedback loop.</p> |
| <p>Enablers of upward feedback</p> <p><i>Ability to speak openly</i></p> <p><i>Equal amounts of manager initiated feedback and subordinate initiated feedback</i></p> <p><i>Duty to provide feedback</i></p> | <p>Referred to subordinates ability to speak openly when providing feedback with no perceived negative consequences</p> <p>Referred to subordinates' ability to provide feedback that managers initiated or that the subordinate themselves initiated</p> <p>Referred to subordinates choosing to continue to provide feedback irrespective of their experience in upward feedback</p> |
| <p>Feedback environment</p> <p><i>Top down flow of information for operational tasks</i></p> <p><i>Top down flow of information for strategic planning</i></p> <p><i>Presence</i></p> | <p>Referred to where information relating to operational tasks originated from within the organisation</p> <p>Referred to where information relating to strategic planning originated from within the organisation</p> <p>Referred to the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes</p> |

Theme 1: Deterrents to upward feedback

The first theme, deterrents to upward feedback, described factors that impeded the upward feedback process. In their experience of providing upward feedback, the majority of participants (a minimum of three out five subordinates) cited the sub themes listed in Table 4.1 as hindrances to upward feedback.

Several participants articulated that physical distance impacted upon the provision of upward feedback. As a number of the middle managers and both superordinates were located in different offices to their subordinates few opportunities existed for the provision of informal upward feedback outside of meetings exemplified by the following:

“Well not being here...we’ve got a situation; we’ve got one manager over three four locations and so because our manager is not physically present in our office very often and normally when she is she’s got a particular thing that she wants to ... doesn’t give that space for informal you know, opportunities to give upward feedback” (Participant 4)

Due to the national nature of the organisation, physical distance between States also had implications for the provision of upward feedback as noted by another participant who commented:

“Like WA [referring to Western Australia], I feel like we’re on our own and we always will be. Like when we have teleconferences and stuff with national they are still putting them at 9 o’clock in the morning Eastern Standard Time and of course that is 6am for us even though we say can you please do it a bit later so we’re included” (Participant 2)

A further complication of physical distance was that participants perceived their managers as not being available, accessible or visible which consequently had implications for upward feedback. As participant 10 stated:

“I would be careful about the feedback that I provided to top managers both because of limited access except by email or phone ... we don’t see them often”

The second deterrent to upward feedback related to the perception that managers treated manager initiated feedback differently to subordinate initiated feedback. Participants’ perceived manager initiated feedback as being more important, more valuable and as

achieving more 'outcomes'. These participants also believed that subordinate initiated feedback was often ignored or deferred by managers. Some participants attributed this to the fact that if managers were initiating the feedback, then the information they were requesting was important to their decision making process. Where participants initiated feedback they perceived managers did not consider the feedback as valuable:

*"Sometimes I feel trying to give feedback if it's not asked for is dismissed"
(Participant 8)*

"If there's something they think is important to their way of thinking then of course it's important but I think if it's something they don't think is relevant they're not so keen to pass it on because they think it's just not important"(Participant 8)

"Well that's seen... the manifestation of the suggestions going into place, you can't really tell whether it's being considered and thought to be valuable or disregarded so I think it will probably take a bit longer to see whether the stuff that staff is providing is making a difference with the way that we do things"(Participant 4)

The third deterrent to upward feedback consisted of the manner in which the participants were asked to provide feedback. The appropriateness of the approach impacted upon the level to which participant's provided feedback. For example, participants were asked to provide upward feedback relating to a job description change in a group situation:

"It would have been better to have a longer amount of time to consider it before discussing it and perhaps structured the discussions a little bit differently just getting everybody around, 10 people around the table wasn't probably the best way to do it" (Participant 1)

Participants were also asked how the organisation could better engage them through the use of a survey:

*"I didn't feel though that there was much opportunity still to have my say; you had to answer the questions there wasn't a chance to say 'but this is what I'm thinking'"
(Participant 8)*

The final deterrent to upward feedback in the participant's experience of providing upward feedback pertained participants feeling heard:

“Our challenge ... is how to be able to get your voice and your input heard in a way that it’s going to be considered” (Participant 4)

“Feeling confident that what you say will at least be heard it might not be acted on if it’s not possible but it will be heard” (Participant 10)

“Seeing that my feedback is not just valued but that things happen as a result of it so that ... it’s been taken on by my line manager and other managers in the organisation” (Participant 1)

Participants also described instances in which they felt unheard which mostly consisted of managers not closing the feedback loop:

“Sometimes I have to ask [middle manager], oh so what happened with that thing we were talking about? She went ‘oh ya they said no’ and that’s like a month later and you’re like ‘oh thanks for telling me’” (Participant 2)

“Something did happen ...I just didn’t hear about the process of what happened or why” (Participant 4)

Theme 2: Enablers to upward feedback

In this theme, there were three factors that impacted upon the participant’s experience of providing upward feedback. The first facilitator to upward feedback was that most of the participants cited feeling comfortable to speak openly when providing feedback:

“Yeah I do I think because I’ve been here a while and I have the right. I think everyone has a right to say what they want to say ... and like yeah your boss isn’t going to come up and to you and say like I don’t think you should have said that cause I’m not being disrespectful, I’m just being honest you know what I mean, I’m having a go at a program I’m not having a go at a person ... I mean its impersonal feedback, its constructive criticism” (Participant 2)

Second, participants also noted an equal amount of manager initiated feedback and subordinate initiated feedback thereby allowing them more opportunities to provide upward feedback.

The final catalyst for the provision of upward feedback related to subordinates feeling duty bound to provide feedback irrespective of their experience. The reasons for this obligation

to provide feedback however differed between subordinates with some choosing to continue to respond to manager initiated feedback as well as to initiate feedback themselves, whilst others only chose to respond to manager initiated feedback or to provide feedback at a State level:

“I would provide future upward feedback in whatever way I felt it would be useful to the organisation or perhaps what the organisation needed to hear” (Participant 10)

“I guess if it’s something that’s simple and we can manage locally ... but there’s no point in tackling the program logistics ...cause we have no control over it ... it’s not up to us it’s not even up to middle management it’s up to the big guys so I guess in that area, I tend to not bother with giving feedback there” (Participant 2)

“If it’s upward feedback that’s been specifically requested I’m keen to do that as quickly and thoroughly as possible” (Participant 4)

Theme 3: Feedback environment

The last theme pertained to the feedback environment in the organisation which consisted of the direction in which information flowed and the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes. The majority of participants believed that information relating to operational tasks and strategic planning originated from the top of the organisation’s hierarchy. While this information flowed top down, participants were provided opportunities to either contribute to and/or participate in decision making. The general view of all five participants therefore was that upward feedback for decision making existed in the organisation. The participants perceived the presence of upward feedback in State meetings, through online surveys, teleconferences and one on one meetings where managers initiated feedback or the subordinates themselves initiated feedback:

“We’ve had more opportunities to provide feedback and I have seen some changes take place because of that” (Participant 8)

“I would say that we are certainly free to give it” (Participant 10)

“At least there was an opportunity for staff to make a contribution rather than it just coming down that this is what will happen” (Participant 4)

The topics that participants contributed towards decision making are listed in Table 4.2 below. The letter X denotes how many subordinates contributed to the same topic.

Table 4.2. Information that subordinates contributed towards decision making

| Information type | Manager | Subordinate |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | initiated feedback | initiated feedback |
| Organisation's IT system | XX | X |
| Program reviews | XXX | X |
| Job description changes | XXXX | X |
| Feedback on events | XX | |
| Logistical issues of a program | | X |
| How to improve the perception of the organisation | | X |
| Formation of a new program | | X |
| Linking students to scholarships | | X |
| Creating volunteer positions | | XX |
| Work coming from different parts of the organisation | | X |
| How to engage staff in the workplace | XX | |
| Annual Key performance indicators | X | |
| Operational issues | X | |
| Scholarship processes | | XXX |
| Pilot program | | X |

4.3.1.2 Non-common themes in subordinates' experience of providing upward feedback.

Further analysis of the subordinate textural-structural descriptions exposed five non-common themes that were fairly significant to the continued provision of upward feedback in the organisation under research. These themes related to (a) a voice ceiling, (b) an increased workload as a result of providing upward feedback, (c) the time allocated to the provision of upward feedback, (d) misappropriation of feedback, and (d) psychological fear. These themes, their sub-themes and their defining characteristics are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. Non-common subordinate themes in the experience of providing upward feedback

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|--|--|
| Voice ceiling | Referred to the level (State or National) to which subordinate feedback had any impact/influence |
| Increased workload as a result of upward feedback | Referred to the contributor of information being given the responsibility to research, follow up or implement their feedback |
| Time allocated to providing feedback | Referred to the time allocated for the provision of upward feedback |
| Misappropriation of subordinate feedback | Referred to the middle manager presenting subordinate feedback as their own |
| Psychological danger | Referred to the withholding of rewards as a result of the provision of upward feedback |

Theme 1: Voice ceiling

One subordinate raised the issue of feeling heard at a State level, but not being able to influence decisions at a National level of the organisation. Even though the participant was given the opportunity to provide feedback at the State level, due to the national nature of the organisation, the participant did not believe that the feedback that she provided would have any impact nationally and therefore she determined that it was best to only provide feedback that could be handled at a State level. As the participant stated:

“I guess it goes up but it only hits a certain level and then it kind of plateaus. So I think like our [middle managers] and State Managers are hearing us but nationally they’re not ... I think that it’s like yeah we sort of manage it ourselves in WA, it doesn’t go as high as it could nationally” (Participant X)

Theme 2: Increased workload as a result of upward feedback

The second non-common theme highlighted the consequences of providing feedback for one participant. The participant perceived negative consequences to providing feedback as

it resulted in an increased workload for the participant. This caused the participant an internal dilemma about whether or not to suggest better ways of doing things or whether to keep her workload to a manageable level by not making these suggestions. As the participant shared:

“it’s hard because you do want to fight for the best for your [clients] and for the good of the program, and also as a [subordinate role] like you want to try and keep your workload to a ... manageable level ... another thing I’ve noticed that providing upward feedback does is that they tend to delegate the role like if you say ah ‘this would be a really great idea’, they will say to you ‘oh why don’t you take charge of that’ and give you more work to do but that’s not really what you want out of providing feedback and I think that also kind of just makes us go well I’m not going to say anything because it will probably mean more work for me” (Participant X)

Theme 3: Time allocated to the provision of upward feedback

Another non-common theme related to the time allocated to the provision of upward feedback. In this theme, even though the participant was offered the opportunity to provide feedback, the time allocated to provision of upward feedback soured the gesture thereby causing the participant to question the authenticity of the request:

“... it was a fairly rushed thing which only was given more time because people protested so given a bit of understanding of that people feel quite a strong commitment to their job role maybe putting it at a different time of the State meeting, maybe morning, might have been a wiser decision as a way of actually eliciting feedback and giving people confidence that your views are genuinely wanted” (Participant X)

Theme 4: Misappropriation of subordinate feedback

While three of the subordinates believed that their middle manager passed their feedback up accurately to senior managers one of these subordinates believed that their middle manager misappropriated her feedback and presented it as their own on at least a couple of occasions, as the participant stated:

“...I don’t see that that happens very often and I feel ... that when that does happen that it’s not fed back as coming from ... if it’s a positive thing it doesn’t come from the staff it comes from the individual, from the [middle manager] ... it’s presented as being their idea rather than my idea. So sometimes I feel like you have to have that little push to say ‘oh that was my idea’” (Participant X).

Theme 5: Psychological danger

In this final theme one of the participants perceived a psychological danger because of the provision of upward feedback. As the participant stated:

“She felt that perhaps I was trying to usurp some of her role ... so I know that I have to be really careful about avoiding that kind of perception or even that reality that ... cause I know it will come back and bite me at some time” (Participant X)

4.3.1.3 Summary of subordinates’ common experiences of providing upward feedback.

While all subordinates perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation their experience of providing upward feedback was mostly unsatisfactory.

Although subordinates were given opportunities to provide upward feedback they perceived a number of deterrents which impacted negatively upon their experience and the provision of upward feedback. One of these deterrents related to managers being located in different offices to their subordinates which meant that not only were subordinates unable to build relationships with their manager but, they also had fewer opportunities than those subordinates who were located in the same office as their middle manager to provide impromptu feedback. The perception that manager initiated feedback occasioned more outcomes than subordinate initiated feedback further exacerbated this negative experience and caused subordinates to question whether their feedback was valued. This uncertainty resulted in some subordinates deciding to only respond to manager initiated feedback in the future. Intensifying subordinates’ disappointing experience further was the manner in which management asked them to provide feedback. Subordinates considered some of the approaches that management used to solicit feedback as being inappropriate and saw these approaches as either negating the request for the feedback or limiting the amount of feedback that subordinates could provide. A combination of the

above and management's inability to close the feedback loop ultimately resulted in the discouraging experience of subordinates feeling unheard.

Whereas their experience of providing feedback was mostly disappointing, subordinates also acknowledged some enablers to upward feedback such as the confidence to speak openly when providing feedback. Subordinates also perceived equal amounts of manager initiated feedback and subordinate feedback which gave them twice as many opportunities to provide upward feedback. The final facilitator of upward feedback related to subordinates feeling duty bound to provide upward feedback irrespective of their experience; the manner in which this was done however differed between subordinates.

4.3.2 Research Question 2

This section presented the findings of superordinate and middle managers experiences of receiving upward feedback. Middle manager's common experiences of providing upward feedback are discussed under research question 3 as the only common experiences they shared related to how middle managers participate in the upward feedback process.

The second research question "what are superordinates' and middle managers' personal experiences of upward feedback, and how do they perceive the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation?" revealed six common themes which related to (a) characteristics of the subordinates (b) significance of subordinate feedback (c) trustworthiness of subordinate feedback (d) importance of subordinates feeling heard (e) continued request for feedback, and (f) the feedback environment. These themes, their sub-themes and their defining characteristics are presented in Table 4.4 overleaf.

4.3.2.1 Common themes.

Table 4.4. Common themes of superordinate and middle manager’s personal experiences of upward feedback and of their perception of the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|--|--|
| <p>Characteristics of subordinates</p> <p><i>Most likely to initiate feedback</i></p> <p><i>Least likely to initiate feedback</i></p> | <p>Referred to the characteristics of those subordinates who were most likely to initiate upward feedback</p> <p>Referred to the characteristics of those subordinates who were least likely to initiate upward feedback</p> |
| <p>Significance of subordinate feedback</p> <p><i>Value of subordinate input</i></p> | <p>Referred to whether or not superordinates and middle managers valued the input of subordinates into the decision making process</p> |
| <p>Trustworthiness of subordinate feedback</p> <p><i>Open feedback</i></p> <p><i>Positive feedback</i></p> | <p>Referred to whether or not superordinates and middle managers perceived their subordinates as speaking openly when providing feedback</p> <p>Referred to the type of feedback that superordinates and middle managers believed that subordinates preferred to provide</p> |

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|--|---|
| <p>Importance of subordinates feeling heard</p> <p><i>Closing the feedback loop</i></p> | <p>Referred to superordinates and middle managers closing the feedback loop so that subordinates felt heard after the provision of feedback</p> |
| <p>Continued request for feedback</p> | <p>Referred to managers continued request of feedback irrespective of their experience of receiving upward feedback</p> |
| <p>Feedback environment</p> <p><i>Top down flow of information for operational tasks</i></p> <p><i>Top down flow of information for strategic planning</i></p> <p><i>Presence</i></p> <p><i>Recipient of the feedback</i></p> | <p>Referred to where information relating to operational tasks originated from within the organisation</p> <p>Referred to where information relating to strategic planning originated from within the organisation</p> <p>Referred to the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes</p> <p>Referred to whom subordinates are comfortable to provide feedback</p> |

Theme 1: Characteristics of subordinates

In this theme superordinates and middle managers described the characteristics of those subordinates who were most and least likely to initiate feedback. While there was no agreement regarding which subordinates were least likely to initiate feedback, the majority of the participants agreed that those who were most likely to initiate feedback were both motivated and passionate about their job. One of the participants also noted that the provision of upward feedback was not contingent on the length of service of the individual. The participant summed it up by stating:

“I think its people who are passionate about what they do. They’re actually very ... positive and believe in the organisation and what they’re doing ... it’s not a person who’s just coming to work doing the basics, getting their pay cheque and going home. I find its people that ... it’s so passionate that they have to say something and so I think those are the sorts of attributes. I mean other ... there’s other personal characteristics I suppose like levels of confidence people have you know different people have different levels of self-esteem and it doesn’t necessarily relate to how long a person’s been in the organisation. There are people who have been in the organisation a very short time who you may intuitively think are going to sit back a bit and see then talk I’ve found some people who are very new who are straight away talking to us about what they think, which is fantastic. And there are others who have been with us a long time and they don’t say much ...” (Participant 7)

Theme 2: Significance of subordinate feedback

All of the participants were unanimous that asking subordinates to participate or contribute to the decision making process was especially pertinent because subordinates were at the front line of the organisation and had access to information that had the ability to impact upon the organisation’s success:

“Oh yeah definitely, cause they’re on the ground and they see what’s going down and they know how its working out there, their feedback is very vital to ... the success of this organisation” (Participant 5)

“I think it’s extremely important. They’re the people on the ground and know what’s happening in the community” (Participant 6)

Theme 3: Trustworthiness of subordinate feedback

The majority of middle managers did not believe that their subordinates spoke openly when providing upward feedback and they attributed this to a lack of trust. Consequently, these managers also perceived that their subordinates were more comfortable to provide positive rather than negative upward feedback. When asked whether subordinates spoke openly when providing upward feedback one of the managers stated:

“No... you have to have a relationship, you have to have trust. If you don’t have that people aren’t going to give you that knowledge. And that takes time ... they don’t know you, you have to build that rapport” (Participant X)

Another middle manager acknowledged that as she was not able to get subordinates to speak openly when providing feedback she needed to learn ways in which to obtain this information from her subordinates:

“I’d have to honestly say no ... because they must have more...[referring to negative feedback] I don’t know because I think I need to work on how to make them feel more comfortable about the failures so that they can open up more around it and we can work on it and we can learn... it’s not their failure ... it’s you know, lots of things happen out there” (Participant Y)

Theme 4: Importance of subordinates feeling heard

In this theme participants related the importance of their subordinates feeling heard after the provision of upward feedback. While they acknowledged not always doing a good job of it, the participants emphasised the importance of closing the feedback loop after the provision of upward of feedback:

“Being available for people to talk to and to give that feedback and for them to know that I am listening to them and I guess feeding back to them that they have been listened to and what the results of their feedback may be so and that’s probably something maybe that I don’t do as much as I could but certainly that’s a good way of them knowing they’ve been heard by receiving the results” (Participant X)

“That people feel positive about providing feedback and... that it’s going to be heard and you know if you can’t do it then there’s some good justifications there” (Participant 5)

Theme 5: Continued request for feedback

There was universal agreement among superordinates that they would continue to request upward feedback from their subordinates irrespective of positive or negative experiences:

“Oh I think I’m always going to request it. And I think as an organisation we’ve become an organisation that does request it so yeah” (Participant X)

Theme 6: Feedback environment

The last theme pertained to the feedback environment in the organisation which consisted of the direction in which information flowed and the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes. In a similar way to subordinate responses, the majority of participants believed that information relating to operational tasks and strategic planning originated from the top of the organisation’s hierarchy. The universal view of all five participants therefore was that upward feedback for decision making existed in the organisation. The participants perceived the presence of upward feedback in State meetings, working parties, brain storming sessions, online surveys, teleconferences, one-on-one meetings, team meetings and informal conversations where they initiated feedback or subordinates initiated feedback. When asked whether upward feedback for decision making purposes in the organisation occurred, one participant responded:

“I would definitely say so. We have quite a large number of working parties happening at the moment around the country around our programs around our ...procedures and input is sought from a cross section of the organisation upwards” (Participant 9)

While the organisation had a strong hierarchical structure through which subordinates were expected to provide upward feedback, the majority of middle managers believed that their subordinates felt comfortable to provide feedback directly to senior managers at State meetings:

“I suppose we’re fairly hierarchical I mean that stuff comes down to [senior manager], to [middle managers] to staff or it comes from program quality across so staff are aware of that, but at our state meeting everyone was quite happy to throw up ideas or comments” (Participant X)

“I think that when they’re in the State meetings just in a social setting they’re happy to give that type of feedback as well” (Participant Y)

Agreeing, one of the superordinates postulated:

“There’s some opportunities, like the State meetings where they will have direct access to me and those once a month when I go to the offices and they can give feedback but otherwise they are sort of held in hierarchical I suppose” (Participant X)

When asked what topics subordinates had contributed towards for decision making purposes, the participants provided the list of topics which are presented in Table 4.5. The letter X denotes how many managers mentioned the same topic.

Table 4.5. Information topics that subordinates contributed to from a middle manager and superordinate perspective

| Information type | Manager initiated feedback | Subordinate initiated feedback |
|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Work coming from different parts of the organisation | | X |
| Community targets | X | |
| Middle manager’s management style/performance | XX | X |
| Operational aspects of programs (including program reviews) | XXXXX | XX |
| Time and tasks subordinates spent on their role | XX | |
| Ways in which to engage staff in the workplace | XXXX | |
| Suggested models for partnering with schools | X | |
| Outcomes of meetings attended | | X |
| Locations for student visits | | X |
| Ways in which to support students | | X |
| How to engage tutors | | X |
| Alternate delivery models for programs | X | |
| Program design | X | |
| Evaluating programs | X | |
| Subordinate perceptions of the organisation and its culture | X | |
| Community needs/programs | XX | X |
| What the organisation should be doing | X | |

| Information type | Manager initiated feedback | Subordinate initiated feedback |
|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Where there organisation should be allocating its resources | X | |
| New programs | | X |
| Timing of the performance review process | | X |
| IT issues and recommendations | | X |
| Setting of key performance indicators | X | |
| Events other organisations were running | | X |

The topics that middle managers initiated have not been listed here as they are very specific and would risk disclosing individual participants.

4.3.2.2 Non-common themes in the experience of providing or receiving upward feedback.

Additional analysis of the superordinate and middle manager textural-structural descriptions revealed six non-common themes relating to (a) the preference of certain types of feedback, (b) decision making ceiling, (c) the time allocated to the provision of upward feedback, (d) physical distance, (e) length of service, and (f) feedback outcomes. These themes, their sub-themes and their defining characteristics are presented in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6. Non-common themes in the experience of providing or receiving upward feedback

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|--|--|
| Preference of certain types of feedback | Referred to the type of feedback that managers preferred to receive |
| Decision making ceiling | Referred to how the national nature of the organisation affected the level to which decisions could be made at a State level |
| Time allocated to providing feedback | Referred to the time allocated for the provision of upward feedback |

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|--------------------------|--|
| Physical distance | Referred to the distance between offices. Also referred to managers being located in a different office to their subordinate |
| Length of service | Referred to how long subordinates had worked with the organisation |
| Feedback outcomes | Referred to the outcomes that were realised as a result of upward feedback |

Theme 1: Preference of certain types of feedback

The first theme revealed some very varied and noteworthy findings with respect to upward feedback provided by subordinates on their middle managers' management style. Each middle manager reacted to positive and negative feedback in a different way. The first middle manager preferred to receive positive upward feedback about her management style as it increased her self-esteem. She did not however appreciate negative upward feedback about her management style as she thought it was too personal. Due to her personality, the second middle manager, felt emotionally stressed when she received positive upward feedback about her management style as she was not used to receiving high compliments. Where she received negative feedback, she dealt with the information in a professional manner by asking the subordinate to discuss their information together with supporting evidence. If she felt the subordinate was justified the manager appreciated it having been pointed out to her. The third middle manager however, admitted that while it was hard to receive, she preferred negative feedback to positive feedback when it came to her management style. This was because she associated positive feedback with ingratiation practices and viewed negative feedback as being more honest and believed she could learn the most from this form of feedback:

"...positive feedback its nice but sometimes you're not sure ...you don't know whether they are just saying it because they think that is what you want to hear where negative is usually more honest so I value negative ... feedback a little bit more than I do positive feedback because it takes a lot for someone to actually give that to you and usually the most learnings can be sought from that" (Participant X)

Theme 2: Decision-making ceiling

The second theme related to the limitations in the decision making capacity of managers and superordinates at a State level when subordinates provided feedback. As the organisation is a national organisation some decisions could not be dealt with at a State level which in turn caused frustration for those providing the feedback:

“We had a meeting up at [Head office] with all the [subordinates] but then it needs to go up because you just can’t work in isolation, we’re a national organisation and our policy’s driven ... in [National office Head Office]” (Participant 5)

“Well unfortunately we are 97 communities an agreed process and an agreed program on how to deliver ... you can feel the person’s frustration but I know a better way to do it, why can’t we do it sort of thing and you ... feel like a bureaucrat saying oh well national office, it’s not its all of us we’re all [organisation name]”(Participant X)

Theme 3: Time allocated to the provision of upward feedback

In a similar way to the subordinate theme, one middle manager raised the importance of being allowed sufficient time to respond to manager initiated feedback when she was providing upward feedback. Where the process was rushed, this caused the manager anxiety:

“Sometimes there is not enough time to think things through ... and I’m like ‘hang on, hang on’ can we just have a kind of a think about what that would mean if we did that ... so sometimes I think people just want to get runs on the board too fast and not think about the process and what it means on the ground so I’m often having to do that... I’ve got to interject and you know slow it down” (Participant X)

Theme 4: Physical distance

In this theme, one of the participants described how physical distance impacted on the provision of upward feedback and also caused uncertainty about whether or not all parties were on the same page:

“I like to do a lot of brain storming sometimes because you know we’re so snowed under we don’t get together ... so trying to find that mutual time can be quite

difficult and [community office] its [distance] away ... I can do a thing on Skype and I sort of know you're face to face ... I think it's good to do it like that and its okay but I don't think it... there's as much opportunity for information for us to be all together on the same page and know our direction clear as we when we do it like this face to face" (Participant X)

Theme 5: Length of service

Another non-common theme highlighted the divergence of perspectives between two middle managers as to whether or not longer serving employees were more or less likely to initiate upward feedback. While one middle manager thought longer serving employees were more likely to initiate feedback due to their contacts that were a source of information, the other middle manager saw longer serving employees as being less collaborative and therefore less likely to initiate upward feedback:

"The people who have been here longer are used to it and actually do it and the people who have been here a shorter length of time don't know the community and don't have the links as strongly as yet to do that always" (Participant X)

"Some of them are more protective than others and that's the older workers ... they are not so open to the kind of collaborative thing ... I think it's about not wanting to lose ... what is considered their kind of importance in the organisation ... and ...kind of resistant to sharing about stuff and to actually thinking two heads are better than one" (Participant Y)

Theme 6: Feedback outcomes

In this final non-common theme, one of the participants commented on how even though the outcome of the feedback did not always materialise exactly as the subordinate had hoped, this did not mean that the subordinate's feedback had not been considered or did not have an impact:

"Look it's a tricky one because when you have feedback ... feedback of course is coming in from a broad range of people and what the final product ends up like, is unlikely to be like exactly what one person in the organisation wants it to be or any person wants it to be. It is what it is through that broad... so someone on a working party or giving a bit of feedback may think I haven't had any influence where

actually collectively they have ... there has been feedback and it has been considered" (Participant X)

4.3.2.3 Summary of middle managers' and superordinates' common experiences of providing upward feedback

All middle managers and superordinates perceived the presence of upward feedback in their organisation. Their experience of receiving feedback was diverse.

While all participants were unanimous about the importance of including subordinates in the decision making process, middle managers were uncertain about the trustworthiness of the information they received from their subordinates because they perceived their subordinates as not speaking openly when providing feedback. This distrust stemmed from subordinates tendency to share positive feedback and avoid negative feedback. In their experience of receiving upward feedback, these managers noticed that subordinate characteristics played a role in determining which subordinates were more likely to initiate upward feedback and which subordinates were more likely to only respond to manager initiated feedback. Whichever form of upward feedback subordinates chose to participate in, it was vital to the managers that their subordinates felt heard after they provided feedback. Superordinates and managers attributed being heard to closing the feedback loop. Irrespective of both positive and challenging experiences in receiving upward feedback, there was a universal agreement that managers and superordinates would continue to ask subordinates to participate or contribute to decision making by providing upward feedback.

4.3.3 Research Question 3

The third research question "how does middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process?" was divided into two categories so as to differentiate between subordinate and middle manager and superordinates responses of how middle-level managers participate in the upward feedback process. Subordinate responses revealed three common themes which related to middle managers as (a) a conduit, (b) a filter, and (c) as inhibitors. These themes, their sub-themes and their defining characteristics are presented in Table 4.7.

4.3.3.1 Common themes of subordinates’ perception of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process.

Table 4.7. Common themes of subordinates’ perception of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|---|---|
| Conduit | |
| <i>Process of feedback</i> | Referred to the process through which subordinates provided upward feedback |
| <i>Accuracy of upward feedback</i> | Referred to the extent to which subordinate feedback was passed upward accurately to superordinates |
| Filter | Referred to the process by which middle managers filtered information when passing subordinate feedback upwards |
| Inhibitors | |
| <i>Middle manager behaviour</i> | Referred to negative behaviours that middle managers displayed that inhibited the provision of upward feedback |
| <i>Middle manager not facilitating feedback</i> | Referred to the inability of the middle manager to facilitate feedback |

Theme 1: Conduit

In this theme, although subordinates used different expressions to describe the manner in which their middle manager participated in the upward feedback process all of the subordinates’ comments pointed to the role of their middle manager as a conduit. As the participants stated:

“I see it as being that if I provide feedback to [middle manager], where relevant, it should go to the [senior manager] from there to the [state manager] (Participant 8)

"I think we are very fortunate in that [middle manager] does pass things on"
(Participant 1)

"They're also part of the communication process ... both upwards and downwards"
(Participant 4)

When asked if they thought that their middle managers passed their information upwards accurately to senior managers, the majority of participants responded affirmatively:

"To the best of my knowledge because I mean I also have conversations with [senior manager] quite regularly ... and know that we're all talking about the same thing ... there's a transparency there" (Participant 1)

"Just what's come back you know has been what I've said" (Participant 8)

"I'm sure it would have been conveyed accurately yeah, I got no reason to doubt that" (Participant 10)

Theme 2: Filter

All of the participants were unanimous that their middle manager's role in the upward feedback process was to filter upward feedback. Participants described this role as consisting of middle managers deciding what to pass upwards based on their knowledge of the organisation's situation; the ability of middle managers' to make decisions within the parameters of their role; and their middle managers' ability to advocate feedback that they agreed with and disregard information that they did not think was relevant:

"[Middle manager]'s got an overview of what's happening ... so there will be things that we're raising that will be ... it's possible to do things about or that it's preferable to leave until a later date or that we just know aren't going to happen ... they have more information than we do" (Participant 1)

"it's to filter it and if I've put forward ideas that are just not worth considering ... it's her responsibility to say 'no [subordinate name], not going to happen'. If it's a little bit left field I think it's her responsibility to consider it and maybe put it forward because all ideas are valuable" (Participant 10)

The filtering role of middle managers was not always looked upon favourably:

“I think she hears what she wants to hear, like she would have to agree with the points made. She is like, I’ll give her due she is a good advocater and she will argue the point to death like she will get what she wants but if she doesn’t agree with your perspective or feedback she won’t it’ll just na” (Participant X)

Theme 3: Inhibitors

Whilst there was agreement among the majority of the participants that the middle manager’s role should be to facilitate upward feedback, it was evident that most of the participants saw their middle manager’s behaviour as being an impediment to the upward feedback process. Some of the behaviours that impeded upward feedback were also discussed in Section 4.3.1.1 and related to misappropriation of subordinate feedback and the psychological danger of the middle manager withholding financial rewards. Additional inhibitors to the provision of upward feedback as raised by the subordinates are presented below:

“I have to say from [middle manager] she is, can be quite harsh like if she disagrees with something she’ll tell you and she’ll put you on the spot” (Participant X)

“I feel I’m quite confident going in but when am there actually giving the feedback I get cut off ... they finish your idea for you so then it doesn’t feel like it was your idea anymore” (Participant Y)

“A manager can set an environment that really is either conducive to that ... or not ... She [middle manager] comes out of a ... process driven setting ... so that when we have meeting they’re generally ‘this is what we’re talking about today, I’m going to tell you about this, I’m going to tell you about that” (Participant Z)

The middle manager’s behaviour was also seen as an inhibitor to upward feedback because she did not ask her subordinates to participate in decision making. As one participant stated when asked if she had been given opportunities to participate in decision making:

“Not as much as I think [subordinate role] would like ... to be perfectly honest my [middle manager] doesn’t ask at all (Participant X)

4.3.3.2 Non-common themes of subordinates' perception of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process.

Further analysis of the subordinate textural-structural descriptions revealed three non-common themes relating to how subordinates perceived middle level managers participated in the upward feedback process. These themes related to (a) relation with recipient, (b) bypassing the middle manager in the provision of upward feedback, and (c) disparity in organisational mission. These themes, their sub-themes and their defining characteristics are presented in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8. Non-common themes of subordinates' perception of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|---|---|
| <p>Relationship with recipient</p> <p><i>Subordinate experience affected by who received the upward feedback</i></p> | <p>Referred to the subordinate's preference to provide feedback directly to the senior manager because of an existing relationship</p> <p>Referred to the difference that the subordinate experienced in providing feedback to different recipients</p> |
| <p>Bypassing the middle manager</p> | <p>Referred to subordinates bypassing their middle manager and providing feedback to a senior manager if they felt unheard by their middle manager or if they felt strongly enough about a topic</p> |
| <p>Disparity in the organisation's mission</p> | <p>Referred to perceived differences in the organisation's mission between the subordinate and middle manager which impacted on the provision of upward feedback</p> |

Theme 1: Relationship with the recipient

In this theme two subordinates expressed preference to provide upward feedback to the senior manager as opposed to their middle manager. This was due to an established relationship with the senior manager who had previously been their middle manager:

“I’d go directly... the [middle manager] now’s not been with us that long and I don’t really have much of a work relationship with her, so I don’t really feel like she’s my first port of call” ... “I feel like it’s more effective in [senior manager]’s hands than in her hands” (Participant X)

The impact of having a relationship with the recipient could also be seen in the type of follower one of the above subordinates became. Where the participant had a manager that was collaborative, the participant became an effective follower, however where the manager was autocratic the participant became an alienated follower:

“My first [middle manager] in this organisation was very keen to be able to expand our programs ... and to do that consultatively with the staff ...our [middle manager] it seems to be very much directed from the top ‘ this is what you’re doing, ... even with staffing decisions that directly impact on you” (Participant X)

“And sort of makes you think ‘well what I should be doing is just doing stuff which is very specifically written in my job description and not going out of the boundaries of that and ... not kind of trying to contribute so much about how to provide a better service and better experience for ... our clients”... “that’s what I’m feeling I don’t really want it to be like that cause I do quite have a lot of ideas” (Participant X)

Theme 2: Bypassing the middle manager

In this theme two participants stated that they would have to feel strongly about an issue to bypass their middle manager and provide feedback directly to a senior manager:

“I prefer to follow the process and go through the [middle manager] but I will go over the [middle manager] if I can’t get where I need to be if it’s important enough” (Participant 8)

“I would have to feel very strongly about an issue to email [state manager] or [senior manager] cause it’s much easier just to mention it to [middle manager] get her feedback” (Participant 10)

Theme 3: Disparity in the organisation's mission

In this last non-common theme, one subordinate expressed that because the middle manager had a different view to the participant with regards to what was within the scope of the organisation's mission, the middle manager would reject the upward feedback. To avoid the participant being identified, only a small portion of the very specific example is presented below:

"I just don't see the point in being a [type] organisation if you can't help people in the [sector]" (Participant X)

4.3.3.3 Summary of subordinates' common perceptions of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process.

Subordinates perceived their middle manager as participating in the upward feedback process in three ways. As a conduit, the role of their middle manager was to pass information upwards to the senior manager. As a filter, the role of their middle manager was to determine the relevancy of the information before deciding what to pass upwards. This filtering role of the middle manager was looked upon favourably where subordinates trusted their manager to decide what to pass upwards and unfavourably when the middle manager would only support ideas that they agreed with. For this latter reason and because of other obstructive behaviours that they displayed, middle managers were also seen as inhibitors to the upward feedback process.

4.3.3.4 Common themes of middle managers' and superordinates' perceptions of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process.

This section presents information relating to research question 3, however from a middle manager and superordinate point of view. Middle manager and superordinate responses revealed three common themes which related to middle managers as (a) a conduit, (b) a filter, and (c) an advocate. These themes, their sub-themes and their defining characteristics are presented in Table 4.9.

Table 4.9. Common themes of middle managers and superordinates’ perception of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|--|---|
| <p>Conduit</p> <p><i>Process of feedback</i></p> | <p>Referred to the process through which subordinates provided upward feedback</p> |
| <p>Filter</p> <p><i>Criteria</i></p> | <p>Referred to the process by which middle managers filtered information when passing subordinate feedback upwards</p> <p>Referred to the criteria that middle managers used when deciding what to pass upwards</p> |
| <p>Advocate</p> <p><i>Facilitator</i></p> <p><i>Accuracy of upward feedback</i></p> | <p>Referred to ways in which middle managers supported and used issue selling tactics to promote subordinate ideas</p> <p>Referred to ways in which middle managers enabled feedback from their subordinates</p> <p>Referred to the extent to which subordinate feedback was passed upward accurately to superordinates</p> |

Theme 1: Conduit

In a similar way to the subordinate responses, the majority of participants saw the middle manager role as being a conduit between subordinates and superordinates.

“Well I am the conduit to that ... there’s weekly connections with my immediate boss and I usually have a list and she has a list and we work through the list”
(Participant 5)

“So in general day to day stuff that middle person is crucial they bring the intelligence back” (Participant 7)

Theme 2: Filter

Again, in a similar way to subordinate responses, there was unanimous agreement between participants about the filtering role that middle managers undertook in the upward feedback process. This filtering role was observed both as being necessary but also a potential impediment to the upward feedback process:

“Now I must say that also as a manager I do not rely on just those middle managers reporting to me because otherwise you are getting one view of things. It may be accurate and it may not be... sometimes it can be an impediment because they put their lens on whatever’s and some important messages perhaps coming from the grass roots are filtered by that person” (Participant X)

“Sometimes I think I impede cause I have to say to staff those ones that are fantastic about thinking outside the box ‘oh they’re not going to let us do it in [National Office] ... so sometimes I have to play that role” (Participant Y)

One of the managers undertook to filter information by assessing it before asking the subordinate to speak directly to the senior manager. As the participant stated:

“Someone gives me an idea I can actually feel it out before hand, see how it’s going to be received and if it’s going well then say to [senior manager] look I think... maybe it’s worth having a chat with that person direct and getting that idea expanded on” (Participant X)

When asked what criteria they used to determine what to pass upwards, two of the three middle managers stated that if it had the potential to impact on the organisation they would pass it up, however if it was a local issue they would deal with it themselves:

“If it’s likely to impact on [organisation] in any way either positively or negatively then it needs to be shared. If it’s just local and it’s not going to impact on the image of [organisation] and it’s only going to relate to our program locally then it can stay here” (Participant X)

Where middle managers received recurrent feedback, the majority of managers would deal with it at their level. One of the middle managers however chose to always raise the matter again with the senior manager although it was the senior manager's expectation that this should not be passed upwards:

"Sometimes I have to say to people particularly if they are going over the same ground all the time which we've all moved on from that it's no use fighting... you got to make a decision to either move with the times and that's where things are going or if you can't then you need to think about what that means" (Participant X)

Theme 3: Advocate

In this final theme the majority of participants viewed the middle manager role as that of advocate. This role included middle managers facilitating information from their subordinates:

"Facilitating most definitely ... well they've got the best interest of their staff in mind ... they want their offices as I've said before to be running smoothly, they want their staff happy and so they're very open about passing things upwards and they actually advocate for their staff and for their programs"(Participant X)

The role of advocate also included issue selling subordinate ideas to senior managers which at times meant that middle managers would not pass up subordinate feedback exactly as relayed to them but they would instead enhance or endorse the feedback:

"Sometimes you can just raise it directly as they've said other times you have to actually rephrase it because what you want to do is sell it. So if it's a really good idea and they haven't sold it, like they may have told me what they want and I can see the benefits in it, I will do a sales pitch for it" (Participant X)

4.3.3.5 Non-common themes of middle managers' and superordinates' perceptions of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process.

Further analysis of the textural-structural descriptions revealed three non-common themes relating to how superordinates and middle managers perceived that middle level managers participated in the upward feedback process. These themes related to (a) the 'parent' effect, (b) the middle manager's management style, and (c) benefits of online surveys as a

feedback medium. These themes, their sub-themes and their defining characteristics are presented in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10. Non-common themes of middle managers and superordinates perceptions of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process

| Themes and subthemes | Defining characteristics |
|--|--|
| Parent effect | Referred to the middle manager feeling like a parent when eliciting feedback |
| Middle manager management style | Referred to the management style employed by middle managers and how this impacted upon upward feedback |
| Benefits of online surveys as a feedback medium | Referred the preference of online surveys to gather feedback in a bid to avoid the filtering effect of middle managers |

Theme 1: Parent effect

In this first non-common theme one of the middle managers expressed frustration at trying to elicit feedback from certain subordinates. The middle manager expressed how trying to get this feedback made her feel like the subordinate’s mother:

“I feel like there needs to be more openness ... on some staff’s part ... I have tried to facilitate that probably in different ways, ...but I still feel like ... what I got to do is be more direct I think for some staff... I feel and I suppose I’m a bit like ‘I’m not your mother’, you know it’s sort of like ... really I just expect that you would be able to do that you ... you know the catch up’s about the program and that you look after and that you would come and say ‘oh well this is how it’s all going and here’s some of the stuff that’s come out of that meeting and oh there was some issues’ but I don’t get that, I get ‘what do you want to talk about’ it’s very interesting isn’t it?”
(Participant X)

Theme 2: Middle managers management style

In this second theme, one of the participant’s expressed how certain behaviours that middle managers displayed could impact on the provision of upward feedback:

“It’s behaviours that may come from personal attributes or experience or from wherever So for instance, you have line managers who are very task oriented they are doers, in the personality type A, they like to get stuff done, they are confident, they know what needs to be done, they are very much around deadlines and when things are due and ...very process driven and I think managers who are overly like that makes feedback difficult” (Participant X)

Theme 3: Benefits of online surveys as a feedback medium

In this final theme, one of the participants expressed the benefits of using an online survey for the provision of feedback as there was less potential for filtering and more opportunities for the provision of honest upward feedback:

“It’s done through survey monkey or something like that where it just goes straight in without the filtering of the middle manager or the [State] Manager or whatever this is very direct and honest sort of feedback, its anonymous and all the rest of it and I think that’s a strength as well” (Participant X)

4.3.3.6 Summary of middle managers and superordinates common perceptions of how middle-level management participate in the upward feedback process.

Like subordinates, both middle managers and superordinates perceived that middle managers participated in the upward feedback process in three ways. In a similar way to subordinates, middle managers and superordinates saw the role of the middle manager as a conduit to information between subordinates and superordinates. Corresponding to subordinate responses the middle manager role was also regarded as that of a filter by both middle managers and superordinates. In this role, middle managers determined what to pass upwards by considering (a) whether or not the information had the ability to either positively or negatively impact on the organisation, (b) whether the information was recurrent feedback, and (c) whether or not the information had local or national implications. Middle managers were mindful not to waste the senior manager’s time by firstly assessing the information before passing it upwards. While the filtering role was beneficial in sorting subordinate’s upward feedback, the role was also viewed as an impediment to the upward feedback process because of the responsibility of middle managers to determine what was important and relevant. Finally, in their role as advocates,

middle managers saw their role as facilitating information from their subordinates and then issue selling subordinate ideas that they agreed with to superordinates.

4.3.4 Research Question 4

The final research question “how can the participation of middle level management in the upward feedback process be enhanced” was answered by summarising participants’ responses to this question and by using inductive data analysis to synthesise key findings from the responses of all ten participants.

Participants suggested that middle managers participation in the upward feedback process could be enhanced in numerous ways. Subordinate responses are presented in Table 4.11 and superordinate and middle manager responses in Table 4.12.

Table 4.11. Ways in which to enhance the participation of middle managers in the upward feedback process from a subordinate perspective

| Subordinates perceptions of how middle managers participation in the upward feedback process can be enhanced |
|--|
| Support staff by either visiting or calling staff on a regular basis instead of only when they have done something wrong |
| Be visible |
| Be available and accessible |
| Be gentle with subordinates who provide feedback that middle managers do not agree with |
| Ask subordinates for their feedback |
| Thank subordinates for their feedback |
| Provide space at meetings for open discussions |
| Affirm subordinates when something is done well |
| Be lenient when mistakes are made so that subordinates can more readily admit to mistakes |
| Take subordinate feedback into consideration and pass it upwards |
| Involve subordinates in the very early stages of decision making process |
| Allocate sufficient time for the provision of upward feedback |
| Schedule feedback sessions at suitable times |
| Inform subordinates of what has happened with their feedback |

Table 4.12. Ways in which to enhance the participation of middle managers in the upward feedback process from a superordinate and middle manager perspective

| Middle managers and superordinates perceptions of how middle managers participation in the upward feedback process can be enhanced |
|---|
| Filter things that do not need to go upwards |
| Build trust and rapport with subordinates |
| Advocate on behalf of subordinates and support their ideas |
| Let subordinates know senior managers are open to feedback |
| Let subordinates know what the middle manager will be providing feedback on and what middle manager is currently working on |
| Build relationships with subordinates to enable more openness |
| Treat each subordinate as an individual and realise that one treatment does not fit all |
| Improve on listening skills |
| Provide more structure for subordinates around what information to bring to meetings |
| Respond using 'open' rather than 'closed' body language |
| Reward upward feedback verbally |
| Recognise the source of the feedback throughout the process |
| Establish more forums for the provision of upward feedback |
| Remove the senior manager from middle manager meetings so as to enable more open feedback and peer discussion |
| Close the feedback loop |
| Have an open door policy |
| Be open and friendly |

In sum, middle managers participation in the upward feedback process can be enhanced by middle managers being open, available, accessible and visible to their subordinates on a regular basis. Middle managers need to create a collaborative upward feedback environment in which subordinates are involved in the decision making process in the very early stages. Middle managers need to inform employees that the organisation values upward feedback and ensure that they display this culture within their offices. Middle managers also need to be supportive of subordinates, ask for their input, thank them, consider their feedback and inform subordinates of what has occurred as a result of their feedback. This closing of the feedback loop is extremely critical to subordinates feeling heard. Trusting relationships also need to be built with subordinates, so that they are

confident that their feedback will be considered and that their middle manager will advocate on their behalf and recognise them throughout the feedback process. In situations where nothing can be done with their feedback, justifications of the reasons should be relayed back to subordinates. It is not so important for subordinates to always see outcomes as for them to feel heard and understand why decisions have been made. These trusting relationships also need to enable subordinates to feel psychologically safe to share mistakes without perceiving negative repercussions. Where mistakes are shared, middle managers need to take a positive approach and seek to learn from the mistakes and reassure the subordinate that it was a good thing that the feedback was provided. Middle managers should applaud the courage of the subordinate for sharing such critical upward feedback which could have potentially had implications for the organisation's success. Where middle managers do not agree with the feedback being provided, middle managers need be mindful and extremely cautious that both their verbal and non-verbal cues do not permanently discourage the provision of future upward feedback. Consideration also needs to be given to the suitability of the medium used for requesting the feedback. For example, some feedback is best sought individually rather than in a group format and some is best solicited face to face rather than through a survey. Sensitivity also needs to be given to the time allocated to the feedback as well as the topic of feedback. If these factors are not carefully considered, it can taint the authenticity of the request for feedback.

4.3.5 Findings from the Document Analysis

The organisation presented the researcher with a total of nine documents, which she reviewed for the evidence of upward feedback in the organisation. The purpose of the document review was to triangulate data from the interviews as suggested by Sanders (1982). The researcher sought to answer the three questions that were presented in Table 3.1 in Section 3.8.1.2 which related to:

1. How does the communication flow in the organisation (with consideration being given to the organisation's structure)?
2. How do superordinates and middle level managers encourage the upward feedback process? and
3. How do subordinates provide upward feedback?

Information on how each document was analysed and its respective findings can be found in Appendix 10.

The document review revealed that communication flowed both top down and bottom up within the organisation. Like data gathered in the interviews, the document review revealed that subordinates were asked to provide feedback on program reviews, events, the staff engagement plan, career plans, job description changes and what the subordinate was working on. The document review also showed that in monthly one-on-one meetings between subordinates and their managers, subordinates were asked to provide feedback on key achievements, challenges, and lessons learnt in the previous month; what was on the horizon for the subordinate and any support or assistance the subordinate might need from their manager. Superordinates and middle managers encouraged subordinates to provide upward feedback mainly through State meetings or one-on-one meetings whereby a range of activities, open feedback sessions and brainstorming sessions were undertaken. A request for staff to provide feedback through online surveys was also visible in the document review.

4.4 Composite Textural-Structural Description of the Experience of Providing Upward Feedback

The experience of providing upward feedback is manifold; it can be gratifying, confusing or disappointing thereby leaving the experiencer perplexed.

At its most fulfilling, the provision of upward feedback can be described as being rewarding, exciting and satisfying. This excitement can be heard in the contributor's voice and seen in their alert and excited body language as they provide upward feedback. Being sought after by management to contribute to or participate in decision making because of the contributor's expertise and knowledge arouses feelings of belonging, being trusted, recognised and appreciated as an employee. While it brings about a gratifying experience for the contributor that their skills are being utilised it also simultaneously adds a certain level of anxiety about whether or not their feedback will succeed.

This positive experience of providing feedback is enhanced where managers do not engage in power games and are open, approachable, accessible, genuinely interested in listening, encourage and facilitate feedback. Such managers are perceived as welcoming feedback and receive it willingly in a friendly, favourable and professional manner. These managers also thank the contributor after the provision of feedback. Where good working relationships exist providing feedback on any topic is effortless and the experiencer

perceives a psychological safety that even though their feedback may not be implemented, the contributor will be heard and that their feedback will be discussed rationally and the feedback loop closed with no negative consequences. Experienced senior and middle managers are viewed as being the most accepting of any type of upward feedback. Senior managers are also seen as closing the feedback loop more often than middle managers. As democratic managers, these managers enable their subordinates to become effective followers. Where middle managers display democratic traits it instils a confidence in the contributor that their manager will filter and deal with their feedback appropriately and pass it upwards accurately.

These democratic managers enable contributors not only to respond to manager initiated feedback but to initiate feedback openly. Not only does the contributor feel confident and comfortable to provide feedback, but their feedback is perceived as being taken into consideration by their managers which in turn exacerbates the experienter's feelings of worth. These managers also allow for open communication which in turn augments discussion and results in higher quality decisions.

In this positive experience, the provision of feedback is seen as being synonymous with favourable outcomes which in turn incite a continuous upward feedback loop.

The experience of providing feedback can also be confusing. Where feedback is initiated, and management respond positively but no outcomes are realised from the feedback, this causes the contributor bewilderment. In this experience, contributors perceive participant initiated feedback as being treated differently to manager initiated feedback. Where feedback is manager initiated it is perceived as being valued, appreciated and taken into consideration for decision making purposes. Opportunities for this type of feedback are perceived as being numerous and management as always ready to listen. Outcomes are also seen as a result of this feedback.

Where feedback is subordinate initiated however, the feedback is viewed as being disregarded and responses to the feedback either delayed or deferred. The contributor feels as though their manager is uninterested in their feedback. A feedback 'ceiling' is also perceived due to an inability to influence decisions beyond a certain level. Where the contributor is able to have an impact however, the provision of upward feedback results in an increased workload which brings about a dilemma about whether or not to suggest improved ways of doing things.

Finally, providing upward feedback can also be a disappointing experience. In this experience, the inability of managers to close the feedback loop almost every time feedback is provided causes frustration and agitation. A lack of perceived outcomes also makes the contributor question the authenticity of their manager's request for feedback.

Where managers use coercive power to punish unfavourable feedback it results in the contributor withdrawing from initiating feedback and choosing to only respond to manager initiated feedback. While the strong desire still exists to initiate feedback, the contributor faces an internal dilemma about whether or not to share ideas as there is a perceived psychological danger to initiating feedback. Consequently the experiencer only provides feedback that is perceived as being 'accepted' in the organisation. Further, where managers exclude subordinates from decisions that directly affect their role or where subordinates are rushed or over ruled when providing feedback, this causes the experiencer to feel unheard, annoyed, worthless and unappreciated.

During this experience, feedback that relates to how the contributor is feeling about their role is avoided, especially where the contributor perceives that there can be no solution to their problem. Negative feedback is also perceived as being particularly difficult to discuss as it causes the contributor to feel that failures reflect on them as an individual. The result is that contributors avert certain types of feedback.

When managers initiate feedback in this experience the contributor believes that their opinion is only valued if it aligns with the middle manager's opinion or if the middle manager considers it important. Outside of these times, it is difficult for the contributor to get the middle manager to pass information upwards. Low levels of confidence in the middle manager also causes uncertainty about the accuracy of messages being passed upwards and results in the contributor preferring to provide feedback directly to senior managers. Feedback is perceived as being more effective with the senior manager than with the middle manager. A perception also exists that to be effectively heard greatly depends on who the contributor is within the organisation and how well they can deliver their message in a way in which it can be considered.

In this disappointing experience of providing upward feedback, the organisation's hierarchy is seen as a barrier due to limited access to senior managers. Consequently, the contributor feels the need to be cautious in the types of feedback that are provided to senior managers as the contributor does not have access to or a relationship with senior managers. Further,

the contributor believes that they can only ever initiate feedback with senior managers if they felt strongly enough about an issue.

Worsening this unsatisfactory experience is when managers make decisions and are unaware of the consequences of the decisions they have made. This causes the experiencer to feel uneasy and also makes them question whether or not management thoroughly think out their decisions.

Other barriers to providing feedback in this experience are seen to arise from a lack of support and an absence of informal opportunities to provide feedback. The invisibility of managers and being held in a hierarchical process when providing feedback also causes additional obstacles. Moreover, management responses to feedback made up of apathy, discouragement, rejection of all ideas put forward, criticism, opposition to passing information upwards, filtering, interruption and misappropriation of the contributor's feedback cause an unsatisfactory experience. Managers can also discourage contributors from initiating upward feedback by their body language and their tone. In all, in this experience contributors feel humiliated, alienated, unsupported, unrecognised, unvalued, annoyed, frustrated, unheard and disinclined to provide upward feedback.

Where the contributor is requested to provide manager initiated feedback during this experience, they feel disengaged, dread speaking up and provide feedback with a heavy heart. This detachment can also be heard in their flat, uninterested and matter of fact tone as they think the whole process is a waste of their time. During this time, the contributor will rarely speak honestly.

In the experience of providing upward feedback, interacting with others in a group feedback session either causes distress where differences exist or reinforces the importance of a message where agreement occurs. The experiencer's experience is also greatly influenced by whom feedback is provided to and the relationship with the recipient. The type of manager to a great extent determines the type of follower the experiencer becomes and therefore, the manner in which the experiencer interacts with managers' results in either a satisfying or dissatisfying experience of providing feedback. In interacting with managers trust is also seen as an element that determines whether or not certain feedback will be provided or received. Professionalism is considered of importance during the provision of upward feedback.

In the experience of providing feedback, time is experienced as being both adequate and inadequate depending on the topic being discussed. Where the topic is important and the time allocated is experienced as being inadequate it causes the contributor to question the authenticity of the manager's request for feedback. Further, the allocation of insufficient time to consider manager initiated feedback results in frustration and causes the contributor to feel unheard.

Physical distance also has implications for whether the provision of feedback will occur more as a result of manager initiated feedback or subordinate initiated feedback. A sense of isolation occurs due to the distance between offices and management being located in different offices to their subordinates. This distance also affects the contributor's experience of providing feedback as there are fewer opportunities for informal feedback and relationship building. This distance and the organisation's hierarchy create a perception of the senior managers being inaccessible which in turn inhibits feedback. The organisation's hierarchy also creates a ceiling on outcomes as a result of feedback.

In the experience of providing upward feedback, the format used to elicit upward feedback impacts on both the quality and quantity of the feedback. The medium used can also cause the quality or quantity of feedback to diminish.

In the experience of providing upward feedback the contributor's feelings are given careful consideration. If they cause the contributor discomfort and are not likely to produce an outcome then that feedback is not shared. Where feedback of a challenging nature has to be shared, prior experiences come to the fore to determine the best way in which to convey the feedback. Where the experiencer is an overachiever, providing negative feedback is especially challenging.

In the experience of providing feedback it is crucial to the experiencer to feel heard and not just listened to. While favourable outcomes are not always necessary, closing of the feedback loop with the reasons behind the decision is considered essential. At times however, outcomes are viewed as being vital to determining whether managers are sincere about seeking the feedback. Middle managers opinions need to be set aside so that if the contributor feels the feedback is important enough, it needs to be passed upwards when requested. The response the contributor receives as a result of providing feedback either acts as an inhibitor or catalyst for further feedback. At times, providing feedback is unfavourable as it causes an increased workload.

4.5 Composite Textural-Structural Description of the Experience of Receiving Upward Feedback

The experience of receiving upward feedback causes a multiplicity of experiences; it can be satisfying, uncertain and challenging.

Where feedback is sought or subordinate initiated feedback is received by management, it causes a sense of contentment and an assurance that subordinates will feel heard, have increased job satisfaction and will not leave the organisation. Feedback is viewed as being highly valuable as well as crucial to improving the organisation's performance and strength. Feedback that aligns with the organisation's mission is especially appreciated and taken into consideration when decisions are being made. Rational and factual upward feedback results in management support and action. Where positive outcomes occur as a result of upward feedback, it causes management to continue to request more upward feedback. Consequently, feedback is welcomed and not viewed as being a threat.

In the experience of receiving upward feedback, subordinate characteristics are seen as playing a role in determining who is more or less likely to initiate upward feedback. Analytical, engaged, confident, passionate subordinates who understand their role and feel that what they were doing is valuable are viewed as being the most likely to initiate upward feedback. Similarly too are newer, open and honest subordinates who share the organisation's values. Conversely, those that are less creative, are often absent from work, negative, have had previous bad experiences in providing feedback, believe nothing will change and wish to only focus on undertaking their role, are seen as the least likely to initiate upward feedback. Paradoxically, longer serving employees are perceived as being both likely to initiate feedback because they have community contacts and less likely to initiate feedback because they are less collaborative than their peers.

In the superordinates' experience of receiving upward feedback, middle managers who are facilitators and advocators of subordinate feedback and those who are positive, open, available, listen to and have strong relationships with their subordinates are seen as being the most likely to initiate upward feedback. Likewise, in middle managers' experience they also believe that advocating subordinate ideas and building relationships and trust are key to facilitating upward feedback from their subordinates.

As they are located at the front line of the organisation, subordinates are seen as a source of expertise and their feedback is considered a valuable component for decision making. Despite this however, managers at times question the trustworthiness of subordinate feedback as not all subordinates are perceived as being comfortable to speak openly when providing upward feedback. In this uncertain experience of receiving upward feedback, managers perceive that subordinates are most comfortable to provide positive and factual feedback and evade negative feedback or failures because they have not yet developed trusting relationships with their managers.

The experience of receiving upward feedback can also be challenging. Where subordinates provide non-evidenced based feedback that has the potential to have national implications for the organisation, it causes management discomfort. This discomfort arises from the limited ability of management to produce outcomes as a result of one person's feedback. In this and many other situations, management considers the source of the feedback and their area of expertise prior to deciding whether or not to take feedback on board. At these times where management has to respond unfavourably to subordinate feedback, management feels like a bureaucrat.

Where negative feedback is shared by a subordinate the subordinate is thanked, the information is reflected on, and management sets a meeting with the subordinate to discuss the feedback at a later date together with supporting evidence. Depending on the manager, negative feedback about the manager's management style is either viewed as being unfair and too personal thereby causing an adverse reaction, or is instead readily accepted, seen as being truthful and preferred over positive feedback.

Although positive feedback about the manager's management style is also welcomed and increases the receiver's self-esteem it is often also closely scrutinised for sincerity. At times, receiving this positive feedback about the manager's management style can be emotionally stressful, especially where the manager is not used to receiving high compliments.

Initiating feedback from subordinates can also be challenging where they are not forthcoming with information. This instigates a question and answer session to elicit information and consequently makes the manager feel like a parent and the subordinate like a child. The less willing subordinates are to share feedback, the more frustrating the experience for the manager.

At times, superordinates view the middle manager role as an impediment to the upward feedback process because of the middle manager's tendency to filter information; as such superordinates seek to validate information by talking directly with subordinates. Some middle managers also seek this validation by engaging superordinates to assist in assessing the effectiveness of the strategies they have implemented to elicit upward feedback.

Another challenging element to receiving upward feedback is receiving recurrent feedback. Where managers receive this form of feedback, it causes frustration usually because decisions have already been made and in the finality of those decisions there is no scope for variation. During these times, managers face a dilemma because while feedback is valued and appreciated, managers have to be firm and ask the subordinate to make a difficult choice if they cannot accept the decision.

Irrespective of the form of feedback it is important to managers for their subordinates to feel heard and to feel as though their feedback has been considered.

In the experience of receiving upward feedback, the relevance of and the type of feedback is given careful consideration. Where information aligns with the organisation's mission it acts as a catalyst to action.

Trust is also seen as an element that determines whether or not certain feedback will be shared by subordinates. Consequently, conduits to information are seen as requiring skill development that focuses on ways in which to elicit information and create conducive environments to upward feedback.

In the experience of receiving upward feedback receiving what is considered to be 'valid feedback' that is free of bias is considered of importance. Engaging employees by using an open and collaborative approach to decision making is important to a pleasurable experience for managers. Some subordinates however resist this approach and view it as weakness on management's part.

The receiving of recurrent feedback is considered pointless and causes an annoying and frustrating experience for managers. Remaining professional at all times when receiving feedback however is considered of importance.

Finally, in the experience of receiving feedback, physical distance between offices causes uncertainty about the accuracy of information shared between subordinates and their manager.

4.6 Summary

This chapter presented findings from ten interviews using empirical phenomenological methodology. The chapter provided three demographic representations of the research participants which included their gender, age and length of service with the organisation.

Data were analysed using NVivo 10. The chapter answered the four research questions by discussing both common and non-common themes found in the research participants' individual textual-structural descriptions.

The first research question which asked "what are subordinates' personal experiences of providing upward feedback, and how do they perceive the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation?" revealed three common themes as well as six non-common themes.

The second research question which asked "what are superordinates' and middle managers' personal experiences of upward feedback, and how do they perceive the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in their organisation?" revealed six common themes and six non-common themes.

The third research question "how does middle level management participate in the upward feedback process?" was separated into two categories so as to differentiate between subordinates and middle managers and superordinates' perceptions of how middle level managers participate in the upward feedback process. Both subordinate and middle manager and superordinate responses revealed three common and three non-common themes.

The final research question "how can the participation of middle level management in the upward feedback process be enhanced?" was answered by summarising participants' responses to this question and by using inductive data analysis to synthesise key findings from the responses of all ten participants.

Subsequently, the chapter presented the findings of a document analysis which was undertaken on nine documents from the organisation.

The chapter concluded by presenting two composite descriptions relating to subordinates and middle managers' experiences of providing upward feedback and middle managers and

superordinates experiences of receiving upward feedback.

While the study also sought to examine whether or not upward feedback occurred more as a result of active versus reactive voice, it was not possible to ascertain this from the findings or to determine it from the participants as there was no consensus between participants. A conclusion could be drawn however that upward feedback occurred as a result of both active and reactive voice.

The next chapter of this thesis discusses the implications and limitations of the study, makes recommendations to the organisation under research and outlines recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This final chapter of the thesis discusses the emergent themes that were presented in Chapter 4. The chapter provides a summary of the study, discusses the findings of research questions 1, 2 and 3, and then considers the implications and significance of the findings. Subsequently the chapter provides recommendations for action, recommendations for future research and concludes by summarising the limitations of the study. The chapter does not discuss research question 4 as the objective of this question was to synthesise the findings of the first three questions which was undertaken in Section 4.34.

5.1 Summary of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative empirical phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of ten participants who were familiar with the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process. Numerous researchers have focussed on the importance of upward feedback in organisations including its ability to improve decision making (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tourish, 2005). However, with the exception of a few researchers (for example, Koplund, 2012; Lam, 2009) there is currently very little research which examines the critical function that middle managers play in the upward feedback process. This study sought to address this gap in the literature and in so doing extend the research in the area of upward feedback. This study was unique and differed from previous studies in the type of methodology that it employed as well as in the type of organisation (a national service organisation) in which the research was undertaken.

The first chapter of this thesis presented a brief introduction to the research problem, the purpose and the significance of the study. The four research questions that guided the study were introduced in this chapter. The second chapter then reviewed the relevant literature pertaining to the study. The literature review focussed on four main elements that related to (a) organisational structures, (b) organisational roles and power, (c) communication theory, and (d) upward feedback. Subsequently the third chapter discussed

the rationale for utilising an empirical phenomenological approach, the data collection process, how data analysis was undertaken and how the credibility of the study was achieved. The fourth chapter then presented the findings from the data analysis. This final chapter discusses the findings and the implications of the study, proposes recommendations for the organisation under research and recommends areas of future research.

5.2 Discussion

The organisation under research forms part of a national organisation. When analysed against Robbins, Bergmann, Stagg and Coulter's (2001) descriptions of organisational structures, the organisation under research employs a mechanistic structure which closely resembles the divisional design suggested by Robbins and Mukerji (1994). Evidencing this divisional design is that each State is managed by a state manager who reports to a National Head Office. As the organisation seeks to maintain consistency across its 97 locations decision making is centralised at the National Office with information predominantly filtering down through the hierarchical levels to subordinates for implementation. Subordinate, middle manager, senior manager and state manager roles across each State are both highly formalised and standardised in terms of their job descriptions which clearly define the processes and procedures to follow. Because of the structural design it utilises, the organisation also has high levels of complexity as evidenced in the numerous levels of the organisation's hierarchy, the range of occupations that exist within the organisation and the physical distance between States all of which impact upon communication.

Within Western Australia, the organisation is located in five metropolitan offices and three regional areas. Superordinates are located in the State Head Office with two middle managers being located in two metropolitan offices and one middle manager being located in a regional area. With the exception of two subordinates, all of the subordinates that participated in the study were not located in the same office as their middle manager. Due to this physical disconnect, the majority of upward feedback occurred in a formalised context.

In light of the above organisational context, the findings that were presented in Chapter 4 are now discussed.

5.1.1 Conclusion of Findings for Research Question 1

The first research question revealed three common themes which related to (a) deterrents to upward feedback, (b) enablers of upward feedback, and (c) the feedback environment. The latter theme is discussed first for contextual reasons.

The feedback environment.

Data analysis results suggested that the majority of participants believed that information relating to both strategic planning and operational tasks originated at the top of the organisation's hierarchy, namely their National Head Office. These findings are coherent given the organisation's mechanistic structure, its centralised decision making and its need to maintain consistency across its 97 locations which are all consistent with a downward flow of information. Despite this downward flow of information however, all of the participants perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making in State meetings, through online surveys, teleconferences, working parties, brainstorming sessions and one-on-one meetings. This finding is explicable given that at a minimum organisations expect their employees to fulfil their positional obligations by providing upward feedback relating to their function within the organisation (Fenn & Head, 1965). Evidencing this latter claim were the topics that formed most of the frequent upward communication in this study. These topics related to program reviews, job description changes, ways in which to engage staff in the workplace and scholarship processes most of which were manager initiated.

Participative decision making in this organisation reflected the dimensions identified by Black and Gregersen (1997). Employees were invited to participate in decision making because of the information they had access to and problems were identified through program reviews and pilot programs. Feedback was usually provided in a formal process either by individual subordinates or using representatives (especially on working parties). Most of the decisions that subordinates contributed to related to work and task design with a few opportunities to contribute to strategic planning.

Deterrents to upward feedback.

While subordinates were presented with opportunities to provide upward feedback the organisation's structure caused complications when it came to the type of 'voice' that subordinates adopted in the provision of upward feedback. Given that very few subordinates were located in the same office as their middle manager, most subordinates provided feedback in a formalised process using their reactive voice rather than their active voice. This was reflective of the limited opportunities for the provision of informal upward feedback. A lack of visibility, accessibility and availability of managers also inhibited subordinates from building relationships and trust with their middle managers and consequently meant that some subordinates preferred to only respond to manager initiated feedback, or to only provide certain types of feedback that they felt comfortable with. These findings align with Fenn and Head's (1965) study which showed that physical or social distance resulting from an organisation's structure has the ability to inhibit subordinate initiated feedback because subordinates are unable to develop trust with their managers which was a necessity for this form of feedback.

Another deterrent to upward feedback that the study revealed related to subordinates perceiving a discrepancy in how manager's treated feedback resulting from reactive voice when compared to active voice. Subordinates perceived more outcomes from the former feedback than from the latter. While prior research has examined employee controlled outcomes (i.e., deliberate turnover) and managerial controlled outcomes (i.e., performance ratings and retention choices) resulting from employee voice (Burris, 2013; Withey & Cooper, 1989) no research currently exists that examines whether manager initiated feedback achieves more outcomes (i.e. the implementation of subordinate ideas) than subordinate initiated feedback. For this reason it is not possible to draw conclusions against existing literature. An inference can however be drawn about the veracity of this finding based on the following assertions. First, if a discrepancy exists between the subordinate's and manager's estimation of the amount of voice the subordinate has contributed, an overestimation on the part of the subordinate can result in a lack of action, recognition or outcomes by management. This is particularly so if managers do not perceive the subordinate's voice as being improvement orientated (Avery & Quinones, 2002). Second, in light of Dutton et al.'s (1997) study, it is possible that middle managers might not advocate subordinate ideas resulting from active voice if they believe that it would negatively impact upon their self-image. Third, as middle managers are often in meetings with senior

managers they are privy to the direction the organisation will be taking. Therefore, where subordinate information does not align with the organisation's strategic direction or vision, middle managers would not use their upward influence to champion subordinate ideas. This is especially the case if the information could adversely impact on the middle manager's credibility in the eyes of senior management. An additional reason as to why reactive voice rather than active voice might have a greater impact relates to situations in which managers seek certain information that is relevant to a particular decision they are currently considering. In this situation managers are more likely to act on the information provided within a specific 'decision time frame'. Conversely, where managers do not respond to subordinate feedback in a timely manner (because they require more evidence or because the feedback does not fit in with the organisation's short term direction) it can give subordinates the impression that reactive voice rather than active voice achieves more outcomes. As Saunders, Sheppard, Knight and Roth (1992) commented subordinates perceive responsiveness as the speed and enthusiasm with which management deal with upward feedback.

Finally, subordinates are also likely to think that reactive voice rather than active voice is more influential in decision making if managers do not offer explanations regarding the viability or otherwise of a subordinate's feedback. This lack of management responsiveness causes subordinate confusion especially where subordinates perceive managers as considering their reactive voice as valuable, yet simultaneously reject or ignore the same knowledge and expertise when it is offered using their active voice. This latter problem can be easily circumvented by managers closing the feedback loop after subordinates provide upward feedback.

For this reason it is clear why subordinates highlighted another of the deterrents to the provision of upward feedback as a sense of feeling unheard. Subordinates felt unheard when there was no information from management about what had occurred with their feedback or where they saw no outcomes from their feedback. Consequently, disaffected subordinates resorted to acquiescent silence (as described by Van Dyne, Soon & Botero, 2003) and displayed the alienated follower behaviours that Kelley described (1992). Consistent with studies by Kelley (1992) and Van Dyne and colleagues (2003) studies, these disillusioned subordinates believed that while they had lots of ideas to share they would not make the effort to speak up as their feedback would achieve no outcomes. Although they "did not want to be that way" these subordinates felt there was no other option for them. This outcome is consistent with Landau's (2009a) findings, which showed that where

subordinates do not see results, they choose to no longer provide feedback and believe it's better to remain silent than to speak up. Landau's (2009a) study also found that irrespective of how many times management declared its appreciation for upward feedback subordinates would not share information if they did not see outcomes. This withholding of information is a clear indication of follower power as described by Daft and Pirola-Merlo (2009).

For other subordinates in this study however, their need to feel 'heard' was not attached to outcomes but to the opportunity to have a voice and to have managers close the feedback loop after the provision of upward feedback. These findings support the value expressive perspective which proposes that people desire an opportunity to articulate their feelings (irrespective of results) as it gives them the impression of being treated fairly (Tyler, 1987). Those subordinates who preferred to see outcomes however, prescribed more to the instrumental perspective which proposes that it is not sufficient to be heard but is equally important for the contributors' feedback to be taken into consideration and to influence the outcomes of decision making (Shapiro, 1993).

The final deterrent to upward feedback was linked to the voice mechanisms used to solicit upward feedback. Subordinates believed that some of the methods their managers used to request subordinate input into decision making were inappropriate. The inappropriateness of the voice methods chosen stemmed from (a) managers requesting subordinate input into sensitive decisions (e.g. job description changes) in a group situation while allowing insufficient time for discussion, and (b) managers asking for critical information relating to how to better engage subordinates in the workplace through the use of surveys which had pre-defined responses.

With the exception of research by Landau (2009b) who studied how voice mechanisms relate to voice propensity and Spencer (1986) who focussed on the link between voice mechanisms and employee voluntary turnover, there is currently no research on the connection between voice mechanisms and their appropriateness for eliciting subordinate information. However, an assumption can be drawn regarding the authenticity of subordinate concerns by considering the following. If managers select inappropriate mechanisms for certain topics of upward feedback this can impact upon both the quality and quantity of feedback. In the job description change example that subordinates provided, ten subordinates were sat around a table and asked to review numerous proposed job description changes within an hour. In this situation, follower's personalities,

behaviours and attitudes as well as management's personalities and behaviours can make for a lethal and detrimental combination where there is disagreement. This can cause some subordinates to engage in the different forms of voice and silence as discussed by Van Dyne et al. (2003) or can fuel ingratiation practices where managers are advocating one change over another. Where extroverts take over and introverts are unable to have a say, this results in dissatisfaction with the resultant job description and could ultimately result in the voluntary turnover of disgruntled subordinates.

Similarly, management's use of surveys to gather upward feedback on ways in which to improve the workplace might not allow subordinates an opportunity to propose suggestions outside of the pre-determined responses. For this reason, as suggested by Tourish (2005) organisations need to create and put systems in place that allow employees to contribute to the decision making process both formally and informally. This then gives subordinates additional channels for the provision of upward feedback if they deem the original mechanism to be inappropriate.

Enablers to upward feedback.

An interesting finding in this study concerned subordinates feeling comfortable to speak openly and honestly when they provided upward feedback. This could possibly be attributed to the fact that the majority of the feedback that subordinates provided related to programs and processes rather than to their manager's management style. As there is no perceived psychological danger in providing this type of information, it is plain as to why subordinates felt comfortable to speak openly when providing upward feedback. This result was incongruous with Tourish and Robson's (2003) and Athanassiades' (1973) studies which showed subordinates' proclivity to either be overly positive when providing feedback or to distort their feedback. It is debatable however whether or not this result would have been the same if subordinates were required to provide feedback on their manager's management style.

As subordinates had an opportunity to provide feedback using both their active and reactive voice, they perceived numerous opportunities to provide upward feedback. While this in itself is an enabler of upward feedback, these occasions to provide feedback have to be considered separately from the outcomes they achieved (as discussed earlier under the differences in outcomes associated with active versus reactive voice).

Finally, while the findings indicated that subordinates would continue to provide upward feedback because they felt duty bound to do so, this should not necessarily be viewed as a positive thing. Some subordinates stated they would only provide feedback that could be dealt with at a State level or would only respond to feedback that was management initiated. It is evident from these responses that these subordinates portray alienated follower behaviours because they choose to actively engage in acquiescent silence regarding matters that they believe will have no outcomes. Consequently, it can be expected that these subordinates would withhold critical information. While it may appear to management that these subordinates are participating in the decision making process, where management do not ask the 'right' questions this empowers subordinates to withhold critical information which can prove to be extremely precarious for the organisation. In sum, just because subordinates are speaking, it does not mean that they are providing the critical information that management may need to make informed decisions. These findings parallel Tourish's (2005) assertion that just because subordinates agree with managers' opinions this does not mean that the decisions managers make are not erroneous but rather it may mean that subordinates are using flattery to gain influence and avoid negative consequences.

5.1.2 Conclusion of Findings for Research Question 2

The second research question revealed six common themes which related to (a) characteristics of the subordinates, (b) significance of subordinate feedback, (c) trustworthiness of subordinate feedback, (d) importance of subordinates feeling heard, (e) continued request for feedback, and (f) the feedback environment. With the exception of the sub-theme relating to the recipient of feedback, the feedback environment was already discussed in Section 5.11. For contextual reasons this sub-theme of the feedback environment is discussed first.

Recipient of the feedback.

The majority of middle managers believed that their subordinates felt comfortable to provide a range of feedback directly to superordinates at State meetings. This finding is consistent with Landau's (2009b) research which found that subordinates would voice their opinions directly to those higher up the hierarchy if presented with the opportunity.

While Morrison and Milliken's (2000) and Bowen and Blackmon (2003) believed that subordinates were not likely to speak up because they wanted to maintain the group's cohesiveness or unless they had the backing of their colleagues, the findings in this study presented a different result. Although there was a greater power differential between subordinates and superordinates than between subordinates and middle managers, because the feedback was being provided in a group situation, subordinates felt 'safer' to provide upward feedback. It can be assumed that subordinates would perceive fewer individual negative consequences, feel more confident to speak up and seek the backing of their peers to reinforce the importance of a message when they were in a group situation. Further where middle managers acted as a hindrance to upward feedback, State meetings offered subordinates an opportunity to 'bypass' their manager and get their message across directly to those who had the power to make the decision.

Characteristics of subordinates.

The majority of managers and superordinates who participated in the study believed that 'passionate' and motivated subordinates were the most likely to initiate feedback in the workplace. These findings correspond with Kelley's description of effective followers who are followers that are fully engaged in the organisation and also consider how the information they are providing is likely to impact on the organisation (Kelley, 1992). It is therefore understandable that these followers would voluntarily speak up in the workplace especially where they saw opportunities that were in the best interests of the organisation.

An interesting finding however was that both middle managers and superordinates did not agree on the characteristics of those subordinates who were least likely to initiate feedback. Responses ranged from those subordinates who had confidence issues, were absent from work and were non-cooperative, to subordinates who liked direction and were happy to only focus on their job. Although there was no agreement, the characteristics they described aligned with Kelly's (1992) descriptions of followers who are dependent uncritical thinkers and passive followers.

Significance of subordinate feedback.

There was shared agreement that subordinates' input into the decision making process was vital to the success of the organisation as they were at the forefront of the organisation and knew what was going on. These findings support Tourish's (2005) suggestion that

subordinates can provide senior managers with beneficial information relating to the viability of management's strategies by contributing to decision making.

Trustworthiness of subordinate feedback.

Tourish (2005) contended that because managers react adversely to critical feedback, subordinates tend to provide feedback that aligns with what they perceive will be acceptable to management. This, according to Tourish can have detrimental consequences for an organisation as subordinates tend not to oppose erroneous decisions that management have made. Conlee and Tesser (1973) also suggested that subordinates find it difficult to convey negative information to leaders. The findings in this study were consistent with the above authors' suggestions and revealed that subordinates preferred to provide positive rather than negative upward feedback. The managers in this study attributed the inability of subordinates to share negative information to a lack of trust on the subordinates' part. These findings correspond with Argyris' (1980) findings that subordinates tend to cover up, modify or lie when a topic is considered as being difficult and undiscussable in nature. Further, they also support Roberts and O'Reilly's (2007) assertion that trust is an imperative factor in the provision of open and honest upward feedback. This would also explain Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin's (2003) finding that subordinates preferred to hold onto their job rather than be perceived as undermining their manager by opposing or correcting management's decisions. As such, if subordinates felt there would be negative consequences for sharing negative information they would keep silent.

Data analysis in this study revealed a difference between managers' and subordinates' perceptions regarding the ability to speak openly and honestly when providing upward feedback. As discussed earlier, subordinates stated they felt comfortable to speak openly when providing feedback, yet management did not perceive subordinate openness in the same way. A conclusion can be drawn that management do not per se doubt the credibility of the information they are receiving from their subordinates (they were more concerned about omissions), but are instead aware that their subordinates are selective about the information that they share due to a lack of trust in management. Because management perceives that negative information is omitted, this causes management to be hesitant about whether or not they have the 'whole picture' when they receive subordinate upward feedback.

Importance of subordinates feeling heard (manager's perspective).

Managers in the study highlighted the importance of subordinates feeling heard after the provision of upward feedback. Managers attempted to accomplish this by being available, listening to subordinates and closing the feedback loop after subordinates had provided feedback. Despite these attempts, both subordinates and managers acknowledged managers were not very good at closing the feedback loop. This theme relating to managers' inability to close the feedback loop appeared numerous times in the study. Closing of the feedback loop was considered especially pertinent by subordinates where there was a lack of outcomes or where outcomes differed from subordinate expectations. As Lam (2009, p.16) suggested "a manager's propagation or non-propagation of voice may function as a feedback loop to affect the subordinate's future tendency to engage in improvement oriented voice". The findings in this study were consistent with Landau's (2009a) study which found that where supervisors did not communicate with subordinates regarding why their suggestions were not viable, subordinates had no idea as to why their feedback had not been implemented or achieved any outcomes. Luthans (1992) warned of the disastrous effect that 'pseudo participation' had on employee morale if managers asked for input but did not use the input or give subordinates feedback. The effects of this were seen in those subordinates who chose to become alienated followers.

Continued request for feedback.

There was overall agreement from managers in the study that they would continue to request upward feedback given its importance to the success of the organisation. These findings parallel Tourish's (2005) assertion that seeking upward feedback not only results in better decision making but also increases the chances of subordinates implementing changes that they had an opportunity to contribute to.

5.1.3 Conclusion of Findings for Research Question 3

The third research question revealed four common themes which related to middle managers as (a) a conduit, (b) a filter, (c) an inhibitor, and (d) an advocate.

Conduit.

There was common agreement among the majority of participants that the role of the middle manager was to pass subordinate suggestions upwards to senior management. The findings in this study correspond with Lam's research (2009) which suggested that one of the roles of middle managers was to propagate subordinate ideas to top management. Where middle managers undertook the role of disseminating subordinate ideas up, down or across the hierarchy they were considered a conduit to improvement orientated voice (Lam, 2009).

Another aspect of the middle manager's role as a conduit related to the accuracy with which information was passed upwards to senior managers. The majority of the subordinates believed that their middle manager passed their feedback upwards accurately. This belief can be both correct and fallacious. It can be argued that where middle managers have to 'issue sell' subordinate ideas, they might not always pass up subordinate information exactly as conveyed but would instead endorse subordinate ideas by either adding to or changing the message so as to make it appear more propitious and viable in the eyes of senior management. Conversely, where subordinates provide sufficient information and put forward a strong case, middle managers pass this information upwards without the need modify the content of the message. This is discussed further under the roles of middle manager as filters and advocates.

Filter.

Due to their ability to determine what information to pass upwards the filtering role that middle managers' play in the upward feedback process was highlighted by all participants. This is understandable given that organisations often employ middle managers to act as gate keepers to the volumes of information that travel up and down the hierarchy. As Dutton and colleagues proposed (1997) senior managers rely on middle managers to provide them with the information that they need to make their decisions.

Lam's research (2009) found that middle managers either propagate or do not propagate subordinate ideas depending on whether or not they understood and agreed with the subordinate's suggestion. Where they agreed, middle managers would give the 'green light' and either deal with feedback if it was within their power to do so, or would alternatively champion the idea to top management. Where they disagreed with or did not understand

the suggestion made, middle managers would discount or ignore the idea. Similar to Lam's study, subordinates in the current study asserted that middle managers were responsible for determining the feasibility of their information prior to passing it upwards or dealing with it at their level if relevant.

While the middle manager's filtering role was seen as a necessity, it was also viewed as a potential impediment due to middle managers' ability to determine what should and should not be passed upwards. As Tourish (2005, p.4) suggested "formal communication channels tend to filter out crucial bits of information, leaving those at the top more out of the loop than they had realised". It can be argued that middle managers as formal communication channels would function in this way. Being aware of this filtering role one of the superordinates decided not to rely on feedback received from middle managers but to instead meet with subordinates to verify the feedback received. This strategy was identical to Tourish's (2005) recommendation for senior managers to make the time to meet informally with subordinates so to enable the two way exchange of honest information.

Another sub theme under the filtering role of middle managers related to the criteria these managers used to decide what information to pass upwards to senior managers. Data analysis revealed that middle managers would determine whether or not the information subordinates shared had the ability to impact upon the organisation. Where it did, they would unreservedly pass the information upwards. Where the feedback was recurrent middle managers suggested that they would deal with it at their level. These findings are somewhat dissimilar to Dutton et al.'s (1997) research which contended that the criteria that middle managers used to consider whether or not to champion subordinate ideas related to (a) whether the organisation's context was favourable, (b) whether middle managers were able to make a good impression, and (c) whether or not the information subordinates shared was useful or relevant to their functional area. While these factors may have been considered by the middle managers in the study, none of the participants' indicated use of this criterion when deciding what to pass upwards.

Inhibitor.

The adoption of middle managers' filtering role, explains why subordinates and some managers perceived the role of the middle manager as an inhibitor to upward feedback. As discussed above because of their ability not to propagate subordinate ideas to top

management where they do not understand or agree with the feedback, middle managers can act as an impediment to the upward feedback process. Another more prominent reason that subordinates raised regarding middle managers as inhibitors however related to the behaviours that these managers displayed when subordinates provided upward feedback. Subordinates used words such as “harshness”, “being cut off”, and “creates an uncondusive environment” to describe middle manager behaviours that discouraged them from providing upward feedback. The behaviours described by subordinates are comparable to the type of behaviours that autocratic manager’s display (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). Moreover, these findings also correspond to Tourish’s (2005) suggestion that managers react adversely in what is called automatic vigilance effect if they do not appreciate the feedback they are receiving. Finally, the current study’s findings support Detret and Burriss’s (2007) assertion that leader behaviours send stronger signals about the appreciation or otherwise of voice.

Advocate.

The final theme in the study, that was only common among managers related to the role of middle managers as advocates in the upward feedback process. This role pertained to middle managers advocating subordinate ideas to top management. As all of the roles of the middle manager are interrelated, some of the issue selling aspects of the middle manager role were discussed under the criteria that they use to filter information. In their role as champions of subordinate ideas, middle managers are well placed to make judgements on the relevancy of information and after screening this information are able to build a credible proposal which they can present to management for consideration (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994). Middle managers are also able to influence senior managers’ decision making by framing subordinate information in convincing ways. Floyd and Wooldridge’s (1994) suggestions are consistent with the findings of this study in which middle managers stated they did not always pass up subordinate information as conveyed to them, but would instead create a ‘sales pitch for it’ so as to sell the idea to top management.

5.3 Implications of the Study’s Findings

Although much research has been conducted in the areas of employee voice and upward feedback, few studies have addressed the influence that middle managers have on the

upward feedback process. This study showed the significant role that middle managers play in influencing the upward feedback process as well as how important it is for organisations to have middle managers who are 'good voice managers' in the upward feedback process.

The study showed how middle managers have the ability to influence the upward feedback process both positively and negatively. Subordinates' experiences showed that where middle managers influenced upward feedback negatively, middle managers behaved as deterrents, filters and inhibitors to the upward feedback process. The difficulty of the middle manager role was especially evident in their role as filter. While both senior management and subordinates expected middle managers to determine the relevancy of the information prior to passing it upwards, it was this very same role that caused middle managers to negatively influence upward feedback. Further, middle managers were also seen to influence upward feedback negatively by being invisible, unavailable and by displaying autocratic management behaviours. These behaviours and their inability to close the feedback loop consequently caused subordinates to withdraw and become alienated followers who engaged in acquiescent silence. It is because of this negative influence that subordinates chose to only use their reactive voice instead of active voice when contributing to decision making; even then, there is no assurance that subordinates do not intentionally withhold critical information that could impact on the organisation's performance or success.

Where middle managers influenced upward feedback positively, they used collaborative approaches, facilitated feedback and advocated subordinate ideas to top management. Where middle managers displayed democratic management behaviours, subordinates become effective followers who engaged with the organisation. Consequently subordinates used both their reactive and active voices.

Despite the role that middle managers played in influencing the feedback process, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that a number of other elements also influenced the feedback process. These elements related to superordinate and subordinate characteristics and the organisation's culture and structure.

This study showed how an organisation's structure could negatively impact upon the provision of upward feedback. The organisations' structure caused a physical disconnect between subordinates and their middle managers which resulted in the inability to establish relationships and trust. Due to a lack of trust, subordinates preferred to provide

positive rather than negative upward feedback. Subsequently, subordinates preferred to use their reactive voice rather than active voice. Lack of opportunities to provide informal feedback due to the invisibility of managers also resulted from the organisation's structure. These findings show superordinates the importance of electing organisational structures that enable both formal and informal upward feedback.

Another important finding in the study related to the importance of closing the feedback loop. While managers acknowledged the importance of subordinate input into the decision making process, subordinates did not believe that their input was valued. This mostly stemmed from subordinates seeing a lack of outcomes or not being informed of what had occurred with their feedback. This study showed the importance of managers closing the feedback loop so that subordinates do not become alienated followers who resort to acquiescent silence which is detrimental to an organisation's success.

Another implication that the study revealed related to the importance of appropriate voice mechanisms. Appropriate voice mechanisms allow for better quality and quantity of decision making and can also enable subordinates to provide honest upward feedback where the mechanisms allow for anonymity. This in turn could alleviate manager's concerns regarding omissions of negative upward feedback. Offering multiple voice mechanisms can also be particularly useful where middle managers behave as inhibitors to the upward feedback process.

Based on the current findings and implications of this study, the conceptual framework that was presented in Chapter 2 has been now been amplified to focus on the aspect of the middle manager's role (element two) within the organisational context. As was seen in Figure 2.1, an organisation's structure; leaders' and managers' style and behaviour; follower behaviour; and an organisation's communication environment all have the ability to either create opportunities for, or create barriers to upward feedback. With this in mind, the conceptual framework overleaf amplifies and concentrates on the single element of the middle manager's influence of upward feedback as purposed in the study. Within the organisational context, a middle manager's style and behaviour can either create barriers to, or opportunities for the provision of upward feedback. Figure 5.1 presents a synthesis of the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process.

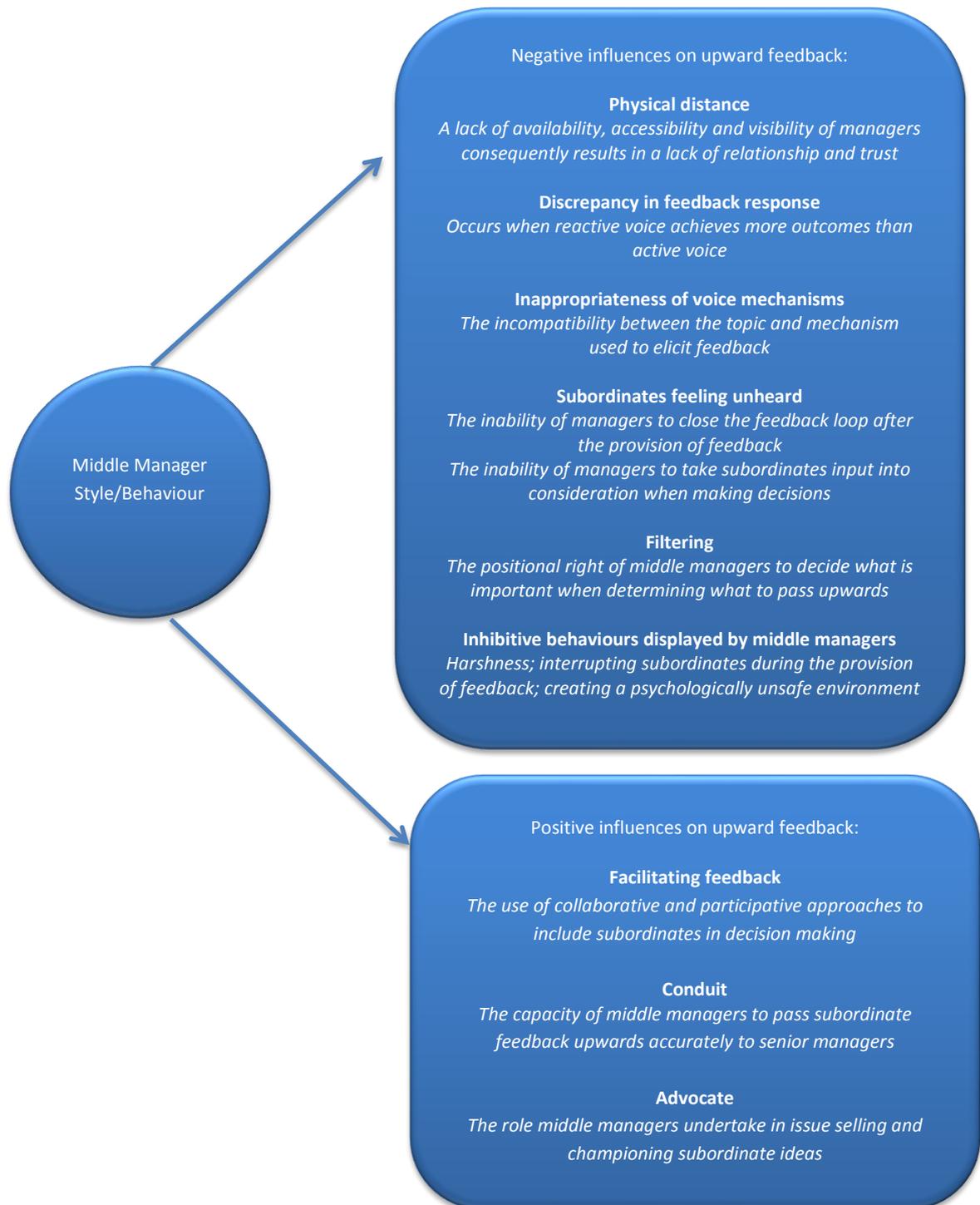


Figure 5.1 Amplification of the conceptual framework’s representation of middle manager’s influence on upward feedback

5.4 Significance of the Study's Findings

The findings of this study are significant to superordinates, middle managers and subordinates in service organisations. Superordinates can utilise information from this study to ensure they select or design appropriate organisational structures which enable them and middle managers to be proximate, visible and available to subordinates so as to build relationships which is a necessity for the provision of voluntary and open upward feedback. Superordinates can also use the information in the study to ensure that the middle managers they employ exhibit democratic management styles which facilitate upward feedback.

Middle managers can use the strategies presented in Chapter 4 to enhance upward feedback from their subordinates. Both middle managers and superordinates can utilise the recommendations provided in the study to ensure that subordinates feel heard and encouraged to continue to provide upward feedback.

The findings in the study are also pertinent to subordinates as it informs them of the importance that management place on their input into the decision making process which will in turn eliminate any doubts subordinates hold about the value of providing upward feedback.

5.5 Recommendations for Action

The study highlighted a number of inadequacies in the organisation under research in terms of the processes utilised for enabling upward feedback. The recommendations below are made in light of the literature and the totality of the findings that have been discussed in this thesis.

Closing of the feedback loop.

If management is to continue to receive upward feedback and keep its staff engaged, it is absolutely critical that both middle managers and superordinates close the feedback loop after a subordinate provides upward feedback (Ryan & Oestereich, 1998). This can either be done immediately by firstly thanking the subordinate for their contribution, and then by

discussing their upward feedback in a non-threatening manner. Where the feedback is not viable, it is essential that managers provide the subordinate with the reasons why. During this time, the manager should ensure that they create a psychologically safe environment and should be especially mindful of both their tone and body language. This not only assuages the subordinate but also provides the opportunity for further discussion which could potentially lead to a better decision than was first suggested.

Where feedback has been considered and used for the decision making process, managers should inform the subordinate of how their information was used. This is especially critical where several subordinates have provided feedback on the same decision and the cumulative result does not look like any of the subordinates' suggestions (Scott-Ladd & Marshall, 2004). Where management has insufficient time to provide feedback for each decision, managers can create a feedback matrix where they can document the feedback and how it was used and then provide this feedback to the individual subordinate in one on one meetings, or to the group at State meetings. These strategies will ensure that subordinates feel heard and will reassure those subordinates who prescribe to the instrumental perspective that their input into decision making is valued (Shapiro, 1993).

Voice mechanisms.

The organisation should offer subordinates a range of formal and informal channels for the provision of upward feedback with the option to remain anonymous. These mechanisms can range from creating a hotline, suggestion boxes or open door policies (Landau, 2009b). The organisation can also create an official ombudsperson role (Milliken et al., 2003) so that if a subordinate has tried on several occasions to pass upward feedback through their middle manager and did not have success, they can approach the ombudsperson. The ombudsperson would have to be adequately trained on what to pass upwards and what to refer back to middle managers whilst ensuring that the subordinate remains anonymous. It would be recommended that the person who undertakes the ombudsperson role should display democratic behaviours that encourage upward feedback.

Visibility.

Due to the organisational structure and the physical distance between offices, middle managers and senior managers should make a concerted effort to visit offices within the metropolitan office on a regular basis or to call subordinates regularly so as to build

relationships with subordinates. This will give subordinates opportunities to provide informal upward feedback which can be just as critical as formal upward feedback. This strategy may also assist in rescinding the physical disconnect that the structure creates. Further, visibility will also facilitate the development of trust between managers and subordinates which will in turn aid with provision of more open upward feedback. Some of the ways that managers can build high trust environments were recommended by Ryan and Oesterich (1998) in Chapter 2.

Train middle managers.

Middle managers should be trained in ways in which to create conducive environments for the provision of upward feedback and in how to be good voice managers (Landau, 2009a). Good voice manager behaviour includes handling subordinates upward feedback promptly, listening to employees, taking action and treating subordinate feedback as a high priority (Landau, 2009a). Middle managers should also be trained to display democratic behaviours and should be equipped with the communication skills in how to manage their tone and body language so as to not discourage future negative upward feedback.

Create reward systems.

Managers can tell subordinates that they value upward feedback (whether negative or positive) several times, however, the message can be put across more powerfully if managers reward those subordinates who share critical upward feedback that could have potentially prevented the organisation from a major failure. Where finances are an impediment, reward systems as simple as certificates, morning teas or acknowledgements at State meetings can be implemented.

Be explicit about the importance of subordinate voice.

Superordinates should explicitly inform all subordinates at State meetings about how the organisation values their voice and input into the decision making process. Superordinates should advise subordinates of the voice mechanisms available in the organisation. If possible, superordinates should ask subordinates to use one of the anonymous voice mechanisms to inform them of any potential inhibitors to upward feedback. Middle managers should also communicate the same message to subordinates on a regular basis.

5.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, numerous opportunities for further research were identified.

First, as the study was only limited to ten participants within the organisation, this study could be replicated with a larger sample in a service organisation so as to be able to generalise the findings. The study could be undertaken in a school as the structures of schools sitting under the Department of Education would closely parallel the organisation under research.

Second, as the study revealed that subordinates perceived manager initiated feedback (or reactive voice) as achieving more outcomes than subordinate initiated feedback (active voice) this presents an additional area for future research to either confirm or repudiate this perception.

Third, as no research currently exists relating to voice mechanisms and their appropriateness for eliciting upward feedback, research could be undertaken in this area.

Fourth, as a major finding in this research highlighted the link between closing the feedback loop and being heard, this presents future researchers with the opportunity to research whether or not closing of the feedback loop results in subordinates feeling heard. When researching this area it is recommended that the value expressive perspective and instrumental perspectives are also considered.

Fifth, although this study briefly addressed the criteria that middle managers use to determine what to pass upwards, undertaking a more comprehensive study of the criteria and reasons for filtering information would expand the literature on middle managers role in the upward feedback process.

Sixth, as the majority of the participants in the study were female and the majority of the participants were aged over 40 years of age, it would be worth replicating this study to determine if there is an association between gender or age and the use of active versus reactive voice in provision of upward feedback.

Finally, as there is very little literature that addresses the role that middle managers play in the upward feedback process, research exploring the 'upper half' of the upward feedback

process that is, feedback from middle managers to superordinates would expand the literature on middle managers role in the upward feedback process.

5.7 Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study was determined by the research questions which were derived from the literature review. Consequently despite contributing knowledge to the areas of upward feedback theory this study had several limitations.

Due to the complexity of the organisation's structure and proximity issues the first limitation pertained to the decision to undertake the study with one division of the national organisation. It was therefore not possible to generalise the findings beyond the Western Australian division.

The second limitation related to the necessity to use a purposeful sampling strategy. As there were a few subordinates in the organisation that reported to a middle manager who could be invited to participate in the study, the results of the study could not be generalised beyond this cohort within the organisation as all those who chose to participate in the study held the same role and job title.

Third, leaders and followers behaviours and attitudes play a critical, key role in the provision or lack thereof of upward feedback. While the study examined these briefly, more in-depth research and analysis would have educed a clearer understanding of how these behaviours and the power dynamics between these two groups affect upward feedback.

Fourth, like leader and follower behaviour, an organisation's culture also determines to a great extent how people behave in an organisation including what is and is not acceptable. Examining upward feedback in light of organisational culture would have been highly worthwhile.

5.8 Summary

This chapter discussed the findings that were presented in Chapter 4. The chapter addressed the implications and significance of the study's findings, made recommendations

for action and for future research and presented the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes by presenting an overview of the study.

5.9 Conclusion

The purpose of this empirical phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of ten participants who had experienced the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process.

The major findings in the study showed that in subordinates' experience of upward feedback deterrents to feedback related to (a) physical distance, (b) discrepancy in feedback response, (c) mode of feedback, and (d) not being heard. Enablers to feedback related to (a) the ability to speak openly, (b) opportunities to use both reactive and active voice, and (c) the duty to provide feedback. Subordinates' experience of upward feedback was also affected by the organisation's feedback environment.

Superordinate and middle managers' experiences of upward feedback revealed six common findings that related to (a) characteristics of subordinates, (b) significance of subordinate feedback, (c) trustworthiness of subordinate feedback, (d) importance of subordinates feeling heard, (e) continued request for feedback, and (f) the feedback environment.

The study revealed four main themes relating to the role of middle managers in the upward feedback process. These included middle managers as (a) a conduit, (b) a filter, (c) an inhibitor, and (d) an advocate.

The study also highlighted a number of non-common themes raised by subordinates, middle managers and superordinates.

The implications of this study included (a) middle manager's ability to both positively and negatively influence upward feedback, (b) the organisation structure's ability to impact upward feedback, (c) the necessity of closing the feedback loop, and (d) the need to use appropriate voice mechanisms for the provision of upward feedback.

Seven significant areas for future research were also identified. These included (a) replicating the study with a larger sample, (b) research into whether reactive voice creates more outcomes than active voice, (c) voice mechanisms and their appropriateness for

eliciting upward feedback, (d) the link between closing the feedback loop and being heard from a value expressive perspective and instrumental perspective, (e) criteria middle managers use to filter information upwards, (f) whether there is an association between age and gender and the use of reactive versus active voice, and (g) the middle manager's role in the upward feedback process from the middle manager's perspective.

The thesis concluded by outlining the limitations of the study.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Western Australia Organisational structure



Appendix 2

Interview questions for subordinates

Date:

Time:

Participant:

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview on upward feedback. I appreciate how valuable your time is.

As you've read in the participant information sheet the purpose of this research is to examine the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process. Upward feedback occurs when you share information with your middle manager or senior leaders. The focus of this study is on upward feedback for decision making purposes, so wherever I refer to upward feedback, it will be for the purpose of decision making.

I'd like to invite you to think of yourself as a co-researcher with me during the interview process. We will be learning about upward feedback together. There are no right or wrong answers I am just very interested in learning and understanding the experiences that you have had of providing upward feedback. Did you have any questions before we get started? [Collect consent form].

1. Could you tell me how long you've worked here and give me a brief overview of what your current role is?
2. Could you describe to me how members of your organisation communicate at present?
3. If I were to focus on day to day tasks, how would you describe the direction that information flows in this organisation?
4. If I was now to focus on long term planning, how would you describe the direction that information flows within this organisation?
5. From your perspective and experience would you say upward feedback for decision making occurs in your organisation?

6. If so, what does it concern?
7. Does your middle manager or top manager ask you to participate or contribute to decision making by providing upward feedback?
8. Are there times when you choose to volunteer information to your middle manager that could impact upon decision making without your manager having to ask for that information?
9. When you do contribute to decision making, does your contribution result more from your middle manager asking for that information or more from you choosing to volunteer up information?
10. What do you think your middle manager's role is in the upward feedback process [when you provide information for decision making]?
 - a. Do you see their role as impeding or facilitating the process?
 - b. From your experience has the information that you have provided to them been conveyed accurately to your top managers?
 - c. Do you provide upward feedback more often because you have a middle level manager as a go between as opposed to if you had to go directly to a top manager?
11. Do you think your manager views your input as being important for the decision making process?
12. I'd like you to try and think back to a situation in which you have provided upward feedback for decision making purposes to your middle manager. Take a few moments to think back on the whole experience. Could you describe to me in as much detail as possible the experience(s) that you had in providing upward feedback for decision making purposes? I am interested in what you might have gone through whether it was mentally, emotionally or physically when providing that upward feedback.
13. Could you describe how that/those experience(s) of giving upward feedback affected you?

14. Because of your experiences are you more or less likely to provide future upward feedback?
15. Are there certain types of upward feedback you feel more comfortable than others in providing to your middle level or top manager?
16. Do you always feel comfortable to voice your honest opinion when providing upward feedback to your manager?
17. Describe to me some of the ways in which you think middle managers and top leaders could encourage you to provide upward feedback for decision making purposes
 - a. Are there any specific behaviours they could display to encourage upward feedback
 - b. What are some of the behaviours that would discourage you from giving upward feedback?
18. Of all the things we've discussed this today in terms of upward feedback what is the most important to you?

Provide summary of main points

Thank you very much for your time. After I have reviewed my interview notes and typed them out, do you mind if I email them to you for you to verify that I have adequately and accurately captured your views?

Appendix 3

Middle manager interview questions

Date:

Time:

Participant:

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview on upward feedback. I really appreciate how valuable your time is.

As you've read in the participant information sheet the purpose of this research is to examine the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process. Upward feedback occurs when subordinates share information with you or your senior leaders or when you share information with your senior managers. The focus of this study is on upward feedback for decision making purposes, so wherever I refer to upward feedback, it will be for the purpose of decision making. I am very interested in the duality of your role because not only do you receive upward feedback, but you also provide upward feedback to your managers.

I'd like to invite you to think of yourself as a co-researcher with me during the interview process. We will be learning about upward feedback together. There are no right or wrong answers I am just very interested in learning and understanding the experiences that you have had of providing upward feedback. Did you have any questions before we get started? [Collect consent form].

1. Could you tell me how long you've worked here and give me a brief overview of what your current role involves?
2. Could you describe to me how members of your organisation communicate at present?
3. If I was to focus on operational tasks how would you describe the direction that information flows in this organisation?
4. If I was now to focus on strategic planning, how would you describe the direction that information flows?

5. From your perspective and experience would you say upward feedback for decision making purposes occurs in your organisation?
6. If so, what does it usually concern?
7. Do you or your senior managers ask subordinates to participate or contribute to decision making by providing upward feedback regarding operational or strategic decisions?
8. Are there times when your subordinates volunteer up information that could impact upon decision making without you requesting that information?
9. Does the provision of upward feedback arise more out of you initiating the feedback or more from subordinates volunteering the information?
 - a. Does this differ between subordinates?
 - b. Describe to me the characteristics of those subordinates you perceive as being more likely to volunteer up information?
 - c. What about those least likely to volunteer upward feedback?
10. How do you participate in the upward feedback process between subordinates and your senior managers when subordinates provide upward feedback for decision making purposes?
 - a. Do you see your role as impeding or facilitating the upward process?
 - b. Do you think subordinates are more likely to provide upward feedback through you as opposed to if they had to give it directly to a senior manager?
 - c. Describe to me what criteria you use to decide what information to pass upward and what to deal with at your level?
 - d. Do you change or rephrase messages when passing them upwards to do you convey the feedback exactly as told by subordinates?
 - e. In what way can your participation in the upward feedback process be enhanced?

11. Do you view subordinates input as being important for the decision making process?
12. I'd like you to try and think back to a situation in which **you provided** upward feedback for decision making purposes to your manager. Take a few moments to think back on the whole experience. Could you describe to me in as much detail as possible the experience(s) that you had in providing upward feedback? I am interested in what you may have gone through emotionally, physically or mentally when providing upward feedback.
13. Could you describe how that/those experience(s) of giving upward feedback affected you?
14. Because of your experience are you more or less likely to provide future upward feedback to your senior manager?
15. Are there certain types of upward feedback you feel more comfortable than others in providing to your top manager?
16. In a similar way to the previous question, I would like you to try and recall any situations in which **you received** upward feedback from your subordinates. Take a few moments to think back on the whole experience. Could you describe to me in as much detail as possible the experience(s) that you had in receiving upward feedback?
17. What type of upward feedback do you think your subordinates are most comfortable in providing?
18. Do you think that subordinates always feel comfortable to voice their honest opinion?
19. Describe to me some of the strategies you can implement to enhance upward feedback from your subordinates?
 - a. *Are there any specific behaviours that you could display that could encourage upward feedback?*
 - b. *What are some of the behaviours that you display that would discourage subordinates from providing upward feedback?*

20. Would any of the above strategies differ with your geographically dispersed teams?

21. Of all the things we've discussed this today in terms of upward feedback what is the most important to you?

Provide summary of main points

Thank you very much for your time. After I have reviewed my interview notes and typed them out, do you mind if I email them to you for you to verify that I have adequately and accurately captured your views.

Appendix 4a

Superordinate 1 interview questions (State Manager)

Date:

Time:

Participant:

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview on upward feedback. I appreciate how valuable your time is.

As you've read in the participant information sheet the purpose of this research is to examine the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process. Upward feedback occurs when subordinates share information with you. The focus of this study is on upward feedback for decision making purposes, so wherever I refer to upward feedback, it will be for the purpose of decision making.

I'd like to invite you to think of yourself as a co-researcher with me during the interview process so we will be learning about upward feedback together. There are no right or wrong answers. I am very interested in learning and understanding the experiences that you have had of receiving upward feedback. Did you have any questions before we get started? [Collect consent form].

1. Could you tell me how long you've worked here and give me a brief overview of what your current role involves?
2. How do members of your organisation communicate at present?
3. If I was to focus on operational tasks how would you describe the direction that information flows in this organisation?
4. If I was now to focus on strategic planning, how would you describe the direction that information flows?
5. Could you briefly describe your organisation's structure to me?

6. Do you perceive your organisation's structure as impeding or facilitating the flow of communication?
7. From your perspective and experience would you say upward feedback for decision making purposes occurs in your organisation?
8. If so, what does it concern?
9. Do you or your middle managers ask subordinates to participate or contribute to decision making by providing upward feedback regarding either operational or strategic decisions?
10. Are there times when your subordinates volunteer up information that could impact upon decision making without you requesting that information?
11. Do you view subordinates input as being important for the decision making process?
12. I'd like you to try and think back to any situations in which you received upward feedback for decision making purposes. Take a few moments to think back on the whole experience. Could you describe to me in as much detail as possible the experience(s) that you had in receiving upward feedback for decision making purposes?
13. Could you describe how that/those experience(s) of receiving upward feedback affected you?
14. Because of your experience are you more or less likely to request future upward feedback?
15. What role do your middle managers play in the upward feedback process when subordinates provide upward feedback for decision making purposes?
 - a. Do you see their role as impeding or facilitating the upward process?
 - b. Do you think subordinates are more likely to provide upward feedback because they have a middle manager to go through as opposed to if they had to give that upward feedback directly to you?

- c. Do you think your middle managers change or rephrase messages when passing them upwards to do they convey the feedback exactly as told by subordinates?
 - d. In what ways can middle managers participation in the upward feedback process be enhanced?
16. What type of upward feedback do you perceive your middle managers are most comfortable in passing upwards from their subordinates?
17. Describe to me some of the strategies that you and middle managers can implement to enhance upward feedback from your subordinates?
- a. Are there any specific behaviours you could display to encourage upward feedback?
 - b. What are some of the behaviours that you display that would discourage subordinates from providing upward feedback?
18. Could you describe to me the characteristics of those middle managers or subordinates that you perceive as being most likely to provide upward feedback for decision making purposes?
19. What about those least likely to provide upward feedback for decision making purposes?
20. Of all the things we've discussed this today in terms of upward feedback what is the most important to you?

Provide summary of main points

Thank you very much for your time. After I have reviewed my interview notes and typed them out, do you mind if I email them to you for you to verify that I have adequately and accurately captured your views.

Appendix 4b

Superordinate 2 interview questions (Senior Manager)

Date:

Time:

Participant:

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview on upward feedback. I appreciate how valuable your time is.

As you've read in the participant information sheet the purpose of this research is to examine the influence that middle managers have on the upward feedback process. Upward feedback occurs when subordinates share information with you. The focus of this study is on upward feedback for decision making purposes, so wherever I refer to upward feedback, it will be for the purpose of decision making.

I'd like to invite you to think of yourself as a co-researcher with me during the interview process. We will be learning about upward feedback together. There are no right or wrong answers and I am very interested in learning and understanding the experiences that you have had of receiving upward feedback. Did you have any questions before we get started? [Collect consent form].

1. Could you tell me how long you've worked here and give me a brief overview of what your current role involves?
2. How do members of your organisation communicate at present?
3. If I was to focus on operational tasks how would you describe the direction that information flows in this organisation?
4. If I was now to focus on strategic planning, how would you describe the direction that information flows?
5. Could you briefly describe your organisation's structure to me?

6. Do you perceive your organisation's structure as impeding or facilitating the flow of communication?
7. From your perspective and experience would you say upward feedback for decision making purposes occurs in your organisation?
8. If so, what does it concern?
9. Do you or your middle managers ask subordinates to participate or contribute to decision making by providing upward feedback regarding either operational or strategic decisions?
10. Are there times when your subordinates volunteer up information that could impact upon decision making without you requesting that information?
11. Do you view subordinates input as being important for the decision making process?
12. I'd like you to try and think back to any situations in which **you received** upward feedback for decision making purposes. Take a few moments to think back on the whole experience. Could you describe to me in as much detail as possible the experience(s) that you had in receiving upward feedback for decision making purposes?
13. Could you describe how that/those experience(s) of receiving upward feedback affected you?
14. Because of your experience are you more or less likely to request future upward feedback?
15. What role do your middle managers play in the upward feedback process when subordinates provide upward feedback for decision making purposes?
 - a. Do you see their role as impeding or facilitating the upward process?
 - b. Do you think subordinates are more likely to provide upward feedback because they have a middle manager to go through as opposed to if they had to give that upward feedback directly to you?

- c. Do you think your middle managers change or rephrase messages when passing them upwards to do they convey the feedback exactly as told by subordinates?
 - d. In what ways can middle managers participation in the upward feedback process be enhanced?
16. What type of upward feedback do you perceive your middle managers are most comfortable in passing upwards from their subordinates?
17. What criteria do you use to determine what to pass upwards to your State Manager and what to deal with at your level?
- a. When you are passing that information upwards to your State Manager do you change or rephrase messages or to do you convey the feedback exactly as told by subordinates?
18. Describe to me some of the strategies that you and middle managers can implement to enhance upward feedback from your subordinates?
- a. Are there any specific behaviours you could display to encourage upward feedback?
 - b. What are some of the behaviours that you display that would discourage subordinates from providing upward feedback?
19. Could you describe to me the characteristics of those middle managers or subordinates that you perceive as being most likely to provide upward feedback for decision making purposes?
20. What about those least likely to provide upward feedback for decision making purposes?
21. Of all the things we've discussed this today in terms of upward feedback what is the most important to you?

Provide summary of main points

Thank you very much for your time. After I have reviewed my interview notes and typed them out, do you mind if I email them to you for you to verify that I have adequately and accurately captured your views.

Appendix 5

State Manager Information Sheet

Research title

A phenomenological study of the influence of middle level management on upward feedback in a service organisation

Introduction

I am a Curtin student studying a Master of Philosophy. I am undertaking research in the area of organisational communication and looking at the role that middle level managers play in the facilitation of upward feedback.

Invitation Paragraph

I would like to invite your organisation to participate in this research study. Before you are able to make a decision on whether or not you would like to participate, I have provided you with some information on why the research is being done, what it would involve for your organisation and why it is significant. Please take the time to read the information carefully and if anything is unclear please do not hesitate to ask me any questions.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this research is to examine middle level management's role in the facilitation of upward feedback for decision making purposes in your organisation. Feedback is an important element of an organisation's internal communication and subordinates, who are key keepers of critical information, can provide vital information to more senior personnel in what is termed upward feedback. For a variety of reasons, upward feedback is important to an organisation's continued existence and success. The focus of the research therefore will be on how upward feedback is manifest in your organisation, especially how middle-level managers engage with and manage the process.

Why has my organisation been invited?

To be able to participate in this study, it is necessary for your staff members to have had some experience of either providing or receiving upward feedback (depending on their role in the organisation). Your organisation has been selected as it provides educational services. The insight gained from your organisation's experience in the area of upward

feedback will be useful to other service organisations (such as schools) that have similar organisational structures to your organisation.

Does my organisation have to take part?

Participation is voluntary. You can make a decision on whether or not you would like your organisation to participate after you have read through this information sheet.

Which of my staff members will be asked to participate in the study?

All [subordinate role], [middle manager role], the [senior manager role] and yourself will be invited to participate in the study.

What will happen if my staff members and I choose to participate and what will we have to do?

To enable me to gain insight into employee's opinions of the presence of upward feedback in your organisation [subordinate role], [middle managers], [senior manager] and [state manager] would be invited to participate in a one-on-one interview. The interviews would be audio recorded to enable me to revisit as well as transcribe the discussions. I will also be taking notes during the interviews.

One-on-one interviews should take no longer than thirty minutes. Follow up interviews may be required should I need to seek further clarification on anything. Participants will also be asked to confirm the information that I have written up following the interview or focus group to ensure that I have adequately and accurately captured their views.

I would also be required to undertake a document review as part of the research process to ensure a more comprehensive and thorough understanding of how upward feedback manifests itself in your organisation. Document analysis enables cross-validation of interview data collected. Document analysis would include reviewing minutes of meetings, agendas team meetings, briefing notes or any emails you and your staff can provide that demonstrate the upward feedback process in your organisation.

Expenses and payments

Interviews will be held at locations and times convenient to the participants. Should participants choose to attend interviews at the Head Office their parking fees will be

reimbursed. Apart from these, there will be no expenses associated with this research on your part.

What the possible disadvantages of taking part?

The risks involved in this study are very minimal. Leaders, managers and subordinates will be interviewed separately from each other. To avoid negative consequences and being identified, all of the data gathered from participants will be presented anonymously. All participants will be given a participant identification number to avoid being recognised.

To reduce the potential of risk to all participants, I will ask them to advise me if they feel uncomfortable responding to any questions during the interview. Should anything go wrong and they have a complaint about how I have handled any situation, participants will be able to contact the Ethics Board at Curtin University (details provided below).

What are the benefits of taking part?

Whilst I cannot guarantee that the study will directly benefit your organisation, it is hoped that the research will provide a greater insight into the area of upward feedback within your organisation. Your organisation will be able to learn what barriers exist to upward feedback. Further, your organisation will be able to identify ways in which to facilitate this valuable source of information from its staff members. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will contribute to knowledge in the area of organisational communication.

It is hoped that the study will be significant to staff at all levels of service organisations. It is hoped that leaders will be able to utilise the information to foster communication cultures that value and encourage upward feedback. It is also hoped that middle level managers will be made aware of useful strategies to employ to elicit upward feedback from subordinates. Finally, it is anticipated that subordinates are likely to feel empowered and valued if they are asked to participate in the organisation's decision making through the provision of upward feedback.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any concerns regarding any aspect of the research, please let me know immediately and I will try and resolve the issue with you at once. Should you still be dissatisfied with the outcome, please contact the Ethics Board at Curtin University.

Will the information I provide in the study be kept confidential?

All of the information participants provide during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and should any information leave the university it will have both the organisation's name as well as participants names removed from it so that they are not identified. Where a professional transcription service is used to transcribe the interviews, they will sign a confidentiality undertaking and will be asked to securely destroy all copies of interviews and transcripts after they have emailed a finalised transcript to the researcher.

All original data collected will be stored with the School of Education. Copies will be stored in a secure locked cabinet in the research office. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this information which will be securely destroyed after five years.

What will happen if my organisation doesn't carry on with the study?

You can choose to withdraw from participating in this study at any point in time without any disadvantage to you. Your organisation does not have to provide me with a reason for your withdrawal. All of the information participants would have provided to date would be securely destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The information you provide will be used in research. Results of this study will be published in a thesis, may be published in journal articles and a copy will also be made available to your organisation. All participants will be given an identification number and where they are referred to in the research their responses will be preceded or followed by their identification number and not their name.

Further information and contact details

This study has been approved under Curtin University's process for lower-risk Studies (Approval Number EDU-99-12). This process complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Chapter 5.1.7 and Chapters 5.1.18-5.1.21). For further information on this study contact Deborah Geddes by emailing deborah.geddes@postgrad.curtin.edu.au or Graham Dellar by emailing g.dellar@curtin.edu.au or telephoning 9266 2164 or Linda Teasdale at the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin

University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing
hrec@curtin.edu.au

I thank you for your time.

Deborah Geddes

deborah.geddes@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

State Manager/Organisation Consent Form

A phenomenological study of the influence of middle level management on upward feedback in a service organisation

Principal Investigator: Deborah Geddes

Statements of confirmation:

I have been informed of and understand the purposes of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that I can withdraw my organisation from the study at any time without prejudice.

Any information which might potentially identify my organisation or staff members will not be used in published material.

I agree for my organisation to participate in the study as outlined to me.

Name of State Manager: _____

Organisation: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 6

Participant information sheet

Research title

A phenomenological study of the influence of middle level management on upward feedback in a service organisation

Introduction

I am a Curtin student studying a Master of Philosophy. I am undertaking research in the area of organisational communication and looking at the role that middle level managers play in the upward feedback process.

Invitation Paragraph

I would like to invite you to participate in this research study. Before you are able to make a decision on whether or not you would like to participate, I have provided you with some information on why the research is being done, what it would involve for you and why it is significant. Please take the time to read the information carefully and if anything is unclear please do not hesitate to ask me any questions.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this research is to examine middle level management's role in the facilitation of upward feedback for decision making purposes in your organisation. Feedback is an important element of an organisation's internal communication and subordinates, who are key keepers of critical information, can provide vital information to more senior personnel in what is termed upward feedback. For a variety of reasons, upward feedback is important to an organisation's continued existence and success. The focus of the research therefore will be on how upward feedback is manifest in your organisation, especially how middle-level managers engage with and manage the process.

Why have I been invited?

To be able to participate in this study, it is necessary for you to have had some experience of either providing or receiving upward feedback (depending on your role in the organisation). Your organisation has been selected as it provides educational services. Your experience in the area of upward feedback will be useful to other service organisations (such as schools) that have similar organisational structures to your organisation.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is voluntary. You can make a decision on whether or not you would like to participate after you have read through this information sheet.

What will happen if I choose to participate and what will I have to do?

You will be invited to participate in a one-on-one interview to enable me to gain insight into your opinion of the presence of upward feedback in your organisation. The one-on-one interviews would be audio recorded to enable me to revisit and transcribe the discussions. I will also be taking notes during the interview.

One-on-one interviews should take no longer than thirty minutes. Follow up interviews may be required should I need to seek further clarification. You will also be asked to confirm the information that I have written up following the interview to ensure that I have adequately and accurately captured your views.

Expenses and payments

Interviews will be conducted at locations and times that are convenient to the participant. Costs associated with parking will be reimbursed. Apart from these, there will be no expenses associated with this research on your part.

What the possible disadvantages of taking part?

The risks involved in this study are very minimal. All participants will be interviewed individually so as to protect their privacy. To avoid negative consequences and being identified in any way, all of the data gathered from participants will be presented anonymously. All participants will be given a participant identification number to avoid being recognised.

To reduce the potential of risk to you as a participant, please advise me if you feel uncomfortable responding to any questions during the interview. Should anything go wrong and you have a complaint about how I have handled any situation, please contact the Ethics Board at Curtin University (details provided below).

What are the benefits of taking part?

I cannot guarantee that the study will directly benefit you. It is more likely however, that the study will benefit your organisation by providing greater insight into how upward feedback occurs in your organisation. The findings will also contribute knowledge to the area of organisational communication.

It is hoped that the study will be significant to staff at all levels of service organisations. It is hoped that leaders will be able to utilise the information to foster communication cultures that value and encourage upward feedback. It is also hoped that middle level managers will be made aware of useful strategies to employ to elicit upward feedback from subordinates. Finally, it is anticipated that subordinates are likely to feel empowered and valued if they are asked to participate in the organisation's decision making through the provision of upward feedback.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any concerns regarding any aspect of the research, please let me know immediately and I will try and resolve the issue with you at once. Should you still be dissatisfied with the outcome, please contact the Ethics Board at Curtin University.

Will the information I provide in the study be kept confidential?

All of the information you provide during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and you will not be identified in any way. Should any information leave the university it will have your name removed from it so that you are not identified. Where a professional transcription service is used to transcribe the interviews, they will sign a confidentiality undertaking and will be asked to securely destroy all copies of interviews and transcripts after they have been emailed a finalised transcript back to the researcher.

All original data collected will be stored with the School of Education. Copies will be stored in a secure locked cabinet in the research office. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this information which will be securely destroyed after five years.

What will happen if I don't carry on with the study?

You can choose to withdraw from participating in this study at any point in time without any disadvantage to you. You do not have to provide me with a reason for your withdrawal. All of the information you would have provided to date would be securely

destroyed, your details from the study file and your contributions omitted from the research findings.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The information you provide will be used in research. Results of this study will be published in a thesis, may be published in journal articles or at a conference and a copy will also be made available to your organisation. You will be given a participant identification number and where you are referred to in the research your responses will be preceded or followed by your identification number and not your name.

Further information and contact details

This study has been approved under Curtin University's process for lower-risk Studies (Approval Number EDU-99-12). This process complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Chapter 5.1.7 and Chapters 5.1.18-5.1.21). For further information on this study contact Deborah Geddes by emailing deborah.geddes@postgrad.curtin.edu.au or Graham Dellar by emailing g.dellar@curtin.edu.au or telephoning 9266 2164 or Linda Teasdale at the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au

I thank you for your time.

Deborah Geddes

deborah.geddes@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

Participant Consent Form

A phenomenological study of the influence of middle level management on upward feedback in a service organisation

Principal Investigator: Deborah Geddes

Statements of confirmation:

I have been informed of and understand the purposes of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions.

I understand I can withdraw at any time without prejudice.

I understand that I will be given a participant identification number to avoid being recognised.

I agree to participate in the study as outlined to me.

I agree for the interview to be audio recorded.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 7

Thank you letter

[Date]

[Participant name]

[Participant address]

Dear [Participant name]

Thank you for meeting with me in an in-depth interview and for sharing your insights into your experiences of upward feedback. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Please find attached a transcript of the interview. Can you check that I have accurately captured what you intended to say. If there are any errors you wish to correct or you realise that an important experience was neglected please feel free to add comments **(in red font)**.

Please note that the interview was transcribed verbatim including any errors or repetitions in speech from both the interviewer and participant points of view. Please do not edit for grammatical corrections as the manner in which you told your story is what is critical.

If you have made any changes please return the transcript to me via email. If I do not hear back from you by the [date] I will assume that you are happy that the transcript is an accurate account of the interview.

I thank you once again for your generous time and support in participating in the study.

Kind regards
Deborah Geddes

Appendix 8

Letter sent to participants with textural-structural descriptions

[Date]

[Participant name]

[Participant address]

Dear [Participant name]

Thank you for participating in my research study on upward feedback.

The next step in the process of this study requires me to ask participants to confirm my interpretation of the emerging issues and themes from each transcript. Please find attached a summary of my interpretation of the interview that I had with you. The summary includes a description of what you experienced when providing upward feedback. Fundamental to the analysis is my interpretation of the factors that affected your experience.

If you wish to provide any clarifying statements with regards to the summary please do so in **red font** and email me back a copy. As the University has set a deadline for me, I would appreciate it if you could email me by [date]. If I do not hear back from you by this date, it will be assumed that you are happy with my interpretation of your experience.

I'd like to take this opportunity once again to absolutely guarantee you that both confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and that any of the information used in the thesis will be de-identified so as to maintain your privacy.

I have also included a copy of the original transcript that you checked if you wish to refer to it.

I thank you once again for your generous time and support in participating in the study.

Kind regards

Deborah Geddes
Master of Philosophy Candidate
Faculty of Humanities
School of Education
Email: deborah.geddes@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

Appendix 9

Synthesis of each participant and the researcher's textural-structural descriptions

Synthesis of participant 1's experience of providing upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in the organisation. Information relating to operational tasks and strategic planning originated from the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

The experience of providing upward feedback was paradoxical; it was both gratifying and frustrating. Being asked by management to contribute to decision making evoked feelings of being valued and appreciated as an employee. Participant initiated feedback was received openly, with genuine interest and gratitude thereby exacerbating feelings of worth. Where outcomes were seen as a result of feedback this incited further upward feedback. The approachability and accessibility of managers, and the confidence that the middle manager would pass information upwards brought about a gratifying experience.

The experience of providing upward feedback was also frustrating. Where the feedback loop was not closed on decisions made or there was no outcome after the provision of feedback a sense of agitation occurred.

In the experience of providing upward feedback of a challenging nature, prior experiences came to the fore. A lack of agreement by other subordinates once upward feedback was provided in a group situation resulted in disappointment. In the experience of providing upward feedback, time was experienced as being both adequate and inadequate depending on the topic being discussed. Physical distance also had implications for whether the provision of feedback would occur more as a result of manager initiated feedback or participant initiated feedback. Lastly, in the experience of providing upward feedback, the format used to elicit upward feedback impacted on both the quality and quantity of the feedback.

Synthesis of participant 2's experience of providing feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in the organisation. Information relating to operational tasks originated from the top of the organisation's hierarchy while opportunities existed to contribute to or participate in strategic planning.

The experience of providing upward feedback was paradoxical leaving the experiencer feeling alienated. Participant initiated feedback was seen as being treated differently to manager initiated feedback. When initiating feedback the participant spoke out with the hope of obtaining an outcome but instead the feedback was disregarded and responses to the feedback were either delayed or deferred.

A feedback 'ceiling' was perceived due to an inability to influence decisions at a National level. At a local level feedback resulted in an increased workload for the participant which brought about a dilemma about whether or not to suggest improved ways of doing things. Positive responses to the provision of feedback with unseen outcomes caused confusion. Low levels of confidence in the middle manager caused uncertainty about the accuracy of messages being passed upwards. The participant preferred to pass messages directly to the senior manager and felt that feedback was more effective with the senior manager. Unlike the middle manager who needed constant follow up, the senior manager closed the feedback loop. The experiencer felt frustrated, unheard, unsupported, unvalued and disinclined to provide feedback.

Where feedback was manager initiated however it was perceived to be valued, appreciated and taken into consideration for decision making purposes. Opportunities for this type of feedback were considered numerous and management as ready to listen. Outcomes were also seen as a result of this feedback.

In the experience of providing upward feedback, a sense of isolation occurred due to the distance between State offices and management being located in another office. The organisation's hierarchy created a 'ceiling' on outcomes as a result of feedback. The provision of feedback was unfavourable as it caused an increased workload. Interacting with others when providing feedback either caused distress where differences existed or reinforced the importance of a message where agreement occurred. The medium used to elicit feedback caused the quality or quantity of feedback to diminish.

Synthesis of participant 3's experience of upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in the organisation. Information relating to both operational tasks and strategic planning originated from the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

The experience of providing feedback was rewarding. Feedback was viewed as being received willingly by senior managers. The ability to provide feedback on any topic without

negative consequences was reassuring. At a State level, the participant felt confident and comfortable to provide feedback and correspondingly felt listened to and valued after the provision of feedback. The provision of feedback was seen as being synonymous with favourable outcomes which incited continuous feedback. At a national level however, the effects of providing feedback was ambiguous; the authenticity of the manager's request for feedback was also questioned as outcomes were lacking.

The experience of receiving feedback was multifaceted. Subordinate input was considered as a valuable component to decision making, yet trust and relationships were seen as being key to receiving honest upward feedback. Positive feedback was scrutinised for sincerity while negative feedback was readily accepted and seen as being truthful. The source of the feedback and their area of expertise were also considered when deciding whether or not to take feedback on board. Strategies were put into place to elicit feedback and senior management engaged to assist in assessing the effectiveness of these strategies. Subordinate characteristics were seen as playing a role in determining who was most likely to initiate feedback.

In the experience of receiving upward feedback, the relevance of and the type of the feedback were given careful consideration. When providing feedback however, seeing outcomes was viewed as being vital to determining whether managers were sincere about seeking the feedback. Trust was also seen an element that determined whether or not certain feedback would be provided or received.

Synthesis of participant 4's experience of upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in the organisation. Information relating to both operational tasks and strategic planning originated from the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

The experience of providing upward feedback was inconsistent. The participant found the process of providing feedback to be slow, cumbersome, unclear and frustrating. Participant initiated feedback was seen as being treated differently to manager initiated feedback. The participant perceived manager initiated feedback as receiving moderately positive outcomes. When this occurred the participant felt recognised and as though their skills had been utilised.

Participant initiated feedback however caused negative responses and outcomes as seen in the uninterested or delayed response from management. The inability of managers to close the feedback loop almost every time feedback was provided caused frustration. Unfavourable participant initiated feedback resulted in middle management using coercive power to punish the participant. Excluding the participant from decisions that affected the participant directly, caused the participant to feel worthless and unappreciated. In all, the experimenter faced an internal dilemma on whether or not to share good ideas but instead felt it was best to withdraw as a psychological danger was perceived with initiating feedback. Further, the participant perceived that being effectively heard depended on who the contributor was in the organisation and how successful they were in delivering their message in a way in which it could be considered. Consequently the experimenter preferred to only respond to manager initiated feedback and to give feedback that the participant believed aligned with what was “accepted” in the organisation. A lack of support, the invisibility of managers, a lack of informal opportunities and being held in a hierarchical process when providing feedback caused further barriers to upward feedback.

In the experience of providing feedback, the participant’s experience was greatly influenced by whom feedback was provided to and the participant’s relationship with the recipient. The type of manager to a great extent determined the type of follower the participant became. Physical distance between offices and managers also affected the participant’s experience as there were fewer opportunities for informal feedback and relationship building.

Synthesis of participant 5’s experience of upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in the organisation. Information relating to both operational tasks and strategic planning originated from the top of the organisation’s hierarchy.

The experience of providing feedback was diverse. Feedback was received openly and was taken into consideration. Providing feedback regarding operational issues, programs, successes or human resource issues was accomplished with ease and no anxiety. The participant felt comfortable when providing this feedback and felt listened to. Where feedback was rushed and suggestions overruled by senior management this caused the participant to feel unheard and frustrated. Providing feedback associated with the participant’s feelings (for instance, around managing subordinates and the need to up skill) was averted as the participant was convinced that there could be no solution to this feedback.

Receiving feedback caused a multiplicity of experiences. Positive feedback about the participant's management style was welcomed and increased self-esteem. Negative feedback on the other hand was viewed as unfair, too personal and caused an adverse response. Initiating feedback was challenging as subordinates were not forthcoming with information. This instigated a question and answer session to elicit information whereby the participant felt like a parent, and the subordinate, like a child. The more willing subordinates were to share feedback, the more pleasant the experience for the participant. Newer and open employees were seen as being more likely to initiate feedback and longer serving and less creative employees as being less likely to initiate feedback. Subordinates were viewed as not being comfortable to speak openly when providing feedback as successes were shared and failures evaded. Advocating subordinate ideas and building relationships and trust were seen as being key to facilitating upward feedback.

In the experience of providing upward feedback feelings were given careful consideration. If they caused the participant discomfort and were not likely to produce an outcome then the feedback was not shared. Time was also of importance, insufficient time to consider feedback resulted in frustration and in the participant feeling unheard.

In the experience of receiving feedback the open and collaborative approach to decision making that the participant used caused resistance and was viewed by some subordinates as a weakness. Physical distance between offices caused uncertainty about the accuracy of information shared between the participant and subordinates.

Synthesis of participant 6's experience of upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making in the organisation. Information relating to operational tasks and strategic tasks originated from the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

The experience of providing feedback was mostly positive. Feedback was welcomed and the participant thanked for providing it. The participant felt comfortable and confident to share information with senior management knowing that it would always be received in a friendly, favourable and professional manner. Positive outcomes were seen as a result of the feedback which resulted in the provision of further feedback. The participant preferred to provide positive feedback rather than negative feedback. Although negative feedback was treated synonymously with positive feedback, the participant personally struggled with sharing negative information. Due to the participant's high standards, the participant

perceived negative information as a failure and a reflection on self. To lessen the stress of providing negative feedback over the phone, the participant would forewarn senior management by sending out an email together with details of the steps that the participant had taken to mitigate risk prior to their conversation.

The experience of receiving upward feedback though, was multifaceted. The participant viewed subordinates as being comfortable to speak openly when providing feedback although the participant was uncertain as to whether or not this was occurring. While the participant perceived that subordinates preferred to provide more positive and factual feedback rather than negative feedback, the participant found it emotionally stressful to accept positive feedback about the participant's management style. This was mainly due to the participant's personality. Where the participant received negative feedback, the subordinate was thanked, the information reflected on and a meeting set for a later date to discuss the feedback with evidence.

Open, honest employees who shared the organisation's values were seen as being more likely to initiate feedback. So too, were longer serving subordinates who had more contacts in the community. Subordinates who were often absent from work were seen as being least likely to initiate feedback.

In the experience of providing feedback the participant was greatly influenced by being an overachiever. If the participant did not meet the high standards set for self, the participant would deem it to be a failure which consequently made providing feedback difficult. Professionalism was important to the participant in both providing and receiving feedback.

Synthesis of participant 7's experience of receiving upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in the organisation. Information relating to operational tasks and strategic planning originated from the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

The experience of receiving upward feedback was multi-faceted. Feedback was viewed as being highly valued as well as crucial to improving organisational performance and strength. Positive outcomes were seen as a result of subordinate feedback which resulted in the instigation of more feedback.

Feedback that aligned with the organisation's mission was appreciated and taken into consideration. Feedback that was rational and factual resulted in management consensus

and action. Feedback that had national implications and was not evidenced based however, caused management discomfort and was viewed as being challenging due to its limited ability to produce outcomes. The participant felt like a bureaucrat when responding to the latter feedback. Irrespective of the form of feedback, it was important for the participant that subordinates felt heard and that their feedback had been considered.

Middle managers were viewed as being most comfortable to provide subordinate feedback on operational issues, program design and opportunities for the organisation. The middle manager's management style and their ability to filter information however were perceived as an impediment to the upward feedback process. As such the participant sought to validate information by talking directly to subordinates.

Those subordinators who provided feedback were perceived as being comfortable to do so. Subordinate characteristics played a role in determining who was more or less likely to initiate feedback. Analytical, confident and passionate subordinates were viewed as being more likely to initiate feedback than those who only focused on their role.

In the experience of receiving feedback, the participant considered the relevance of the information. Where it aligned with the organisation's mission, the information acted as a catalyst to action. Conduits to information were seen as requiring skill development that focussed on ways in which to elicit information and create conducive environments to upward feedback. Validity of feedback which was free of bias was considered important.

Synthesis of participant 8's experience of providing upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making in the organisation. Information relating to operational tasks and strategic planning originated at the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

The experience of providing upward feedback was varied; it was both satisfying and frustrating. At a National level being sought after and consulted because of the participant's expertise, knowledge and accuracy of predictions evoked feelings of satisfaction and being heard. Yet, simultaneously it added a certain anxiety about whether the feedback would succeed.

At a State level, the experience was different. Feedback was sought for the same reason, however the response was different. Feedback was elicited about prior experience and not about new ideas. The sincerity of manager initiated feedback was questioned. The

experiencer perceived that middle management only valued the participant's feedback if it aligned with the manager's opinion or if the manager considered it as important. The participant found it difficult to get middle management to pass information upwards.

When the participant initiated feedback the participant spoke up confidently and openly. Responses to feedback included apathy, opposition to passing information upwards, interruption, misappropriation of the participant's feedback and the inability to close the feedback loop. Consequently the participant felt annoyed, frustrated, unheard and wanted to be recognised for the feedback provided. As a result the participant felt there was no point in providing feedback.

In the experience of providing feedback it was crucial to the experiencer to feel heard and not just listened to. Favourable outcomes were not necessary, however, closing of the feedback loop with the reasons for the decision was considered essential. The participant perceived that the middle manager's opinion needed to be set aside for this to occur. If the participant felt the feedback was important enough, the participant needed it to be passed upwards when requested.

Synthesis of participant 9's experience of upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making in the organisation. Information relating to operational and strategic planning originated from the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

The experience of receiving upward feedback was both satisfying and frustrating. Where feedback was sought or subordinate initiated feedback was received it caused a sense of contentment and assurance that subordinates would feel heard, have increased job satisfaction and would not leave the organisation. Feedback was therefore welcomed and was not viewed as being a threat. Subordinates were seen as a source of expertise due to being at the front line of the organisation. Outcomes were seen as a result of upward feedback which caused the participant to continue to request more feedback.

Receiving recurrent feedback however had a different effect. It caused frustration because decisions had already been made and in the finality of those decisions there was no room for variation. The participant faced a dilemma because while feedback was valued and desired, the participant felt the need to be firm and to ask the contributor to make a difficult choice if they could not live with the decision.

Middle managers were seen as facilitators and advocates of subordinate feedback. Middle managers who were positive, open, available, listened to and had strong relationships with subordinates were seen as being most likely to initiate feedback. Subordinates who were engaged, passionate, understood their job, felt what they were doing was valuable were also seen as being likely to initiate feedback. Those who were negative, thought nothing would change and had prior bad experiences when providing upward feedback were perceived as being least likely to initiate feedback.

The experience of providing feedback was pleasant. The participant viewed the superordinate as being open, approachable and accessible and the good working relationship they had built caused the participant ease when providing feedback.

In the participant's experience of receiving upward feedback, collaborative decision making and engaging subordinates, was important to a pleasurable experience. Recurrent feedback was pointless and caused an annoying and frustrating experience.

Synthesis of participant 10's experience of providing upward feedback

The participant perceived the presence of upward feedback for decision making purposes in the organisation. Information relating to operational tasks originated from the top of the organisation hierarchy and the participant perceived an absence of information relating to strategic planning.

The experience of providing upward feedback was twofold. Limited opportunities existed for feedback outside of formalised processes. Feedback provided to the middle manager was accepted unreservedly. The participant did not withhold any type of feedback. The middle manager was viewed as being open and facilitating feedback and was also perceived as not engaging in power games. Feedback had one of three outcomes. It resulted in action, was put on hold or had no result. While outcomes weren't always realised, the participant felt heard and as though the participant had a voice. The participant trusted the middle manager to filter and deal with the upward feedback provided appropriately by making decisions regarding what should and should not be passed upwards. Where information was passed upwards, the participant believed it was conveyed accurately.

Providing feedback that went further up the hierarchy caused frustration. The hierarchy was seen as creating a barrier to upward feedback as there was limited access to the senior and state manager. Consequently, the participant was more careful about what feedback was provided to these managers. To initiate feedback directly with either the senior or

state manager, the participant believed that [gender] would have had to felt very strongly about an issue. As such, the participant believed that [gender] provided more feedback because [gender] had a middle manager. The participant believed that decisions were made at the higher levels of the organisation with no explanations being fed back down the chain as to the reasons for the decision. Where feedback was provided and superordinates were unaware of the consequences of the decision that was made, it caused the participant to feel a sense of uneasiness and frustration regarding whether or not management had thoroughly thought out decisions.

In the experience of providing manager initiated upward feedback time was experienced as being inadequate for making important decisions. As such the participant questioned the authenticity of the request for feedback. The factor of physical distance and the organisation's hierarchy created a perception of superordinates being inaccessible which in turn inhibited feedback.

Synthesis of the researcher's experience of providing feedback

The experience of providing feedback was double edged. Whilst providing feedback to senior managers was exhilarating, providing feedback to middle managers was disappointing. Where senior managers were open, approachable, genuinely interested in listening, encouraged and facilitated feedback the researcher felt a psychological safety to initiate feedback openly. Providing feedback to these managers was exciting, satisfying and opened up communication for further dialogue and discussion which resulted in higher quality decisions. This excitement could be heard in the researcher's tone and seen in her alert and excited body language. There was a sense of security that even though feedback may not be implemented it would be discussed rationally and the feedback loop closed with no negative consequences for the researcher. Seeing a number of results from the feedback and the favourable responses to feedback incited further feedback. Feedback was perceived as being appreciated and the researcher's input both trusted and valued. In her experience of providing feedback the researcher observed that experienced managers and senior managers were the most accepting of any type of upward feedback. Because they were such democratic managers, the researcher became an effective follower. The result was that the researcher enjoyed providing feedback and found it extremely gratifying. She also felt a sense of belonging to organisation because of her ability to provide feedback.

The provision of feedback to middle managers was disappointing. The researcher observed that those managers who rejected all ideas put forward without any discussion and also

criticised and discouraged feedback by their response, tone and body language eliminated all possibility of the researcher initiating upward feedback. Further, one middle manager who misappropriated the researcher's ideas after a prolonged period of time and re-introduced it as their own caused the researcher distress. The researcher felt her ideas were not valued or welcomed. When the middle manager disrupted the researcher's provision of feedback and reacted adversely to the feedback in a group situation, the researcher felt humiliated, frustrated and angry. The researcher withdrew, believed it is pointless giving feedback as it was always rejected and decided she would only respond to manager initiated feedback. Even whilst providing manager initiated feedback, the researcher felt heavy hearted, dreaded speaking up and was disengaged. Her tone of voice was flat, uninterested and matter of fact and various thoughts ran through her mind about the process being a waste of time. The researcher was unable to speak honestly when providing feedback to these managers as she felt psychologically unsafe and perceived punishment and the withholding of rewards. The researcher perceived that these managers would not accept any feedback outside of their way of thinking as they deemed it irrelevant. These autocratic managers made the researcher become an alienated follower.

In the experience of providing feedback, the manner in which the researcher interacted with her managers resulted in either a satisfying or dissatisfying experience of providing feedback. The response she received as a result of providing feedback either acted an inhibitor or catalyst for further feedback.

Appendix 10

Document analysis findings

| Document reviewed | Forum of upward feedback | Upward feedback topic | Responded to research question(s) |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| State meeting agenda | State meeting | Program reviews: how did it go, what did we learn and what will take forward in the following year Alternate delivery models for a program | 1, 2, 3 |
| State meeting agenda | State meeting | Staff engagement plan Open feedback forum on Programs Ideas for next State meeting | 1,2, 3 |
| Power point of survey results | Online survey | Career opportunities, managing performance and the organisation's employment promise Opportunity for staff to feedback their ideas and suggestions on each of the above three areas | 1, 2, 3 |
| State meeting agenda | State meeting | Staff engagement activity Ideas for next State meeting | 1 ,2, 3 |
| Notes from State meeting | State meeting | Improving two way communication with the National Office Secondments Career plans Accurate job descriptions Performance management process and making it a two way process | 1, 2, 3 |

| Document reviewed | Forum of upward feedback | Upward feedback topic | Responded to research question(s) |
|--|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| Template for one-on-one monthly meetings | One-on-one monthly meeting between subordinate and manager | Key achievements Challenges/lessons learnt in the last month What subordinate is working on What subordinate's direct report is working on and key achievements, challenges, focus for coming month What's on the horizon (Next 3 to 6 months) Progress against Development Plan and other upcoming opportunities Support or assistance needed from manager | 1, 2, 3 |
| Lines of communication document | Not applicable | Not applicable. Document covered who subordinates should communicate with when they have queries at a State level | 1, 2, 3 |
| [Middle managers] meeting notes | [Middle managers] meeting with senior manager | Feedback around events and programs, and also on achieving consistent definitions for certain programs. Closing of the feedback loop by the senior management on upward feedback topics that middle managers raised previously | 1 |
| Organisational chart | Not applicable | Not applicable | 1 |

| Document reviewed | Forum of upward feedback | Upward feedback topic | Responded to research question(s) |
|---|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Staff engagement plan PowerPoint slides | Brainstorming session | <p>Ways in which to increase staff engagement with regards to career opportunities, managing performance and the organisation's employment promise</p> <p>Selection of three strategies from the brain storming session</p> <p>Writing up of an implementation plan</p> <p>Opportunities to complete an annual staff engagement survey</p> | 1, 2, 3 |