

# VERTICAL COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

A Case Study of the Commercial Department in Kristiansand Dyrepark

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## **ABSTRACT**

Previous research has ascertained that communication plays an important role in organizations, but an overweight of research address communication from superiors to subordinates, and less the other way around. The purpose of this thesis is to conduct research on how ideas and improvements proposed by employees flow upwards in a specific organization and what the challenges are. The research is based on eight interviews with employees in different positions in the case organization, and is limited to vertical communication within one main department. The findings relate to how culture and structure are influencing factors on the communication flow, and the most frequently mentioned challenges were time limitation and lack of feedback from superiors on ideas or improvements promoted. Based on the data, we provide suggestions and recommendations to the organization.

## **PREFACE**

This bachelor thesis marks the end of our bachelor degree in Marketing and Management at the University of Agder. We consider the work process with the thesis as exciting, educational and challenging. We would like to take the opportunity to thank all the people who have contributed to the thesis. First, thank you to our supervisor, Andreas Erich Wald, Professor of Strategy at the School of Business and Law at the University of Agder, for good guidance and valuable feedback. Thanks to the Commercial Director at Kristiansand Dyrepark, Morten Skraastad, and to all the respondents and informants from the case organization. Tor Geir Kvinen, Associate Professor at the University of Agder and Senior Researcher at Agderforskning, also deserves thanks for taking the time to speak engagingly with us about the thesis, for reassuring us that "this is going to be fine" and for answering questions along the way. We would also like to thank Henry Langseth, university librarian, and other employees at the university library for assistance regarding search for and use of sources and source criticism.

Kristiansand, May 2017

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# LIST OF CONTENT

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>LIST OF CONTENT</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 The Thesis Topic	5
1.2 The Thesis Structure	6
<b>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Communication In Organizations	7
2.1.1 The importance of organizational communication	8
2.1.2 The communication process	8
2.2 Influencing Factors and Challenges in Upward Communication	9
2.2.1 Organizational culture	9
2.2.2 Hierarchical structure	10
2.2.3 Employee silence and time limitation	10
<b>3. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 Research Design	11
3.2 Data Collection	12
3.3 Data Analysis	14
3.4 Validity and Reliability	14
<b>4. CASE PRESENTATION OF KRISTIANSAND DYREPARK</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS</b>	<b>18</b>
5.1 The Information Flow and the Communication Process	18
5.1.1 Communication channels	18
5.1.2 Lack of feedback	19
5.2 How Organizational Culture and Structure Influence the Communication	20
5.2.1 Organizational culture	20
5.2.2 Hierarchical structure	20
5.3 Challenges Concerning Employee Silence	21
5.4 Challenges Concerning Time Limitation	22

<b>6. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>23</b>
6.1 Recommendations to the Case Organization	24
6.2 Research Contribution	24
6.3 Implications for Further Research	24
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>STATEMENT</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>30</b>
APPENDIX A Interview Brief	31
APPENDIX B Interview Guide for Department Manager	32
APPENDIX C Interview Guide for Area Manager	33
APPENDIX D Interview Guide for Seasonal Manager	34
APPENDIX E Interview Guide for Seasonal Employees	35
<b>FIGURES AND TABLES</b>	
TABLE 1 Respondent Overview	14
FIGURE 1 Organization Chart of the Commercial Department	17

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 The Thesis Topic

The topic of this thesis is vertical communication in organizations. The thesis will study how information flow upwards in a particular organization, focusing on new ideas and improvement proposals. It will assess factors influencing the information flow and communication process, such as organizational culture and structure. Furthermore, it will attempt to identify what the challenges in this process are, and by putting the findings in a relevant context, provide more clarity and proposals for improvement to the organization.

Effective internal communication is essential for the organization to achieve success (Ruck & Welch, 2012: 294), and it can therefore be a rewarding area in which to conduct research. Not taking advantage of ideas and opinions promoted by employees may lead to large information loss, compromising the organization's ability to learn, and distorting the knowledge which managers base their decisions upon (Kaufmann & Kaufmann, 2015: 409; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003: 1473). Research conducted by Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003: 1461) reveals that a third of their sample felt unable to offer suggestions for organizational improvement, including ideas on how things should work and ideas for improvement. Even though moving towards more participative environments, subordinates still find it difficult to express their opinions to their superiors (Modaff, Butler, & DeWine, 2012: 189). The majority of prior research regarding feedback has focused on downward communication from managers to employees (Tourish & Robson, 2006: 711), despite that the opportunities for subordinates to communicate upwards in the hierarchy has increased in line with the emergence of the participative workplace (Modaff et al., 2012: 188). Glauser (1984: 614) presents that limited cognitive capacity regarding information overload, structural challenges and management ideologies are influencing factors emphasizing that upward communication should be paid extra attention to.

The research topic was chosen based on a request from an organization to examine vertical upward communication in one of their main departments. Two of the researchers are related to the organization through employment and thus possess some internal insight. The third researcher has no connection to the organization and has been able to provide an objective view and ask critical and clarifying questions. As the research seeks answers to how something is in real life, and is based on experience from a case organization, it is empirical (Dalland, 2012: 115). The research problem found is that the organization is experiencing that ideas and

improvement proposals, promoted by employees at different hierarchical levels, do not always reach the right destination upward in the organization. As a result, important information and new ideas may not be made advantage of. On this basis, the research question formulated is:

*How do ideas and improvements proposed by employees flow upwards in organizations and what are the challenges?*

The research question will be answered by performing a case study of the commercial department in Kristiansand Dyrepark. Kristiansand Dyrepark is a zoo and theme park and it is Norway's largest family attraction (Kristiansand Dyrepark, 2017b). The case study research method was chosen in conjunction with the research question reference to explain *how*, and because of the method's contribution to understanding of and knowledge about an organizational phenomenon (Yin, 2014: 4). The method will be accounted for in a separate chapter and Kristiansand Dyrepark will be given a complimentary presentation later.

The research will be interesting for the case organization and for others who want to know more about vertical upward communication, compromising the flow of ideas and improvement proposals and the related challenges in organizations.

## **1.2 The Thesis Structure**

The thesis is structured as follows: it begins with a literature review which addresses communication in organizations, comprising the importance of organizational communication and the communication process. Further, influencing factors and challenges in upward communication are being accounted for. The organizational culture, the hierarchical structure, employee silence and time limitation are included in this section. A chapter on methodology then follows, divided into sections about research design, data collection, data analysis and validity and reliability. After that, a case presentation of Kristiansand Dyrepark is given. Then follows a chapter where the analysis is conducted and the results are discussed. It starts with looking at the information flow and the communication process. Here, the communication channels used in the organization, and how lack of feedback affects the communication, are reviewed and discussed. Then follows an analysis and discussion of how organizational culture and structure influence the communication. After that, challenges concerning employee silence and time limitation are considered in separate sections. Eventually comes the conclusion and

finally, the recommendations to the case organizations are listed, the research contribution is disclosed, and the implications for further research are designated.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Communication in Organizations**

To examine the flow of ideas and improvements within an organization, we need to study the internal communication. Communication between people generally have four functions: a social function, an expressive function, an information function and a control function. Although these four functions cannot be isolated, the further research will focus on the information function of communication, which is about transferring or acquiring knowledge (Erlien, 2006: 20). Organizational communication can be perceived in many ways. We have chosen to use the definition from Goldhaber (1993: 14-15): “Organizational communication is the process of creating and exchanging messages within a network of interdependent relationships to cope with environmental uncertainty”. Further on, vertical communication can be directed both upward and downward, and is defined as communication between superiors and subordinates on different hierarchical levels in organizations (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 290). Vertical upward communication is the communication from subordinates to their superiors, and is what will be addressed in this assignment. The influencing factors examined through this thesis include organizational culture and the hierarchical structure of an organization, based on the fact that organizational communication is affected by and affects its environment (Goldhaber, 1993: 14-15). The relationship between communication and organizational culture is reciprocal as they influence each other (Modaff et al., 2012: 95). Organizational characteristics like a hierarchical structure and an unsupportive culture are in later research defined as reasons for employees not raising their opinions, believing that speaking up will not make a difference, and thus leading to employee silence (Milliken et al., 2003: 1467). Informal talk in the workplace is filled with information exchange and learning, but the ever-increasing demand for effectiveness makes time a scarce resource (Ekman, 2004: 16-17). This may cause time limitation to negatively affect the organizational communication.

The transfer of relevant information throughout all levels of the organizations is essential to achieve effective operations (Glauser, 1984: 613), whereas upward communication is important not only for employee satisfaction and attitude, but also for organizational decision-making and performance (Roberts & O’Reilly, 1974: 205). To promote an idea is as much about improving

the everyday small changes in how to work, as about improving a process or expanding a service, or creating a new revolutionary product (Sætre, 2009: 182).

**2.1.1 The importance of organizational communication.** Communication is the most important process in all organizations because it is crucial for both internal integration and external adaptation (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 278). Effective communication is prerequisite to achieve success in the organization (Ruck & Welch, 2012: 294). In addition to the positive meaning communication constitutes, failure in communication is one of the most important factors regarding lack of productivity and prosperity in the organization (Grenness, 1999: 123). Previous research argues that upward communication takes one of four primary forms. One of them including “information about what needs to be done and how it could be done” (Katz & Kahn, 1978: 446), which can encompass the proposal of ideas and improvements.

If the information access fails, analysis and situation descriptions easily become incomplete or erroneous, which may lead to choosing solutions that are poorly adapted to the specific situation that one is in (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 300). One should note that internal communication has a great impact on employees’ motivation and satisfaction. Employees need internal communication to cover their needs, among other to get their ideas and opinions heard by their managers (Erlie, 2006: 30). For the organization, it will be important to have employees, including managers, who want to promote ideas and thoughts (Sætre, 2009: 182).

**2.1.2 The communication process.** Communication can be referred to as the transmission of information, ideas, attitudes and emotions from a person or a group to another (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 280). The communication process is complex, but is often explained simplified with a model consisting of two contributors: a sender and a receiver. Between them we find the channels used to communicate and interpret the message. There are four critical phases in this process: (1) coding of the message, (2) the message being conveyed through the selected channel, (3) decoding of the message and (4) feedback (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 280-282). Johnson, Donohue, Atkin and Johnson (1994: 114-115) argue that the level of employee initiative differs between formal and informal channels, and that subordinates tend to use informal channels more frequently. The choice of channel should be done based on what is essential to emphasize in each situation of communication (Hansen, 2011: 191), and it is wise to choose a channel that is within the employee’s normal media consumption (Hansen, 2011: 197). Written communication usually has a long time-span before the sender gets feedback. Oral communication on the other hand, provides the opportunity for quick and direct feedback about the message (Daft & Lengel, 1986: 560). If the employees do not get any feedback, and



further do not feel like their opinion is taken into consideration when speaking up, this is demotivating (Hansen, 2011: 181). Several studies on organizational communication show that oral face-to-face communication is preferred and perceived as the most effective (Rice, 1993; Westmyer, DiCioccio, & Rubin, 1998). This especially applies if the people communicating feel their time is limited, which is also supported by several studies showing that most managers prefer oral rather than written communication (Hales, 1986: 98). Ekman (2004: 18) claims that informal conversations between superiors and subordinates help to minimize the distance between them, and is a prerequisite for employee proposals to be put into practice. In direct interaction, the non-verbal communication and the perceived status between an individual and the one they interact with, provides important information affecting the communication process (Mehrabian, 2007: 179-181).

## **2.2 Influencing Factors and Challenges in Upward Communication**

According to Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2013: 290), upward communication is faced with especially two challenging factors one should be aware of. The first one being that a hierarchical structure influences the amount of information possible to communicate upwards, restrained by the fact that there will be fewer receivers higher up in the hierarchy. This thought is accompanied by Glauser (1984: 614), who states that managers due to limited cognitive capacity cannot process all the information received. The second challenge is that research has shown that subordinates and intermediates often underestimate negative information and attempt to put themselves and their work in a positive light (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 290-291). This is supported by later research showing that employee silence can be a challenge, and that the fear of being viewed negatively or ruin valued relationships is comprehensive (Milliken et al., 2003: 1454). Employees with ambitions to climb within the organization may restrict communication of unfavorable information, and the lack of a trusting climate as well as the influence from the superior on the subordinate, has a great impact on, and may lead to, failures in upward communication (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974: 212-214).

**2.2.1 Organizational culture.** Culture is developed through communication (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 278) and is a pattern of beliefs and values shared by the members of the organization (Goldhaber, 1993: 69). Having a great impact on how the members interact, the culture is a crucial factor influencing the organizational communication (Modaff et al., 2012: 88). Within the culture, the organizational psychosocial climate reflects how the interaction between the people in the organization is experienced (Kaufmann & Kaufmann, 2015: 367). It

is closely related to the perceived security and openness (Kaufmann & Kaufmann, 2015: 483-485), and strongly influences upward communication. A trusting climate leads to a more efficient information flow, as well as more efficient problem solving within a group (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974: 212-213). An unsupportive culture is on the other hand defined as one of the main reasons why employees do not speak up, mainly because they believe that raising their opinions will not make a difference (Milliken et al., 2003: 1467). Research has shown that employees' perception of how their supervisor will manage the message, strongly affect their likelihood to speak up (Saunders, Sheppard, Knight, & Roth, 1992: 255). This is somewhat coinciding with research conducted by Pelz (1952), stating that employees will initiate less upward messages if they believe that their superiors do not have upward influence (Putnam & Cheney, 1992: 74). The studies on culture by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) define power distance as the extent to which the less powerful members of an organization expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. They further state that low power distance leads to superiors usually consulting with subordinates before reaching a decision (Hofstede et al., 2010: 60-62). In situations where the power distance is high, contact between superiors and subordinates is supposed to be initiated only by the superiors (Hofstede et al., 2010: 73), and thus does not facilitate upward communication.

**2.2.2 Hierarchical structure.** The organizational structure affects the information flow and communication in general (Erlie, 2006: 91). A fundamental problem in vertical upward communication is that the hierarchy suppresses communication between subordinates and superiors (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 290). Nevertheless, a hierarchical structure is expedient for filtering out information (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 290), and is purposed to avoid unnecessary information upward in the hierarchy, and thus also information overload for superiors regarding both limitations in time and cognitive capacity (Glauser, 1984: 614; Hansen, 2011: 181; Mintzberg, 1979). Research has shown that too much information can lead to reduction in productivity (Ben-Arieh & Pollatscheck, 2002: 3572). On the other hand, the number of tiers in a hierarchical structure can lead to unwanted filtering of valuable information (Hansen, 2011: 182; Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 290). In some cases the different organizational members can act as gatekeepers if there is lack of trust, or an expectation that the message will be distorted when moving upwards (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974: 209). The upward line of communication in the hierarchy should function well, so that good ideas can be channeled up in the organization (Hansen, 2011: 173).

**2.2.3 Employee silence and time limitation.** Employee silence can be described as the reluctance to speak up and limit or withhold information (Milliken et al., 2003: 1453-1454).

Prior research states that this retention of information and opinions may lead to a great loss of information and efficiency loss if valuable information is not taken advantage of in the organization (Milliken et al., 2003: 1473). Employee silence can arise from deficiency of trust in superior-subordinate relationships (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974: 212), the feeling of lack of influence upward in the organization (Putnam & Cheney, 1992: 74), or the fear of being viewed negatively when putting awareness to challenges or circumstances that should be improved (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 291; Milliken et al., 2003: 1454).

Another factor that can challenge the information flow is that upward communication is a time-consuming process (Hansen, 2011: 181). Time is a scarce resource and the strive for efficiency gains can affect the relationship between superiors and subordinates, including the informal communication in the workplace (Ekman, 2004: 17). The capacity to process and make use of the information is less as we move upward in the hierarchy, as there are fewer receivers relative to the number of senders (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 290). Superiors are faced with the challenge of ensuring that they get relevant and accurate information, and restrict the unnecessary upward communication that may lead to overload (Glauser, 1984: 614-615). When managers get more information than they can handle, this can lead to responses including omission, queuing, filtering and escaping from the task (Miller, 1960: 697).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The research design should specify what types of data is needed to answer the research question, how to proceed to obtain the data and how to analyze it (Gripsrud, Olsson, & Silkoset, 2016: 39). With a mission to gain insight into the problem area, and to better understand and interpret the situation of the department, an exploratory research design is appropriate for this research. This thesis includes a literature review, use of secondary data and collected primary data, as the exploratory design tend to do (Gripsrud et al., 2016: 47). Qualitative methods like depth interviews aim to understand a certain situation (Gripsrud et al., 2016: 103), which is coinciding with the purpose of this thesis, and are, along with focus groups, the most commonly used techniques within exploratory research design (Gripsrud et al., 2016: 50).

The research is done by conducting a case study of a department in the organization to understand the complex social phenomena by focusing on this particular case in its realistic context (Yin, 2014: 5). A case study looks in-depth at one or a few organizations or individuals

(Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012: 54), and the more the research question seeks to explain a certain situation, the more relevant the method will be (Yin, 2014: 4). The case study method is suitable as the research question is explanatory: we have no control over actual behavioral events and the focus is on the present situation as opposed to entirely historical happenings (Yin, 2014: 9-15). By using the case study method we are able to understand a real-world case assuming that its context will be of importance to include (Yin, 2014: 16). The research will include what Yin describes as a single-case design (2014: 50), as a result of analysis of a single unit and case. A rationale for the choice of the single case design is to capture the circumstances and conditions of the everyday situation in the department (Yin, 2014: 52), which was in line with the request from the case organization.

We are aware that there is a risk for our research to be biased because of our connection to the organization, because researchers affiliated to either project sponsors or participants may ignore certain results and add weight to others (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 108). With knowledge of this, we have been conscious of our role as researchers. The researcher not related to Dyreparken has constituted an important role, ensuring the objectivity of the research.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

For the data collection, we made use of both respondents and informants. Our respondents are employees directly related to the phenomenon conducted research on, and represent the group we wanted to study. Our informants do not represent the group, but have a good knowledge of the group or the phenomenon studied (Jacobsen, 2015: 178-179). The informants in this research have been five employees in the case organization: the Commercial Director, the Human Resources Director, the Human Resources Head of Office, an employee from the Human Resources Department and the Salary Manager. The respondents will be listed after the disclosure of the data collection.

In qualitative research participants are selected purposively (Flick, 2011: 12), and the respondents were therefore selected based on their position in the organization to ensure several perspectives on the information flow in the work line, and to provide us with a holistic view. This is also known as strategic selection (Johannessen, Christoffersen, & Tufte, 2016: 117). To ensure that they had experience in our research field, all the respondents chosen are experienced in their positions.

We have conducted eight individual depth interviews with respondents at all the major level sections within the department. The method was chosen because the individuals' personal

experiences, opinions or similar are of interest (Gripsrud et al., 2016: 115). The purpose of qualitative research interviews is to get the interviewees' own description of the situation (Dalland, 2012: 153). An interview is a conversation with a certain structure and purpose (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 22). To ensure that the relevant topics got addressed during the interviews, we designed an interview guide in advance. A research interview has an ask-and-listen oriented approach, and goes deeper than the spontaneous exchange of views that happens in everyday life (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 22). The research interview is an interpersonal situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 156), and interviewers may, because of the close interpersonal interaction between themselves and the respondents, be inclined to be influenced by them (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 108). In our situation, this will be extra important because the two researchers related to the case organization may know of some of the respondents. Interview bias, which can arise if either the respondent or interviewer carry a motivation to counterfeit responses (Williams, 1964: 339), also needs to be taken into consideration. Appropriate interviewer selection can be done based on knowledge about factors producing bias, to overcome this particular challenge (Williams, 1964: 338). To reduce the possibility of bias in this research, the researcher not related to the organization was originally supposed to carry out the interviews. Due to changes regarding when the interviews were to be held, some interviews needed to be carried out by one of the other researchers. This circumstance allows for critique of the data collection, but due to the validity of the interview guide and the number of interviews conducted, we still find the collected data to be representative.

To ensure the quality of the information gathered, the data collection was performed in two different subdivisions within the commercial department. The purpose was not to compare the departments as it is with multiple-case design (Yin, 2014: 50, 56), but rather to acquire a wider knowledge base. It was desirable that the respondents worked in a straight vertical line in relation to each other, to uncover connections, similarities and differences in the answers. To provide anonymity for the respondents, and not revealing data that identifies the participants, the respondents will only be referred to by their position title (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 106). The subdivisions will be referred to as Subdivision A and Subdivision B. Half of the respondents are women and half are men. Their age range from 18 to 43 years old. The respondents are listed on the next page.

TABLE 1  
Respondent Overview

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Subdivision</b>	<b>Position title</b>	<b>Interview duration</b>
Respondent 1	Subdivision A	Department Manager	20 minutes
Respondent 2	Subdivision B	Department Manager	31 minutes
Respondent 3	Subdivision A	Area Manager	35 minutes
Respondent 4	Subdivision B	Area Manager	40 minutes
Respondent 5	Subdivision A	Seasonal Manager	25 minutes
Respondent 6	Subdivision B	Seasonal Manager	35 minutes
Respondent 7	Subdivision A	Seasonal Employee	17 minutes
Respondent 8	Subdivision B	Seasonal Employee	23 minutes

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

To analyze means to divide something into pieces or elements (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 219), and the purpose of qualitative analysis is to understand, interpret and theorize from the collected data (Flick, 2011: 13; Schwandt, 2001: 6). Before we could analyze the data, the oral interviews had to be transformed into written text through transcription (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 137, 205). With eight conducted interviews, we have gathered a great amount of data relative to the magnitude of the thesis, amounting to approximately 42 pages of transcript. To analyze the data from the interviews, we performed content analysis. Content analysis is a classical way of analyzing text, and is an empirical method for the transparent disclosure of significant and formal functions in messages, in a systematic and inter-subjective manner (Flick, 2011: 133). This is done to sort the data into categories and to select the material most relevant for answering our research question (Flick, 2011: 133, 136-137).

### **3.4 Validity and Reliability**

When evaluating empirical studies, it is necessary to assess whether the methods used are reliable, and whether the results obtained meet the requirements for validity (Flick, 2011: 200). The terms validity, reliability and generalizability can differ in meaning within different research traditions and people can therefore use different criteria when evaluating a study

(Easterby-Smith et al., 2012: 70). In a case study, Yin (2014: 240) describes reliability as “the consistency and repeatability of the research procedures”, which refers to how reliable the results are. The reliability is interrelated with the credibility of the results (Dalland, 2012: 52), and is hence connected to the credibility of the respondents. Due to the respondents’ employment and experience in their positions, we consider the reliability to be fairly solid.

Validity is “the extent to which measures and research findings provide accurate representation of the things they are supposed to be describing” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012: 347). Internal validity refers to the validity of the research design, and the focus is on the results of the research (Flick, 2011: 202). Our choice of methods was carefully considered to provide answers to the research question. To ensure the quality of the data collected, we followed our interview guide. An interview guide is a script that structures the interview process. A semi-structured interview, as used in this research, contains an overview of topics to be covered and suggested questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 162). The interview guide was developed supported by knowledge from the literature review and in accordance with guidelines established within methodology. We consider the questions in the interview guide to be appropriate, based on the overall similarity in understanding by the respondents, and because they gave answers to what we wanted to examine. Based on this, we consider the validity to be good.

External validity is about the extent to which the results of a study can be transferred to similar situations (Grønmo, 2004: 233). External validity is thus a matter of generalization (Gripsrud et al., 2016: 58). If the results of a study are considered to be reasonably reliable and have satisfactory internal validity, then often the question follows whether the results can be generalized. Generalization concerns with whether the results are primarily of local interest, or if they can be transferred to other interviewees, contexts or situations (Flick, 2011: 200; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 289). It can therefore be conflicting that it is often precisely the connection to a specific context that provides value to qualitative research (Flick, 2011: 211). The findings of this thesis cannot be generalized based on this research alone, but they can be of interest to the case organization and can contribute to the diversity of knowledge.

## **4. CASE PRESENTATION OF KRISTIANSAND DYREPARK**

The thesis is constructed around a case study of the commercial department in Kristiansand Dyrepark, hereafter referred to as Dyreparken. The zoo and theme park is located in the south of Norway. It was officially opened June 25, 1966 and has welcomed guests every day since. Dyreparken has over 1 000 000 visitors per year, mostly tourists from Norway (Kristiansand Dyrepark, 2017b). In approximately the last 15 years, the number of yearly visitors has doubled (Kristiansand Dyrepark, 2017a) and the turnover has tripled (Proff Forvalt, 2017b), proving that the organization is experiencing a significant growth. For 2015 Dyreparken's revenue amounted to 331 043 000 NOK, and their result ended up being 43 989 000 NOK (Proff Forvalt, 2017a).

In 2016, there were 59 full-time employees and 38 part-time employees in the organization. During the summer, Dyreparken employs approximately 1180 seasonal workers, most of them between the age of 16 and 25. In total, this amounts to 224 full-time equivalents. Of the total number of employees, approximately 850 works in the commercial department, making the department the richest in human resources (Kristiansand Dyrepark, 2017b, with modifications according to the Salary Manager).

The organization is divided in several main departments. Our contact, Morten Skraastad, is the director of the commercial department, which our research will be limited to. Further on, also the commercial department is divided into subdivisions, as can be seen in the organization chart on the next page. The chart reflects the structure of the department, but is simplified from the area managers and downwards due to the high number of employees. The number of employees in these positions are written in parentheses. The levels where the data collection was conducted is highlighted.



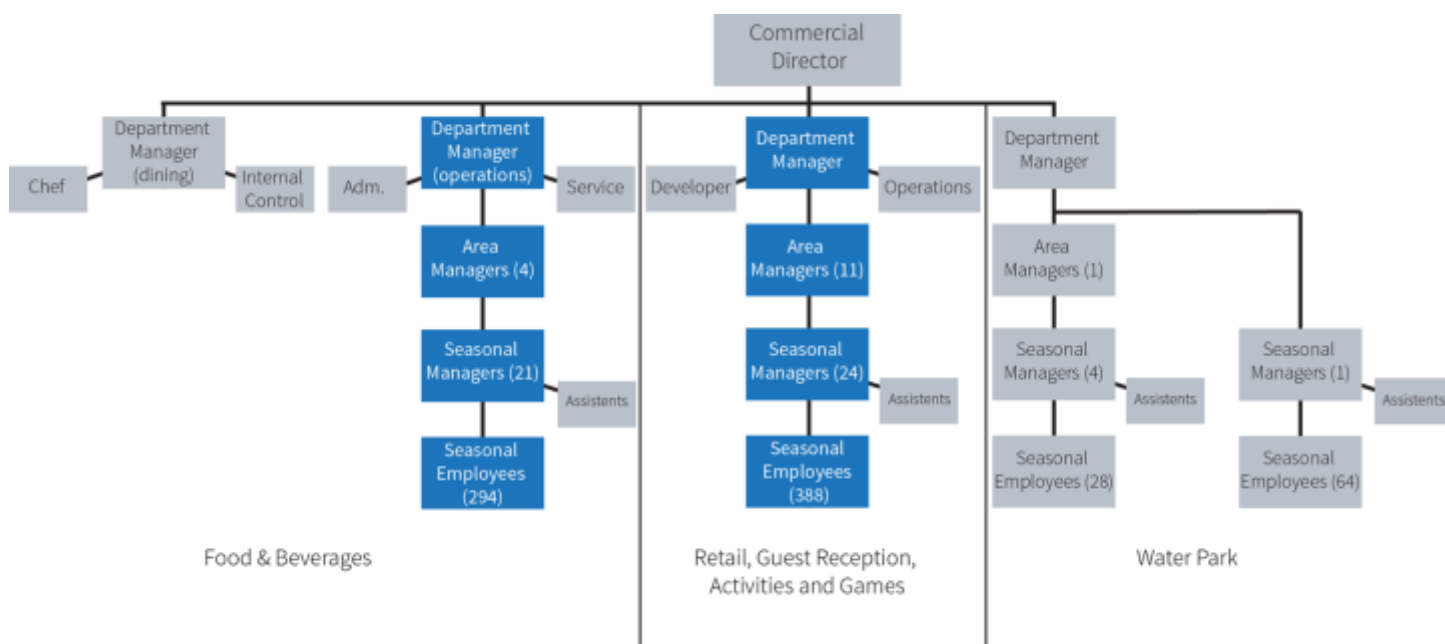


FIGURE 1

Organization Chart of the Commercial Department (provided by Kristiansand Dyrepark)

The department has a hierarchical structure consisting of levels from the director down to the seasonal employees. We have collected data from all the main levels in the department. The seasonal employees are subordinates working in different sub-departments, managed by a seasonal manager. The seasonal managers' nearest superiors are the area managers, which further report to the department managers. In addition to these positions, most seasonal managers also have one or more assistants. Our research has not included the assistants because of their lack of human resources responsibility. The structure can be compared with what Mintzberg (1979) refers to as the machine bureaucracy, with clearly defined responsibilities and a fixed structure, which may act inhibitory for development and change.

Dyreparken has set itself the goal of becoming a learning organization. Senge (1990: 14) defines a learning organization as an organization that is continuously learning and has the capacity to transform itself. Successful organizations will be the ones taking advantage of their employees' engagement and ability to learn at all levels in the hierarchy (Senge, 1990: 4). The name of the project is "Dyreparken – litt bedre enn i går", which can be translated to "Dyreparken – a little bit better than yesterday". Within this commitment, the power of always wanting to improve what they are doing is an essential focus. In 2016, Dyreparken introduced a tool to gather, register and process ideas and suggestions for improvements from employees. Employees log in with an app or on a webpage, providing their name and contact information

together with their suggestion. The improvement system was initially developed for registering deviations, and the Human Resources Director states that it is far from a perfect solution. During our research, the organization also introduced and started the implementation of a new intranet: Workplace by Facebook. The channel has similarities with Facebook in use and design, and is intended used for internal communication throughout the organization. With Facebook being a frequently used channel within many people's normal media consumption, the organization anticipates the implementation of Workplace to be effective.

Dyreparken operates within enormous seasonal variations since it predominantly is a tourist attraction visited during the summer. Most of the organization's sales and working hours belong within this period. Due to the thesis limitations, this will not be further assessed as an influencing factor on the research question.

## **5. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

### **5.1 The Information Flow and the Communication Process**

Especially two of the four critical phases in the communication process, defined by Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2013: 280-282), stand out as perceived challenging by the respondents: the channel conveying the message and the feedback. A more in-depth analysis and discussion of the two factors follows in the next two sections.

**5.1.1 Communication channels.** Earlier research has shown a tendency to more frequent use of informal above formal channels by subordinates (Johnson et al., 1994: 114-115). It appears that the different respondents in our data collection use different communication channels in the promotion and reception of ideas, but with an emphasis on the usage of channels perceived by them as informal. Especially the informal conversation on how things are going, as described by Ekman (2004: 17), is mentioned by all respondents. The preferred communication channel somewhat differed between the respondents, but several favored oral face-to-face communication. The reason given was the feeling of the message being received immediately and that they hence experienced to get some immediate feedback. On the other hand, the benefit of structure and non-volatile information was emphasized by some, especially the ones receiving the suggestions. This is coinciding to prior research which puts forward that leaders' cognitive capacity can be a challenging factor (Glauser, 1984: 614), but is somewhat in contrast with Hales' (1986: 98) findings stating that leaders prefer oral communication.

Even though all managers in the department conduct performance appraisals with their subordinates annually, none of our respondents mentioned this as a channel for raising ideas or improvement proposals. This indicates that this is not seen as a significant channel for this purpose as of now.

While some respondents focused on the implemented improvement system, others did not mention it at all. Some respondents had no experience using the system to receive or promote their suggestions for improvements. Hansen (2011: 197) states that the organization ought to choose a channel that employees normally use. This can explain why some employees choose not to use the current system for improvements, which is a stand-alone solution for the improvement process and deviations.

*“We do have that ‘Dyreparken – a little bit better than yesterday’-thing, but there is nobody who uses it.”* – Area Manager, Subdivision A

Workplace by Facebook is a recently introduced channel for internal communication. Although it was yet fairly used by the respondents, several expressed their positive expectations of it as an internal communication channel, including the ability to promote ideas and improvements. This may be because Workplace, unlike the current improvement system, is similar to Facebook: a communication channel which is likely to be within the normal media consumption of the respondents. Essential attributes for each situation of communication should be the basis when choosing a channel (Hansen, 2011: 191). In the case organization, the ease-of-use is considered to be especially important.

**5.1.2 Lack of feedback.** Considering the importance of different attributes in the choice of channel for improvement proposals brings us to the next challenging phase. One of our clearest findings is the desire for feedback from superiors when promoting an idea or suggestion for improvement.

*“When you have reported improvement suggestions several times and nothing happens, you stop believing that something actually will happen.”* – Seasonal Employee, Subdivision B

The findings can indicate that the lack of two-way communication is an important deficiency with the current state. Several of our respondents mentioned the lack of feedback as a factor negatively affecting their willingness to continue promoting ideas. This is consistent with

research showing that if the receiver is not perceived as responsive and the senders feel they are not heard, employees are less likely to speak up (Milliken et al., 2003: 1467-1468). Additional research also designates the importance of feedback from superiors when concerns are raised from subordinates (Ruck & Welch, 2012: 295). Our research shows that subordinates who did not get feedback on the proposals given, felt less motivated to continue to suggest ideas. This is consistent with Hansen (2011: 181) stating that employees feel demotivated when feeling that their opinions are not taken into consideration when speaking up.

## **5.2 How Organizational Culture and Structure Influence the Communication**

**5.2.1 Organizational culture.** Our data generally carries an emphasis on the importance of trust and proximity to the respondents' nearest supervisor, and how this relationship will influence the communication climate. The results show that the respondents value trust and openness as crucial factors for facilitating suggestions moving upwards in the organization, as also stated by Kaufmann and Kaufmann (2015: 483-485). This is supported by the findings from Roberts and O'Reilly (1974: 212-213) showing that a trusting climate leads to more efficient information flow, as well as more efficient problem solving between organizational members. The perceived proximity to the nearest superior indicates a low power distance in the department, indicating that the subordinates' opinions will be taken into consideration (Hofstede et al., 2010: 60-62).

Our respondents perceived their superiors to have influence upward in the organization, which according to Pelz (1952) promotes upward communication. This is supported by our findings which indicates a low power distance throughout the department, substantiating that employees have an impact upward. A crucial factor though, is the employees' perception of how the message they send will be managed by their superior (Saunders et al., 1992: 255). Our research shows that subordinates who did not feel that their superior had the capacity to process their suggestions felt less motivated to continue to promote suggestions, and sometimes withheld their ideas or improvement proposals.

**5.2.2 Hierarchical structure.** The hierarchical structure of the department is by the respondents viewed as expedient for conveying ideas and improvements upwards. Still, the majority of the respondents also noted that the number of tiers can be challenging and lead to halt of information, which is supported by Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2013: 290) and Hansen (2011: 182). This is a view shared by the Human Resources Director, who states that the

organization can be somewhat bureaucratic. An obvious finding is that the subordinates mostly pass on information to their nearest supervisor, using the intended line of communication. The information flow up the hierarchy constitutes an important part in the process of filtering messages. Our research problem claims that there is a perceived challenge related to valuable information not reaching the right decision-makers, which can be a consequence of unwanted filtering as explained by Hansen (2011: 182).

An interesting ascertainment is that several respondents mentioned that seasonal managers may withhold ideas and suggestions from reaching receivers higher up in the hierarchy. This finding indicates that some employees may act as gatekeepers of information, as described by Roberts and O'Reilly (1974: 209). This can possibly be explained by the seasonal managers being in the position to receive a lot of upward communication from their employees. By being the first tier to filter information, the seasonal managers' cognitive capacity is challenged by information overload, as explained by Glauser (1984: 614). On the other hand, it is important to remember that filtering is also positive in the means of preventing unnecessary and too much information for superiors (Hansen, 2011: 181; Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 290). In our case, the area managers are shown to be a much-valued tier in the line of communication. Respondents at all levels emphasize that the area manager prevent information overload to the department manager, and in many cases, play a key role to get ideas and improvements implemented.

### **5.3 Challenges Concerning Employee Silence**

Our research indicates that the lack of a channel enabling anonymity when promoting ideas or proposals for improvements, may lead to employee silence. This is in line with previous research pointing out that employee silence can be a result of employees' fear of being perceived in a negative way or damage relationships, for example when pointing out areas for improvement (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013: 291; Milliken et al., 2003: 1454). Some of the respondents were reluctant to openly propose their suggestions. They suggested that a channel making it possible to be anonymous would prevent employee silence and bring more ideas and improvement proposals to the table. This can easily be linked to the perceived trust between the subordinate and their superiors, which is shown to be crucial to counteract employee silence (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974: 212). The majority of our respondents described a trusting climate, facilitating their opportunity to speak up. Still, some employees or messages belie this description. This may indicate that the organization can benefit from facilitating anonymous

feedback. The deficiency of feedback and action on suggestions seem to negatively affect the amount of upward communication of ideas and improvements. If this is absent, subordinates can perceive their superiors to not be influential, which can reinforce employee silence (Putnam & Cheney, 1992: 74).

#### **5.4 Challenges Concerning Time Limitation**

The time limitation, experienced in all levels, is one of the most prominent findings in our research. This is shown through the withholding of ideas by employees, who experience that their superior has too much on their plate already.

*“I save part of the improvements that could have been implemented during the summer until after the season, because I know that the overload during the summer is a reality for my superiors.”* – Seasonal Manager, Subdivision B

Earlier research supports these findings, presenting that managers’ cognitive capacity can be a challenge related to the information flow (Glauser, 1984: 614). Our findings are consistent with the challenge Glauser (1984: 615) points out: how to find the perfect balance of valuable information that does not lead to overload.

*“If Dyreparken really is concerned with improvement proposals, they should set aside time for it. Otherwise, it is of course given less priority. Always.”* – Seasonal Manager, Subdivision A

The managers in the case organization acknowledged that work related to ideas and improvements is given a lower priority due to time shortage and is in some occasions left out. This is in accordance with the responses Miller presents when information overload occurs (Miller, 1960: 697). Our respondents describe time to be a scarce resource due to the strive for effectiveness, as also stated by Ekman (2004: 16-17). The perceived work overload and time limitation can in many cases lead to inaction from the superiors considering ideas and improvements raised from their subordinates. This can include lack of both feedback and implementation, which again negatively affect the subordinate’s motivation to further raise their suggestions. It hence seems to be a correlation between time limitation and employee silence in the department.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The purpose with this thesis has been to answer the research question:

*How do ideas and improvements proposed by employees flow upwards in organizations and what are the challenges?*

By conducting a case study of the commercial department in Kristiansand Dyrepark, we have tried to supplement previous research on vertical communication in organizations. Effective upward communication, and taking advantage of employees' ideas and suggestions for improvements, are through literature and prior research pointed out as important factors for achieving organizational success. The case organization is experiencing that ideas and improvement proposals promoted by employees at different hierarchical levels do not always reach the right destination upwards in the organization, which deprives the organization the possibility to take advantage of the suggestions.

Our results show that the information flow in the studied department is satisfying to a certain extent, explained by the respondents' experiences of a trusting culture and an expedient structure for conveying information. Still, there are some clear challenges related to the passing of ideas and improvement proposals upward in the organization. It is obvious that several different channels are used for raising ideas and improvement proposals. The combination of the use of many communication channels, and that not everyone uses the intended channel for ideas and improvements, can be disorderly – leading to several flows of information that may be challenging to manage. The shortage of feedback on the suggested ideas and improvements seems demotivating on employees' willingness to promote more suggestions. Even though the organizational culture seems to facilitate for employees raising their voice, a channel enabling anonymous improvement proposals is missed by some, and may lead to employee silence in certain cases. Within all the examined levels, the time limitation is stated as a crucial factor. The time shortage leads to lack of feedback on the promoted ideas and improvements, and the implementation of good ideas or improvements is not always carried out because of time pressure. Further, this is shown to lead to more employee silence as a result of subordinates not experiencing their suggestions to be heard and acted on.

## **6.1 Recommendations to the Case Organization**

Based on our results, we have the following recommendations for the case organization. The organization should: 1) improve and increasingly standardize the communication channels for ideas and improvements to ensure more equal use throughout the department. This should include the facilitation for two-way communication and use of channels that is within the employees' normal media consumption. 2) Assure feedback to be given from superiors to subordinates on ideas and improvements promoted. This to contribute positively to employees' motivation regarding the promotion of ideas and improvements. 3) Establish a channel enabling employees to provide ideas and improvement suggestions anonymously in order to prevent employee silence. 4) Allocate time for communication regarding ideas and improvement proposals. Employees should be given time to promote suggestions, and superiors should have time to provide feedback on the proposals and possibly implement them.

These recommendations designate the clearest and most important improvements that can be made, based on our research. By following these recommendations, Kristiansand Dyrepark can arrange for better organizational communication and thus perhaps achieve greater success.

## **6.2 Research Contribution**

Our research illustrates a correlation between suboptimal two-way communication and employee silence. It also points out how limited time and lack of feedback can challenge the upward information flow. In addition, the research contributes to the case organization's knowledge of the studied phenomenon as explained in the previous section.

It is important to mention that none of the employees in the organization who were asked contribute as either respondents or informants in this research hesitated or said no to the request. It can be assumed that employees with protruding opinions or experiences would have refrained to participate. The research contribution is limited in particular because of the extent and depth of the research. This follows from the time and scope limitations set for this thesis, and the study can hence not provide sufficient empirical evidence.

## **6.3 Implications for Further Research**

Our research elucidates several implications for further research: researchers may study the connection revealed in this research between the lack of feedback on ideas or improvement proposals and employee silence to a greater extent. Future research can advantageously study the same topic by using a multiple-case design as described by Yin (2014, p. 50), to increase



the external validity of the research. In addition, researchers can study how our findings may be related to the large seasonal variations the organization operates within, and how communication can be optimized seen in that context – a theme that was beyond our limitations.

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## STATEMENT

We declare on our word of honor, that we are the sole authors of this bachelor thesis. This thesis is our own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree. The work was completed using only the cited sources. All information taken directly from source material or ideas based on information taken from source material have been clearly identified through the cited references.


Kristiansand, June 1, 2017



Karianne Hartviksen



Karoline Liane Bjørnerud



Zelia Johansen Moss

## **APPENDICES**

Prior to the interviews, all respondents were given an interview brief (APPENDIX A Interview Brief) in addition to the information they received when they agreed to be interviewed. The interview guides were adjusted according to the respondents' position, and therefore there are four interview guides. The interviews were conducted between March 27 and April 11, 2017.

## APPENDIX A Interview Brief

Tusen takk for at du ønsker å delta i datainnsamlingen til vår bacheloroppgave innenfor bachelorprogrammet Markedsføring og ledelse ved Universitet i Agder.

Bacheloroppgaven omhandler vertikal kommunikasjon i organisasjoner. I samråd med kommersiell direktør Morten Skraastad har vi valgt å gjøre et case study av den kommersielle avdelingen i Kristiansand Dyrepark. Forskningsspørsmålet vårt er:

*How do ideas and improvements proposed by employees flow upwards in organizations and what are the challenges?*

Med andre ord vil det si at vi ønsker å se nærmere på hvordan ideer og forbedringsforslag fra medarbeidere beveger seg oppover i organisasjonen, og eventuelt hvilke utfordringer som er tilknyttet dette. Med ideer og forbedringsforslag mener vi nye ideer, forslag til forbedringer, herunder også innspill angående utfordringer eller problemområder knyttet til arbeidsutførelsen. Vi vil fokusere på ideer og forbedringsforslag som beveger seg fra medarbeidere på ulike nivå til nærmeste leder oppover i bedriften. Spørsmålene vi vil stille deg omhandler dine erfaringer med å fremme, videreformidle og/eller motta ideer og forbedringsforslag.

Gjennom forskningsarbeidet vårt vil vi intervjuet et utvalg respondenter i ulike stillinger. Intervjuet vil ta ca. 45 minutter og alle svarene vil bli anonymisert. Vi ønsker å benytte oss av stillingstitler i oppgavens analysearbeid, men det vil ikke være mulig å gjenkjenne personen som har svart.

Med vennlig hilsen,

Karianne Hartviksen, Karoline Liane Bjørnerud og Zelia Johansen Moss

# APPENDIX B Interview Guide for Department Managers

## Del 1 - Introduksjon

1. Hvordan synes du kommunikasjonen fra medarbeidere til ledere i avdelingen fungerer?
2. Har du opplevd utfordringer knyttet til denne kommunikasjonen? Forklar.

## Del 2 - Kommunikasjonsprosessen

3. Gjennom hvilke informasjonskanaler mottar du ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag fra dine underordnede?
  - a. Hvilke formelle og/eller uformelle kanaler benytter dere?
  - b. Hvordan fungerer dette?
4. Opplever du at du får tilstrekkelig informasjon om relevante forhold fra dine underordnede?
5. Opplever du misforståelser i kommunikasjonsprosessen ved mottak av ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag fra dine underordnede?

## Del 3 - Organisasjonskulturen

6. Opplever du at kulturen i avdelingen påvirker kommunikasjonen?
7. Har du opplevd at en underordnet ikke har tatt ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag videre? Hvorfor?

## Del 4 - Organisasjonsstrukturen

8. Opplever du at strukturen i avdelingen påvirker kommunikasjonen?
9. Opplever du at organisasjonsstrukturen er hensiktsmessig i forhold til ideene og/eller forbedringsforslagene du mottar?

## Del 5 - Avslutning

10. Har du noen forslag til hvordan ideer og/eller forbedringer foreslått av medarbeidere på en bedre måte kan bli brakt videre til rett person oppover i avdelingen?
11. Kan vi gjengi sitater dersom det skulle bli aktuelt?
12. Er det noe annet du synes vi burde ha spurt om?



# APPENDIX C Interview Guide for Area Managers

## Del 1- Introduksjon

1. Hvordan synes du kommunikasjonen fra medarbeidere til ledere i avdelingen fungerer?
2. Har du opplevd utfordringer knyttet til denne kommunikasjonen? Forklar.

## Del 2 - Kommunikasjonsprosessen

3. Gjennom hvilke informasjonskanaler fremmer, videreformidler og/eller mottar du ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag fra dine underordnede til din leder?
  - a. Hvilke formelle og/eller uformelle kanaler benytter dere?
  - b. Hvordan fungerer dette?
4. Opplever du at du får tilstrekkelig informasjon om relevante forhold fra dine underordnede?
5. Opplever du at du får formidlet tilstrekkelig informasjon om relevante forhold til din leder?
6. Opplever du misforståelser i kommunikasjonsprosessen ved fremming, videreformidling og/eller mottak av ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag fra dine underordnede til din leder?

## Del 3 - Organisasjonskulturen

7. Opplever du at kulturen i avdelingen påvirker kommunikasjonen?
8. Er det noe som hindrer deg fra å fremme eller videreformidle ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag?

## Del 4 - Organisasjonsstrukturen

9. Opplever du at strukturen i avdelingen påvirker kommunikasjonen?
10. Opplever du at organisasjonsstrukturen er hensiktsmessig i forhold til ideene og/eller forbedringsforslagene du fremmer, videreformidler og/eller mottar?

## Del 5 - Avslutning

11. Har du noen forslag til hvordan ideer og/eller forbedringer foreslått av medarbeidere på en bedre måte kan bli brakt videre til rett person oppover i avdelingen?
12. Kan vi gjengi sitater dersom det skulle bli aktuelt?
13. Er det noe annet du synes vi burde ha spurt om?

# APPENDIX D Interview Guide for Seasonal Managers

## Del 1 - Introduksjon

1. Hvordan synes du kommunikasjonen fra medarbeidere til ledere i avdelingen fungerer?
2. Har du opplevd utfordringer knyttet til denne kommunikasjonen? Forklar.

## Del 2 - Kommunikasjonsprosessen

3. Gjennom hvilke informasjonskanaler fremmer, videreformidler og/eller mottar du ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag fra dine underordnede til din leder?
  - a. Hvilke formelle og/eller uformelle kanaler benytter dere?
  - b. Hvordan fungerer dette?
4. Opplever du at du får tilstrekkelig informasjon om relevante forhold fra dine underordnede?
5. Opplever du at du får formidlet tilstrekkelig informasjon om relevante forhold til din leder?
6. Opplever du misforståelser i kommunikasjonsprosessen ved fremming, videreformidling og/eller mottak av ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag fra dine underordnede til din leder?

## Del 3 - Organisasjonskulturen

7. Opplever du at kulturen i avdelingen påvirker kommunikasjonen?
8. Er det noe som hindrer deg fra å fremme eller videreformidle ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag?

## Del 4 - Organisasjonsstrukturen

9. Opplever du at strukturen i avdelingen påvirker kommunikasjonen?
10. Opplever du at organisasjonsstrukturen er hensiktsmessig i forhold til ideene og/eller forbedringsforslagene du fremmer, videreformidler og/eller mottar?

## Del 5 - Avslutning

11. Har du noen forslag til hvordan ideer og/eller forbedringer foreslått av medarbeidere på en bedre måte kan bli brakt videre til rett person oppover i avdelingen?
12. Kan vi gjengi sitater dersom det skulle bli aktuelt?
13. Er det noe du annet synes vi burde ha spurt om?

# APPENDIX E Interview Guide for Seasonal Employees

## Del 1 - Introduksjon

1. Hvordan synes du kommunikasjonen fra medarbeidere til ledere i avdelingen fungerer?
2. Har du opplevd utfordringer knyttet til denne kommunikasjonen? Forklar.

## Del 2 - Kommunikasjonsprosessen

3. Gjennom hvilke informasjonskanaler fremmer du ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag til din leder?
  - a. Hvilke formelle og/eller uformelle kanaler benytter dere?
  - b. Hvordan fungerer dette?
4. Opplever du at du får formidlet tilstrekkelig informasjon om relevante forhold til din leder?
5. Opplever du misforståelser i kommunikasjonsprosessen ved fremming av ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag til din leder?

## Del 3 - Organisasjonskulturen

6. Opplever du at kulturen i avdelingen påvirker kommunikasjonen?
7. Er det noe som hindrer deg fra å fremme ideer og/eller forbedringsforslag?

## Del 4 - Organisasjonsstrukturen

8. Opplever du at strukturen i avdelingen påvirker kommunikasjonen?
9. Opplever du at organisasjonsstrukturen er hensiktsmessig i forhold til ideene og/eller forbedringsforslagene du fremmer?

## Del 5 - Avslutning

10. Har du noen forslag til hvordan ideer og/eller forbedringer foreslått av medarbeidere på en bedre måte kan bli brakt videre til rett person oppover i avdelingen?
11. Kan vi gjengi sitater dersom det skulle bli aktuelt?
12. Er det noe du annet synes vi burde ha spurt om?