

# INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION MEDIATES THE EFFECT OF COMPETENCE AND CREATIVITY ON EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

Bagus Devan Widartanto<sup>1\*</sup>, Suwitho<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Master of Manajemen Student, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Indonesia (STIESIA), Surabaya, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Indonesia (STIESIA), Surabaya, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: [bagusdwidartanto@gmail.com](mailto:bagusdwidartanto@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** This study analyses the effect of competence and creativity on the employees' performance at Perumda Delta Tirta, Sidoarjo, with interpersonal communication as a mediating variable. The study is due to the data that states 28% employees have performance below the standard. It will decrease the service quality of clean water for the public. Furthermore, the study applies quantitatively with a survey approach. The instrument in the data collection technique was a questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed to 61 employees as samples. Moreover, the data analysis technique used Smart PLS. As a result, it shows competence has a positive and significant effect on performance. However, creativity has a negative effect on performance. Additionally, interpersonal communication is proven to mediate the relationship between competence and creativity on performance, although it has a different effect. In brief, the research stresses the importance of interpersonal communication in optimizing employees' performance in the public service sector.

**Keywords:** interpersonal communication, competence, creativity, employees performance, and Perumda Delta Tirta

## 1. Introduction

The provision of essential public services, such as clean water, is a constitutional mandate in many nations, directly tied to public welfare and national development (as enshrined in Indonesia's 1945 Constitution). Regional State-Owned Enterprises (BUMD) like Perumda Delta Tirta Sidoarjo are at the forefront of this effort, bearing the strategic responsibility of safeguarding this fundamental citizen right. However, the management of public service utilities often faces complex challenges, including evolving public values, rapid technological advancement, and increasing demands for service quality. Navigating this landscape requires not only technical infrastructure but also a superior human resource capacity capable of innovation and effective collaboration.

An internal performance assessment at Perumda Delta Tirta Sidoarjo in 2023 revealed a critical concern. While a combined 72% of employees were rated in the "Very Good" (20%) and "Good" (52%) categories, a significant minority of 28% fell into "Adequate" (18%), "Poor" (7%), or "Bad" (3%) categories. This underperforming cohort represents a substantial systemic risk, potentially undermining service productivity, quality, and, ultimately, public trust. Qualitative insights from management suggest that this performance gap is exacerbated not merely by a lack of individual skill, but by structural communication failures. Rigid top-down communication and fragmented inter-divisional coordination were identified as key impediments, exemplified by stalled pipeline repair initiatives due to miscommunication between field teams and material suppliers.

This situation creates a counterproductive dynamic where high-performing employees shoulder a disproportionate burden to compensate for underperforming colleagues, increasing the risk of burnout and decreasing long-term organizational morale. Effectively addressing this

performance imbalance requires moving beyond a focus on individual capability to understand the relational and communicative processes that enable those capabilities to translate into collective outcomes.

Existing research provides a foundation for this inquiry. Studies consistently affirm a positive correlation between creativity and employee performance (Nasir et al., 2022; Yang & Zhao, 2021; Ngo et al., 2020). However, the relationship between competence and performance shows more divergent findings, with some studies reporting a strong positive impact (Were, 2022) and others finding no significant effect (Adipratama et al., 2020). This inconsistency points to the presence of contingent variables that mediate this relationship. Previous research has explored mediators like work motivation (Anggraini et al., 2023) and job satisfaction (Kurniawan & Nugroho, 2021). Yet, a critical mediator remains underexplored: interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal communication—characterized by empathy, openness, positiveness, and supportiveness (Devito, 2011)—is the vital lubricant of organizational machinery. It is essential for building relationships, preventing and resolving conflicts, reducing uncertainty, sharing knowledge, and coordinating tasks (Cangara, 2016). For competent and creative employees to effectively contribute their skills and ideas, they require effective communication channels to articulate, share, and integrate their contributions within teams.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate the dual mediating role of interpersonal communication in the relationships between competence, creativity, and employee performance at Perumda Delta Tirta Sidoarjo. Grounded in Goal Setting Theory, which posits that clear goals and feedback are central to performance (Locke & Latham), we argue that effective communication is the primary mechanism through which goals are clarified, feedback is provided, and creative solutions are mobilized to achieve performance targets.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. Does competence have a significant effect on employee performance?
2. Does creativity have a significant effect on employee performance?
3. Does interpersonal communication mediate the effect of competence on employee performance?
4. Does interpersonal communication mediate the effect of creativity on employee performance?
5. Does interpersonal communication have a significant direct effect on employee performance?

This research offers a novel theoretical contribution by testing a dual-mediation model in the underexplored context of public water services. Practically, its findings will provide actionable insights for Perumda Delta Tirta to enhance its human resource strategies, improve operational coordination, and ultimately fulfill its constitutional duty to provide high-quality clean water services to the community of Sidoarjo.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Foundation: Goal Setting Theory**

This study is grounded in Goal Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1968, 1990, 2006), a cornerstone of organizational behavior and human resource management research (Neubert & Dyck, 2016). The theory posits that human beings are rational actors whose performance is significantly enhanced by the presence of specific, challenging, and difficult goals compared to vague or easy objectives. These goals direct attention, mobilize effort, increase persistence, and encourage the development of effective task strategies (Locke & Latham, 1990).

In the context of Perumda Delta Tirta, a public water utility, Goal Setting Theory provides the philosophical rationale for linking individual attributes (competence, creativity) and processes (interpersonal communication) to organizational performance outcomes. The theory assumes that employees are driven to achieve clear organizational targets, such as providing high-quality water services. However, as the initial performance data suggests, nearly a third of employees are not meeting optimal standards. Goal Setting Theory implies that this performance gap may stem not only from a lack of individual capability but also from inadequate mechanisms—such as effective communication—that translate capability into goal-directed action and achievement.

### **Key Constructs and Hypothesis Development**

#### **Employee Performance**

Employee performance is defined as the achievement of work results against established standards, encompassing both quantity and quality (Bernardin & Russel, 2015). In public service organizations like Perumda Delta Tirta, performance indicators extend beyond mere productivity to include service orientation, integrity, commitment, discipline, and cooperation, as mandated by public service regulations (e.g., Indonesian Law No. 25/2009). The dependent variable in this study is the holistic performance of employees in delivering essential water services to the community.

#### **Competence and Performance (H1)**

Competence refers to the underlying characteristics of an individual—including knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Spencer & Spencer, 1993)—that enable superior performance in a job. Rooted in the work of McClelland (1973), the competence approach argues that non-intellectual factors like motivation and behavioral skills are better predictors of success than traditional IQ measures.

Competence influences performance through multiple pathways: the technical-efficiency path (applying knowledge to optimize tasks), the adaptation-innovation path (using cognitive ability to solve novel problems), and the social-collaborative path (working effectively with others). In public utilities, technical competence in water management must be coupled with a service-oriented attitude (Perry & Wise, 1990). Supported by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which views investment in competence as an investment in productivity, we hypothesize:

H1 : Competence has a significant positive effect on employee performance.

#### **Creativity and Performance (H2)**

Creativity is the ability to produce novel and useful ideas concerning products, services, or work processes (Amabile, 1988). In a technical service environment, creativity is crucial for problem-solving, such as finding innovative solutions to pipeline leaks or customer service challenges. It involves characteristics like originality, flexibility, risk-taking, and collaboration (Isral et al., 2022).

The relationship between creativity and performance is well-established in various sectors (Yang & Zhao, 2021; Ngo et al., 2020). Creative employees can devise more efficient methods, improve service delivery, and adapt to changing circumstances. However, this relationship is not automatic and may depend on contextual factors. Thus, we propose:

H2: Creativity has a significant positive effect on employee performance.

### The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Communication (H3 & H4)

Interpersonal communication is the dynamic, transactional process of meaning-making between people (DeVito, 2016). In an organizational context, it involves the exchange of information, coordination of tasks, active listening, and conflict management (Adler & Rodman, 2017). It is the "social lubricant" that enables competence and creativity to be effectively applied.

The Communication Competence Theory (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) and Organizational Communication Theory (Goldhaber, 1993) provide the framework for its mediating role. Communication acts as:

1. An Amplifier: A highly competent technician must be able to clearly explain a complex problem to their team and customers to ensure effective resolution.
2. A Translator: Creative ideas remain abstract unless they can be effectively articulated, shared, and refined through dialogue with colleagues.
3. A Facilitator: It fosters the trust and collaboration necessary for innovative and competent teams to thrive, preventing the coordination failures noted in the background (e.g., stalled repair projects).

Therefore, we argue that possessing competence or creativity is insufficient without the ability to communicate effectively. This leads to the following mediation hypotheses:

H3: Interpersonal communication mediates the effect of competence on employee performance.

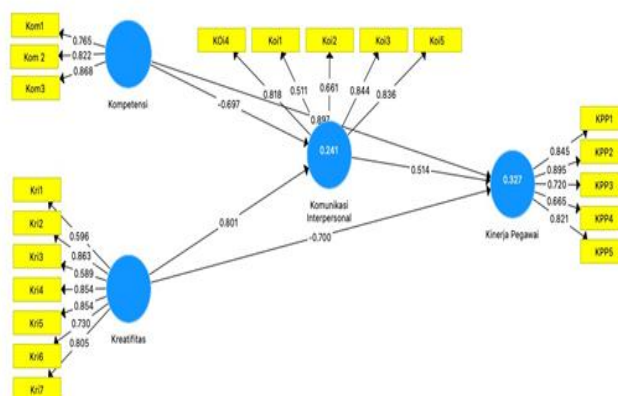
H4: Interpersonal communication mediates the effect of creativity on employee performance.

### Interpersonal Communication and Performance (H5)

Beyond its mediating role, interpersonal communication is hypothesized to have a direct effect on performance. Effective communication reduces misunderstandings, builds psychological safety (Rogers, 1954), strengthens social capital (Barney, 1991), and enhances team cohesion. It is directly linked to key performance indicators in public service, such as customer satisfaction and efficient inter-departmental coordination. Supported by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that positive interactions foster reciprocal commitment and effort, we hypothesize:

H5: Interpersonal communication has a significant positive direct effect on employee performance.

### Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1: Path diagram construction**

### 3. Method

#### Research Design and Population

This study employed a positivist (quantitative) approach with a descriptive quantitative method to test the proposed hypotheses. The research design is causal, aiming to analyze the relationships between variables that influence employee performance. The focus of this research is on human resource management within a public service context.

The research population consisted of 127 employees from Perumda Delta Tirta, Sidoarjo Regency, Indonesia, spanning various divisions including Research and IT Development, Public Relations, Water Resource Control, Planning, Human Resources, Corporate Secretariat, and Internal Supervisory Unit.

#### Sampling Technique

Given the constraints of time and cost, a sampling method was necessary. The sample size was determined using the Slovin formula (Riduwan, 2015) with a 5% margin of error:

$$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2) = 127 / (1 + 127(0.05)^2) = 127 / 2.61 \approx 48.65$$

Therefore, the minimum required sample size was 49 employees. The study ultimately collected data from 61 respondents to ensure robustness for the planned statistical analysis.

#### Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire (Likert-scale) distributed directly to the employees of Perumda Delta Tirta. The questionnaire was designed to measure four key variables:

1. Employee Performance (Kpp): Measured by five indicators: service orientation, integrity, commitment, discipline, and cooperation.
2. Competence (Kom): Measured by three indicators: knowledge, skills, and attitude.
3. Creativity (Kri): Measured by seven indicators: originality, flexibility, risk-taking, imagination, persistence, collaboration, and personal motivation.
4. Interpersonal Communication (Koi): Measured by five indicators: self-confidence, togetherness, interaction management, expressiveness, and other-orientation.

Respondents were given one week to complete the questionnaire. All instruments were tested for validity and reliability prior to the main study. An item was considered valid if the correlation coefficient (r-count) was  $> 0.3$ . Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with a value  $> 0.70$  indicating a reliable construct (Jogiyanto, 2017).

#### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages: descriptive statistical analysis and inferential analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the SmartPLS software.

The choice of PLS-SEM was justified because the data violated the assumption of normality, as confirmed by a significant Kolmogorov-Smirnov test result ( $p < 0.05$ ). PLS-SEM is a variance-based technique suitable for non-normal data, small sample sizes, and complex models that include mediating variables (Hair et al., 2019).

The analysis followed a two-step process:

1. Measurement Model (Outer Model) Assessment: This step evaluated the validity and reliability of the constructs. Convergent validity was established by ensuring all

indicator loadings were  $> 0.5$  and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was  $> 0.5$ . Discriminant validity was confirmed using the cross-loading criterion. Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha values  $> 0.70$  were used to establish internal consistency reliability.

2. **Structural Model (Inner Model) Assessment:** This step tested the hypothesized relationships. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was used to evaluate the model's explanatory power. The significance of the path coefficients (direct, indirect, and total effects) was assessed using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples. A path was considered significant if the t-statistic was  $> 1.96$  ( $p < 0.05$ ).

To test the mediating role of interpersonal communication (Koi) on the relationship between independent variables (Kom, Kri) and employee performance (Kpp), we followed the procedure by Preacher and Hayes (2008). The Variance Accounted For (VAF) index was calculated to determine the mediation strength (full or partial)..

#### **4. Result and Discussion**

##### **Descriptive Statistics and Respondent Profile**

The study collected data from 61 employees of Perumda Delta Tirta Sidoarjo. The majority of respondents were male (65.6%) and held a Bachelor's degree (68.9%), indicating a well-educated workforce. Descriptive analysis revealed that all main variables—Employee Performance, Competence, Creativity, and Interpersonal Communication—were perceived highly by respondents, with mean scores above 3.97 on a 5-point Likert scale.

1. **Employee Performance (Mean = 4.13):** The highest-rated indicator was Integrity (e.g., "principled and dare to refuse ethical violations"), while Commitment had the lowest average score.
2. **Competence (Mean = 3.97):** The Attitude indicator (e.g., "dedication and earnestness") scored highest, whereas Technical Skills were rated slightly lower.
3. **Creativity (Mean = 3.83):** The Collaborative indicator (e.g., "accepting feedback") was strongest, while Originality (e.g., "having different ideas") was perceived as the weakest aspect.
4. **Interpersonal Communication (Mean = 3.99):** Orientation to Others (e.g., "active listening") was the strongest indicator, while Expressiveness scored relatively lower.

These high averages suggest a positive baseline but also indicate room for improvement towards "very high" performance levels.

##### **Measurement Model (Outer Model) Evaluation**

The measurement model assessment confirmed the validity and reliability of the constructs. All indicator loadings exceeded the threshold of 0.5, establishing convergent validity (see Table 10). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was greater than 0.5, and the square root of each construct's AVE was higher than its correlations with other constructs, confirming discriminant validity (see Table 11). Furthermore, both Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs were above 0.75, demonstrating excellent internal consistency reliability (see Table 13).

##### **Structural Model (Inner Model) and Hypothesis Testing**

The structural model was analyzed using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples. The  $R^2$  value for Employee Performance was 0.327, indicating that the model (Competence, Creativity, and Interpersonal Communication) explains 32.7% of the variance in performance. Although this

is considered a moderate value, it is substantively significant in the complex context of a public service organization.

The results of the direct effect hypothesis testing are presented in Table 15.

1. H1: Competence → Employee Performance. The path coefficient was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.897$ ,  $t$ -statistic = 2.877,  $p = 0.002$ ). Thus, H1 was supported.
2. H2: Creativity → Employee Performance. Surprisingly, the path coefficient was negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.700$ ,  $t$ -statistic = 1.993,  $p = 0.023$ ). Thus, H2 was supported, but in the opposite direction to what was initially hypothesized.
3. H3 & H4: The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Communication. The analysis of indirect effects (see Table 16) revealed that Interpersonal Communication acts as a significant mediator.
  - a. Competence → Interpersonal Communication → Performance: The indirect effect was significant ( $\beta = -0.358$ ,  $p = 0.028$ ).
  - b. Creativity → Interpersonal Communication → Performance: The indirect effect was also significant ( $\beta = 0.411$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ).

The Variance Accounted For (VAF) values for both paths fell between 20% and 80%, confirming that Interpersonal Communication plays a partial mediation role. Therefore, both H3 and H4 were supported.

## Discussion

The findings reveal a complex interplay between individual capabilities, communication, and performance in a public utility company.

**The Positive Role of Competence.** The strong, direct positive effect of competence on performance aligns with Goal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) and established HR literature (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Employees with high knowledge, skills, and a professional attitude (the highest loading indicator) are better equipped to achieve organizational goals efficiently. This underscores the importance of continuous training and development programs.

**The Paradox of Creativity.** The negative direct effect of creativity on performance is a critical and intriguing finding. It suggests that in a structured, procedural public service environment like Perumda Delta Tirta, unbridled creativity might lead to deviations from standard operating procedures, create uncertainty, or even provoke interpersonal conflicts, ultimately hindering productivity (cf. Janssen, 2003; George & Zhou, 2001). Creativity might be perceived as a lack of discipline if not properly channeled.

**The Pivotal Role of Interpersonal Communication.** This study highlights communication as the crucial linchpin that resolves the creativity paradox and amplifies the benefits of competence. Communication fully mediated the relationship between creativity and performance, turning a negative direct effect into a positive total effect. This means that creative ideas only translate into higher performance when they are effectively communicated, socialized, and collaboratively refined within teams.

Furthermore, communication partially mediated the competence-performance relationship. This suggests that while competent employees can perform well individually, their impact is significantly magnified when they can effectively share knowledge, coordinate tasks, and integrate their efforts with others through excellent communication. The highest loading indicator, "Orientation to Others" (e.g., active listening), is particularly vital for building the collaboration needed in public service delivery.

**Theoretical Implications.** This research expands Goal-Setting Theory by demonstrating that achieving goals (performance) is not solely dependent on individual ability (competence) or innovation (creativity). It critically depends on the social process of communication, which facilitates the alignment, coordination, and acceptance of new ideas necessary for goal achievement in a collaborative setting.

**Practical Implications.** Management should adopt a holistic approach to human resource development:

1. Continue strengthening technical competence through training and education.
2. Reframe creativity not as mere ideation but as innovation management. Implement structured programs (e.g., innovation labs, suggestion schemes) to channel creative efforts towards practical, organizationally-aligned solutions.
3. Prioritize communication skills training. Focus on active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and cross-departmental communication to ensure that both competence and creativity are effectively leveraged for organizational benefit.

**Limitations and Future Research.** A key limitation is the potential for sampling bias due to the two-wave data collection method. Future studies could use a larger, randomly selected sample and employ longitudinal designs to better establish causality. Qualitative inquiries could also delve deeper into the specific contexts in which creativity manifests negatively and how communication acts to mitigate this. about data analyze and discussion research finding. It should be formatted using 12 point, Times New Roman, single spaced.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study set out to investigate the complex interplay between employee competence, creativity, interpersonal communication, and performance within Perumda Delta Tirta Sidoarjo, a public service utility company in Indonesia. The main findings reveal a nuanced relationship where interpersonal communication plays a critical, mediating role.

The primary conclusion is that while individual capabilities are important, they are insufficient on their own for optimizing performance in a collaborative public service environment. Competence was found to have a strong, direct positive effect on performance, underscoring its foundational importance. Conversely, creativity exhibited a surprising negative direct effect, suggesting that in a structured, procedure-driven context, unguided creative efforts can potentially disrupt workflows and hinder productivity.

The most significant finding is the pivotal mediating role of interpersonal communication. It acts as the essential mechanism that transforms potential into performance. Communication fully mediated the relationship between creativity and performance, turning a negative influence into a positive one. It also partially mediated the competence-performance relationship, indicating that even high competence yields greater results when knowledge and efforts are effectively shared and coordinated. This underscores that performance is not merely an individual outcome but a social process facilitated by effective communication.

**Theoretical Implications:** This research extends Goal-Setting Theory by demonstrating that the path from individual ability (competence, creativity) to achieved goals (performance) is not direct. It is critically mediated by the social process of communication, which is necessary for aligning efforts, refining ideas, and achieving collective goals in an organizational setting.

Practical Implications: For management, the findings advocate for a holistic human resource development strategy:

1. Continue building technical competence through targeted training.
2. Reframe creativity as "managed innovation" by creating structured channels (e.g., innovation programs, guided brainstorming sessions) to focus creative efforts on practical, organizationally-aligned solutions.
3. Prioritize communication skills development. Invest in training for active listening, giving constructive feedback, and cross-functional collaboration to ensure both competence and creativity are effectively leveraged.

Limitations and Future Research: A key limitation of this study is the potential for sampling bias due to the two-wave data collection method. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to better establish causality and explore the specific contexts and types of creativity that may be detrimental. Qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the communication dynamics that successfully channel creative potential into positive performance outcomes.

In essence, this study concludes that for public service organizations like Perumda Delta Tirta, fostering a culture of open, effective communication is just as crucial as developing individual skills. It is the vital bridge that connects employee potential to organizational performance.

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