

Challenges and Prospects of Effective Communication Among Senior Managers at Institutions of Higher Learning

TV Dzaga

University of Venda, South Africa

Abstract: This study aimed to evaluate the challenges and prospects of effective communication among senior managers at higher education institutions. The participants sample of 523 was identified for the purpose of representing the staff, students, alumni, and council members. The methods used to collect data entailed interviews and questionnaires with selected service staff and council members as well as alumni. The data from students was collected through questionnaire. The study revealed that internal and external systems of communication of an institution play an important role in addressing challenges of effective communication among senior managers which leads to improved system of governance and effective management within an institution. The study further revealed that poor vertical communication can result in stakeholders failing to understand their respective roles which could eventually lead to a communication void.

Keywords: Effective communication, Vertical communication, Institutional productivity, Governance

1. Introduction

Communication is critical for the success of any institution. Institutions struggle to achieve their pre-determined goals due to ineffective communication. Despite the availability of a variety of tools of communication, institutions struggle to communicate with their respective stakeholders effectively (Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017). The key challenges experienced by the higher education institutions include the lack of mechanisms of identifying appropriate tools of communication, ineffective communication about the institutional strategy and failure to convene meetings for updating and involving key stakeholders the strategic direction of the institution. The stakeholders who are not well informed, would hardly support the vision and mission of the institution, which could lead to poor performance of the entire institution (Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017). When communication within the institution is ineffective, staff members would not understand what is expected of them and as a result there will be a vacuum in communication. This will lead to a situation where the gaps of communication would be filled by speculations. Unavailability of effective tools of communication could lead to a situation where the management, structures, and processes, provide irrelevant service to the stakeholders. In a situation where there are no relevant tools of communication, the process of identifying the stakeholders' needs would be negatively affected.

Unavailability of the tools of communication could result in a situation where the consultation process and dialogue between the stakeholders and institution become ineffective (Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Implications of Tools of Communication on Governance and Management at Higher Education Institutions

Communication at institutions of higher learning is inevitable. Several researchers have confirmed that institutions of higher learning cannot perform effectively without having identified communication tools for sharing valuable information with various stakeholders (Hajir *et al.*, 2015; Amajah *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017). According to Stephen (2011), communication is essential for the purpose of mobilising the workforce for the accomplishment of institutional objectives hence effective management and governance. For employees to perform effectively, it is important to have communication tools that the stakeholders can easily access. Most researchers maintain that communication for any institution is like the flow of blood in the human body. Communication coordinates factors of governance and management at institutions of higher learning. Institutions have a role of training the internal stakeholders to use available communication tools effectively. Poor

usage of tools of communication at higher education institutions could lead to poor governance and management (McKinney, Barker, Smith & Davies, 2004; Williams, 2007; Stephen, 2011; Tronconi, Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

The management, including communication practitioners at institutions of higher learning, have a role of ensuring that communication tools used to communicate with various stakeholders are known and accessible. In most institutions of higher learning, managers spend most of their time communicating through various tools of communication including face to face meetings (Hajir *et al.*, 2015; Amajah *et al.*, 2016; Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017). This could also be confirmed by the fact that basic management process which entails planning, organising, leading, and controlling cannot be achieved without proper communication tools to communicate effectively. Effective communication at higher education institutions leads to effective governance and management. It is however important for the higher education institutions to ensure that the tools of communication identified could effectively transmit the messages to relevant stakeholders (Lee, 2003; Scott, 2004; Okoye, 2004; Peter, Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

Since communication is also referred to as the process of change to a system, it is important to always develop or identify communication tools to communicate the changes. Resistance to change is one of the barriers to effective communication. It is therefore important to participate in the reorientation of communication tools to be used at institutions of higher learning. The performance of higher education institutions becomes effective when the communication tools available make provision for feedback (Husain, 2013; Kibe, 2014; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017).

2.2 Problems and Prospects of Effective Communication Among Senior Managers to Institutions of Higher Learning

The skills and experience of senior managers in communication influence the performance of institutions of higher learning. Some of the contributing factors could be poor reading habits of the senior managers. When senior managers have poor reading habits, it could be exceedingly difficult to use e-mail or newsletter to communicate with various

stakeholders within the institution. Unfamiliar words and phrases are adopted on a regular basis to provide explanation on technological developments. The same applies to the young generations (Hajir *et al.*, 2015; Amajah *et al.*, 2016; Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017). They invent and add their linguistic items in the process of communicating with various stakeholders. The media also play a vital role in the use of various tools of communication. Some of the challenges of communication by senior managers is their tight schedule, they hardly have time to read and respond to messages. It is of immense importance for communicators to read more than they write (Miller, 2003; Hajir *et al.*, 2015; Amajah *et al.*, 2016; Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017). Effective communication skills and use of accessible communication tools is important to institutional communication. One of the challenges in the effective use of communication tools at the higher education institutions is that most of the communication practitioners are youths who like to experiment innovative ideas. Using proper communication tools, communication practitioners must be effective listeners who can take appropriate actions (Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017). It is therefore of immense importance for the institutions of higher learning to use communication tools that enable them to enhance their listening, speaking, and writing skills. When communication practitioners and senior managers at higher education institutions cultivate and maintain effective use of communication tools, the institutions would attain greater academic, management and governance and the stakeholders as well as the public would derive full benefits from the institutions of higher learning (Okoye, 2004; Haiemann, 2011; Chichi-Oji, 2013; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

2.3 Improving Effective Management and Governance Through Internal Communication

Every successful institution of higher learning is perceived to have effective communication practices which include the tools used to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders. Effective communication with internal stakeholders is intended to disseminate essential information for

superior performance (Hajir *et al.*, 2015; Amajah *et al.*, 2016; Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016). It is also through effective communication and use of appropriate and relevant tools that relationships of trust and commitment are built. This implies that for higher education institutions to be productive and effective, there should be healthy internal communication. It entails ensuring that internal stakeholders are provided with communication tools that would enable them to communicate effectively (Smith, 2002; Scott, 2005; Marks, 2009; Randall, 2010; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017).

Where internal stakeholders do not have appropriate communication tools to communicate among themselves, the governance and management of the higher education institution will be negatively affected. For instance, if there is tension between two or more employees within a division or department, the level of communication would be negatively affected. This will in turn affect the governance and management of the institution, which would eventually lead to deficient performance of the institution (Miller, 2003; Hajir *et al.*, 2015; Amajah *et al.*, 2016; Darawshen *et al.*, 2016; Tarhini *et al.*, 2016). In a situation where employees do not speak to each other, some decisions could not be communicated to relevant personnel who should ensure effective implementation of such decisions. This could also lead to a situation where valuable information is withheld and as such the performance of the entire institution will be negatively affected. As a result, the effective governance and management of the institution will be negatively affected (Smith, 2002; Scott, 2005; Marks, 2009; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

2.4 Internal Communication Can Increase Job Satisfaction

Employees become demotivated when they struggle to communicate due to several reasons including unavailability of communication tools. For example, employees who spend most of their time away from the institution due to the nature of their job could struggle to perform their duties if they are not provided with communication tools (Scott, 2005; Randall, 2010; Faith Baris & Tosun, 2013; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017). Employees responsible for marketing the institution can struggle to perform their

duties when they are away from the institution if they do not have communication tools that would enable them to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders irrespective of their location. Employees feel satisfied and happy if there is provision for upward communication and feedback. This implies that employees feel happy if they receive feedback from their line managers and when line managers listen to their views and suggestions (Scott, 2005; Marks, 2009; Randall, 2010; Tronconi, 2016; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

2.5 Effect of Communication Tools in Customer Service

Communication tools influence the provision of service, which leads to customer service. Poor communication with internal stakeholders and unavailability of accessible and appropriate communication tools can negatively affect the satisfaction of customers. In an institution of higher learning environment, it is critical to identify relevant communication tools to communicate with various stakeholders including prospective students (Scott, 2005; Randall, 2010; Faith Baris & Tosun, 2013; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017). Institutions are gradually moving away from traditional tools of communication like applying for admission as well as providing feedback to applicants through online communication tools instead of sending letters. However, to avoid excluding other prospective students who do not have access to these tools, there should be provision for traditional tools of submitting applications to the institutions of higher learning as well as communicating the outcome of applications through the post office with such students (Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

3. The Role of Tools of Communication in the Enhancement of Effective Governance and Management

Management activities entail the role of communication in enhancing good governance. Managers in institutions of higher learning spend most of their time communicating using various tools of communication. Good governance is manifested by available effective communication tools (Scott, 2005; Randall, 2010; Faith Baris & Tosun, 2013). Institutions cannot achieve their respective strategic

goals without effectively sharing the strategic goal and vision of the institution with all relevant stakeholders. This could only be possible through identifying communication tools relevant to various stakeholders (Luthans & Larsen, 1986; Sims & Lorenzi, 1992; Russu, 2001; Nicube, 2006; Hargie & Tourish, 2009; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

The efficiency and effectiveness of the institution depends on the ability of the manager to communicate effectively with both internal and external stakeholders using appropriate and relevant communication tools. There is a need to demonstrate maximum efficiency when communicating. This could be achieved if relevant tools are identified for various stakeholders. In a departmental environment, managers should ensure that departmental meetings are convened on a regular basis to ensure that the vision and strategic goals of the institution are shared with internal stakeholders (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992; Russu, 2001; Nicube, 2006; Hargie & Tourish, 2009; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

4. Effect of Communication Tools in Keeping Stakeholders Updated

Due to the changing technological situations or environments, it has become evident that life will not be the same without the availability of various communication tools which includes social media. Institutions of higher learning are expected to provide the necessary training to the community even beyond the institution to make use of communication tools like computers, laptops, and cellphones. Some people believe that with the use of technology, several problems will be easy to deal with. In an endeavor to stay connected with various communities and provide the necessary training, institutions of higher learning have community engagement directorates (Franklin & Peat, 2001; Chrisdede, 2005; Garrison & Vaughn, 2008; Tapschoh, 2009; Kurtz & Sponder, 2010; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017). Continuous use of information technology tools at higher education institutions is imperative for the purpose of providing latest information to various stakeholders. At the higher education institutions, the use of information technology tools provides students with interactive and engaged environment. This will hopefully add value to the quality of education provided. Use of mobile technological devices plays a pivotal role in ensuring that

stakeholders are kept updated. However, when using these technological tools, it is important to guard against information overload (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Richardson, 2008; Poole, 2009; Mcrill, 2011; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

Garrison and Vaughan (2008) challenge higher education institutions to actively engage communities for the purpose of helping these communities, including students to address their respective challenges, which include training on the use of communication tools. This could only be possible if these communities have access to communication tools. As the custodians of knowledge, higher education institutions should play a leading role to educate communities to use the latest communication technologies to communicate valuable information (Scott, 2005; Randall, 2010; Faith Baris & Tosun, 2013; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017). For instance, because community members cannot always carry some of the equipment that they could use to receive information like through Radio, they can be encouraged to tune to their mobile cellphones and listen to the Radio station of their choice. By doing this, they will be up to date with activities taking place in their respective communities. The same applies to students at the institutions of higher learning, they can use their mobile phones to tune to the Campus Radio stations (Wilson, 2000; Machnarik, 2002; Jonassen, 2002; Burgess, 2004; Kim & Reeves, 2007; Richardson, 2008; Poole, 2009; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017). Institutions of higher learning should play a leading role by using communication tools that are easily accessible by all internal stakeholders. According to Hume (2010), when institutions communicate effectively with their internal stakeholders, they tend to create a cohesive culture where there is buy-in by all internal stakeholders which leads to a situation where everyone within the institution will be focused on the same goals and objectives as well as understanding. It also becomes easy for internal stakeholders to make informed decisions (Hume, 2010; Mcrill, 2011; Kazmi, 2011; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

5. Importance of Relevant Communication Tools

Pirani and Sheenah (2009), maintain the importance of ensuring that communicators are familiar with the

communication tools preferred by the various target audience. It is critical to ensure that communicators understand the communication preferences of their respective constituencies and target audience. The information that is electronically disseminated is perceived to be timely and that it reaches the intended target audience effectively and promptly (Manda, 2006; Harrison, 2006; Pirani & Sheenah, 2009; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017). There are also instances where communication tools should be identified in accordance with the target audience. Some tools that play a vital role in improving internal communication include telephones, e-mails, memorandums, letters as well as meetings. According to Harrison (2006), employees are motivated and become more productive when the communication environment is healthy and when they have access to available and relevant communication tools. When employees are happy, the complaints from clients tend to be minimal. This implies that making employees happy leads to a situation where the clients will receive satisfactory and quality service (Harrison, 2006; Pirani & Sheenah, 2009; Macrill, 2011; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

6. The Effect of Internal Communication in Effective Governance and Management at Higher Education Institutions

According to Omilion-Hodges and Baker (2014), strategic internal communication refers to the process of crafting messages for meeting the internal stakeholders' needs. There is a perception that line managers are the main reason that internal communication suffers. Although effective communication is the responsibility of all internal stakeholders, in most situations, managers are expected to ensure that institutions do experience effective communication. The tools of communication become more effective when they are used in consultation with relevant stakeholders. It is therefore always important to involve relevant stakeholders in the crafting of communication strategies as well as identification of communication tools to be used for various stakeholders (van Staden *et al.*, 2004; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016). Effective management and productivity in institutions of higher learning increases when employees are satisfied and happy with their jobs and the level of communication, they receive from management is

effective. The use of relevant communication tools and effective communication has serious positive impact on employee's morale which affects institutional productivity. When employees are kept updated on the developments taking place within the institution, including provision of feedback on their performance, they tend to perform hard and more efficiently and this leads to effective management and governance (Harris, 1993; van Staden *et al.*, 2004; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Aelst *et al.*, 2017).

7. Importance of Evaluating the Effectiveness of Communication Tools

The process of evaluating the effectiveness of communication tools should be considered by institutions of higher learning as a vital aspect of communication. Institutions of higher learning should have a way of evaluating how their communication tools are, in ensuring that they achieve effective management and governance. This will also help the institutions to establish how informed their stakeholders are (Dinnicco *et al.*, 2008; Brozozowski *et al.*, 2009; Wilson, 2009). This is mainly because effective communication requires a particularly good process of evaluation. Without evaluations, institutions would not know the impact of their communication tools. Diverse tools of communication should be evaluated (Seitel, 2007; Dinnicco *et al.*, 2008; Brozozowski *et al.*, 2009; Wilson, 2009; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017).

Institutions of higher learning should ensure that they segment their audiences for the purpose of using appropriate communication tools of communications when communicating with various stakeholders. This is due to that fact that one tool of communication may not necessarily be relevant to another group of stakeholders. Some institutions make mistakes by using communication tools that are intended to target everybody (Dinnicco *et al.*, 2008; Brozozowski *et al.*, 2009; Wilson, 2009; Walker, 2015; Bright, 2016; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; Scott, 2017). Doing this leads to a situation where some categories of stakeholders feel that they are being neglected. A practical example is when institutions of higher learning develop their strategic plans. All stakeholders should be involved in the process of crafting such strategic plans (Seitel, 2007; Dinnicco *et al.*, 2008; Brozozowski *et al.*, 2009; Wilson, 2009; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017;

van Aelst *et al.*, 2017). These are some of the questions that institutions should ask themselves. The frequency of evaluating communication tools is of vital importance. Most institutions do evaluate their impact through media monitoring instruments as well as websites through Google analytics. But other tools like meetings, telephones, emails, newsletters, and social media are not evaluated. When evaluating communication tools, it is of primary importance to consider amongst others the credibility of the author and the tone of the message. The identification and use of communication tools should not be based on what has been working before, it is important to identify and use communication tools in accordance with current and most suitable circumstances (Seitel, 2007; Dinnicco *et al.*, 2008; Brozozowski *et al.*, 2009; Wilson, 2009; Tronconi, 2016; Nakayama, 2017; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

8. Results, Recommendations and Conclusion

The study revealed that transparency and trust play a critical role in the promotion of effective and healthy communication among senior managers and other stakeholders within institutions of higher learning. Through this study, it was made explicit that regular engagement on all important matters promotes positive work culture and encouragement of adherence to ethical standards within the institutions of higher learning. According to the study, healthy communication among senior managers promotes healthy working relationship among subordinates which in turn leads to productivity. The study further revealed that senior managers should be available to provide the necessary support, including making available the tools of trade to the subordinates. The study also revealed that poor reading habits by senior managers could negatively affect the performance of institutions of higher learning.

The study strived to outline the role that senior managers play in the promotion of internal and external communication in management and governance of institutions of higher learning. Amongst others, the study indicated that the art of internal communication is dependent on the knowledge of effectively identifying appropriate and relevant communication tools.

The study recommends the importance of healthy communication among senior managers and

Effective selection of communication tool for the purpose of providing internal stakeholders with relevant and appropriate information needed for them to perform their jobs in an effective manner.

As a result of this study, it has been made clear that regular communication with stakeholders leads to a situation where they become familiar with all the relevant and necessary information about their respective institutions. Internal communication is considered by some authors as the glue that binds an institution together. This is possible by ensuring that there is provision for feedback and that employees are provided with clear standards and expectations of their work. The benefits of using social media were also outlined. However, although social network is widely used in institutions of higher learning, some challenges were also identified and as such policies should be developed to ensure proper use of social media platforms. The importance of evaluating communication tools should also be considered.

References

- Babbie, E. 2013. *The Practice of Social Research*. USA, Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Bright, J. 2016. The Social News gap: How News Reading and News Sharing Diverge. *Journal of Communication*, 66:343-365. Google Scholar.
- Cooper, D.R. & Schindler, P.S. 2006. *Business Research Methods*, 9th ed. Boston, McGraw Hill.
- Cornelissen, J. 2010. Reputation Management: Corporate Image: *An audience Centered Model*. *An International Journal*, 5:(2).
- Dawson, C. 2006. *A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, 2nd ed. Oxford: How to Books.
- Dimarco, J. 2017. *Communication Writing and Design: Integrated Manual for Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations*. London: Wiley Blackwell.
- Dominick, J. 2012. *The Dynamics of Mass Communication* 12th Edition, Boston, McGraw Hill.
- Hesse-Biber, S.N. 2010. *Mixed Method Research: Merging Theory with Practice*, New York: Guide Press.
- Kapur, G.B. 2017. *Effective Communication During Disaster – Making use of Technology, Media and Human Resources*, Canada, Oakville: Apple Academic Press Inc.
- Miller, K. 2006. *Organisational Communication*, Thompson: Wardsworth.
- Miller, R. 2017. *Putting the Social into Internal Communication Thoughts on Internal Communication*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Mishra, K., Boyton L. & Mishra, A. 2014. Driving Employee Engagement: The Expanded Role of Internal Communication, *International Journal of Business Communication*, 51(2):183-202.

- Niethammer, C., Gracia, J., Hilbrich, T., Knupfer, A., Resch, M.M. & Nagel, W.E. 2017. Tools for High Performance Computing. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, AG.
- Peter, L. 2015. Effective Business Communication, McGraw Hill In. New York Publishing Nigerian Limited.
- Scott, D.M. 2017. The Rules of Marketing and Public Relations. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Hoboken.
- Struwig, F.W. & Stead, G.B. 2004. Planning Design and Reporting Research. Cape Town: Pearson Education.
- Tronconi, F. 2016. Organisation, Communication and Ideology. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Van der Walt, L. 2013. The Role of Communication and Management Approaches in the Organisational Change Process. In Integrated Organisational Communication. Cape Town: Juta.
- Van Ruler, B., Smit, I., Ihle, O. & Romenti, S. 2017. How Strategic Communication Shapes Value and Innovation in Society. London: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Walker, R. 2015. Strategic Management Communication for Leaders. London: Cengage Learning.