

The Role of Internal Communication in the Morale of Staff and Improvement of Productivity: A Case of the University of Venda

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Abstract: This paper aimed to evaluate the role of internal communication in staff morale and improving institutional productivity at the University of Venda. A sample of 523 participants was chosen to fully represent the staff. The data was collected through both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The appropriate research methodology and techniques were identified and used to gain a further intuition into the role of internal communication in the morale of staff and improvement of productivity. The questionnaires were physically administered by the Researcher. The levels of communication were used in the paper. These levels of communication include upward, downward and lateral/horizontal. The results of the paper show that the internal communication system of an institution plays a vital role in the morale of staff and improvement of productivity which in turn contributes to the effective management and governance of an institution. The paper revealed that internal stakeholders are rarely consulted in decision-making processes, for them to support the policies. The paper also revealed that when internal stakeholders are poorly informed, they may lose confidence in the institution, particularly the executive leadership and that could negatively affect their morale more especially when they are not consulted on matters that affect them and the institution. The paper further revealed that poor bottom-up communication can result in employees failing to understand the expectations of the institutional leadership which could eventually lead to a communication vacuum. The paper recommends effective and constant communication with internal stakeholders.

Keywords: Internal communication, Staff morale, Institutional productivity, Motivation, Governance, Management

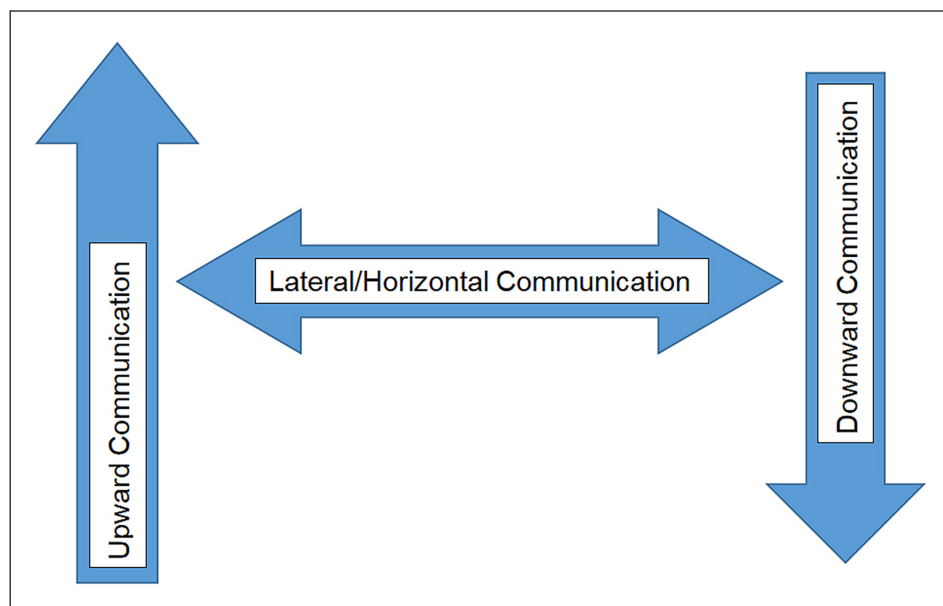
1. Introduction

Communication is considered the lifeblood of institutions. This implies that in the absence of effective internal communication, institutions could struggle to achieve their intended objectives. This is mainly due to the fact that if the leadership do not involve all members of the institution in matters that affect them, including working conditions, the staff morale would be negatively affected and productivity within the institution would decline. According to Mersham and Skinner (2005), organisational communication is the lifeblood of any institution. They maintain that institutions would cease to exist if there are no processes for effective communication. They further state that effective use of communication tools and well managed and motivated employees within the institution are more productive. It will be highly impossible to achieve organisational goals without effective communication tools which are accessible by all stakeholders. No single department within an institution can operate in isolation, without interacting with sister departments. This implies that departments should operate in a coordinated

manner and there should be effective and accessible communication tools in order to achieve better management and governance as well as improved staff morale. This could be achieved by encouraging regular and constant interaction between the departments.

2. Levels of Communication

Through effective communication processes, internal stakeholders will be able to understand their respective roles as well as the strategic direction of the institution. Otherwise if communication processes within institutions of higher learning are poor, the end result will be that there will be high level of uncertainty among internal stakeholders, leading to low morale. Understanding of stakeholder's communication roles is possible when relevant communication tools are utilised to communicate (Greenberg & Baron, 2011; Jones, 2011; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016; Stromback, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017). Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008) have shown communication in the following three distinct directions in Figure 1 on the following page.

Figure 1: Levels of Communication

Source: Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008)

When employees are given the opportunity to participate in the entire business process of the institution, they tend to take ownership of their work. This however does not necessarily mean that they need to sit in decision making committees. What is of critical importance to employees and other internal stakeholders is to constantly communicate decisions with them using communication tools that will easily and effectively reach them (Hamilton, 2008; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008; Jones, 2011; Wicks, 2015; Bode, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Stromback, 2017). Effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning is easily achieved in environments where internal stakeholders believe that they are valued by management (Bergstrom, 2016; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017). This could be experienced when proper communication tools are used to interact with internal stakeholders. This will encourage and motivate employees to stay in their respective jobs for a long time (Bergstrom, 2016; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017). Institutions that have effective communication tools hardly experience resistance to change within internal stakeholders. In order for the institutions of higher learning to achieve their objectives effectively, it is of vital importance to make provision for internal stakeholders to be involved in decision making committees through their representatives (Baker & Gaut, 2002; Hamilton, 2008; Konopaske & Matteson, 2011; Jones, 2011; Walker, 2015; Bergstrom, 2016; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017).

There is no doubt that communication is considered as the glue that holds institutions together, more especially when there is constant or regular sharing of information. Communication tools play a vital role in effective management and governance and this also depends on the level of interpersonal communication within the institution. Communication becomes effective when stakeholders are consulted and involved in determining communication tools that effectively convey messages to different target audience (Konopaske & Matteson, 2011; Jones, 2011; Bergstrom, 2016; Boulianne, 2016; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

2.1 Upward Communication

According to Barker and Gaut (2002), upward communication refers to a situation in which a subordinate sends a message to a line manager. There are instances where subordinates communicate valuable information to management or line managers through this process. Subordinates are also able to express their concerns through the same process (Barker & Gaut, 2002; Fenech, 2013; Walker, 2015; Bode, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Stromback, 2017). Upward communication is considered as another platform to allow subordinates to make inputs in the management and governance of the institutions using various tools of communication. This arrangement minimises conflicts and tensions because subordinates will have the opportunity to participate in decision making processes. In

some institutions, internal stakeholders are represented in decision making committees by elected representatives who carry the mandates of their respective constituencies when participating in decision making committees (Barker & Gaut, 2002; van Staden *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2006; Hamilton, 2008; Bright, 2016; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

2.2 Downward Communication

Downward communication is a process of communication that is initiated by the line managers at the institutions. Line managers usually communicate with subordinates when they assign them various tasks to perform. It is of great importance to ensure that the message that is communicated is clear and that the line manager should ensure that the recipient understands the message in accordance with the expectation of the sender of the message. During this process, provision should also be made for subordinates to provide feedback about matters that affect them for better performance of the institutions of higher learning. Making provision for feedback is perceived as being effective in minimising tensions between line managers, institutional management and subordinates as well as improving morale (Van Staden *et al.*, 2005; Hamilton, 2008; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017). Downward communication is also important when line managers clarify certain issues about tasks and or assignments given to subordinates. This clarification helps in ensuring that subordinates will have a better understanding of what they are expected to do. Smooth flow of communication will ensure healthy communication within the institution (Van Staden *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2006; Hamilton, 2008; Wolfsfel *et al.*, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

2.3 Lateral/Horizontal Communication

According to Barker and Gaut (2002), lateral communication refers to communication between departments and divisions within an institution. This also refers to communication among people who are on the same level within an institution. It could take place informally or formally in formal meetings. It is of critical importance to have smooth flow of lateral communication because it also leads to cooperation among internal stakeholders and this also contributes positively to effective management and governance of the institution. It is also important

for departmental heads to cooperate among themselves so that they could also encourage respective subordinates to cooperate for the purpose of effectively achieving institutional objectives (Barker & Gaut, 2002; Hamilton, 2008; Walker, 2015; Bode, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

3. Institutional Culture

The culture of an institution comprises of accepted ways of doing things. Institutions are mainly made up of people from diverse cultures. Although institutions are made up of people from diverse cultures, it is important to ensure that the institutional culture is aligned to the institution's strategic objectives. It is critical to note that institutions have their unique corporate cultures. These cultures are influenced by individual cultures of internal stakeholders. The culture of an institution plays a vital role in its performance (Fenech, 2013; Walker, 2015; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017). It is important to understand that communication is mainly based on the behaviors that happen between the interacting systems. An institutional culture could be the standard practice of using a particular communication tool to communicate with internal stakeholders. For instance, internal stakeholders could be used to the fact that when there is a crisis within the institution, they will receive text messages informing them about the situation on Campus (Hellriegel *et al.*, 2004; Hamilton, 2008; Walker, 2015; Bright, 2016; Scott, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

4. Institutional Climate

Institutional climate plays an important role in the productivity of an institution as well as its management and governance. The institutional communication climate can build or destroy the reputation of the institution. It is important to always create a good climate for internal stakeholders so that they could speak in one voice. This will also avoid a situation where there are internal stakeholders working against the strategic objectives of the institution. This is only possible if the management involves employees in the management and governance of the institution. If internal stakeholders, in particular employees are not involved in the governance of the institution, they tend not to support the vision of the institution which could negatively affect its accomplishment and performance (Hamilton, 2008; Walker, 2015; Bode, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

5. Organisational Internal Communication

According to the proponents of organisational communication theory, the internal communication system of an institution plays a vital role in the morale of staff and improvement of productivity which in turn contributes to the effective management and governance of an institution. Internal stakeholders in particular staff tend to perform well and motivated in a situation where the tools and channels of communication are open (Komodromos, 2014; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; Stromback, 2017). Employees' morale could be improved by merely involving them in decision making processes and regularly communicating with them about the strategic direction of the institution (Seitel, 2004; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Scott, 2017). Institutions need to create a positive internal climate and effective tools of communication. In order to achieve this, institutions should create or develop internal communication strategies that are responsive to the needs of employees. Employees are considered the most important assets of the institution and they play a vital role in the effective management and governance of institutions (Peter, 2015; Walker, 2015; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017). Employees who are well informed are always satisfied and this leads to effective management and governance of the institution as well as improved morale and productivity. It is therefore important for management to take the concerns expressed by employees seriously (Seitel, 2004; Bright, 2016; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Stromback, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

5.1 Communication Between Management and Employees

Hendrix (2001) defines employee communication as all communications between management of an organisation and its employees. In order to determine the satisfaction of employees within an institution, it is of primary importance to conduct a survey on the perception of staff within an institution. According to Theaker (2001), if such surveys could be conducted, it is likely to increase the employee knowledge of organisational activities and policies and the employee attitudes towards the organisation would be enhanced favorably (Walker, 2015; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Stromback, 2017). Organisations should have good

public relations systems in order to be productive. According to Skinner (2003), the reputation of a good employee has to be earned. The atmosphere within an organisation plays an important role in the morale of employees and organisational productivity. The atmosphere within organisations has a vital bearing on the morale of employees. It is therefore important for institutions to ensure that there is a conducive environment for employees to have a fair understanding of their job and institutions (Skinner, 2003; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Scott, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

According to Smith (2006), internal communication is imperative for the effective management and governance of institutions irrespective of the size of the institution. Most institutions experience corporate turmoil and unrest as well as protests due to amongst other ineffective communication. Due to differences between management and employees, there is always tension and the loyalty of employees to their institutions declines (Belch & Belch, 2012; Walker, 2015; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017). Apart from publications that are intended to keep employees informed and updated on the activities taking place within the institution, it is of primary importance to have regular meetings with employees or their representatives. In order to improve productivity at institutions of higher learning, it is of primary importance for employers to devise strategies of communicating with employees (Smith, 2006; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017).

5.2 Effective Internal Communication

In order to achieve organisational goals, it is important to maintain healthy communication between management and staff at various levels within the institution. Most institutions tend to make a mistake of neglecting internal stakeholders and focus more on external stakeholders. For instance, when internal stakeholders learn about strategic and critical decisions taken by the institution, through the media (Walker, 2015; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016; Scott, 2017). It is therefore of primary importance for communication practitioners to play their role of ensuring that institutions communicate with internal stakeholders who are considered to be the most important resource. Institutions sometimes create the right climate and make provision for appropriate tools to motivate employees (Du Toit *et al.*, 2003; Skinner, 2003; van Staden *et al.*, 2005; Smith,

2006; Botha *et al.*, 2007; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017). Management should take into cognisance that employees have an important role to play in maintaining a positive image of the institution. This could be achieved if employees are kept abreast of the developments and activities taking place within their respective institutions (Du Toit, 2003; Bode, 2016; Bright, 2016; Gottfried *et al.*, 2017; Stromback, 2017).

6. Overcoming Challenges to Improve Organisational Communication

Communicators who are effective endeavour to ensure that they convey messages that are relevant to the target audience. They do this through amongst others learning from their mistakes. For instance, if they do not get a response to their requests, they tend to change the approach. It is however of primary importance to consider reasons as to why the messages are not responded to. The communication tools used vary from stakeholder to stakeholder (Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017). In order to use relevant tools, it is important to know the target audience so that relevant tools could be identified and used for various stakeholders. Successful communicators possess some of the qualities below: (Soroka, 2012; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

6.1 Precision

When conveying messages, they ensure that they create a meeting of minds so that the target audience could share the same sentiments. In order to achieve effective communication, it is important for the sender of the message to ensure that the message is crafted in such a way that it will be well understood by the receiver (Shen & Kim, 2012; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017). This could be possible if the sender of the message puts him/herself in the position of the intended recipient of the message. It is also important for the sender of the message to take into cognisance how the intended recipient would feel about the message and to ensure that the communication tools used will be easily accessible. This implies that when messages are crafted, the sender of the message should strive to respond to anticipated questions that might arise upon receipt of the message by the intended recipient (Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

6.2 Credibility

Effective communicators are believable. The target audiences are made to have faith in their messages and their information is trusted. Although the tools which are used also play an important role, provision of accurate information all the time plays an important role in making the recipients to believe the sender of messages. The tools of communication also play an important role in ensuring credibility. For instance, if an institution has a weekly or monthly publication, there could be readers who would not like to miss a single issue of the publication (Belch & Belch, 2012; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017). The reason being that, the accuracy of the information provided had made such readers believe that the publication is credible. It is therefore important to ensure that such credibility is maintained by always providing accurate information. The same applies to television news, there are people who would not like to miss the news and some people prefer to have television in their offices so that they should not miss important information (Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

6.3 Control

Effective communicators have the ability to shape the responses of the target audience. They are able to make the target audience laugh or take action. Messages are communicated with intentions. It is therefore important to know the target audience in order to identify relevant communication tools and craft relevant messages for respective stakeholders. This could only be possible if the sender of the message anticipates how the message would be received and interpreted by the intended target recipient. This is also important for someone who chairs a committee, more especially during meetings. The Chairperson of the meeting should be in a position of controlling the meeting by amongst others effectively reading the minds of the participants. This could also minimise tension because, whenever statements are uttered, the Chairperson or any other participant will be in a position of anticipating the reactions of the participants or members of the committee (Miller, 2014; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

6.4 Congeniality

Effective communicators create pleasant relations with the recipients of message. Irrespective of

whether that target audience is in agreement with them or not, they are able to command the respect of recipients. Target audience or recipients of messages are able to work with them regardless of their views. There is a saying that people differ to agree (Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017). It is for this reason that in a committee set up, it is practically impossible for all committee members to be in agreement with all matters for discussion and in a situation where one member has a view which is contrary to the views of other members it does not mean that they fight. The same applies to an interview; it is unlikely to find that the whole selection committee is in agreement with the appointment of a particular candidate. However, the successful candidate would be offered the position despite the fact that there are some members who are not in agreement (Miller 2014; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

7. Results and Discussion

Questionnaires were directed to a sample population consisting of academic, administrative and service staff of the University of Venda. The results of the paper were then correlated with the literature review and the organisational communication theory. The analysis revealed that the majority of staff believed that effective communication can improve the morale and productivity in the workplace. The paper also revealed that staff felt that they were not effectively communicated with mainly due to poor access to various communication tools used at the University of Venda.

The paper revealed that in some instances, available tools of communication are not effectively being utilised. For instance, if a staff member submits a request for purchasing an equipment, which is critical for his/her performance, whoever is responsible for processing the request could take very long time without providing feedback about progress, to the end users. Despite availability of communication tools like e-mails, and telephones, some end users had to make follow-up with responsible personnel. This situation negatively affects the performance of staff in particular and the entire institution in general. In order to avoid this situation, there should be guidelines on internal communication including timelines for providing feedback. It is also of vital importance to have effective monitoring and evaluation system within the institution. The use of social

media as official communication tools has been recommended by the majority of respondents.

The paper further revealed that internal stakeholders respond to messages as and when they feel like doing that without any sense of urgency. Some respondents indicated that they view and respond to their e-mails at least once per day. Some access their e-mails more than a day or some days later. This could lead to poor performance and ineffective management and governance. In order to address this situation, the institution should make available communication tools to all internal stakeholders and ensure that they are able to access e-mails even through mobile devices which are portable. As a result, staff could be able to access messages even when they are off campus.

The paper also revealed that a very small percentage of internal stakeholders are familiar with available communication strategy and policies. Although some respondents indicated that the information about the policies and other communication tools is brought to their attention during new staff orientation sessions, the institution should ensure that there are campaigns to familiarise all stakeholders about available communication tools and their effective use.

The majority of service staff indicated that they only receive limited information about activities taking place within the institution through their respective supervisors. In order to keep all stakeholders abreast of developments taking place within the institution, there should be weekly briefing sessions at departmental and or school level. The university management should also consider having regular staff engagement sessions. This could help to ensure that internal stakeholders are familiar with the strategic direction of the institution. The paper also revealed that there are few tools that the university makes use of without having given internal stakeholders the opportunity to make inputs on the determination of such tools of communication. In order to address this matter, the university should list all available tools to communicate information and get buy-in about the use of such tools. For instance, if the agreement between the university management and staff is that information will be communicated through e-mails, sms, Univen Radio, website, weekly e-newsletter, messages should consistently be communicated using all these tools. This implies that if some stakeholders could not receive the message

from one or two tools, they would certainly be able to access the message through other tools. It is further recommended that internal stakeholders should receive regular training on communication.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper revealed the importance of having effective tools of communication to ensure flow of information within an institution to keep employees updated on the activities taking place within the institution as well as employee motivation. All these are manifestations of effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning. It was evident through the literature that if communication channels are open, staff morale could improve, and institutions can operate in a productive manner. It was explicitly demonstrated that communication should not only be one way. This was demonstrated through different levels of communication which are upward, downward and lateral or horizontal. It is worth reiterating that organisational communication is significant and it focuses on amongst others upward, downward and lateral communication. The paper emphasised the importance of being specific when communicating, using various tools of communication to communicate same messages, like following-up phone calls with confirmation e-mails. This helps to ensure that the message sent is well received and correctly interpreted. As reflected in this paper, there is no doubt that in order for institutions to achieve effective governance and management, there is a serious need for competent communicators and identification as well as the use of relevant tools of communication. It is therefore imperative for institutions to have people who can follow and give instructions, accurately listen, get along with fellow employees, work well in teams and have the ability to critically solve problems to have a well-functioning and productive institution. Efficient organisational communication entails knowing how to exchange information in a professional manner, working with people from diverse backgrounds as well as being able to communicate in an appropriate manner with internal stakeholders of the institution.

Through effective and regular communication some problems can be avoided within organisations and staff morale could be improved. It is therefore recommended that institutional leadership should have regular assemblies like open forum sessions where all staff could get the opportunity to engage on matters of strategic importance.

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