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# HUMAN FACTORS IN ORGANISATIONS: COMMUNICATION AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT INTERFACE

JIDE IBIETAN

## Abstract

*One cardinal aim of this paper is to highlight the impact of communication on effective human resource management in organisations. It is doubtful if work organisations in the form they are and intended to be can function effectively and ultimately achieve their goals/objectives without communication. This perhaps, is the rationale for referring to communication as the "life blood" of any organization. The importance of communication and qualitative human resource management cannot be overemphasized in organizational effectiveness. This paper comprises of Abstract; Introduction; Conceptual Clarification; Types of Communication; Communication and Human Resource Management Interface; Conclusion and Recommendations. The paper concluded that effective communication is the master key that unlocks most areas of organizational activity. It called on Human Resource Managers to identify effective communication strategies and pro-active methods that enhance mutual interaction in the work place. The paper recommends transparency and unambiguity in the communication process. It also canvassed that managers should conduct communication audit in the critical segments of the organization on a continuous basis.*

**Key words:** Organisation, Communication, Interaction, Human Resource Management

## INTRODUCTION

Attempts have been made by scholars and management practitioners to highlight the central role of communication in all

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phases of managing; suffice it to say that it is more relevant in the management function of leading (managing people). Leaders act as facilitating and inspiring agents in a group in order to accomplish organizational goals. Eghe (2003:210) observed that "an ...organization cannot work properly without an efficient and effective system of communication". The leadership or human resource management function of coordination and fostering cooperation among employees can never be realized without a proper and working communication system in an organization.

Communication acts as a unifier of organizational activities. It is through communication that behaviour is modified, necessary inputs are fed into organisational systems, information is made more effective and productive, change and Total Quality Management (TQM) are achieved and the goal of organizational effectiveness becomes attainable.

Barnard in Wehrich and Koontz (1993:537) identified the linking effect of communication on human resources and its management in organisations. Communication is the means by which employees are linked together to achieve the common purpose (goals/objectives) of the organization. Without communication, group dynamics, coordination and change become unrealizable. Corroborating this position, Herman and Zelda in Eghe (2003:211) observed that "communication is the underlying medium of bringing the route between human behaviour and management".

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

This will focus on the concepts of communication and human resource management.

## **THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION**

Wehrich, Cannice and Koontz (2008:385) see communication as "the transfer of information from a sender to a receiver, with the information being understood by the receiver".

The cardinal idea behind this definition is that communication is deemed successful when the receiver clearly understands the message. Inherent also in this definition is the idea of the communication process which underscores the role of the sender (encoding); the transmission; the receiver (decoding); feedback and the possible interplay of noise as barrier to effective communication.

Cole (1996:207) defines communication as "the process of creating, transmitting and interpreting ideas, facts, opinions and feelings between two or more persons". Communication therefore, implies a mutual exchange or interchange of ideas, facts, opinion and feelings between two or more persons. This point was reinforced in a similar discourse by Eghe (2003:211).

Stoner, Freeman and Gilbert (2000:546-547) see communication "as the process by which people attempt to share meanings through symbolic messages". Stoner et. al emphasise that communication is important to managers because it facilitates the management functions of planning, organizing, leading and controlling. This view tallies with those of Wehrich, Cannice and Koontz (2008) in the application of communication to all phases of managing.

Robbins (2000:284) sees communication as the process of transmitting an idea or thought in such a way that the mental picture perceived by the receiver is exactly the same as that envisioned by the sender. When this happens, communication is said to be complete. Robbins (2000) view communication as "transference and understanding of meaning".

A practical way of observing communication in a typical organization is to listen to telephone conversations/messages, the sound coming from office typewriters (in times past) or staff busy manipulating the computer keyboard, individual conversations, group meetings, questions and answers during staff, management and board meetings, pens and pencils scratching the surface of papers. When these communication processes cease to operate, the organization becomes functionless immediately.



The effectiveness of communication in an organization depend on the “perception and attitude” of management and workers and their awareness of how these elements affect the communication process. It is therefore instructive that H. A. Simon in Stoner *et. al* (2000:531) affirms “that organizations are necessary to help people communicate” .

Ngu (1994:31) argued that when Herbert Simon talks of administrative behaviours, reference is being made to the behaviour of administrators or behaviouralism, which is analogous to decision-making. Decision-making is essentially facilitated or aided by communication.

Organisation theorists like Frederick Taylor, Henri Fayol and Max Weber emphasized the place of communication in human resource management. Inherent in their principles of division of labour/ specialization, documentation/ record keeping, decentralization and scalar chain among others is the paramount role of communication.

The systems theory as propounded by Katz and Kahn (1966) is also of tremendous relevance and applicability to communication and the communication process. The reference to “input”; “conversion/processing”; “output” and “feedback mechanism” necessarily facilitate our understanding of communication, the process and problems/possible solutions. Refer to Shafritz and Hyde (1992:248-256) and Yalokwu (2006:60-63) for detailed discussion on this.

The purposes or functions of communication to an organization include the following:

- To establish and disseminate the goals of an enterprise
- To develop plans for their achievement
- To organize human and other resources in the most effective and efficient way
- To select, develop and apprise members of the organization
- To lead, direct, motivate and create a climate in which people want to contribute

(to the organization).

- To control performance (Weihrich, Cannice and Koontz, 2008:385)

From the above stated functions or purposes of communication in an organization, the nexus or interface between human resource management and the gamut of communication in a system is not in doubt.

## HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Stoner, Freeman and Gilbert (2000:376) see Human Resource Management (HRM) as “the management function that deals with recruitment, placement, training and development of organization members”. Stoner and his colleagues expatiated that HRM is a staff function which inevitably leads to an inference that there are staff managers responsible for personnel or staff duties, while line managers are responsible for core technical and specialized functions with peripheral staff functions as adjuncts to their main duty.

Human Resource (HR) or staff managers advise line managers throughout the organization on how to combine men and material resources in achieving the corporate goals and objectives. To this extent, HRM is seen as a process (an ongoing process) which tries to keep the organization supplied with the right people in the right positions when the need arises.

The HRM process includes the following activities which can be captioned as the components of human resource management: Human resource planning, Recruitment; Selection/Placement; Socialisation; Training and Development; Performance appraisal; Promotion/Motivation; Industrial relations; Discipline and Separation to mention but a few.

Another way of looking at HRM in organizations is to see it as the personnel function considered in wider terms to encompass the role of managing people. It is the team leadership role, which is essentially about harnessing people’s efforts in the pursuit of organizational goals (Cole, 1997:1-2).

As a corollary, HRM utilizes the human relations principle of organizational democracy, which literally translates to consultation in the decision-making process; information sifting and management; and bottom-top approach to management. The minority must be heard and all forms of discrimination, bias or selective perception must be eliminated in the areas of appointment, reward, discipline and decision-making. The role of effective communication in all these cannot be overemphasized.

## **TYPES OF COMMUNICATION**

Writers on Management and Organisational Behaviour tend to agree that communication can be categorised into formal or official, informal or unofficial and lateral, diagonal or crosswise. Some organizational literature equates formal communication with vertical communication, while informal communication is synonymous with horizontal or lateral communication (Stoner et. al 2000). Also see Robbins (2000); Cole (1996); Weihrich & Koontz (1993) and Weihrich, Cannice & Koontz (2008). This paper discusses types of communication broadly as formal, informal and lateral.

## **FORMAL COMMUNICATION**

The operations of the formal communication system follow the classical hierarchical structure of an organization. Such a structure follows the line of authority, which takes the form of up and down movement of all formal communications.

Formal communication in its downward form transmits policies, instructions and such information as necessary for the determination of what must be done from the top management through middle management to the lowest levels of the organization. This downward form of communication reflects the traditional approach to administration by way of delegation of authority, and as Luthans in Eghe (2003:212) argued, its purposes in an organization are as follows:

- To give specific task directives about job instructions.
- To give information about organizational procedures and practices
- To inform subordinates about their performance
- To provide ideological type of information to facilitate the indoctrination of goals.

Eghe (2003:212) however submitted with candour that "until recently, only the first two purposes were accomplished and the rest were more or less ignored". He added that "this had a negative organisational impact...promotes authoritative atmosphere... inhibit the effectiveness of ...communication".

Formal communication flows upward through the same lines of authority in the form of feedback from the lowest through the middle level to the final decision making level. Upward communication takes the form of proposals, reports, suggestions or recommendations from a subordinate to a supervisor or manager. This is referred to as non-directive communication.

Although, this pattern is considered necessary to enable managers coordinate subordinates activities effectively, the underlisted barriers render it ineffective: physical distance or inaccessibility; distortion at each level; attitude of the superior officers; inferiority complex on the part of subordinates and rigid adherence to work rules or tradition.

In addition, a major disadvantage of the strict adherence to the line of authority as the direction for formal communication is that it is time-consuming when viewed against the backdrop of speedy decision-making and action. Nevertheless, result oriented managers ought to find other means to supplement this type of communication in order to overcome the inherent drawback.

## **INFORMAL COMMUNICATION**

The informal system provides necessary communication outside the established formal lines of authority. This is important to maintain organizational linkages and to fill in the gaps and omissions of the formal system. This type of communication is

mostly limited to oral face-to-face. In most organisations in Nigeria, a lot of informal communication is done via rumours and gossips flowing through ethnic cliques and other sectional interests and associations. It finds positive use in the sense that it has the advantage of speed over formal communication.

Another use to which it is put is what can be termed the "trial balloon". This happens when a formal authority in an organization releases official information through the informal channel in order to test its acceptability, and depending on reactions to it, the authority withdraws or reinforces action without loosing face.

Informal communications in organisations also serve as a device for evaluating managers by their subordinates, since the formal channel does not provide for such actions. It is not unusual to see managers supplanting the formal structure of communication with the informal mode which in extreme cases could be very destructive in its consequence.

## **LATERAL COMMUNICATION**

In the main, lateral communication is informal communication. However, while informal communication is commonly found in one and the same organization or in one unit of the organization, lateral communication cuts across organisations or units. It is normally between colleagues or persons at the same level of organization.

In its informal mode, it is mainly oral and face-to-face. Its main use is consultation for one technical advice, opinion or skills lacking in one unit or an organization and existing or abounds in another. However, formal provision is made for correspondence in the public sector between ministries, departments and agencies with such mode being usually formalized, written and lateral in nature.

Observation shows that lateral communication is in greater use and substantially encouraged in organisations that are more

“organic” in operation. Such organisations adopt the principle of “management by exception” which emphasises a high degree of delegation and information is sought on “need to know” basis (Cole, 1996:208).

## COMMUNICATION AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT INTERFACE

The task before this section of the paper is to identify the link between communication and the different components of HRM or how communication facilitates the HRM components. To reiterate, the components of HRM are: Human resources planning; recruitment; selection/placement; socialization; training and development; performance appraisal; promotion/motivation; industrial relations; discipline and separation.

The pivot of human resources planning is to ensure that personnel needs are appropriately and constantly met. Internal factors such as current and anticipated skill requirement, vacancies, departmental growth and reductions are considered. External factors which can be environmental in nature or feedback from the labour market are also noteworthy in a human resource plan. Communication, especially the use of computers (spreadsheet package) empowers an organization (HR managers in particular) in achieving efficient human resources inventory, forecast, audit and planning. Thus, areas of deficits and surpluses can be identified and necessary changes in form of transfers, redeployment and secondment can be effected.

The above steps enable an organization to make efficient allocation and utilization of human resources. Communication plays crucial role in identifying vacancies, advertising vacancies in print and electronic media, interviewing, selecting the right candidate, placing the candidates on the job and other external factors such as feedback from the labour market. It is only through effective, adequately timed and focused communication system that an organization can achieve the foregoing HRM functions.

The recruitment process ensures conformity of the human resources plan with developing a pool of job candidates through the relevant media, employment agencies, verbal conversation and in time past, through visits to tertiary and professional institutions.

Selection refers to hiring the right candidates usually through the use of application forms/letters; curriculum vitae; interviews; skill/aptitude tests and referrals to evaluate candidates. The aforementioned reference to the role of communication in advertising vacancies, eliciting/sorting applications, invitation to interviews/interviewing, selection and placement underscores its utility in the recruitment process within and outside formal organisations.

Socialisation or orientation is the process of ensuring that the candidates selected are appropriately introduced to the organization through learning of organizational culture, policies, responsibilities, expected behaviour and group relations. Communication facilitates the learning process. It is important that instructions, mission statements, goals and objectives are clearly expressed and appropriate channels are used in order to ensure that employees internalize organizational values.

Training and development enhances skills through refresher, on-the-job training and other developmental programmes, which prepare employees for advancement and promotion. Training and development contribute to increasing employees' abilities for organizational effectiveness, and these become easy through appropriate communication aids. Communication and training/development in organisations are virtually intertwined, inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Effective communication is a vehicle to delivering qualitative training in an organization. Lectures, seminars and symposia are made easy through well-focused communication strategies and instrument.

Performance appraisal enables managers to compare employee performance against set standards or objectives of the

organization. Incentives and inducements (motivation) such as merit award, productivity/profit sharing bonus and promotion are given to encourage and sustain high performance, while corrective action and additional training are instituted to transform employee from low to high performance. The HR department initiates policies, guides and liaises with other departments/units and top management in achieving a very articulate performance appraisal system, although an employee's immediate supervisor or manager performs the requisite appraisal duty. Performance appraisal, reward and motivation in organisations become difficult or unrealisable without appropriate standards and objectives.

Standards and objectives must be well set and structured. This is a function of communication. It must specify output-reward correlation. It must be fair, just and competitive for employees to be adequately motivated. The theories of J. S. Adams (Equity theory) and E. A. Locke (Goal setting or Social comparison) are instructive and positively reinforcing in this regard. In circumstances where employee performance is less than management set standard/expectation, the tone and content of communication should be fair, humane and simply corrective in order to create and retain a sense of self-worth and value in employees. This adds a human relations (theory) angle to human resource management.

As a corollary, on issues of promotion, transfer, demotion and the various means of severance from the organization, the intentions of management must be conveyed in fair, open, transparent tone and nature. It is only through well-structured and humane communication skills that this becomes realisable.

An important area of HRM upon which effective, transparent and proactive communication rests is industrial relations. It is therefore not surprising to observe scholars like Cole (1997); Stoner, Freeman and Gilbert (2000) and Udom (2002:420-421) anchoring their discourse on communication to this core area. The role of open, frank and effective communication in reducing organizational disharmony and conflict



in employer-employee (union) relations built on collective bargaining were highlighted. In collective bargaining, dialogue and flexibility are potent tools of the management and labour unions in the bargaining process. The place of constructive dialogue cannot be overemphasized, and dialogue is communication in action. Communication is an indispensable tool in achieving group cohesion, industrial harmony, conflict resolution through constructive engagement and the attainment of organizational effectiveness.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is clear from the foregoing that effective communication is the master key that unlocks most issues and areas of organizational activity. This paper revealed the potent and patent use to which communication can be put to achieve the goals and objectives of organisations. It is incumbent on managers of organisations especially Human Resource Managers to identify effective strategies to making communication work in their organisations by adopting pro-active methods that enhances mutual interaction and organizational effectiveness.

In order to strengthen the communication situation in organisations, this paper recommends the following:

- That managers keep employees adequately informed on management philosophy and expectation in transparent and unambiguous manner.
- Communicate employees' performance promptly, clearly and with courtesy
- As a supplement to other management techniques, managers should practice supervision based on managing by wandering around (MBWA). Through this, issues requiring prompt action can be attended to.
- Effective managers should discover ways of combining the various types of communication that makes them tap into every segment of the organization in order to achieve results.

- Managers should endeavour to practice Honest, Open, Transparent (HOT) communication. Nothing happens until people talk.
- A very effective way of improving communication in organisations is to conduct communication audit which is a tool for analyzing communication related to many key managerial activities. It examines policies, networks and activities. It can really be a means to facilitating organizational goals/objectives.

It is also consistent with the systems approach based on its integrative role in management functions and linking the enterprise to its external environment. The four major communication networks worthy of audit are as follows:

- \* The task related or regulative network consisting of policies, procedures, rules and superior-subordinate relationships.
- \* The innovative network comprising meetings, problems solving and suggestions for change.
- \* The integrative network made up of praise, rewards, promotion and issues or items that harmonise organisational goals with employees' personal needs and aspirations.
- \* The informative- instructive network including bulletin boards, company publications and the grapevine.

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