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The Internal Communication Barriers: A Communication Audit Report of a Nonprofit Organization

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Findings: This study revealed that the internal communication barriers within this organization have to do with several contributing factors such as (the lack of staff meetings, unwillingness to open communication, the lack of entertaining feedback).

Keywords: *communication audit, internal communication, communication structure, feedback, leadership effectiveness, thematic analysis, semi-structured interview.*

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Findings: This study revealed that the internal communication barriers within this organization have to do with several contributing factors such as (the lack of staff meetings, unwillingness to open communication, the lack of entertaining feedback).

Research limitations/implications: The study showed limitations like the withholding of valuable information by some research participants, the unwillingness to communicate effectively, and the consciousness of time.

Practical implications: Some practical implications affecting the organization are the lack of feedback or low listening capacity between top managers, supervisors, the subordinates, and the communication network challenging the internal environment of the organization.

Originality/value: This study emphasizes on the values/relevance of communication audits within organizations and how effective communication within organizations can bring about employee communication satisfaction, trust and bonding, supervisor-employee and manager-leadership relations, in turn, bring about increased organizational productivity.

Keywords: *communication audit, internal communication, communication structure, feedback, leadership effectiveness, thematic analysis, semi-structured interview.*

I. Introduction

Internal Communication is the foundation of all organizations strategies because it involves not only the management and the staff alike but also on the effective communication within an organization. Recent literature (Linjuan, 2014; Odine, 2015; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014) described Internal Communication as a tool for communicating within organizations.

The objective of this study is to conduct an inquiry or examination into the root cause of the Internal Communication Barriers within a non-profit Catholic religious organization which examined three research questions to arrive at a result. The study critically observed the following research questions: 1) what is the root cause of the Internal Communication Barriers within the Organization? 2) How are the communication structures of the organization affecting the people? 3) why are the leadership style and the management decisions of the organization influencing employee behavior?

The researcher is motivated to pursue this research topic for two reasons: a) to find out the reasons behind the inadequate use of the communication structures that exist within the organization, and b) Communication Audit has never been carried out within the organization and pursuing this research means that it is the first-ever to be carried out within the organization.

The research methodology used in this study is the interview method (semi-structured interview, with the use of open-ended questions). An audiotape is used to record the findings from the research, and the data generated were analyzed and transcribed using qualitative research and thematic analysis. This study interview is done in the conference room of the organization, and the population of interest was selected at random using a systematic random sampling technique. Ten participants partook in the interview to cut across all the various psychological groups within the organization. The research participants are recruited from the Human Resources, the Finance, the Administrative, the Security, and the Managerial Departments of the organization.

The ethical concerns raised by the research were the confidentiality issue, which formed the major problem of the study. The code of the research conduct observed in this study was respect, confidentiality, integrity, and responsibility.

The result of the Mini Communication Audit showed that the internal communication barriers within this organization have to do with so many factors among them are, the lack of staff meetings, unwillingness to open communication, etc. The study showed limitations like the withholding of valuable information by the management participants and consciousness of time.

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Recommendations and strategies for changes in the communication practices of the organization are suggested and that, if not immediately implemented, can cause serious harm to the organization's productivity.

II. Literature Review

a) Communication Audit

An audit is described as an independent review or examination of records and activities that assess the adequacy of an organizations systems to ensure compliance with created policies and procedures and to recommend necessary changes in the policies and procedures of organizations. According to Tourish & Hargie (2017), Communication Audit helps organizations to figure out the communication barriers within an organization and proffer strategies to ensuring effective communication channels within organizations. In that, Communication Audit try to find the exact problems associated with organizations internal and external communication environment. Smith (2017) described Communication Audit as a planned research method that identifies organizational strengths and weaknesses of its internal and external communication structures. Communication Audit also identifies the communication loopholes within an organization and provides information to decision-makers, giving them room to digest this information in the making of a very construct decision (Besterci and Hazel, 2014).

The goal/relevance of this mini Communication Audit will have for the organization is that the audit looked at the root cause of the internal communication barriers within the organization and provided vivid representation of the communication structures (downward, upward, and horizontal communication) of the organization which seek to find out how well top managers, supervisors, and the subordinates are communicating within themselves. Lastly, the mini Communication Audit will recommend strategies that can enhance effective communication practices within the organization.

The result of this mini Communication Audit is used to develop a strategic internal communication plan such as a well-defined specific goal of the internal communication within the organization and a clear and consistent sharing of information or messages that develop a sustainable long-term focus that can strengthen effective communication within the organization. Hume (2015) suggest that in creating an internal communication plan or strategies, organizations must be reliable and consistent in their messages and identify the perspectives of their communication.

b) Internal Communication

Modern organizations have overlooked their internal communication structures, but sufficiently giving more attention to their external communication environment (Hume, 2015; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2014). Internal Communication plays a role in the daily survival of any organization (Bharadwaj, 2014). The different communication networks that exist within the organization are formal and informal communication. Formal communication is the structure of the organization following a chain of command. The formal is grouped into the downward, upward, and the horizontal. From downward, messages flow between managers to the supervisors and then to the subordinates. From upward, information flow from employees to the supervisors and then to the managers. The horizontal is the communication that flows between the various departmental heads or between peers/employees. The informal is the unofficial way of carrying out information in the organization like the information concerning staff welfare, dismissal, or query. The structure of an organization's communication reflects the growth and pattern of the society it serves. Internal Communication (according to Bekele, 2017) is the communication that exists within an organization and between employees. This type of communication can take any shape like face-to-face communication, emails, SMS, letters, etc.

c) Barriers to Effective Communication

There are so many barriers facing effective communication. These challenges are known as barriers to effective communication or environmental factors. In recent literature, Patako and Yazdanifard (2014) posit that communication is a composite and often difficult process for managers and employees. However, communication barriers come from both the managers and the employees, which hinder or deviate the real meaning of a message and frustrate clear, open, and satisfactory communication in the organization. Noise as one of the environmental factors that affect effective communication within organizations is unwanted interference, usually associated with the delivery of a message. According to various Organisational Psychological Literature (Agarwal & Gary, 2012; Conrad, 2014; Rani, 2016), the barriers that hinder successful communication includes message overload, lack of feedback, and physical challenges, etc. Message overload may arise when an individual receives too much information at the same time. Physical barriers such as the nature of the environment, which can lead to environmental factors like noise, which the organization have no control over. The lack of feedback or who to report to in certain situations can equally affect effective communication within organizations. For example, noise and lack of feedback are affecting the organization. A communication barrier is a factor that hinders the successful receiving or understanding of a message an employee or employer use from passing information, their ideas, and message across (Rani, 2016).

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d) Qualitative Research

According to (Anyan, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2013), qualitative research is a methodology that employs the use of data, collected, and analyzed differently. Qualitative research is a scientific research method consisting of an investigation that seeks to answer a research question using procedures to collect evidence. Braun & Clarke (2014) literature suggest that qualitative research offers urgent attention insights into real-life experiences.

e) Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis offers a wide range of comfortable to teach and understand fundamental introduction to qualitative research analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Furthermore, the literature also suggests that thematic analysis suits a wide-angle of research and theoretical approach, and it is an essential technique because it works with different kinds of research questions forming people's experiences. Thematic analysis is useful for analyzing various data from primary to secondary data such as focus groups, interviews, etc. Besides, the thematic analysis offers a very flexible method of qualitative analysis and provides easy to understand data analysis, proffer solutions, and better judgment to research findings.

f) Research Questions

This study examined three research questions, which include: 1) what is the root cause of the Internal Communication Barriers within the Organization? 2) How are the communication structures of the organization affecting the people? 3) Why the leadership style and the management decisions of the organization influencing employee behavior?

g) The Interview Method

The mini Communication Audit used the interview method precisely, the semi-structured interview method to process findings and open-ended questions to interview the participants. The interview method, according to research, builds an ethical connection between the interview recipient and the interviewer. In (Levashina, Hartwell, Morgeson & Campion, 2014) piece of literature, the interview method is easy to use a device and cheaper to use instru ments. Brinkmann (2014) notes that semi-structured interview provides some shape based on the research interview guide and allows for a flexible room for the respondents to respond according to his or her own free choice without much planning. The literature also states that the interview method can be structured or unstructured, and most, if not all, qualitative research or interview methods are conducted in a semi-structured way employing the use of open-ended questions.

The reason for this chosen method is that participants were more comfortable engaging in a one-to-one conversation with the researcher. The use of the interview method of conducting research creates an avenue of getting to see the participants air their views in person other than a reported speech and gives an adequate room for finding out more about the research. The use of gestures and confidence levels of the participants can only be observed with an interview (Brinkmann, 2014; Levashina et al., 2014; Spector, 2012). The disadvantages are that it can be biased and lack fairness if not adequately checked, especially where the process is unstructured (Spector 2012, p.116).

The interview for the study is conducted in the conference room of the organization, and an audio recorder is used to extract information from the participants. The semi-structured interview method lasted only 30 minutes for the employees and 20 minutes for the managerial team. This was so because the management participants were unwilling to give out useful information and were equally conscious of time. The interview contained seven questions, and some of the questions asked were: how the participants viewed communication within their organization? How well are they been communicated to within their departments, with their supervisors and managers, and among their colleagues? What method of communication do they prefer within their organization? What is the possible root cause of the internal communication barriers within their organization?

h) Ethical Concerns

Ethics is a principle showing the relationship between right and wrong behavior. It is the standards that govern a person, especially a member of a profession. Resnik (2015) defined ethics as a technique, guideline, or procedure for deciding on how to act and the analysis of a difficult issue. Several different reasons are eminent to agree to ethical rules in research. Research ethics promotes honesty and moral conduct and enables the research participants to freely participate if they perceive fairness, respect, and integrity in consenting to research work.

The code of the research ethics employed in this study is Confidentiality, Respect, Integrity, and Responsibility. The ethical concerns raised by the research were the confidentiality issue, which formed the major problem for the study. The managerial participant was unwilling to give any information regarding the interview and was so conscious of time even though an agreement is reached regarding the use of time and how the study will take place.

According to the British Psychological Society code of ethics and conduct (2009), researchers must respect and value the rights of each participant and their decisions to participate or consent to research work. Also, confidentiality is a must in all research works, and no way, should researchers disregard confidentiality in research ethics. Resnik (2015) literature also suggest that ethical standard (such as responsibility, respect,

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confidentiality, and integrity) promotes values in research and guides against falsifying or fabricating results, avoidance of errors, and the building of trust among research participants and researchers. In that, ethical norms reduce conflicts of interest and respect the right of the people, particularly where it involves human participants.

III. Methodology

a) Procedure

All the ten (10) participants received a consent form and an information sheet containing details regarding the research. After careful study of the information sheet, the participants signed a consent form to show acceptance to partake in the study. Each of the participants voluntarily consented to take part in this study.

b) Interview Participants/population of Interest

The chosen organization is a not-for-profit Catholic religious organization which has a population of thirty-five people. The sample of interest was selected at random using a systematic random sampling technique. This strategy is described as a process whereby every fifth person in the sample of interest has an equal opportunity of been selected at random. This sampling method was appropriate for this study because of the size of the organization. Among the ten participants, two representatives each is recruited from the Human Resources, the Finance, the Administrative, the Security, and the Managerial department of the organization to show anonymity. The participants consist of five males and five females ranging between the ages of 29-45. The research participants' role in the organization is as follows: the head of the finance team (supervisor) whose duties include the daily supervision of the income and expenditure of the organization and an employee in the finance department. The Assistant Supervisor in the administrative department whose role involves assisting the administrative head of the organization's psychological group and a subordinate in the admin department. The head of security and assistant security. Last of all, the two participants in the management department role consist of managing the entire psychological groups within the organization. These participants are chosen because their opinions form the opinions of the respective groups within the organization.

IV. Analysis

The mini Communication Audit is analyzed using the qualitative research method and thematic analysis. The data gotten from the interview were carefully listened to by the researcher to identify meaningful themes/codes for the research. The audiotape was played several times and systematically reviewed to ensure that useful information regarding the interview has been extracted, transcribed, and coded. The interview revealed nine themes, that were grouped into four key codes. These themes were as follows: 1) The Communication line is thin, 2) Face-to-face Communication is the height of it all, 3) Communication with top bosses is usually at the dying minutes, 4) the leaders are blindfolded to the ideas of the people. The following paragraph will show the result in each theme.

V. Result/Findings

a) The Communication line is thin

The first theme that emerged in the interview is the communication line within the organization is thin. All the participants that are interviewed agreed and described in detail how their organization is lacking effective communication. According to Conrad (2014), poor communication within organizations causes most of the work problems resulting in communication barriers. The participants believed that effective communication within organizations creates a safe working environment, which makes work more productive. As one of the participants in the finance department described:

In my organization, there has not been a high level of effective communication. The communication line is thin. Information is not communicated to the people, and when you are trying to figure out what to do, there is a change of plan in the message received, causing a lot of communication gap not only within the finance department but also around the organization.

From the above statement, it shows that effective communication is an obstacle challenging the organization. All the participants believed that effective communication is a way of freely disseminating information among persons.

b) Face-to-Face Communication is the height of it all

The second theme generated and analyzed from the interview is the face-to-face communication is the height of it all. Respondents favored the use of face-to-face interaction. The mode of communication employed in the organization were letters, SMS, emails, and face-to-face discussion. The participants said they value face-to-face communication more often in the sending of messages.

The participants responded differently and gave reasons for their favoring face-to-face Communication. They said:

Face-to-face communication builds personal contact. Sometimes communicating through letters or emails, we might not get a better picture of the message. But through personal interaction, I can understand the conversation and be able to express feelings regarding the instantaneous flow of the information.

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Face-to-face communication is paramount, and it is the height of it all. Other aspects of the communication modes such as (emails, letters, SMS) are all attached to face-to-face communication.

Face-to-face communication affords you the time to be able to walk up to your colleagues and employers, talk about issues that bother on the department, and get direct feedback from them.

In summary, through face-to-face communication, you get a better understanding and a better result of what is communicated. In other words, despite the massive support of the face-to-face communication within the organization, the level of communication within the various psychological groups of this organization has not been so smooth.

c) *Communication with Top Bosses is usually at the dying minutes*

The third theme established in the analysis of the interview is the communication with top bosses is at the dying minutes. This theme revealed the lack of mutual understanding between the managers, supervisors, and their subordinates, which is affecting employee behavior. In describing the reasons behind this behavior, the participants in the finance, administrative, and managerial department explained it to be:

Communication with top bosses is usually at the dying minutes, and as such, there is no mutual understating within the communication structure of the organization.

As someone in the finance department, I need to have every time communication concerning income and expenditure and how it is disbursed or distributed. Sometimes I just follow instructions because there is not much I could question, and I am solely an employee who fears for the loss of my job.

There is not much I could do regarding the lack of mutual understanding. As a manager, I try my best to ensure I communicate to the subordinates the little way I can.

In a nutshell, this theme revealed the root cause of the internal communication barriers within the organization has to do with the lack of mutual understanding within the communication networks such as the (upward, downward, and horizontal communication) of the organisation. There is no walking relationship with top bosses, and as such, if one cannot communicate with their managers and supervisors, then, there is bound to be lapses in the communication patterns of an organization.

d) *The Leaders is blindfolded to the ideas of the people*

In line with the research questions examined by the mini Communication Audit, this final theme revealed the ultimate root cause of the internal communication barriers within the organization. The managerial participants do not speak much about this part, but participants in the finance, the administrative, and the security department of the organization spoke at length. The respondents believed that the leadership style, ego, and much more are all the root causes of the internal communication barriers within the organization.

As one respondent mentioned

The leadership style, as well as the negative ego of the managers, is also posing as the root cause, attaching so much importance to self, and blindfolded to the ideas of the people.

Likewise, the two participants in the finance department identified another root cause of the internal communication barriers within the organization as:

The lack of coming together to have meetings and to share ideas. Also, the lack of welcoming feedback to see ways to improve the organization and not creating good enough room for the people to air their views or partake in the management decisions of the organization.

There are a lot of leadership styles, and different people think they could exercise their rights the way they can. Autocratic leader or a dedicator where my final say must count poses a lot of problems, this type of leadership affects the organization from growth, which is the type we are practicing.

In all, the last theme showed that the root cause of the internal communication barriers within the organization is diversified into different classes: a) the lack of not been in contact with direct bosses, b) not believing that employees can make decisive, effective decisions, c) lack of staff meetings which can help point out some of these barriers, d) and the leadership style or practice within the organization.

VI. Summary of key Interview Findings

To create effective communication within organizations, managers must seek employees' opinions or ideas. The mini Communication Audit interview result showed that Internal Communication within this organization is faced with many challenges. Effective communication has an impact on effective decision-making (Odine, 2015). The respondents all favor the use of face-to-face communication as their best method of communication. Current literature (Marit, 2014; Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014; Linjuan, 2014), reveals that employees mostly value the use of face-to-face communication, which brings about richness to an interpersonal relationship, honesty, which creates a strong employer/employee rapport and bonding. The interview also shows that a lot is lacking, such as mutual understanding within the communication structure of the organization, and management decisions are affecting employee behavior. Conversely, the lack of entertaining feedback is causing serious ineffective communication barriers within the organization.

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So far, the mini Communication Audit and the research questions examined in the study, which form the basis for the research has identified the root cause of the internal communication barriers within the organization. The study found that there is a big gap between the communication structures of the organization, which is causing ineffective communication. According to Bekele (2017), communication effectiveness such as openness and performance feedback and the adequacy of dishing out information is related to how employees feel in the workplace and their job performance. The subordinates in the organization are greatly affected by the unstructured way in which their managers, supervisors, and employees are communicating within themselves, which is affecting their work morale and organizational productivity. The literature also suggests that communication helps to better understand the people by removing misunderstanding and creating a clearer picture of the people's opinions or ideas. Also, this study revealed that the leadership style, as well as not involving staff in the management decisions of the organization, is affecting employee behavior. As (Carvalho, 2013; Husain, 2013) noted ‘‘in a good organization practicing effective communication, subordinates should be giving room to air their opinions and positively contribute to the decision-making phases of the organization". The leaders of any organization are solely responsible for the communication flow within their organization, and many organizations lack the skills or the ability to take advantage of a good communication practice (Conrad, 2014; NIDA International Business Conference, 2017). Employees are humans and not animals, so they have the right to equally air their views, as stated by one participant in the interview. As the audit revealed, there is a lot of missing links such as (unstructured communication networks, lack of entertaining feedback, management decision-making) embedded in the communication structure of the organization that is affecting the staff of the organization.

VII. Recommendation

The mini Communication Audit has shown that there is a barrier facing the internal communication structure of the organization. For effective changes in the communication practices within the organization, the following strategies are recommended by the researcher.

The organization should practice the strategy of having staff meetings if not monthly, but at least quarterly. According to Hume (2015), one ideal way of communicating relevant information regarding an employee, decision-making, or the organization is through the strategy of staff meetings. Through staff meetings, employees can share in the management and board decisions of the organization.

Another strategy that was recommended by the researcher for changes in the communication practices of the organization is the creating of the habit of welcoming feedback. In recent literature (Kang & Sung, 2016; Voinea, Busu, Opran & Vladutescu, 2015) said any organization, manager, or boss who is a good listener and entertains feedback will be more likely to have employees who can identify and solve work-related problems. The entertaining of feedback provides employees with an avenue to express their opinions or ideas concerning their needs and challenges, which in turn can boost their work morale. This type of attitude shows that management takes and value their opinions very seriously.

And lastly, the researcher also recommended the strategy of being transparent or open to communication. Employees are one of the most internal stakeholders and critic of organizational policies. According to (Bekele, 2017; Besterci and Hazel, 2014; Odine, 2015) the focus of any internal communication is the assurance employees have the support of actively participating in organizational decisions and how they understand it can impact their work. Bharadwaj (2014) strategy on employee participation in the decision-making planning of organizations shows that employees who participate in the decision-making process of organizations creates room for information exchange and show more communication satisfaction. Leaders should embrace the practice of transparent communication as Jiang & Linjuan (2017) literature strongly emphases on openness and participation. The scholars postulate that any transparent or transformational leaders will be open to different ideas/opinions of the people and encourage employees to participate in the decision-making process of the organization.

a) Practical Implication

While auditing the Internal Communication Channels of the organization, the researcher found some practical implications seriously affecting the staff and the organization. One of these implications is the lack of feedback or low listening capacity between top managers, supervisors, and subordinates. According to Voinea et al. (2015), lack of evaluation or low listening capacity within an organization's internal communication structure or bad leadership practices shows that an organization is lacking in communication style. Another practical implication discovered is the low communication network affecting the internal environment of the organization. Research has shown that (Tkalac & Poloski, 2017) employees who are experiencing internal communication dissatisfaction show low organizational productivity, turnover intention, and decreased motivation.

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b) Research limitations

This study showed limitations as the respondents in the managerial department were very much conscious of time and their unwillingness to share information regarding the aspects that concerns the management. The mini Communication Audit showed great strengths also, as the participants in the finance, the administrative and the security department spoke at length regarding the research and gave meaning and useful information to the study.

In conclusion, the mini Communication Audit was conducted within a not-for-profit Catholic religious organization, which found great results affecting the root cause of the internal communication barriers within the organization. According to (Carvalho, 2013; Tourish & Hargie, 2017), Internal Communication Audit plays a crucial role in identifying the communication weaknesses or strengths of any organization. Communication Audit shows an organization's drawbacks in the communication structures of both their internal and external environment and seeks strategies for improving these barriers. The study used the interview method, such as (semi-structured) and open-ended questions. Ten participants partook in the research and were recruited from the human resources, the finance, administrative, security, and the managerial department of the organization to create anonymity. They include five females and five males ranging between the ages of 29-45. The systematic sampling technique is used, which selected every fifth person in the population of interest at random. This technique was appropriate for the study because of the number of the organization's population of thirty-five persons. The data of the findings were analyzed and transcribed using qualitative research and thematic analysis. The study examined three research questions in the introductory section of the audit report to arrive at a construct decision. The interview findings revealed four key themes. One of the key codes in the study which form the basis for the research showed that the root cause of the Internal Communication Barriers within the Organization has to do with the lack of staff meetings, the leadership practices of the organization, and the lack of receiving or giving feedback. Also, the result reveals that top managers are not open to communication; in that, the organization's leadership practices are influencing the internal communication structure of the organization and employee behavior. The mini Communication Audit proffers changes in the communication practices of the organization. The audit suggests that the leaders of the organization should be open to feedback and change their leadership style. As such, if this persists can lead to reduced organizational productivity.

Despite the revealing findings from the research, the study showed several challenges, to be sought out in future research. The interview findings showed bias in terms of the received responses. Participants in the managerial department gave a very brief reply to the interview questions.

Future research should address the reasons behind managers/top bosses' lack of entertaining feedback within their organizations. Also, future research should investigate the problems around the lack of mutual understanding between employers/employees within the internal communication structures of organizations. Finally, future research should investigate the external environment of this organization to get a better understanding of the organization's external environment.

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Appendix -Interview question set

1. What do you understand by effective communication in a lay man's description?
2. Why is communication important among persons?
3. How do you view communication within your organization?
4. What method of communication do you prefer among the various mode of communication

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employed by your organization, such as Face-to-Face communication, Letter, SMS, Emails, etc.?
5. Among the different psychological groups within your organization, how well are you communicated to in your department, with your managers, your supervisors, and subordinates?
6. Do the decision-makers within your organization give you enough room to contribute to the decision-making process of the organization?
7. What is the possible root cause of the communication barrier within your organization?

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