

## **An evaluation of internal communication in the local council of Moqhaka Municipality**

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### **Abstract**

Municipalities face the task of communicating their policies and practices to employees. Their purpose is to achieve an understanding of their strategies by all stakeholders, including their employees. The research conducted exhibited evidence that Moqhaka Municipality in Free State Province of South Africa recognised the need to address the issue of internal communications but had not been involved in any in-depth assessment of its internal communications, nor did it have a written internal communication strategy. The first stage of the empirical study was to identify the current communication strategy within the particular municipality. Official documents were analysed and qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with key role players selected according to their expertise, availability and knowledge regarding the research topic. In the second stage the researcher focused on the employees' perceptions and needs with regard to the internal communication at their workplace. To gather information, self-administered open and closed-ended questionnaires were distributed to employees.

It was established through the literature study, that a need does exist for the internal communication to undergo regular evaluation. The results showed a general dissatisfaction in respect of communication and specific dissatisfaction in relation to particular areas of the organisation. The findings demonstrate not only the need to evaluate communication in an organisation on a regular basis, but also the importance of communication to employees, and the general need for improved organisational communication.

**Keywords:** Internal communication, local municipality, communication audit.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Internal communication is so entwined with the process of organising and with organisational structure, environment, power and culture that organisations cannot exist without it (Grunig 1992:532). Mersham and Skinner (2001:68) define internal communication as "all kinds of interactions that take place between members of one organisation". The benefits of effective communication practices are: increased productivity, higher quality of services and products, increased staff participation, higher levels of creativity, greater employee job satisfaction, decreased absenteeism and reduced staff turnover (Haggie, Dickson & Tourish 1999:6). Rogers (2006:20-23) further indicated that effective internal

communication aligns employees with the company's mission, vision, goals and objectives.

The internal communication strategy therefore needs to take account of how awareness and understanding of the organisation's values and desired behaviours can be generated (Argenti 1998:129). Johnson (2003:13-17) believes that the organisation's code of ethics and values must effectively be communicated to all employees.

Employees can only be motivated and informed of policies, developments and changes in the organisation through

communication. Mersham and Skinner (2001:699) confirm that communication processes and practices should undergo regular evaluation to prove their worth in terms of employee/management relations, as well as employee performance and awareness of key public issues. Skinner, Essen and Mersham (1999:39) state that: "People should be given equal opportunity and be respected as fellow human beings." Anyone, regardless of education or background, should be able to provide valuable input into the running of the Moqhaka Municipality

*Effective communication is a vital ingredient of attempts to increase participation, secure the widespread ownership of corporate goals and implement such programmes as total quality management (Hargie and Tourish, 1993: 89).*

Broom, Center and Cutlip (1994:283-284) present the following guidelines with regard to effective communication (the seven Cs of communication):

- **Credibility.** Communication starts with a climate of belief. This climate is built by performance on the part of the institution, reflecting an earnest desire to serve the receiver. The receiver must have confidence in the sender and a high regard for the source's competence on the subject.
- **Context.** The context must provide for participation and playback. It must confirm, not contradict the message. Effective communication requires a supportive social environment; one largely set by media.
- **Content.** The message must have meaning for the receiver, and it must be compatible with his/her value system. It must be relevant to the receiver's situation. In general people select those items of information that promise them the greatest rewards. The content determines the audience.
- **Clarity.** The message must be put in simple terms. Words must mean the

same to the receiver as to the sender. Complex issues must be compressed into simple, clear themes, slogans or stereotypes. The further a message has to travel, the simpler it must be. An institution must speak with one voice, not many voices.

- **Continuity and Consistency.** Communication is a never-ending process. It requires repetition to achieve penetration. Repetition, with variation, contributes to both factual and attitudinal learning. The story must be consistent.
- **Channels.** Established channels of communication should be used. Different channels have different effects and are effective at different stages of the diffusion process. Different channels are used for reaching different target audiences. People associate different values with the many different channels of communication.
- **Capability of the audience.** Communication must take into account the capability of the audience. Communication is most effective when it requires the least effort on the part of the recipient to comprehend the message.. This involves factors such as availability, habits, reading ability and receiver's knowledge

#### **INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AUDIT**

In addressing the perceived imbalance and lack of internal communication in the municipality, a communication resource has to be employed optimally. Since no resource can be managed unless it is measured, public relations research is required. One of the tools of public relations research is a communication audit, which endeavours to quantify the many intangible aspects of communication.

An internal communication audit is often used as a benchmark with which later assessments can be compared in watching the development of an organisation's culture (Downs & Adrian 2004: 217). An audit provides a process for acquiring data for

analysis (Downs & Adrian 2004: 315). Functionally a communication audit can tell organisations:

- who they should communicate with;
- who they actually do communicate with;
- what they should be communicating;
- how they should communicate;
- how they actually do communicate (Hargie and Tourish, 1993: 89).

It can also assist managers by providing them with knowledge of what actually is happening at the communication level, rather than what they thought, or were told was happening, Communication auditors have shown how it is possible to: “successfully incorporate both qualitative and quantitative analysis to provide data to illuminate effectiveness” (Hargie and Tourish, 1993: 93). If audits are administered in a phased manner (Hagie et al., 1999: 65) the analysis provides an accurate snapshot of internal communications within an organisation at a particular point in time.

The basic idea of a communication audit is that relevant information about the organisation’s communication system is gathered and used to improve communication (Rensburg 1996:118). Communication audits represent an approach and set of tools which can fulfil this function and therefore assist organisations to improve their communication practices. Accordingly, audits have been defined (Du Plooy 1996:50) as a comprehensive and thorough study of communication philosophy, concepts, structure, flow and practice within an organisation.

By carrying out such an audit, municipal managers will be able to discover what communication channels are being utilised, how well they are used, the amount of credence that staff gives to various sources of information and, most importantly, how staff feel communication could be improved. Undertaking a communication audit will enable managers to listen more effectively to what staff has to say and in this way they

can identify strengths and weaknesses in the communication system.

According to Tourish and Wilson (2002: 59), the ability of the internal communication audit to improve organizational performance is well documented. An effective internal audit can reduce uncertainty, increase trust, and it can help facilitate important management objectives. Internal communication audits are identified as valuable because they enable redress of poor communication, thus preventing a communication breakdown before it occurs; they generate new information that can ascertain perceptions and help the organization strategically; they forecast problems; they identify strengths to be reinforced; and they contribute to the development of communication systems within the organization (Downs & Adrian 2004: 85).

Internal communication audits address: communication between management and employees; interpersonal communication; public relations activities; and overall internal communication effectiveness (Rensburg 1996: 56). This in turn will allow any perceived communication deficiencies within the municipality to be addressed and this should facilitate the development of a comprehensive communications strategy (Tourish and Wilson 2002: 64).

According to Goldhaber (1993:57), clients implemented the following recommendations as a result of internal communication audit findings:

- adding new formal channels of communication (including communication technology);
- development and disclosure of communication goals, policies, and objectives;
- developing methods to improve informal communication;
- changing the amount of information communicated about human resources, opportunities and training;
- improving upward input solicited by top management;
- adding or shifting staff resources;

- periodic monitoring and evaluation of the company's external image as perceived by significant sections of the public.

It is necessary accurately to assess the present communication performance so as to be able to devise and implement worthwhile improvements. Such a strategy begins with gathering accurate information about current communication systems and practices within an organisation.

The key steps in developing such a strategy were summarised by Tourish and Wilson (2002: 72) as follows:

- Identify the nature of current practice. The most systematic method for so doing is through the implementation of a communication audit, and this forms the main thrust of this paper.
- Use the results of the audit to sensitise management and staff to the realities of good communication practice.
- Integrate this process into the business planning cycle of the organisation - i.e. ask all contributors to the business planning process to consider the communication consequences of the decisions that are being contemplated.
- Request detailed examples of how management behaviour can be changed to meet the new communication challenges which have been identified.
- Feed the results of this planning into future audit materials, thereby creating benchmarks for further improvements in organisational cohesion and efficiency in other words, ask specific questions about new communications programmes, assess whether or not understanding of particular issues has improved and ascertain whether or not relationships on the ground are improving as a result.

In the 1970s Greenbaum pioneered the first large-scale development effort to address the lack of standardized procedures for assessing organizational communication systems (Gayeski: 2000: 234). Haggie & Tourish (1993:39) maintain that the most widely used internal communication audit tool originated from the work of the International Communication Association (ICA) in the 1970s. As an internal communication audit, the Survey of Organisational communication (SOC) presented a series of modifications. The SOC enhanced the instruments and procedures of the ICA audit and streamlined its administration.

The SOC also required respondents to fill in dual columns rating the amount of communication currently received against the amount of communication they would like to receive. The shortcoming of rating communication this way, according to Gayeski (2000:235 ), is that employees often say what is expected of them and not what they really think or feel.

Gayeski (2000: 235) contends that while the internal communication audit has benefits as a measure of employee perceptions or quality of interaction between employee and manager, there are a number of shortcomings. She further suggests that it might be more productive to focus on the communication "tools and rules" of the organization, rather than the behaviour of employees.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The method of data collection that was used to elicit information regarding municipal internal communication comprised structured interviews at the workplace and questionnaires. Both closed and open-ended questions were utilised. Open-ended questions were used to allow a wide-scope for the respondents to express views from their own perspective. This allowed the respondents to elaborate on their responses and to provide their own answers to questions. In the close-ended questions, the respondents were asked to select an answer from a list provided by the researcher. Multiple-choice questions were used.

The questionnaires were personally administered and collected by the

researcher. The pilot study was conducted in order to improve the validity of the questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were used in cases of illiteracy, as per format of the questionnaire.

### **SAMPLE SELECTION**

The research was very specific in that it included a specific organisation and as a result was purposive in nature, as it attempts to gain a deeper understanding of what is happening with communication in the organisation. The sample of employees in this study was determined by convenience and availability. In order to ensure an appropriate level of validity in terms of the research findings, it was necessary for the researcher to include forty percent of the total population of 300 employees.

Simple random sampling was also used to determine the perception and experiences of the general employees about the effectiveness of internal communication at the MM. Welman and Kruger (2001:52) define random sampling as the simplest case whereby each member of the population has the same chance of being included in the sample.

In addition, a non-probability, purposive (known group) sample was used for the semi-structured interviews, as the participants were selected based on their specific positions in order to gain information from senior staff/managers who, in terms of hierarchical authority, have both an administrative and strategic role to play in the organisation. It was critical not simply to get the view from management as they may not be in touch with the current situation regarding internal communication or alternatively may not be aware of the extent of potential internal communication-related issues. The staff on the ground, will not only look at communication from a management perspective, but will also have a better understanding of the internal communication realities due to the operational nature of their work.

Sampling is the selection of research participants from an entire population, and it involves decisions about which people,

settings, events, behaviours, and/or social processes are to be observed (Durrheim 2002:49). The interviewees who are selected for a study depend on the specific criteria determined by the purpose of the study. In this instance the criterion was to evaluate the effectiveness of the internal communication in the local Moqhaka Municipality (MM) in Kroonstad, and in order to do this the question of how communication is perceived by employees had to be assessed and evaluated.

According to Welman et al. (2005:69) purposive sampling is the most common type of non-probability sampling. The main aim is to select a sample from which the researcher aims to draw conclusions (Durrheim 2002:49). In this study, the purposeful sample conducted included employees who were most influential in communication - for example senior and middle managers. The assumption was that different levels of authority may be exposed to different audits of information.

To evaluate internal communication at the MM, as perceived by employees, six typed time registers with alphabetical names were collected from six different departments one hour prior distribution of questionnaires and every second name from the time register was selected. A hundred questionnaires were distributed on 26 September 2007 and were collected the following day on 27 September 2007.

### **RESULTS**

#### *Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to establish the nature of internal communication at the MM's head office in Kroonstad from the perspective of those who are influential in communication.

According to the information extracted from the interviews, the municipality does not have a written communication strategy. The interviewees believed that the role of internal communication was to disseminate instructions, legal documents and details of employment equity. They all agreed however that the contribution of internal communication is to motivate employees, to

enhance communication and to improve the relationship between management and staff.

The only channels of communication that the management is using to inform staff about policies, vision and mission of the MM are through meetings, memos, letters and the union's local labor forum. Staff communicates with the management through unions, at meetings and they can write letters. The municipality has four notice boards and suggestion boxes to encourage two-way communication

The municipality has a grievance procedure where one has to complete a form and submit this via the supervisor to the municipal manager.

The interviewees suggest that a system to monitor communication should be set up.

#### **QUESTIONNAIRES**

The ICA questionnaire applied as validated by Hargie and Tourish (2000) is an extensive instrument, comprising a total of 91 items.

Information received/identifying the communication needs.

The findings of the study are of relevance in that 44% of the respondents feel that the information received is average and 79% feel that the information needed is enough. This indicated that it is important that the majority of employees should receive more information about how well they are doing their jobs on a daily basis, so that they can receive acknowledgement for good performance, and also so that work-related problems can be identified.

The findings indicate that most employees want to receive rather than send more information. They expressed the need for more information about job-related matters and about organizational decision-making. They would also like more opportunities to air grievances and to evaluate their managers or supervisors. The conclusion we can reach is that in the opinion of most employees in the municipality, they do not receive sufficient communication from their superiors about the quality of their work.

Charles Handy in his motivation calculus based on expectancy theory argued that there should be more than effort alone required, including Energy, Excitement, Emotion and Expenditure. His E-factors in the workplace include the following (Davis 2004:45):

- *The intended results had to be made clear, so that the person could work out how much 'E' was required;*
- *There had to be feedback on performance, for confidence, prevention of hostility and so on;*
- *People committed themselves when the goals were specific, particularly if they had helped identify them.*

#### **INFORMATION FROM DIVERSE CHANNELS**

According to the results the "grapevine" is the most powerful source of information in the municipality. This is confirmed by the fact that 75% of the respondents receive enough information from the "grapevine" and only 35% of the respondents feel that they need little information from the "grapevine".

"Grapevine" communication is less heavily laden with task information than with information about people, attitudes, relationships, interpretations, values, norms and needs. The "Grapevine" information may be damaging when circulated and possibly acted upon (Rensburg 1996:106). An organisation with a strong "grapevine" could experience problems with its formal communication channels and networks. The supervisor is rated as the second-best source of information of which 63% of the respondents received enough information from the supervisor on face to face contact. Approximately 87% of the respondents need to receive enough information from the supervisor. Goldhaber (1993:82) is of the same opinion that the best sources of information are those closest to employees. It is clear from this context that the supervisor is the most preferred source of information in the municipality.

The third preferred channels of communication in the municipality are the written channels like memos and letters.

39% of the respondents receive enough information from written channels like memos and letters and 91% of the respondents need enough information from the written channels.

The researcher is of the opinion that those who mostly receive written communication are office workers.

### **COMMUNICATION GAP**

The 4% of employees have satisfactory relationships with their immediate supervisors and that only 2% have a say in decisions that affect their work. There were no general patterns of relationships between demographic characteristics of age, gender, race, and so on. The findings indicate that the higher in the organisational hierarchy messages are sent, the less likely there is to be feedback, especially when information is sent to top management. The management provides less timely, and lower quality information than do most other key information sources.

The conclusion reached is that in the opinion of most employees the greater the distance between communication sources and receivers in the organisation, the less information is received and the less opportunity there is to receive information, the less follow up there is and the poorer the information quality.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

A final open question in the questionnaire requested suggestions from respondents as to how communication could be improved. A total of 52 respondents (52 percent) completed this part. Many suggestions were supplied and these were content analysed to identify recurring themes. The following themes emerged.

- The addition of new formal channels: development of the communication of the newsletter, more bulletin boards, regular meetings, e-mails and web design.

- Improvements in informal communication: open days, social events and open-door policies;
- Development of communication goals, objectives and policies, and the disclosure of these to employees;
- Hiring of communication specialist to improve communication functions in the municipality;
- Better upward information solicited by top management to improve the planning process, and the development of specific mechanism to generate such input in a non-threatening way;
- Training and retraining of certain employees in communication skills, writing, listening, public speaking, interviewing, group discussion, problem-solving, brainstorming;
- Better and more regular monitoring of the internal communication

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The results as outlined reflected commonality within municipality employees studied, in terms of communication climate and problems identified. The main findings from this audit was that of employees having a strong desire for more information. In addition, there was a clear need for more openness, directness and contact with organisation, particularly with senior management.

In light of the findings of the literature study and the empirical study, the following conclusions have been drawn:

- Although generally satisfied with inter-personal communication channels, employees would like to have more face-to-face communication, especially with upper management;
- Employees report being generally satisfied with their jobs, but not satisfied with opportunities for advancement within the municipality;
- Employees prefer getting information through formal communication channels than via

- the grapevine which is perceived to be fast, but not sufficiently accurate
- Employees require more job-related information from immediate supervisors, and more organisation-wide information from upper management;

- The need does exist for a structured internal communication policy;
- There should be open communication channels between management and employees.

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