MINIMIZING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS FOR EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Communication is key to effective management of higher institutions like the University system. Both academic and non-academic staff need to be properly informed before they can be efficient on their jobs while the students on their own part need to know what is expected of them. What this means is that effective communication network should be put in place to facilitate easy flow of information if the university's vision and mission must be actualized. This paper examined the communication network in the university system in Nigeria and suggested ways that communication barriers such as use of ambiguous words, wrong timing and inappropriate communication network can be overcome in the Universities. The paper recommended that managers of Nigerian Universities should ensure that communication gaps are reduced to their barest minimum for effective management of the institutions.

Keywords: Communication, communication barriers, effective management, university.

Introduction

Communication is vital in the management of any organization as it touches all facets of life. Human beings who constitute an organization must communicate, verbally or non-verbally if the organization's goals must be achieved. Gamble and Gamble (2010) define communication as the deliberate or accidental transfer of meaning. It is the process that occurs whenever someone observes or experiences behaviour and attributes meaning to that behaviour. There are certain common elements that further help define the communication process. The elements are sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback and noise.

The communication process begins with a sender who transmits or sends a message. The sender, also referred to as the encoder, must choose appropriate words or non-verbal signs to transmit the intended message. The channel, also sometimes called medium, is the method used to deliver a message which is received by the receiver. The receiver, on receiving the message must attach meaning to the words or non- verbal signs and subsequently sends a feedback to the sender or originator of the message. Noise is also considered as an element of

communication in that when not properly put in check, it can cause a barrier to effective communication.

Effective communication is an essential ingredient in organizational accomplishment. According to Akinnubi, Gbadeyan, Fashiku and Kayode (2012), effective personnel management is a function of effective communication as management involves working with and through others to achieve corporate goals. In the university system, effective communication is encouraged as it helps to build relationships and facilitates achievement of goals. Ijaiya, cited in Akinnubi etal (2012), argue that a school manager cannot organize his staff, coordinate and control their activities as well as delegate responsibilities without effective communication. Morreale and Pearson cited in Alder, Elmhorst and Lucas (2013) assert that when it comes to communication, quality matters in every career. Communication skills are essential to career success and organizational success.
From the foregoing, it is apparent that communication is indispensable in organizations like the university system as people who make up the organization must communicate and this could be verbally or non-verbally. Barriers to effective communication can lead to students' unrest and trade disputes by workers' unions in the university. The work place dynamics and the increasing diverse workforce calls for effective communication in the university system. Most times, messages are not delivered appropriately and promptly which can hinder the smooth flow of vital information in the university. Other barriers to communication flow which have been observed in Nigerian universities include ambiguous memoranda, poorly trained personnel, inadequate and obsolete communication gadgets. The overall effect of these communication problems is the inability of many universities to meet up with their mission and vision thus, the need for effective communication network in order to minimize communication barriers that may hinder effective management of Nigerian universities. To this end, this paper examines the channels of communication, importance of effective communication, communication barriers and suggests how communication barriers can be closed in order to enhance effective management of universities in Nigeria.

Channels of Communication in the University

The communication channels adopted by university administrators to deliver messages can have a big influence on their effectiveness. New technologies have given administrators and managers a wider range of choices for communication. Before now, the only means of communication in organizations were verbal communication, telephone or written memoranda. Contrarily, today, there are e-mail messages, voice mail, faxes, instant messaging, video conferencing, web conferencing, Facebook, Twitter, cellphones, pagers, texting and more (Alder, Elmhorst & Lucas 2013). The authors further argue that it is important to evaluate the various channels of communication by considering their different characteristics and how those characteristics match the organization's

communication goals. The culture of the organization may also favour some communication channels over others. In some organizations, e-mail and instant messaging can be the norm while some others utilize voice mails. Turner, Grube, Tinsley, Lee and O'Pell (2006) aver that it is important to consider the preferences of Departments or even individuals in an organisation's overall preference for some channels. Another factor to be considered is using multiple channels in sending a message. For instance, the university administrators, through their information unit may decide to distribute memoranda or bulletins and later do a follow-up with email messages to the target audience or receiver. According to Fashiku (2016), there are various channels of communication in an organization and these include:

Oral or Verbal Communication: This is the commonest form of communication and it involves talking; one person to another, face to face verbalization, intercoms, workshop, meetings, conferences and the likes. It is adjudged the most effective means for immediate feed- back. It is used frequently for internal communication. Among its advantages is that speech can be reinforced with facial expressions, gestures, voice inflection and many other physical devices. This communication method is in use and should be encouraged in the Nigerian university system.

Written Communication: Written communication is a major means of external communication. It includes; letters, memo, circulars, report, cables, telex, fax, minutes of meetings and a host of others. These are pre servable for records, references and legal defense. It also provides uniformity in policy and procedures in the universities. One major flaw of written communication is its inability to give an instant feed-back to ensure whether the message is understood or not.

Nonverbal Communication: They are very important form of communication because the real intention of communication is shown through body gestures of different types as the eye contact, facial expression, voice inflection, gestures, postures, dress, and the physical setting. (Nwankwo cited in Fashiku 2016). In fact, as commonly said, action speaks louder than voice and this makes non verbal communication to be more effective than oral and written form of communication in the university.

Visual Communication: It is equally effective because it involves the use of relevant pictures which mirrors the situation in real life. Visual communication includes the use of chalkboard, over-board protector and multisensory communication system that can be used in facilitating learning and understanding at seminars and workshops and in the universities.

Communication by Means of Electronic and Mechanical Devices: With rapid technological improvement in the society, people have been able to communicate

through the use of electronic and mechanical devices especially over long distances. Such devices include the use of telephone, radio phone, hand set, e-mail, fax, internet and the likes. All these modern communication devices that make the whole world a global village and assist the universities' organization in the effective management of information. The use of these electronic devices has gone a long way in assisting the university programme in Nigeria.

In the current information age, universities are expected to utilize digital technology to improve communication as Information Communication Technology (ICT) has become part of our everyday life. Tosun and Baris (2011) affirm that using ICT in education has become one of the most effective factors in school improvement. In some Nigerian universities, digital technologies are being used for communication during management meetings, seminars and lectures. University administrators are expected to adopt innovative network services that can enhance effective communication process. Iroegbu and Etim (2017) argue that one of the most reliable ways of holding meetings is through teleconferencing which has become reliable due to globalization and rapid advancement in technology. Some technologies that connect people in offices and schools are telephones / wireless networks, video conferencing, electronic presentations, social networking and many others. However, Bovee and Thill (2013) stress on the need for managers to guide their employees in productive use of information tools because the speed and simplicity of the tools is also one of their greatest weaknesses.

University Management

Generally, management connotes getting things done through other people's effort. However, Stoner and Wankel cited in Olagboye (2004) defines management as a process of planning, organizing, leading and controlling the efforts of members of an organization and all other organizational resources to achieve stated organizational goals. Also, Daft cited in Jimoh (2013) views management as the attainment of organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organizing, leading and controlling organizational resources. These functions of management as highlighted in the above definition are not different from that of educational management which according to Olagboye (2004) is a process of planning, organizing, influencing and controlling the efforts of the operators of the education system to achieve stated goals of education. The university, as an educational system can be considered as the largest and highest level of education in Nigeria with staff and students from diverse culture and background. According to Mullins and Christy (2013), organizations are made up of their individual members and the individual is a central feature of organizational behavior. For effective organizational performance, university managers or administrators must respond to diversity and a work climate that respects individual differences through meaningful communication. Management, as it

relates to the university system and other school systems, the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor and other Principal Officers, management staff, academic and non-academic staff all perform veritable management functions geared towards the realization of the school's goals. Undoubtedly, these management functions can only be efficiently carried out with the aid of effective communication as communication is inescapable in the effective management of the university system.

Types or Forms of Communication in the University.

In the university environment, just like in any other organization, there exists both formal and informal communication networks. Under the formal network, ideas and information flow along the lines of command within the institution and between the institution and its external audience. On the other hand, in the informal communication network, information does not always follow channels of communication.

Formal Communication Network: Vertical and horizontal flow of communication are the most common ways of communication. Diagonal flow of information in addition to this, include all forms of communication that cut across an organization's chain of command. In the University system, vertical communication is the method employed by the management in sending orders, giving directives, indicating goals, making policies and sending memoranda to the staff in the struggle for goal attainment. Letters, circulars, telegrams, e-mails, advertisements, memoranda are good examples of formal channels of communication in the university system.

Downward Communication: This is a form of communication flow from the top element of the organization to the bottom. It is a communication flow that is transmitted down the vertical lines of the organization from the top level of the management to the employee. This is synonymous to the chain of command or line of authority in the organization. In the university system, this type of communication will be of use in; giving specific instructions, bringing about understanding of work relationship, providing information about procedures and practices in the system, providing evaluation feedback to the subordinates and providing a sense of mission by indoctrinating in them organizational goals and objectives. This system is an integral part of the traditional organization where the university belongs.

Upward Communication: According to Omoike (2013), communication that flows to a higher level in an organization is called upward communication. This form of communication is usually informative rather than directive. Fashiku cited in Fashiku (2016) posits that it is a channel through which the low ranking staff

relay their disaffection to the management. Asides the fact that upward communication makes the subordinates to represent an important source of ideas for improvement, the following are its relevance in the university system ; it reveals the degree to which the subordinates accept the ideas passed to them by the management, it motivates the subordinates to defend and support the policies made jointly with the management, encourages subordinates to make useful contributions to the improvement of the organization and helps the management to find solutions to the problem of the organization.

Horizontal Communication: Agbato cited in Omoike (2013) views this form of communication to involve those outside the chain of command or people from several different units in the organization. It can also be referred to as communication that flows along the horizontal lines of the organization structure. Olubadewo cited in Fashiku (2016) observed this type of communication to involve lateral communication between those at equal levels of the management hierarchy and staff functions of the organization. Lateral communication allows various departments and faculties to work together in solving problems and relate information of common interest. This promotes team work. Horizontal communication seems to be more effective in an organisation because of the free atmosphere associated with the encoder and the decoder.

External Communication: This is communication that takes place between the university management and external groups and stakeholders such as parents, members of the community where the school is located, banks, religious bodies, government and non-governmental organizations and other institutions.

Informal Communication Network: According to Fashiku (2016) informal communication represents all modes of communication which are not formalized in the organization. Often times, when formal channel of communication fails, informal communication can be very strong and may in some cases take precedence over formal communication. Informal communication may be in form of advice, information, discussion, gossip and rumour or the grape vine. The inherent danger in this method is that the informal communication, (rumour and gossip) which is mostly half-truth or complete falsehood is usually detrimental to the attainment of the organizational aims and objectives. This should be discouraged in management. Therefore, employees should always be promptly kept abreast of any information that has to do with their job in good time in the university system**.**

Importance of Effective Communication

The importance of effective communication in the management of universities is incontestable as no institution can plan, coordinate, control, direct or organize the

limited human and material resources available at its disposal. When there is effective communication by management, communication gaps and barriers are eliminated and educational goals are achieved. This relates to the view of Morgan (2002) that the success of managerial actions depends to a large extent on the effective use of communication process. Scott and Mitchell cited in Muraina (2014), mentioned four major functions of communication as follows:

(a) Communication gives employees the opportunity of expressing their feelings and also serves as medium of resolution of conflicts, reducing tension and refining direction for individuals.
(b) It serves motivational function of encouraging achievement in subordinates.
(c) It provides the necessary information for decision making.
(d) It is used to control activities in an organization (school).

Similarly, Omoike (2013) alludes that effective communication is significant for managers in the organization so as to perform the basic functions of management. Continuing, Omoike added that communication serves as a foundation for planning in the sense that all the essential information must be communicated to the managers who in turn must communicate the plans for implementation.

In the same vien, Atambo & Momanyi (2016) emphasise that through proper communication, information is timely, there is proper work coordination, the management is able to give instructions to employees in the lower cadres, employees are in a position of airing their views to the management on matters affecting their performance and also the management is able to get feedback on employees' performance. In a study by Muraina (2014), it was discovered that there was a positive and significant relationship between communication skills and principals' administrative effectiveness which implied that for effective administration and management of schools, communication is paramount.

Communication Barriers in Universities

Communication barriers occur when messages are poorly delivered and are not properly acted upon by the receiver thereby defeating the purpose or aim of communication. Communication barriers in the university can lead to poor management and breakdown in its relationship between the internal and external audience. It can also lead to students' crisis. Odu (2013) found that some school authorities have lukewarm attitude towards responding to students' complaints which often times lead to students' crisis. The study further revealed that students in most cases lay their complaints through proper channels to air their grievances but are treated with slash or silent reproach. Apparently, effective communication flow is indispensable in management of staff - students' relationship in the university system. As such, it is important to examine some barriers to

communication that can disrupt the flow of information which can adversely affect the overall goals of the university system. These barriers include:

Ambiguous memoranda: This is a situation whereby memoranda convey vague information concerning staff and students. When memoranda are written in ambiguous words, they constitute semantic noise and do not pass the intended message, as often times, the receiver tends to misinterpret the content. There are other instances when memoranda totally contradict the intended message by the sender. When this happens, there will be a communication breakdown which results to poor management of universities.

Poorly trained personnel: This is when the personnel assigned to handle mails are not professionally trained to carry out such important official duties. Communication, which is a complex process is usually taken for granted and left in the hands of non-professionals in the university system. For instance, in many Nigerian universities, the Public Relation Units are not managed by professional communication managers while some staff who are assigned to bring up memoranda in the various units or departments are not thorough. In addition, many clerical officers are not well trained in handling mails while many messengers charged with the duty of dispatching mails cannot read thereby distributing wrong mails to the wrong destination.

Inadequate and obsolete communication gadgets: This is a situation whereby modern means of communication are not readily available. The intercom system of communication which is one of the fastest means of communication is not available in many Nigerian universities. Even when some gadgets are available, they are obsolete. As a result, there is poor information storage and retrieval system.

Delayed feedback: Feedback enables the university management to know the effectiveness or impact of the information disseminated. It is through feedback that management will know what the staff and students feel about new school policies and working practices. Also, delayed or absence of feedback on the part of management to messages from subordinates, staff and students can lead to rumour. Rumour, which most times is fabricated and circulated by persons in order to tarnish one's image usually emanate as a result of poor flow of information.

Use of inappropriate communication channel: A communication channel is a medium through which messages are transmitted and received. Selecting the most appropriate channel of communication is an important issue to be considered as each channel of communication affects the receiver in different ways. Often, appropriate communication channels are not utilized in the dissemination of

information from management to staff and students. Some communication channels available in the university system are face- to-face communication channels, written communication (memos, bulletins, school magazines, annual reports) and other electronic means such as telephone and the social media.

Wrong timing: This occurs when information is not provided timely or does not get to the target audience promptly. When a particular information demands immediate action and it does not get to its destination timely, it can slow down the decision making process and undermine administrative effectiveness.

Other barriers to communication flow in the university system as summarized by Nwanko in Fashiku (2016), include:

Content barrier: This occurs when there is a systematic distortion in the message sent out. Words mean different things to different people. Semantic distortion occurs when the message passed or instruction given contains some ambiguous words in the language used. The message is incomplete and unclear as the receiver may misinterpret it entirely. Such situation may cause confusion and uncertainty. This barrier affects both senior and junior staff of the universities when they interact through writing.

Organizational barrier: This problem is often experienced in many academic institutions. The subordinate expects the superior office to criticize him /her privately because of his poor ability. The superior officer may instead scold the subordinate in the presence of other colleagues. Such action of the superior officer may make the subordinate feel indifferent and fail to get the message sent correctly.

Physical barrier: This refers to a wall of separation between the superior officer and the subordinate. Such physical demarcation may hinder information flow or cause delay in message delivery especially when the distance between the superior officer and the subordinate is far apart in the university.

Group barrier: Informal groups exist in the universities; their existence can undermine free flow of communication of the management in times of conflict so that the correct message does not reach the people as intended.

Structural issue: It occurs in a situation where the structure of the university is defective. For example, if the organizational chart of an institution does not clearly show the chain of command in the organization, information can be sent to a wrong person. This may equally lead to a bad job description. Routing is another form of structural barrier in communication. It occurs when information is passed through a wrong channel to a wrong person.

Overloading: This is another common barrier and it connotes sending too much messages to a person to the extent that the content of the message is lost to the receiver.

Other communication issues: Apart from the issues so far raised, problems of contradictions between verbal and nonverbal gestures, noise, distortions, wrong timing, auditory and visual problems, age, health and psychological problems among others serve as barriers to effective communication in the university system.

Causes of Communication Barriers

The following conditions can be said to be responsible for communication barriers in universities.

Individual Perception Process: Mullins and Christy (2013) consider perception as an important aspect of communication which can lead to a barrier to effective organizational communication. The process of perception explains the manner in which information (stimuli) from the environment is selected and organized to provide meaning for the individual. Perception gives rise to individual behavourial responses to particular situations

Workforce Diversity: Diversity includes all characteristics and experiences that define people as individuals. University staff members and students have diverse characteristics and experiences such as ethnic origin, age, parental status, marital status and personality traits. Other diverse characteristics at the work place as pointed out by Mullins and Christy (2013) are gender, early family experiences, social and cultural factors, motivation, attitudes, intelligence and abilities. These diverse characteristics of individuals in the university system can constitute constraints to effective communication flow. Bovee and Thill (2013) emphasize that elements of human diversity can affect communication at every stage of the communication process.

Complexity in Organisational Structure: This can also cause a barrier to effective communication in the university system considering the complex and numerous management levels in the system. Omoike (2013) argues that the greater the hierarchy in an organisation, the more are the chances of communication getting destroyed. Only the people at the top level can see the overall picture while the people at the low level just have knowledge about their own area and a little knowledge about other areas.

Minimizing Communication Barriers in the University

Based on the communication problems highlighted above, it is important to minimize communication barriers for effective university management in Nigeria.

Barriers to effective communication in universities can be minimized by adopting several strategies. Boyer (2016) suggests ways of achieving a culture of communication on campus to include sharing information and soliciting feedback, maintain a social presence by leveraging social media and effectively using the school's websites to provide access to details of policies, programmes and statistics. According to Boyer, an effective and intuitive website which is often the ultimate brand statement for an institution is among the most important tools in higher education. Other strategies are documenting and or clearly publicizing governance policy and developing an emergency communication plan by keeping the line of accessibility open as well as a planned communication strategy. The following are summary of some strategies that can be adopted.

(a) University managers and administrators should take cognizance of the workforce diversity and be sensitive to individual differences to avoid communication breakdown. Such individual differences could be in form of different background, experiences, value, culture, religion and other factors
(b) Avoid use of ambiguous words. The simplest language should be used so as not to lose the intended meaning of the message being sent.
(c) Prompt feedback. Communication cannot be said to be complete until there is response. Delay in responding to a message can lead to chaos.
(d) Appropriate media should be selected for a particular message and target audience while university management should key into the use of modern communication technology.
(e) Multiple channels should be encouraged in sending messages while the communication system should be open to avoid mistrust and rumor mongering.

Conclusion

Communication barriers can impede the management process as effective communication is regarded as the life blood of any organization. When communication barriers are eliminated, management's relationship both within the university and with the external audience are maintained and strengthened. Also, effective communication reduces the risk of rumors and speculations which can be detrimental to the achievement of educational goals. A prominent communication challenge is the choice of appropriate channel of communication for the prompt and accurate dissemination of information in the sense that most times, vital information do not get to the target audience at the right time.

Recommendations

1. University management should optimally utilize the numerous channels available and solicit feedback by periodically conducting surveys.
2. The use of ambiguous words by university managers in memoranda should be discouraged and information should be disseminated timely in order to avoid mistrust among members of the university system.
3. The use of third party by university managers in communicating vital information should not be allowed so as to prevent distortion of information which can be chaotic while team work should be encouraged to create a conducive academic environment.
4. Professional communication managers should be appointed by the university management to head Public Relation Units in Universities. Also, workplace communication training should be organized periodically by university management for management staff in various units or departments.

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