CORPORATE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE EMFULENI LOCAL MUNICIPALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore how corporate reputation is managed at the Emfuleni local municipality in the Gauteng province of South Africa. This study employed a qualitative research approach and a case study design. In-depth individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants until data was saturated. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The results show that management of reputation is a multifaceted concept, which includes corporate social responsibility, emotional appeal, financial performance, products and services, vision and leadership and workplace environment. They also show that corporate communication is an essential part of the local municipality as it serves to align the organisation's vision, culture and image. The study recommends that corporate reputation should be one of the most important objectives of corporate communication departments, meaning that the organisation needs to work harder to build and manage productive relationships with its internal and external stakeholders. The study further recommends that communication should be dialogic because it is a tool for negotiating and managing stakeholder relationships.

Keywords: Corporate reputation management; local municipality; corporate social responsibility; public relations; communication and stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

This study explores how corporate reputation in the Emfuleni local municipality (ELM) of Gauteng province is managed. Feldman, Bahamonde and Velasquez-Bellido (2014:55) define corporate reputation as a collective representation of an organisation's past actions and results that is based on its assessment of financial, social, organisational performance and environmental impact by its multiple stakeholders, both internal and external. From a strategic point of view, Feldman *et al*., suggest that corporate reputation is an asset of great value for organisations in their attempts to differentiate from the rest of the industry and create potential barriers to entry for potential competitors. Bechan (2008:2) suggests that reputation management can help to enhance an organisation's objectives by creating stakeholder support for public and policy issues, consumer loyalty and positive shareholder value for investors. Corporate reputation management is thus, for Luoma-aho (2008), the business of directing all aspects of an organisation's performance. Firestein (2006:25) asserts that reputation is the strongest determinant of any corporation's sustainability. Feldman *et al.,* (2014:2) assert that because corporate reputation is built on external and internal stakeholders' current perceptions, it is possible for it to be either positive or negative. They go on to say that "in this sense, it can

be differentiated from concepts such as identity and organisational image, which are conceptualised only from one type of stakeholder (identity for internal stakeholders and image for external ones)".

Numerous studies with different areas of focus have been conducted on corporate reputation. Adeosun and Ganiyu (2013:220-223) looked at corporate reputation as a strategic asset in Nigerian hospitals. They found that the hospitals they studied did not give enough attention to issues that could improve corporate reputation for the hospitals' internal stakeholders, such as nurses. Maden, Arikan, Telci and Kantur (2012), found that all stakeholder groups in their research perceived good reputation to characterise those firms that focus on social performance. Olmedo-Cifuentes and Martínez-León (2014:223-241) looked at corporate reputation from a management style perspective. Kwatubana (2014:1439-1447) and Beneke (2011:29-44) focused on corporate reputation in public schools and reputation management in higher education. Tlou and Govender (2015:62-73) investigated common reputation drivers by focusing on financial institutions. Some studies, for example, investigated corporate reputation from the stakeholder, employee and investor perspective (Maden *et al.*, 2012). Although these studies are useful as a framework for this study, there is, however, a gap in research because they are silent on corporate reputation management in a local municipality in the Vaal Triangle. The purpose of this study is an attempt to address this gap.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

South Africa's local government system has generally been heavily criticised for its poor service delivery, a situation that has led to service delivery protests emanating from every corner of the country, particularly among the previously disadvantaged communities (Lekubu, 2015). Fraud, corruption, mismanagement of public funds and general incompetence by municipal managers and their subordinates have been a challenge that has crippled most of the municipalities (Madonsela, 2010). Lack of an adequate reporting system towards good governance has led to a bad reputation where instances of suspension have resulted. There is seemingly a lack of continuous two-way communication between the local government and its community, which results in poor service delivery, lack of understanding of the concerns of communities, and inadequate dissemination of relevant information to communities (Kanyane, 2014). The local municipalities seem not to be able to provide services that are essential to uplifting society at large, subject to national and provincial legislation as provided for in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (Rogerson, 2010:482). The recent outburst by communities due to lack of these services has a detrimental effect on the corporate reputation of the local municipalities that are supposed to serve them (Hough, 2008). These problems have a strong bearing on how corporate reputation is managed. The research questions are:

- What is the nature of corporate reputation in the Emfuleni local government?
- Why is corporate reputation management important at the local government level?
- What strategies can be employed to enhance corporate reputation management at the Emfuleni local government?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine how the local government manages corporate reputation. The sub-aims are to:

- explore the nature of corporate reputation management
- understand how reputation is managed at the local government level
- suggest strategies that can be adopted to enhance corporate reputation management at the Emfuleni local municipality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zulhamri (2009:171) asserts that corporate reputation, image and identity are interrelated concepts. For Gotsi and Wilson (2001:28), corporate reputation is made up of a cognitive feature of an industry that crystallises a company's perceived ranking in a field of rivals. Fombrun and Van Riel (1997:5) maintain that corporate reputation gauges an organisation's relative standing both internally with employees and externally with stakeholders, in both its competitive and institutional environments. Gabbioneta, Ravasi and Mazzola (2007:99) suggest that reputations constitute subjective, collective assessment of the trustworthiness and reliability of organisations. According to Mitnick and Mahon (2007:324), organisations are known by the perceptions they generate through their reputations. These authors further assert that reputation is a directional affect in the form of a perception targeted to a focal organisation by several stakeholders, where the perception is derived from or transferred from affective perceptions of performances by the focal actor, or statuses or qualities in the actor.

Ettenson and Knowles (2008) indicate that reputation can be regarded as a precondition for people's willingness to do business with a company. Reputation is a social construction that can be based on observations of the consequences of actions as well as observations of the guides used to generate the actions (Helm, Liehr-Gobbers & Storck, 2011:4). Davies, Chun and Kamin (2010) assert that it is important to manage external reputation through internal reputation that involves staff in the process of building a reputation that resonates within the organisation. Ettenson and Knowles (2008:19) indicate that reputation can be regarded as a precondition for people's willingness to do business with a company. Corporate reputation is a social construction that can be based on observations of the consequences of actions as well as observations of the guides used to generate actions (Helm *et al*., 2011:4).

CORPORATE IDENTITY AND IMAGE IN REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Leiva, Ferrero and Calderón (2014:1) suggest that corporate identity deals with the essence of the organisation and the unique characteristics of its philosophy, values, history, strategy, business scope and communication. Corporate identity is also recognised as a strategic source and a valuable tool for addressing the needs of the organisation's stakeholders (Feldman *et al.,* 2014). For Zulhamri and Yuhanis (2009:171), image is made up of the perception of constituencies on how an organisation presents itself, while corporate identity refers to the self-presentation of an organisation through corporate logo, colour and any signal that can be easily be seen by stakeholders. According to Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham and Motau (2010:8), corporate image is the net result of the interaction of all experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge that people have about a company. Botha, Chaka, Du Plessis, Krause, Rawjee, Porthen, Veerasamy and Wright (2007:259) posit that corporate image is the collection of all the perceptions a person has of an organisation. The image belongs to the people who perceive or experience it. These scholars further argue that an organisation cannot change its corporate image at will or have total control over it (Botha *et al.*, 2007:259). They suggest that factors that influence corporate image include the size of the organisation, its buildings or

factories, the behaviour of staff, its social involvement and social responsibility, its management style, marketing and advertising practices and its public relations practices.

THE MANAGEMENT OF CORPORATE REPUTATION

Feldman *et al*. (2014:56) suggest that corporate reputation management is the capacity to configure an optimistic strategy for managing corporate reputation. The management of corporate reputation entails everything that an organisation does or does not do to communicate plans of action that affect both internal and external stakeholders. Reputation management aims at creating shared interests with stakeholders (Helm *et al*., 2011:17). The management of reputational risk is part of corporate reputation management. It consists of providing the procedures and internal alignment necessary for detecting and minimising those gaps that can potentially compromise the fulfilment of strategic goals (Feldman *et al.,* 2014:58). Davies *et al*. (2010) assert that it is important to manage external reputation through internal reputation by involving staff in the process of building a reputation that resonates within the organisation. Theaker (2001:67) suggests that organisations build their reputations by developing practices that integrate economic and social considerations into their competitive strategies. They initiate policies that reflect their core values; that consider the joint welfare of investors, customers and employees; that invoke concern for the development of local communities; and that ensure the quality and environmental soundness of their technologies, products and services.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The researchers opted for the qualitative approach because it is naturalistic and inductive, according to Bryman and Bell (2011). A case study design was used as it was found relevant for investigating the perceptions of the local municipality employees about corporate reputation in a bounded context (Yin, 2014:18). The qualitative approach in this study is relevant because the researchers wanted to hear how the participants view corporate reputation and what meanings they assign to this understanding (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:53). Their lived experiences helped to make sense of their accounts about how corporate reputation works at the Emfuleni local municipality.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

This study was conducted at the Emfuleni local municipality in the Gauteng province. There are 1000 employees at this local municipality. From the population, a sample of eight participants was purposefully selected. It consisted of one communications manager, two assistant managers in media relations and branding, a public relations practitioner, media relations officer, graphic designer, communications practitioner and web master (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:86). The participants were selected to reflect the gender balance, thus four males and four females comprised the sample.

METHODS OF ACHIEVING TRUSTWORTHINESS

The researchers observed a set of standards of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability to ensure trustworthiness (Toma, 2006:406). To maximise the trustworthiness of the results, the researchers referred the transcribed data back to all informants in the municipality to ensure that data represented a reasonable account of the information they

provided in the interviews (Daymon & Holloway, 2011:90). To ensure dependability, the researchers made sure that the findings of the study are consistent and accurate by showing how the data is linked to sources of information so that a reader would be able to establish that the conclusions and interpretations arise directly from the data (Daymon & Holloway, 2011:91).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Confidentiality and autonomy of the selected research participants were observed. The welfare of the selected participants was a major concern while conducting interviews and the researchers endeavoured to avoid any harm to them during the interviews. Permission was sought from the municipal manager at the Emfuleni local municipality to conduct the interviews. The municipal manager was informed about the nature of the research and that the results would be made available to all participants.

DATA COLLECTION

Individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants to explore their perceptions about corporate reputation management at Emfuleni local municipality. The venue and times for all the interviews were negotiated with the selected participants. The interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. The aim was to obtain rich descriptive data that would enable us to understand the participants' construction of knowledge and reality about corporate reputation within their bounded context (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:92). Their responses were tape-recorded with their consent.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data gathered was transcribed for all eight individual in-depth semi-structured interviews. We used thematic analysis to analyse the data that was collected. Through an iterative process, data was systematically searched and analysed to capture the nuances of participants' descriptions of corporate reputation in the local municipality. Through data reduction the researchers sorted and organised data in such a way that final conclusions could be drawn and verified (Miles & Huberman, 1994:11). Thus, the first stage of data analysis involved the process of open coding, whereby each line of the data was considered to identify keywords or phrases to retain participants' words (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The second stage involved sorting and sifting of keywords, searching for types, sequences and patterns, labelling and categorising, to identify themes (Flick, 2011). The next stage of data analysis involved bringing similar categories together, which resulted in four broader themes, namely, (i) corporate reputation, (ii) shared responsibility for corporate reputation, (iii) internal stakeholders as custodians of reputation, and (iv) media relations. These themes are discussed below.

THEME 1: CORPORATE REPUTATION

The participants had different perceptions about what corporate reputation looked like in the municipality. Some of the participants indicated that corporate reputation was at the lowest level in the municipality. For example, one participant said:

In my eyes, corporate reputation in Emfuleni is that we don't deliver service.

Another participant said:

Mainly corruption. That is the opinion of the participants about our municipality. Like if I'm recently employed by ELM they think I paid for the job or got the job otherwise.

Another participant expressed the following:

We have a lot of things that people are unhappy about. Now, corporate reputation is the lowest. Internally, employees are kind of demoralised because we think that the municipality is not doing well. Our reputation is at the lowest even with employees.

From the accounts of these participants, corporate reputation is associated with poor service delivery within the different departments of the Emfuleni local municipality. Theron-Wepener (2015:1) indicates that "over the last decades, the business world has been characterised by financial disruption, unethical and fraudulent practices, negative publicity and cracks in the foundations of capitalism, to name a few. People have lost their trust in organisations and a climate of anti-business activism, scepticism, pessimism, blame and cynicism has emerged". Harrison (2013:1) corroborates the participants' views and shows that "corporate reputation is a 'soft' concept, therefore many organisations put the importance of a good reputation to the back of their minds while they attend to more hard-edged, day-to-day urgencies". The accounts of these participants are corroborated by Reputation Institute UK, which studied 88 Senior Reputation Leaders from 79 leading UK companies. The study found that many organisations ignore corporate reputation, which focuses on what people expect from a company. It looks beyond products and services into areas such as open and honest communication, playing an active role in society on issues that matter to people, leadership and governance, and strong performance. This sheds light on why some of the participants feel despondent about the reality of corporate reputation at the local municipality.

THEME 2: SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR ENHANCING CORPORATE REPUTATION

The data reveals that the participants believe that the building of reputation is everyone's responsibility and more importantly, that of the municipal manager as senior employee.

One participant noted:

I think all the employees of Emfuleni, but now going through the hierarchy of politicians it's very important for them to work on the reputation of the institution. It's everybody's responsibility within the institution to try and address the issue of reputation.

Another participant said:

One I would say no we don't have, but I will believe because we are in a political office one of the things that we should do is that we have systems in place like your ward committees which are currently taking place; those are people who are supporting structures to councillors and remember, we are dealing with council so we are responsible for councillors, so protest or anything that has to do with service delivery

or anything that affects the community it always comes to us and we communicate with the Mayor's office, we have systems like ward committees.

Another participant noted:

We are as communication. We are the custodians. That's why if there is anything that has to go internally or externally, we have our own systems or standards operating procedure or systems that we have to check first.

Men (2013:1) corroborates the participants' perceptions and suggests that "not only does a favourable internal reputation reinforce employee identification with corporate mission, values and beliefs, and fuel employee loyalty, motivation, and engagement. More importantly, an organisation's reputation image, or brand, which ultimately drives the organisation's performance and success, is built from inside out." Gatti, Caruana and Snehota (2012:1), indicate that "claims have been made that both corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate reputation can provide a competitive advantage and influence performance within the organisation".

THEME 3: INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS AS CUSTODIANS OF REPUTATION

Most of the employees stated that they are the custodians of the reputation of the municipality that employs them. They indicated that their actions outside the organisation would have a negative impact on the reputation of the municipality. For example, one participant said:

If you're a supervisor working with this category, try to workshop the people, show them the importance of the reputation of the municipality so in that forum he tries to touch base on issues that affect the reputation of the municipality.

Another participant indicated:

The office of the Speaker, which I'm currently in, mainly deals with stakeholder engagement, among others. We make sure that all kinds of stakeholders are brought on board, we all engage in trying to make sure that they understand what this organisation is doing for them, also to ensure that they assist in ensuring a strong relationship.

Most participants felt that the workplace environment is crucial in creating stakeholder support for reputation. Zulhamri and Yuhanis (2011:299), in their study on managing corporate reputation, stakeholder relations, and corporate social responsibility in Malaysia, found that, despite the significant alignment and integration between corporate reputation, stakeholder relations and corporate social responsibility in their practice have all been managed as business duties (regulated), and not genuinely for the substantial contribution to a larger social community and environment (self-regulated).

THEME 4: MEDIA RELATIONS

Most of the participants believe that the relationship that ELM has with the media is good. However, some indicated that only certain persons are responsible for liaising with the media.

One participant said:

I would say the relationship that we have with media people, locally we have a very good relationship with our local media. We try always to respond to them timeously when they have media enquiries and we try to inform them always that we are not only relying on positive things even negative things we inform them.

Another participant said:

We will ensure that we don't run away from our issues. With national media, we do have a relationship but it's not the same as local media. When we have things, we invite them like your Sowetan so we do have a good relationship with media people.

Another participant said:

Our relationship with national media is just a cold neglected kind of a relationship unless we are doing advertising with them. With the local media, with print media locally we don't have quality writing, quality newspaper, quality reporting. I would say if it's according to me I would advise to close shop and forget.

In line with the above, Owusu and Poku (2013:12) indicate that "media relations is a core activity among the corporate organisations and the media. Media relations have over the years become an increasingly significant profile and this has added value to the business bottom line". Men (2015:1) suggests that "most essentially, strategic communication efforts improve the organisation's media and market presence, which is a prerequisite for reputation because it builds quality stakeholder relationships that eventually contribute to a favourable organisational reputation". Whereas Cabral (2016:735) argues that "the dynamics of firm reputation are highly asymmetric: slow increases in reputation are followed by sudden drops". He points out that more endogenous media coverage implies greater dispersion of firm performance. Revis (2012:1) suggests that "it is essential to establish a crisis communications response team to drive the messaging and response and that organisations should further use listening platforms, monitor sentiment, and establish a dedicated team to inform and advise internal and external stakeholders of issues and responses".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results reveal that management of corporate reputation is a multifaceted concept and consists of numerous sub-categories that include corporate social responsibility, effective communication, quality performance and services to the public. The study also found that the participants perceive corporate reputation to be part of the image and identity of the municipality. Corporate communication was found to be the "glue" that holds internal stakeholders together because it serves to align the organisation's vision, culture and image that people hold about the municipality. The results reveal that reputation management is a strategy that could provide public relations with an opportunity to prove and confirm its value to an organisation (Rensburg & Cant, 2009:99).

Regarding shared responsibility for enhancing corporate reputation, the results reveal that some of the previous studies focused primarily on how corporate communication can support corporate reputation, enabling stakeholders to know and appropriate the organisation's activities (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016:490). This in turn will have an impact on service delivery to communities in ELM. We also found that building relationships with the surrounding external institutions plays a major role in ensuring that ELM sustains itself as a corporate

citizen. The study further reveals that the internal stakeholders are custodians of reputation, with corporate communication acting as a "glue" that holds them together. We also found that effective corporate communication enables mutual understanding among employees, influences people in a positive manner, and serves to facilitate dialogue between them.

Regarding media relations, the results of the relationship between communication and corporate reputation reveal that social media is important for communicating corporate reputation because it can reach large numbers of stakeholders within a short space of time. Within the Emfuleni local municipality, policies are in place to manage a social media platform. The results also show that it is necessary for managers to respond in a rapid and accurate way, especially where disseminated information could harm the image and reputation of the local municipality. The results show that the local municipality is political, entrenches hierarchical structures, and subsequently is inclined to a uniform response directed from the political head. This was seen by the participants as "unnecessary red tape" that serves to delay responses.

CONCLUSION

What corporate reputation is and how it is perceived by employees in the Emfuleni local municipality (ELM) of Gauteng province has been discussed. The literature revealed that corporate reputation is a collective representation of an organisation's past actions and has results based on its assessment of financial, social and organisational performance and environmental impact by its multiple stakeholders, both internal and external. Corporate reputation is also seen as an asset of great value for organisations that attempt to differentiate themselves from the rest of the industry. Reputation is, thus, the strongest determinant of any corporation sustainability. Effective management of corporate reputation is an essential strategy to spawn superior organisational performance.

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