AN INTERNAL COMMUNICATION MODEL FOR MULTI-CAMPUS HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

In this article the authors propose a model for South African multi-campus universities, aimed at improving the effectiveness of internal communication. The development of the model was informed by three factors: the bureaucratic nature of higher education institutions; the restructured South African higher education landscape comprising various multi-campus universities with campuses situated geographically apart; and the fact that the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT) identified certain shortcomings in its internal communication practices during a climate survey. Various communication models, including those employed by the corporate sector, were studied, after which an extensive empirical investigation was carried out. The proposed model incorporates essential features, but also addresses shortcomings of existing internal communication models. The characteristics of the model were developed from an empirical investigation that included a mixed-method research as well as the recommendations of communication executives from seven multi-campus universities in South Africa.

Keywords: Internal communication; organisation; multi-campus universities; higher education; South Africa

1.   INTRODUCTION

Effective internal communication is important to the success of any organisation, whether a corporate company or an organisation that does not function in a corporate environment, such as a higher education institution.

Anyangwe (2012:1 of 4) remarks that internal communication is a function that is underdeveloped at most universities – mainly because of their complex and bureaucratic nature (Venter, 2006:18; Gizir and Simsek, 2005:197). According to Miller (in Holtzhausen, 2002:324), communication in bureaucracies takes on specific characteristics such as that communication is normally task-related and in the form of orders, rules and directives, resulting in little feedback. The communication style is formal, and even when asked for, employees' input and opinions are not likely to be acted on.

Higher education institutions are known for their academic nature and for being managed by academics not always familiar with the best means of communicating effectively on a managerial level.

Tomaselli (in Tsiu, 2003:10) states that: "Higher education institutions do not enjoy a reputation for good management of resources and Commerce generally sees them as extravagant and un-businesslike." According to Simpson, universities tend not to regularly monitor their internal communications (Anyangwe, 2012:1 of 4). It is thus not surprising that many higher education institutions are regarded as still having a long way to go in implementing effective internal communication systems.

South Africa's higher education landscape was restructured radically in order to be stronger, more focused and more efficient (Leslie, 2003:841). By 2005, 36 institutions were reduced to 11 universities, six universities of technology, six comprehensive institutions, and two new National Institutes for Higher Education (CHE, 2004:49). Through this, many institutions were merged into multi-campus universities – separate campuses significantly separated by geography but combined into a single system (Nicolson, 2004:351).

Given the complexity of higher education institutions and the numerous challenges this poses for communication, there is a need – especially in the South African multi-campus university environment – to find effective communication models that can improve the efficiency of internal communication.

This article proposes a model for improving internal communication at multi-campus universities in South Africa. Although the authors were tasked with undertaking research to direct the development of an effective internal communication model for the Central University of Technology (CUT), it is envisioned that the research findings can subsequently be applied to other multi-campus universities in South Africa.

In the search for a suitable communication model, an extensive literature review of internal communication models was undertaken. Models employed by the corporate sector and other higher education institutions were examined and ten were selected and evaluated in terms of their essential features and shortcomings.

2.   EVOLVEMENT OF COMMUNICATION MODELS

Communication scientists, such as McLuhan, MacLean, Westley, Stephenson, Gerbner, Rothstein, Osgood, Johnson and Cherry, have developed various communication models over the years, to illustrate the dynamic process of communication and the relationship among the various components inherent to each model. Communication models have been described by Wideman (2006:2) as diagrammes that provide a picture of how the theoretical components of communication relate to one another during a real-life encounter.

The first models of communication, e.g. Aristotle's Speaker-centred Model, the Shannon Weaver Mathematical Model, and Berlo's S-M-C-R Communication Model, were linear in nature (Harris, 1993:7). Although extremely simplistic, they were effective in drawing attention to certain aspects of the communication process, such as the communicator and the message.

However, these linear models were subsequently found to be effective only in situations requiring no feedback (Cockett, 2007:1). According to Riva and Galimberti (1998:11), the linear communication models offer only a partial explanation of human communication because they are "too approximate and restricting" for current research into communication. These models were concerned only with the clarity of the message and not its meaning (Steinberg, 2006:55). Their limitations in depicting the communication process necessitated the development of interactional models of communication which take into account the critical importance of feedback and the reciprocal message exchanges that occur between sender and receiver (Harris, 1993:7). These interactional models led to the development of an array of internal organisational communication models. The authors identified ten such models as applicable to the study. Following is a discussion of these models, their essential features and shortcomings.

3.   INTERNAL COMMUNICATION MODELS

3.1   Conglomerate Communication Model

Power and Rienstra (1999:501) were concerned with developing a corporate communication model for organisations in local government. As such, state agencies had to recreate themselves as conglomerates of "loosely coupled businesses" – business units that are linked, or "loosely coupled" and that are characterised by both distinctiveness and responsiveness, whilst still retaining the synergies of collaboration with other businesses which share the same vision and dedication to service. Power and Rienstra (1999:504) advocate that a workable model of communication for such a conglomerate is one which has built-in adaptation to four levels of communication, namely internal (to itself), with other businesses and divisions within the organisation, with the CEO, and external (to outside businesses and clients or customers). The model represents the decentralised planning and process inherent in loosely coupled conglomerate communication planning. According to this model, the corporate system cascades from the organisational objectives and determines an umbrella model with clearly articulated aims and objectives in relation to communication planning and system effectiveness.

The model accentuates horizontal communication, but also makes provision for symmetrical two-way communication between business units (conglomerates) and the CEO.

However, the model lacks a set of indicators or statements of good practice designed to enable organisations to evaluate their staff communication practice and policies.

3.2   Asif and Sargeant's Internal Communication Model

Asif and Sargeant (2000:300) developed a Model of Internal Communication in the context of two major retail banks in the United States, utilising a qualitative approach based on grounded theory. Their model considers internal communication as a non-hierarchical process and ongoing activity, where a variety of different variables influence and determine the outcome of any communication effort (Asif & Sargeant, 2000:315). The model consists of various components, namely target audience, the planning process of communication, communication tools and techniques, communication outcomes, as well as moderating variables.

The communication planning process consists of the following elements: budget, programmes, positioning, communication objectives, key factor analysis, internal market segmentation and internal market research.

Internal communication objectives can be achieved through the use of a variety of both formal and informal communication tools directed at informing employees of important organisational news and encouraging employees to provide managers with feedback (Asif & Sargeant, 2000:308).

The desired outcomes of communication are: shared vision, service focus, empowerment, commitment, satisfaction and loyalty. Asif and Sargeant (2000:313) purport that the extent to which the communication outcomes may be achieved is related to the presence of a number of moderating variables, including: status of sender, management style, communication style, volumes of communication received, position and length of service.

With regard to most applicable features communication is depicted as a non-hierarchical process, while the model also illustrates both the process of communication and the outcomes thereof. However, the model does not draw a clear link between the overall strategy of the organisation and the internal communication process. The model also does not identify symmetrical communication and dialogue as a component of the internal communication model nor does it identify any need to consider the context to which the internal communication occurs.

3.3   Top Management Communication Outcomes Model

In addressing employees' varying communication preferences and needs, Pincus and Rayfield (1991:8) proposed a Top Management Communication Outcomes Model.

In this model, the researchers hypothesise that employees prefer to receive information about their organisation such as policies and future plans from top-level management, but information about their jobs from their immediate supervisors. In this regard Ruck (2012:1 of 2) mentions that information about plans, goals, progress and achievements has a greater impact on employee engagement levels than information about pay, benefits, job opportunities and recognition. The top management-employee relationship is portrayed as affecting staff morale, productivity, commitment and loyalty. The immediate, supervisor-employee relationship is presented as most directly influencing individual job-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover, performance and teamwork. The model also suggests that complex and varying communication relationships will generate somewhat different, yet positive outcomes (Pincus et al. 1991:8).

The features that can be regarded as essential are the following: Strategic information is communicated by top-level management, whilst job-related information is communicated by immediate supervisors. The model stresses the importance of two-way communication. With regard to shortcomings the model fails to indicate the relationship between the overall strategy of the organisation and the internal communication process. The model does not reflect the elements and dynamics of the communication process.

3.4   Twente Organisational Communication Model (TOCOM)

According to Van Gemert and Woudstra (1999:73), the Twente Organisational Communication Model (TOCOM) aims to provide a frame of reference for designing communication policy. The model is based on the characteristics of an open system model with internal and external communication regarded as a coherent whole.

The model depicts communication as a management tool – thereby implying that communication can be directed and controlled. In this model the organisation's vision and goal, in addition to its vision of communication and communication goals are placed at the top.

Van Gemert and Woudstra (1999:74) view the identity (internal aspect) of the organisation as its personality, whilst the image (external aspect) is the view that people have of their organisation. Identity and image include the following components: the communication mix (the means to provide internal and external target groups with the desired information), information (the message), symbols (all information carriers that an organisation uses to express its identity, behaviour and skills), and target groups and stakeholders. Analysis of the communication mix, message, symbolism and behaviour of an organisation serves to provide insight into the quality of the communication.

The most essential feature of this model is probably the fact that the communication vision and goals are derived from the organisation's vision and goals. Open system- and integrated communication are also essential features. Although a thorough and workable model for communication, it lacks mechanisms as to how communication should be monitored.

3.5 Integrated Communication Management Model

According to Claassen and Verwey (1998:74), integrated communication management is one of the most valuable tools in organisational communication. In their quest to clearly stipulate the important strategic role of the Communication Manager, Claassen and Verwey developed an Integrated Communication Management Model.

The model depicts the organisation as an open system within an environment with which there is dynamic exchange of information, and where change is seen as an integral part of the organisation. Claassen and Verwey (1998:77) purport that an integrated communication approach allows closer cooperation between communication management and the rest of the organisation and equips communication specialists for objective participation in organisational functioning and strategic communication planning. Claassen and Verwey (1998:78) mention that its real value is in the increased effectiveness with which organisation programmes and environmental changes can be managed. In this regard, the Communication Manager's role is to inform management about changes in the environment and recommend changes where necessary. The Integrated Communication Management Model depicts the Public Relations subsystem at three levels inside and outside the organisation. The three levels are environmental management (which takes place at macro level), organisational management (which takes place at meso level) and communication management (which takes place at micro level).

The model articulates the strategic positioning of the communication management function. By following an integrated and open system approach to communication multi-campus universities hold the possibility to develop fast and flexible communication systems to meet the challenges posed by increasing globalisation. However, this particular model lacks a set of indicators or statements of good practice designed to enable organisations to evaluate their staff communication practice and policies.

3.6 Strategic Employee Communication Model

Although strategic internal communication is relatively new to higher education (Freeman, 2009:5 of 7), Barrett (2002:219) remarks that a strategic communication model can help management understand the strategic role of employee communication in a high-performing company.

As such, the Strategic Employee Communication Model comprises of some best practice definitions, which are composite of effective employee communication examples collected from research-selected Fortune 500 companies.

The Strategic Employee Communication Model captures all of the most important components of employee communications linking them to each other and to the company's strategy and operations. In this particular model, employee communication is broken down into recognisable parts, whilst the model also demonstrates how intertwined and interdependent each part is when employee communication is positioned strategically so as to facilitate change. The communication components' messages and media are at the core of the model, "but the direct link to the company's strategic objectives and the business planning process and the overlay of supportive management with ongoing assessment of individual and company communication move the model from the tactical to the strategic level" (Barrett, 2002:221).

Barrett (2002:222) distinguishes between the following best practice definitions regarding employee communications: strategic objectives; supportive management; targeted messages, effective media; well-positioned staff; ongoing assessment; and integrated processes. These definitions can serve as a benchmark against which companies can measure the potential need for improving communication.

The model stresses the important strategic role of the communication staff in an organisation. It accentuates the importance of interpersonal and especially face-to-face communication – an aspect university management could consider a challenge if they want internal communication to be effective. Ongoing assessment is a crucial aspect of effective communication. Once an organisation has implemented a communication model or programme, the effectiveness thereof needs to be measured against clearly defined goals on an ongoing basis. These measurements could take on the form of, for example, a communication audit or qualitative survey. With regard to shortcomings of the model no mention is made of "symmetrical communication" in the list of best practice definitions. A strategic internal communication model should advocate symmetrical communication between various target groups.

The discussion of the selected communication models in this section emphasises a number of features of effective internal communication in an organisation. These features, of best practice, as summarised below, are considered applicable to the higher education sector (multi-campus universities in particular):

•   Two way-communication, both horizontally and vertically
•   A non-hierarchical process; both the process of communication and the outcomes are illustrated

- Alignment with the organisation's vision and goals
- An integrated and open system approach
- A fast and flexible system (can meet challenges of increasing globalisation and digitalisation)
- Strategic role of communication staff
- Provision is made for interpersonal communication
- Regular measurement of the effectiveness of an organisation's communication process.

In the next section the emphasis is on best practices in communication followed by companies in the corporate sector.

4. BEST PRACTICE FROM MODELS EMPLOYED BY THE CORPORATE SECTOR

4.1 Benchmarking internal communication at South African companies

Groenewald (2004:4) conducted a study among the following South African companies to benchmark their internal communication practices: Absa, Sasol, Standard Bank, Eskom, Harmony, Ford Motor Company and Kumba Resources.

It became evident from her study that the measurement of the overall value of internal communication is subjective, qualitative and unstructured. Companies tend to do "process" instead of "impact" measurement, whilst skills, budget and time are seen as constraints. The CEO and top management are viewed as the most important internal clients, followed by the management teams of other core business units. Engagement with internal clients is mostly reactive (Groenewald, 2004:8).

According to Groenewald (2004:6), the main issues facing internal communication practitioners today are, among others, achieving strategic alignment, addressing the decline in employee trust, enhancing management communication, facilitating organisational transformation, reacting to a new, broader corporate social responsibility agenda, and developing employee understanding of governance and liability.

For the purpose of this study, the authors approached four well-established organisations in trying to gain a better understanding of their internal communication practices. The authors had telephone conversations with communication executives of Vodacom, Standard Bank, Absa and Sanlam. Although the communication executives were very positive about the study, they were reluctant to share their internal communication policies, strategies and models – the reason being that this type of information is treated confidentially by most of the organisations.

The Head of Channels: Group Communications and Public Relations at Absa, however, shared some best practice with respect to internal communication. It seems that Absa's CEO recognises the important role of internal communication and that it is treated as a core business value. Absa has developed its own communication model – taking into account the structure of the bank, employees and geographical spread to link internal communication practices to the company's strategic objectives. The internal communication function is decentralised to 42 Business Units across Absa's geographic area. According to Gwamanda (2008: personal communication), a consultant is assigned to each Business Unit. Absa has segmented its audience of over 30 000 employees into four main groupings and created specific vehicles to speak to various groups of internal stakeholders – including newsletters, SMS's, e-mail and personal conversations.

The authors are particularly impressed by the array of communication media used by Absa to communicate with staff. Absa should be applauded for the way communication is decentralised across the organisation. Research is highly valued, but hugely underutilised. Companies tend to do "process" instead of "impact" measurement when evaluating their communication practices.

4.2   The 5M-Communication Model

The 5M-Communication Model was successfully implemented and maintained in a Northern Free State Gold Mine in the late 1990s. Coetzee (in Ferreira 2003:61) postulates that the model comprises of process (message, motive and market), output (media), and monitoring elements.

The communication message constitutes a significant part of the communication process. Landes (in Ferreira 2003:61) remarks that communication messages should flow back and forth in a continuous exchange, instead of in a straight line.

Ferreira (2003:62) mentions that the motive "is normally to focus on facilitating the exchange of information related to the initiative and making sure that everyone understands his or her role in the process."

The type of market or target groups to be reached will determine the amount of information that will be made available as well as the media to be used in communicating messages (Adey in Ferreira, 2003:65). Robert Holbach (in Anyangwe, 2012:2 of 4) states that "the bigger the institution, the more it needs to look into filtering content – empowering users to make some choices themselves".

Once the communication message and the type of market to be reached have been decided, communication media can be selected to effectively and efficiently convey the message.

In today's technology-driven world, organisations have an array of media to choose from - from electronic mails, iPods and SMS messages to small group discussions and face-to-face briefings.

Monitoring and evaluation of the communication message refer to determining if the message is interpreted correctly or not. Communicators therefore have to ensure that they have mechanisms in place to ensure feedback from decoders or receivers of the communication. According to Boyd (in Anyangwe, 2012:3 of 4), face-to-face communication is still king as it provides for feedback and constant exchange of information between the parties involved (Klein in Wood, 1999:136).

It is clear that this model emphasises the back and forth flowing of messages and that it stresses the importance of feedback in a communication situation. It also highlights the monitoring and evaluation of the communication message. The model fails to indicate the relationship between the overall strategy of the organisation and the internal communication process.

4.3   INVOCOM

Ferreira (2003:163) has identified a communication methodology that was implemented at Country Bird, a significant player in the food production industry in South Africa and was developed by OIM International, which has been widely acknowledged as a leader in the development of employee involvement and communication methods. This methodology, combining the two concepts of "employee involvement" and "commitment", is called INVOCOM and is regarded not only as best practice but as "Best in Breed" (OIM International Business Improvement Consultants, s.a.:1 of 2). According to Ferreira (2003:163), the emphasis on providing information and involving employees in problem-solving gives the areas the means to improve service to their internal customers. Furthermore, staff participation results in improved knowledge, which in turn, results in improved customer service (Du Plooy, 2008). Good communication and effective employee involvement are also key to success (Mokhema, 2008), even though for some senior managers, involving others is the most difficult part of communication because they see it as a soft option, not a hard business one (Mounter, 2003:266).

By following an INVOCOM approach to communication, leaders create an atmosphere of open and honest communication that fosters and encourages a climate of trust and gives direction by building respect, confidence and competence (Ferreira, 2003:163).

The correct application of INVOCOM contributes to excellence in problem-solving and goal achievement. The researcher regards involvement a key element of the proposed communication model.

The model fails to indicate the relationship between the overall strategy of the organisation and the internal communication process. It follows a systematic, rational approach to communication rather than an emotional approach. Communication, however, is a human activity and cannot be completely objective/rational at all times.

The discussion of communication models and strategies followed in the corporate sector clearly shows how the best practice features suggested by the selected communication models can be refined on the one hand, and practically realised in the corporate sector on the other. Examples of these are the appointment of a communications manager, the use of an array of communication channels and the decentralisation of communication across the organisation. Communication is treated as a core business value. Aspects such as two-way communication, the importance of feedback and staff involvement are also stressed. A very important aspect, namely regular monitoring and evaluation of internal communication, is emphasised.

The next section focuses on the HELiX model, which is presented as a guiding model of communication in higher education. Since the aim of the research is to develop an internal communication model for multi-campus universities in South Africa, the authors deemed it necessary to also study models of communication employed by the higher education sector.

5. BEST PRACTICE FROM MODELS EMPLOYED BY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

5.1 The HELiX as a guiding model of communication in higher education

The HELiX (Higher Education: Leaders in Internal Communications) methodology is a collaborative project led by the University of Leicester together with the universities of Bristol, Oxford Brookes and Edge Hill. It is funded by HEFCE's Leadership, Governance & Management Fund. The Knowledge Partnership has provided professional support services to the project (University of Leicester, n.d.:1 of 1).

HELiX is the evaluation and benchmarking system for good practice in internal communications for the higher education sector (Harrison, 2014:1 of 1), regardless of size or mission (University of Leicester, n.d.:1 of 1). It consists of a model framework and set of indicators or statements of good practice designed to enable a higher education institution to evaluate its staff communication practice and policies. The framework not only incorporates vertical communication (such as corporate newsletters), but intra and inter departmental communications as well. According to Harrison (2014:1 of 1), HELiX also encompasses aspects of leadership, management practice and staff engagement that are critical to effective internal communications (Harrison, 2014:1 of 1).

It includes a range of tools for evaluating and benchmarking the effectiveness of internal communication activities. These tools vary in detail from light touch self assessment (which takes 40 minutes to conduct) through to full organisational audits over a period of weeks and months (University of Leicester, n.d.:1 of 1).

There are 35 HEIiX indicators of good practice which are grouped into eight areas.

- University goals, ambitions and character
- Leadership
- Strategy, accountability and evaluation
- News and message dissemination
- Information sharing
- Campus space and collegiality
- Crisis, safety and security
- The employee journey

An underlying purpose of HEIiX is to raise recognition of the strategic importance that effective internal communications can have upon an organisation's success.

The HEIiX project therefore proposes that effective internal communications is concerned with the communication of strategic vision and objectives, as well as news and operational information. It is concerned with the role of leaders, managers, processes and structures in facilitating communication, since when these are effective, research from outside the sector suggests that organisations are enhanced (University of Leicester, n.d.:1 of 1).

The concept of effective internal communication is especially applicable to higher education institutions because of the centrality and importance of people to the core mission and operation of said institutions that are fundamentally about the skills, qualities and abilities of those who work in them. The framework advocates staff engagement and makes use of various communication media to communicate with staff. However, higher education institutions wishing to download the HELiX Toolkit will need to register. Also, since a full communications audit will take about 3 months - given the academic and bureaucratic nature of higher education institutions - it is unlikely that these institutions are prepared to invest such an amount of time in an activity (communication) that doesn't fit comfortably in an academic institution.

The discussion of HELiX emphasises a number of features of effective internal communication in higher education institutions. HELiX also demonstrates similarities with models employed by the corporate sector (as discussed earlier) such as staff engagement and the use of various communication media to communicate with staff.

Aspects such as two-way communication, the reflection of institutional goals, vertical and horizontal communication, feedback from staff and the strategic importance of internal communication are articulated. HELiX demonstrates the importance of continuous evaluation and monitoring of internal communication.

The empirical investigation undertaken clearly showed which aspects of internal communication at the CUT, as well as in other higher education institutions in the country, do not comply with the key features of effectiveness or best practice as suggested in the discussion above.

6.   METHODOLOGY

6.1   Research Design

The empirical investigation comprised three phases, namely:

1.   A quantitative and qualitative questionnaire survey at the CUT to investigate staff members' practices, preferences and perceptions regarding internal communication at the institution.
2.   A qualitative interview-type survey regarding internal communication at seven multi-campus universities in South Africa, including the University of the Free State (UFS), Vaal University of Technology (VUT), University of Johannesburg (UJ), North-West University (NWU), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and Durban University of Technology (DUT). This phase included two sub-phases:
-    Telephonic interviews with communication executives to determine the nature and practices surrounding internal communication at the various campuses, including the existence and employment of specific communication models.
-    An e-mail survey among the same communication executives to determine the concerns, issues and perceptions of the effectiveness of internal communication at these institutions.
3.   A qualitative and quantitative inter-institutional evaluation and subsequent refinement of a draft internal communication framework by communication specialists of the seven identified multi-campus universities.

The study employed a mixed-method design, comprising qualitative as well as quantitative methodology. The pragmatic combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in this study allowed a more functionalist approach to research, which means that the two research paradigms could be used to strengthen the data-gathering and analysis processes (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:65).

6.2 Population

The population of phase 1 of the study comprised of all CUT staff members (1073 full-time and part-time academic and support services staff members at the Bloemfontein, Welkom and Kimberley campuses).

In the second and third phases of the empirical study, purposive sampling of communication executives at the seven aforementioned multi-campus universities in South Africa was employed, as a strategy to select small groups of individuals likely to be knowledgeable and informed about internal communication practices in higher education. The authors approached staff members who specifically deal with internal communications at their respective institutions. The sample included two participants from the NWU and one each from the other six institutions.

6.3 Data Gathering

Data was personally gathered (phase 1) and each communication specialist was individually contacted telephonically (phase 2) and via e-mail (phases 2 and 3) to gather information about internal communication practices. In this regard the qualitative researcher interacts with those he studies and actively works with (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000:48) to minimise the distance between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:16).

6.4 Data Gathering Instruments

Phase 1:

A structured questionnaire was used to gather the data. The questionnaire was based on the perspectives the authors gained from the literature review, as well as from the information gathered in a climate survey in 2005. Although the questionnaire was predominantly quantitative in nature, it was supported by open-ended questions to qualitatively enhance the study. The questionnaire consisted of nine categories, namely: 1) Demographic and other background information; 2) Attendance and perception of training sessions; 3) Adaptation to information overload; 4) Timeousness of communication; 5) Perceptions on communication channels at the CUT; 6) Preference of communication channels; 7) Ease of use, efficiency and timeousness of communication media; 8) Opinions on selected aspects relating to interpersonal communication skills; and 9) Communication from a personal point of view. After completion of the data gathering, 192 questionnaires could be used for data analysis. Although a relatively small response rate (17.9%), an analysis of the profile of the respondents showed that the sample adequately represented the various categories and post levels of employees at CUT.

Phase 2:

With regard to the semi-structured telephonic interviews with communication specialists at the seven identified multi-campus universities, a focused interview was employed where a framework was established beforehand. Conversations were focused by means of questions relating to internal communication models employed at these institutions; strategic importance of internal communication at these institutions; and financial and human resources to communicate effectively to staff.

The communication specialists were also asked to respond via e-mail to a list of open-ended questions, focusing on the role of internal communication at universities; whether internal communication is regarded as a core business value; and whether their universities have an effective upward, downward and horizontal communication system in place. Participants were encouraged to come up with suggestions to improve the effectiveness of internal communication. They also had to indicate whether and how they thought the fact that their universities boasted multi-campuses, hampered communication. Data from eight communication specialists at the seven multi-campus universities could be used for analysis.

Phase 3:

Based on the perspectives from the literature and the findings from the first two phases of the study, the authors compiled a (theoretical) framework reflecting principles and guidelines for ensuring and consequently improving the effectiveness of internal communication at CUT as a multi-campus institution. In order to potentially make the framework applicable to the wider South African higher education context, the framework was subjected to scrutiny by communication executives from the seven multi-campus universities mentioned earlier. The participants had to evaluate key aspects of the framework, identify possible shortcomings and make suggestions as to how the framework could be improved. The e-mail questionnaire was accompanied by a one-page document summarising the key features of the framework, plus a PowerPoint presentation summarising the findings of the CUT questionnaire survey and the institutional survey, also illustrating five main communication issues/concerns and the various suggestions on how to address each. The concerns/issues related to the following: the bureaucratic nature of higher education institutions; the academic nature of higher education institutions; the organisational structure of higher education institutions; the communication process; communication from management structures (like the Management Committee). With regard to the layout of the questionnaire, it consisted of five short sections, each of which pertained to the same five issues mentioned above. Each statement/suggestion referred to a possible feature of the proposed framework.

Each suggested feature had to be rated in accordance to its suitability for inclusion in the intended communication model. A total of 14 questionnaires were sent electronically to the communication specialists at the seven institutions, whilst nine completed questionnaires were received back.

6.5   Data Analysis

The processing of the quantitative data (phase 1) included various statistics, namely cross tabulations, frequency tables, categorical variables, nominal variables, sample averages and chi-square tests. The qualitative data (open-ended questions) obtained in all three phases of the investigation were analysed by means of content analysis. The respondents' answers to the open-ended questions were reviewed and grouped into categories.

As the researcher had already completed the literature review when the data analysis was undertaken, the researcher worked inductively in assigning codes (where the codes emerged from the data) to an extent, but also made use of a priori or predetermined codes (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:107) related to the communication models studied. By utilising the coding and other procedures in content analysis it was possible to identify patterns and, ultimately, themes and categories of meaning related to the theory and the aim of the research.

7.   FINDINGS

Phase 1:

The most important findings of the CUT survey (phase 1) can be summarised as follows:

With regard to demographic and other background information most of the respondents were from the Bloemfontein Campus (86.3%), while the majority of the respondents were employed in an administrative support capacity (45.7%), followed by academic staff (32.1%).

Regarding the section on attendance and perception of training sessions, 67% of the respondents indicated that they had not attended any of the seven communication training sessions offered by the CUT for staff. The responses suggest that the quality of the training sessions needs to be improved.

The majority of the respondents (84%) adapted to information overload by making use of a priority system.

With regard to timeousness of communication respondents indicated that information from supervisors and heads of divisions was regarded more timeous than communication from MANCOM and the CUT Council in particular.

It seems that the further the recipient is located from the communicator and the more hierarchical the lines are that need to be followed, the more difficult communication becomes.

Another section of the questionnaire dealt with perceptions on communication channels at the CUT, with 60.5% of the respondents indicating that they had received important information too late, whilst 54.5% felt that information that was important to them, did not always reach them. More than three-quarters (76.4%) indicated that they received organisational news from their co-workers. It thus becomes clear that the "grapevine" plays a significant role in the communication of important organisational information. More than half (55.2%) of the respondents indicated that the CUT did not have an effective upward communication system in place. More than half of the respondents (54%) felt that information was not coordinated among different units and departments and sections. The overall impression is that horizontal communication at the CUT is not satisfactory and needs to be improved. Almost 50% felt that MANCOM did not communicate important matters, more than 60% felt that MANCOM did not encourage staff members to become involved in decision-making and 46.5% of the respondents indicated that MANCOM did not regard effective internal communication as a core business value at the CUT.

Electronic communication received the highest rating with regard to preference of communication channels followed by face-to-face communication.

With regard to ease of use, efficiency and timeousness of communication media, e-mail communication was regarded the most easy to use (86.2%), efficient (93.4%) and timeous (92.8%), followed by face-to-face communication.

Opinions on selected aspects relating to interpersonal communication skills: According to the data a very high percentage of the respondents (95.8%) indicated that the discussion of job-related problems needed to be encouraged.

Communication from a personal point of view: Electronic communication is regarded as the best aspect of communication at the CUT, followed by face-to-face communication. Communication by MANCOM and Council is regarded the worst aspect of communication at the CUT.

Phase 2:

The telephonic interviews with communication specialists at the seven identified multi-campus universities brought valuable insights and suggestions with regard to internal communication practices at multi-campus universities in South Africa.

None of these institutions seem to have a formal internal communication model in place. The DUT recognises the important strategic role of internal communication and works close with the Executive Management in planning the release of news and information to its community. The TUT follows an integrated approach to both internal and external communication and has implemented a variety of methods to inform staff members about important and relevant news. Both management teams of the TUT and CPUT value the importance of internal communication, whilst the CPUT is afforded the necessary human and financial resources.

The most important findings of the e-mail survey are the following:

With respect to the role of internal communication at universities the majority of the respondents stressed the importance thereof, but stated that it has been neglected as there has never been a focused internal communication portfolio.

The second question focused on whether internal communication is regarded as a core business value. The overall perception is that, although management realises the important role of internal communication at the institutions, it is not seen as a core business value or a strategic management function.

Question 3 dealt with communication systems in place. Although downward communication seems to be more prevalent than upward and horizontal communication, some of these institutions seemingly experienced a lack of two-way communication between management and staff members. E-mail communication is deemed the most preferred communication medium (only at those campuses where staff members do have access to electronic mail), whilst e-mail communication seems to be in greatest demand during crisis times.

The respondents made various suggestions for improving internal communication at their institutions. One of the respondents stated that "competent staff should be appointed as communication practitioners." Besides the human resources aspect, one of the respondents mentioned that a strategy needed to be developed to guide the way forward. More effective two-way communication between management and staff and the facilitation of communication among staff members were also stressed.

Most of the respondents indicated communication was hampered by the fact that universities consisted of multiple campuses. Besides the geographical issue, certain campuses had their own preferences regarding the format and language of internal newsletters. Furthermore, the communication function is not fully aligned on all the campuses and the institutional communication offices. It seems that the effective and timely dissemination of information, especially from management, presents a problem.

Phase 3:

The inter-institutional evaluation provided insight into the perception of communication executives from other multi-campus universities of the proposed communication framework. Their feedback, comments and suggestions were particularly valuable in the refinement of the proposed framework and, eventually, the drafting of the internal communication model. Following is a discussion of the most applicable features of the framework to be incorporated into the proposed model. The features are discussed in terms of their relation to the five main communication issues mentioned earlier:

The bureaucratic nature of higher education institutions:
Besides the fact that an internal communication policy needs to be drafted, communication should be established as a core business value and be advocated on all levels. An open systems approach to communication should be followed and a Communication Manager should be appointed on managerial level. Although social and personal communication should be encouraged, clear guidelines must be set to control communication of a personal and social nature.

The academic nature of higher education institutions:
Interpersonal communication training should be offered to all staff, with a specific focus on hands-on and practical training. Adequate human and financial resources should be provided to fully optimise the internal communication function. Management should be evaluated on their communication skills.

The organisational structure of higher education institutions:
With regard to organisational structure, decentralisation should be applied. Multi-campus communication is especially important and the following aspects need to be incorporated into the proposed model: A communication coordinator should be appointed on each campus; special attempts should be made to make staff on distant or other campuses feel part of the functioning of the main campus; special channels for feedback from distance campuses should be created; and the communication function should be aligned among all the campuses and the institutional office.

The communication process:
More than one medium and language should be used, whilst the creative use of technology should be encouraged (including SMSs and e-mail), especially to part-time staff and service workers. Information from the VC needs to be communicated as soon as possible. Messages need to be considered in terms of what employees NEED to know (job-related information), WANT to know (motivational information), and HAVE to know (organisational information). Feedback should be encouraged, whilst the effectiveness of the communication process should be measured or evaluated constantly.

However, great caution has to be exercised to prevent information overload and the irritation factor.

Communication from management structures (like the Management Committee):

Management communication could be enhanced by two-way symmetrical communication, attaching timelines between different managerial levels, offering communication training for managers and implementing a reward and recognition system which recognises management communication performance.

The empirical investigation indicated important shortcomings in the internal communication at the CUT specifically and in South African Higher Education in general. The authors believe that these shortcomings can be addressed by incorporating the best practice features identified in literature and the suggestions made by communication executives (Phase 3 of the investigation) into an internal communication model for the CUT, as a multi-campus university.

8. MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AT CUT AS A MULTI-CAMPUS INSTITUTION

A workable model for internal communication at South African multi-campus universities, with specific reference to CUT, is presented in Figure 1. The outside border represents the boundaries of the university. Information is continuously exchanged between the university and its environment. The internal communication structure consists of the various departments, faculties, schools and campuses that make up the system, indicated in the model as black circles inside the boundaries of CUT. The arrows suggest two-way symmetrical communication between units that are loosely coupled. Channels for feedback are inherent to the structure.

The model incorporates the most applicable features of the ten communication models discussed earlier, whilst also addressing the shortcomings of these models. It also incorporates the issues and concerns highlighted during the empirical investigation. Six key principles are central to effective communication which can also serve as statements of good practice:

- Communication is a strategic management tool.
- Communication is decentralised.
- Communication is guided by policy.
- Communication is a core business value.
- Communication is integrated with other business functions.
- A communications manager is appointed on managerial level.
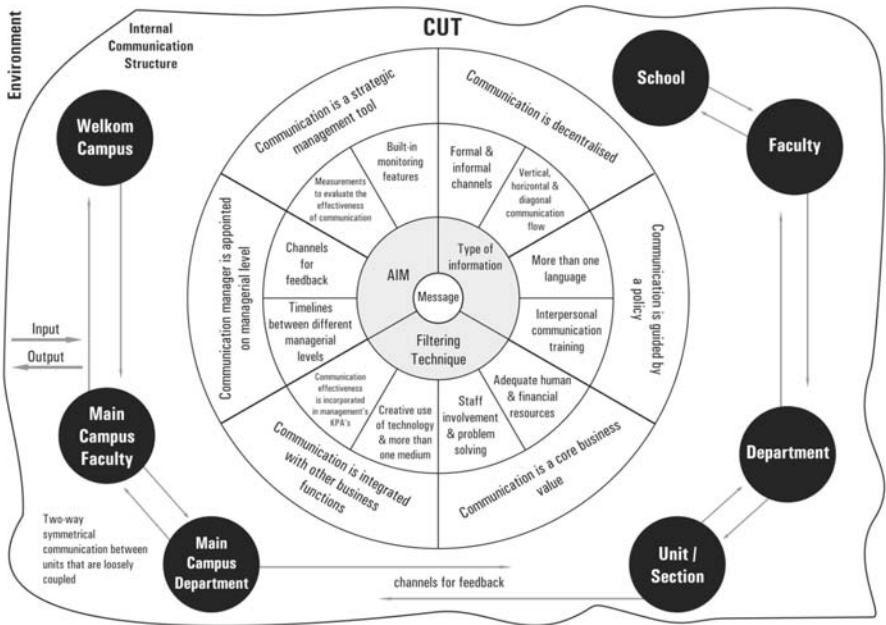
Fig. 1   Internal communication model for multi-campus institutions

With regard to structure, the model boasts strong features of the open systems theory (TOCOM Model and Integrated Communication Management Model), whilst communication is depicted as a strategic management tool (TOCOM Model, Integrated Communication Management Model, and Strategic Employee Communication Model). The model accounts for the extensive vertical hierarchy of higher education institutions by following a decentralised approach to internal communication. Organisational communication is thus characterised by a narrow span of control. Business units are loosely coupled (Conglomerate Communication Model). Furthermore, communication is guided by a policy (TOCOM Model), internal communication is depicted as a core business value, and the communication function is integrated with other managerial functions, with a communications manager appointed at managerial level (Integrated Communication Management Model).

The communication process is central to the model, where communication is depicted as a two-way, symmetrical process (Conglomerate Communication Model, Top Management Communication Outcomes Model, TOCOM Model, Integrated Communication Management Model, and 5M Communication Model). Formal and informal channels are used to communicate information to staff members (Asif and Sargeant's Internal Communication Model, HELiX). With regard to informal communication, clear guidelines are set for communicating messages of a social or personal nature.

The model portrays the creative use of technology, as well as more than one medium (Strategic Employee Communication Model), especially for reaching part-time staff and service workers more effectively. Some of these technologies include the extension of e-mail and SMS communication (when communicating via SMS, aspects such as information overload and the irritation factor need to be considered).

Internal communication effectiveness is incorporated in management's key performance areas and given reasonable weight in total performance evaluation. In this regard, interpersonal communication guidance and capacity-building for all staff, and in particular management, is vital. The focus is on hands-on, practical activities. Timelines are recommended for communication from management to ensure the timely dissemination of information to other line managers or subordinates. Channels for feedback form an essential part of the communication process, thereby stressing the importance of upward communication (INVOCOM and 5M Communication Model). Staff is encouraged to become involved in decision-making (INVOCOM and HELiX).

Messages are relevant, simplistic, meaningful, consistent, and timely (Strategic Employee Communication Model). The authors distinguish between information that employees need to know (job-related information), information that employees want to know (motivational information), and information employees have to know (organisational information). Messages are communicated in more than one language, namely English, Sesotho and Afrikaans.

The model has built-in monitoring features (as suggested by HELiX), which form the basis for a quality assurance system. In this regard, a reward and recognition system that recognises management's communication performance is regarded as essential. The effectiveness of the communication process must be constantly measured or evaluated (5M Communication Model).

The suggested appointment of a communications manager at managerial level integrates the communication function with other managerial functions, thereby addressing the concern that internal communication is not regarded as a strategic management tool. The fact that communication is depicted as a core business value makes it an essential part of the institution's building-blocks. The lack of communication to part-time staff and service workers is addressed by exploring new technologies and media to communicate with these employees.

9.   RECOMMENDATIONS

The model is flexible – thereby implying that it can be adjusted. The authors recommend that an action plan be formulated to eventually implement the model at ground level. Such an action plan could incorporate activities or tactics to address certain communication issues or challenges. Specifics such as responsible persons, means to implement the action/tactic, timeframes and quality impact measurements may direct the action plan to subsequently enhance effective communication. The authors furthermore suggest that each multi-campus institution in South Africa develops its own action plan, based on a workable model for internal communication.

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