Effective Communication: A Tool for Improvement of Secondary School Management

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Abstract

Communication remains a unique instrument that integrates management functions in an organization. This explains why communication is inevitable and indispensable in the school system for effective management. This paper examined how communication aids managers of secondary schools in carrying out their duties effectively. Meaning and avenues of communication as well as communication flow were discussed. Road blocks to communication and active listening as a means of promoting a closer, more meaningful relationship between the staff and students towards school improvement were considered. It was concluded that communication is an important ingredient and vital instrument in any given organization and a good school principal should bear in mind that the success of the school is determined by his effective management of the school. It was also recommended, among others, that the channel of communication needs to be modern, effective and as personal as possible if management of large organizations such as the school is to maintain close ties with teachers and encourage maximum performance.

Keywords: Effective Communication, Improvement of Secondary School, Management

1.   Introduction

In any organization, formal or informal, effective communication leads to effective management which aids achievement of organizational goals. Effective personnel management is a function of effective communication as management involves working with and through others to achieve corporate goals. The realization of the goals of a secondary school as an educational organization hinges on effective communication among the various operating personnel. The basic function of education itself relies almost entirely on communication. A school manager cannot organize his staff, coordinate and control their activities as well as delegate responsibilities without effective communication (Ijaiya, 2000). Communication helps to build relationships and facilitates achievement of goals. Thus the need for effective communication strategies for the improvement of a secondary school cannot be overemphasized.

Communication is derived from the Latin word "communicare" which means "to put in common" and "to share". It then means the sharing of ideas, facts, thought and feelings for easy coexistence. It is a two way process which involves the sender and the receiver. Communication is, therefore, concerned with transmitting and receiving information which is the key to all aspects of organizational life, whether by planning, controlling, problem-solving, decision-making, motivating, interviewing and other management activities.

2.   Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this paper are to: identify the concepts of communication as related to the school system, depict the place of communication in the functions of a school manager, show the importance of communication in secondary school management, examine road blocks to communication and give recommendations on how communication can enhance effective school management.

3.   Concept of Communication

Concepts are the basic ideas or facts about an event or phenomenon. Communication as a concept simply means the basic ideas and facts about the transmission of messages from one person or group of people to another. That is, passing the information within the school system for effective management. With this, attempts have been made to delimit the term communication. According to Cole (1996), communication could be defined as the process

of creating, transmitting and interpreting ideas, facts, opinions and feelings. To him, communication is a process that involves creating and transmitting of ideas, facts, opinions and feelings in form of a message from one person (encoder) and the message is translated and interpreted by another person (decoder). For instance, in the school settings, a principal would create a message in form of objects, transmitting the message through heads of departments to the teachers. These objects are translated and interpreted based on the facts and ideas.

Peretomode (1991) affirmed that communication, at any point in time within an organization, is successful to the extent that the sender of a message and a receiver have a very similar comprehension of the content of the message. Meaning that for encoder to create a message and for a decoder to translate it, there must be a sound knowledge of facts and ideas about the message. He also buttressed the fact that communication does not take place unless the receiver correctly interprets the information being transmitted. Nevertheless, communication is not effective until the message is properly and accurately decoded by the receiver. Ogunsaju (1990) considered communication as an event that occurs whenever people assign meaning to each other's behaviours. A school manager, however, needs to take caution and ensure that wrong interpretations are not assigned to information communicated especially in behaviour. There have been cases where actions of school managers are misconstrued for lack of interest in the students' welfare. For example, a principal of a school having an audience with the deaf and dumb students on issues relating to the students welfare. The students on their part saw the principal's action/behaviour as lack of interest in them. This heated up their relationship which eventually led to the chasing out of the said principal from the school by the students. Communication is an active task and a purposefully shared experience involving two or more people and the school administrator should see it as such. The school administrators interact with many different people during the day, including other administrators, teachers, parents, and students etc. The ability of an administrator to contribute to the improvement of the school system will depend on his or her communication skills. For example, communication is essential for: understanding roles and assignments; planning and carrying out learning activities; coordinating approaches with students; providing information to teachers on student progress and behaviours; and building a positive relationship with students, teachers and other staff. Effective communication promotes awareness of others' interest and needs. Being aware of the necessary skills that will encourage open communication is important when working with others. Consequently, issues such as road blocks to communication, using accepting language and listening strategies which will relay information that lead towards more positive interactions with others will be examined.

4.   Concept of School Management

Management is defined as "getting things done through others". It can be more scientifically defined as the co-ordination of all the resources of an organization through the process of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling in order to attain organizational objectives. Management is the guidance or direction of people towards organizational goals or objectives. It can also be seen as the supervising, controlling and coordinating school activities to attain optimum results with organizational resources (Akinnubi, 2010). As related to the school system, the principal and the classroom teachers perform the same management functions of rational organization and efficient utilization and control of educational/school resource to maximally achieve school goals at different stages and in different circumstances.

Consequently, management is an integral aspect of any organization, be it church, mosque, school, industry etc. Effective and efficient management of the school is indispensable.

5.   Avenues of Communication

The process of disseminating information through various channels in the organization, forming a chain of clear understanding from top level management to workers at the bottom level and vice versa, and integrating the members of the entire organization into a unified team is very necessary and crucial. The medium of communication is perhaps one of the most crucial determinants of the effectiveness of communication. No matter how good the message may be, if it is sent through a wrong channel, the message will not only be ineffective but can cause serious management problems.

In a school system, there are various avenues through which information is given. These include: school assembly, staff meetings, bulletin board, through minutes in files, signs, pictorial representations, parent representations, during lessons in the classroom and radio, television and print media. Information that the school manager communicates through the above channels are many depending on the situation. Ijaiya (2000) stated that the

information the school manager communicates include:

1.   Government Policies e.g. Curriculum matters, student welfare issues, circulars from the Ministry of Education and Teaching Service Commission.
2.   Information on School fees and levies.
3.   Notice of meetings and other important school events, for example, sports.
4.   Observation, discipline, school plant maintenance, supervisory reports.
5.   Staff promotion
6.   Committee reports.
7.   Personal matters such as when a staff puts to bed or is bereaved.

Nwankwo (1987) grouped the methods of communication exposure in a school system into four which include: speech or oral communication, written communication, signs and signals and actions.

6.   Function of A School Manager

Who is a manager? A manager is a person who plans, controls, organizes and leads an organization. He combines the available human and material resources so as to attain the organizational goals. In line with the above, one can simply refer to the principal as a manager of the school system.

Nwachukwu (1992) concluded that there is considerable similarity in the behaviour of managers at all levels. All managers, he argued, have formal authority over their own organizational units and derive status from that authority. The status causes all managers to be involved in interpersonal relations with subordinates, peers and supervisors, which in provide managers with the information they need to make decisions. So, the principal needs to rely on the teachers and students in the school in order to obtain and effectively process the information he needs for effective school management.

However, receiving and communicating information are perhaps the most important aspects of a manager's job. This belief was amply supported by the findings of the research work done by Nwachukwu (1992). One of the findings is that a manager needs information in order to make the right decisions.

According to Oyedeji (2000), some of the functions of a school manager are:

i)   **Planning: -** Line of action. It is the process of preparing a set of decisions for future action and directed towards specific goals. Planning deals with defining and preparation of policies and procedures in advance. The influence of effective communication in this process cannot be underrated.

ii)   **Organizing:** Organizing relates to the grouping of people and activities into specific unit and trying to establish relationship between them based on the information received. It, therefore, involves the school manager establishing a formal structure through which work is sub-divided and coordinated to attain specific goals within the school system.

iii)   **Directing:** Directing means ensuring staff to do the job given to them at the right time. Adequate motivation is needed to encourage them to accomplish the tasks. In addition, clear and unambiguous communication is a necessary ingredient for direction. The school principal must lead and guide the school by showing examples.

iv) **Coordination: -** This is the duty of integrating various parts of the work in order to be sure that the operating results match the established goals. It involves mobilizing .the personnel and facilities to operate a school. It is harmonizing the efforts of teachers, students, cooks, librarian, bursar etc. A good principal is that one who ensures that right things are done at the right time by the right people using materials and the right methods with adequate communication.

v)   **Supervision:** This is guidance of operation and co-ordination of work. It also entails the cultivation of good relationship among the staff. The major aid of supervision is to ensure the good organizational planning.

vi) **Controlling:** This is to ensure that the results are planned. Therefore, it involves the setting of the standard that provides the basis for comparing actual output with initial set goals. Effective communication should be made to those concerned.

vii)   **Deciding:** This involves the school manager employing good communication in making good decisions that affect all aspects of the school system for better and effective management.

7.   Importance of Communication in Secondary School Management

Failure to communicate the school's aims, values and achievements to the staff and students, make school

management a mirage. This is why the school must be properly monitored to ensure quality of instruction. Thus, effective communication becomes critical to the process of instruction. In order for the school principal to make a sound and coherent decision, planning, organizing, controlling etc., he must map-out strategies for receiving and passing information from every individual within the school for effective management.

Communication in an organization such as school serves various functions:

i)   Communication gives staff the opportunity of expressing their feelings and serves as a medium of resolving conflicts, reducing tension and defining direction for individuals.

ii)   It serves motivational function of encouraging achievement in subordinates.

iii)   It provides the necessary information for decision-making.

iv)   It is used to control the activities in an organization.

v)   Communication can also be used to create a good public image for the school e.g. through publication of school magazines.

vi)   Effective communication helps in fostering school community relationship e.g. the Parents-Teachers-Association (PTA).

vii)   It is an aid for management control. This is because when achievement and problems of subordinate staff are communicated to the higher authority, advice and correction can be quickly offered in order to keep the staff in line with the objectives of the school.

8.   Communication Flow

Communication flows mainly in three directions namely downward, upward, and horizontal or lateral (Peretomode, 1991, Riches, 1994).

1. Downward Communication- This involves instruction or directives being sent down from the top hierarchy (top management) to the lower levels in formal organization e.g. Principal to teachers, teachers to students. Management directives are building on the staff and are usually taken seriously whether they receive positive or negative responses. It can, however, be marred by increasing complexity of an organization leading to reduced personal contacts and isolation; lack of clearly defined goals resulting in confusion of subordinates.

2. Upward Communication: This involves communication emanating from subordinates to top management or from lower level of hierarchy to the top level. It thrives on the degree of trust and confidence that the top level has on the lower level. It encourages participative management. In a formal organization, both downward and upward communication must follow established routes e.g. in a school system the teacher cannot write directly to the honourable commissioner without going through the principal.

3. Lateral Communication — This is the type of communication among various managers or officers at the same level or across various divisions. It is the most frequent of the three flows as workers exchange information often whether work related or personal. This encourages team or group work.

Mullins (1993) pointed out that communication is not always a one—line flow as in downward or upward flow. Human communication can be more complex. The complexity is represented in networks. Four types of networks are said to be prominent namely wheel, circle, all channel and chain:

a)   Wheel network: - This occurs when a manager chairs a meeting with subordinates and he is the only source of information. Problems that are not complex can be solved quickly.

b)   Circle network: - This involves a group of staff or team working together in a physical arrangement in which they can only communicate with their immediate neighbour but not with the others in the group. This allows some measure of participation though less efficient than the wheel.

c) All channel network: - This is a situation where a team works together with unrestricted communication. It encourages full participation and is good for solving complex problems when not under pressure. Individuals can communicate with any member of the group. Level of satisfaction is high among members.

d) Chains: This is equivalent to a one-way downward communication process of a highly hierarchical organization (Mullins, 1993).

Road Blocks to Communication

According to Thomas (2005), there are thousands of messages that we can send to students by how we communicate with them. These can be grouped into twelve categories, each of which tends to show or completely stop existing communication that students need to solve problems and continue in their learning.

Some typical responses that communicate un-acceptance are:

1)   Ordering, commanding, directing.
2)   Warning, threatening, for example you had better sit up if you expect to pass my subject". You cannot make it".
3)   Moralizing, preaching, giving "should" and "ought". For example "you should leave your personal problems out of the classroom".
4)   Advising, offering solutions or suggestions.

The following responses tend to communicate inadequacies and faults.

5)   Judging, criticizing, disagreeing, blaming.
     For example "You are such a lazy student".
6)   Name calling, Stereotyping, Labeling.
7)   Interpreting, analyzing, diagnosing.
     Other messages try to make the student feel better or deny there is a problem.
8)   Praising, agreeing, and giving positive evaluation.
9)   Reassuring, sympathizing, consoling, supporting.
10)   Questioning, probing; interrogating' cross examining
11)   Withdrawing, distracting, being sarcastic and humouring.

Many people are unaware that they respond to students in one of these ways. Many of these responses above have hidden messages when the students hear them. School managers and teachers must avoid as much as possible speeches, signals or actions that will communicate unacceptable, inadequacies and faults while dealing with the students.

Active Listening

As an alternative to the road blocks discussed above, Thomas (2005) used techniques of active listening to promote communication. Communication has several avenues that can get crossed if the speaker is not clear with the message or the listener decodes it incorrectly. When we use our own words to repeat what we think the student or teacher has just communicated, we are clarifying their message. This feedback is called active listening. For example.

Students: - "I don't like this school as much as my formal school. People are not very nice".
Teacher: - You are unhappy at this school?
Student: - Yes, I have not made any good friend. No one includes me.
Teacher: - You have not really made friends.
Student: - Yes. I wish I know more people.

The Principal or Teacher is verbalizing what he/she thinks the student is saying. This lets the student affirm what is being said or explain their meaning in a different way.

Active listening is a powerful tool which helps the school manager or teacher communicates more productively with the student. He fully understands what the student is saying and helps the student articulate his concerns. Active listening helps the student deal with and diffuses strong feelings. Students are helped to understand their own emotions, Active listening, among others, facilitates problem-solving, keeps the responsibility with the students, makes the students more willing to listen to others, and promotes a closer, more meaningful relationship between the staff and students.

Listening is an important part of effective communication. The school manager needs to concentrate on encouraging not only students and teachers but also himself to exhibit good listening behaviours and strategies. Listening can be affected by personal bias, environmental factors, a short attention span, rehearsing a response, day dreaming, hot words or through use of filtering. These have to be guided against for effective communication to take place.

9.   Conclusion and Recommendations

Communication is an important ingredient and vital instrument in any given organization. It is the means by which organized activity is unified. It is the pillar upon which social inputs are fed into the social system. It is also the means by which social behaviour is modified and change is affected. Information is made productive and goals of the educational system are achieved. A good school principal should bear in mind that the success of the school is determined by his effective management of the school. Therefore, communication serves as multi-purpose and

multi-dimensional role in improving and achieving the goals of an organization.

The channel of communication needs to be modern, effective and as personal as possible if management of large organizations such as the school is to maintain close ties with teachers and encourage maximum performance. If the communication system in a school is open, an atmosphere of trust, reciprocity, intimacy and growth is built thus giving room for effective teaching and learning.

The principal and staff must be a team that works together to create a good learning environment. They should meet regularly to discuss the lesson plans and activities and to air any concern they might have.

The principal and teachers can also reach an understanding of different background, experiences, value, culture, religion and other factors which might affect their working relationship. The principal must be willing to ask or make clarifications on task, if the assignment is misunderstood. The principal and staff need to work together to build trust in the working relationship. Just as communication skills are also needed for effective communication, school administrators should understand what is to be communicated and do it effectively. This is because instructions need to be passed intelligibly to people to arouse their interest and support. If communication is ambiguous it can lead to chaos. The principal must come down to use the simplest language so as not to lose the meaning of what is being communicated. The idea of using a "third party or middle man" in communicating vital information often leads to distortion especially when the information being communicated is not of much interest or benefit to the "middle man". At times, the information being communicated may be of interest and he may have his own hidden agenda for introducing another dimension to the issue which on the long run may not be to the advantage of the school.

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