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## The Role of Internal Communication and the Effect on Employee Engagement

Cherie Gaither

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## Background and Significance

Communication gaps can be devastating for any business in today's competitive and fast paced environment. In the hospital setting, it can literally be a matter of life or death. According to the Joint Commission (2010), there is a prevalent culture of poor communication among health professionals resulting in significant medical errors and employee turnover. Hospital and healthcare workers are faced with improving patient outcomes, maintaining high patient and employee satisfaction scores, and managing human resources shortages, while providing effective, efficient and safe care to patients. The role of effective internal communications has become apparent as hospitals evaluate employee engagement and organizational performance.

Additionally, as hospitals deal with staff shortages, a collaborative, engaging communication model becomes a necessity to recruit and keep top performers. According to a recent study by Cooper-Warren (2008), the younger workforce is paying attention to organizational culture which is influenced by internal communications. Communication satisfaction is related to job satisfaction and organizational performance (Carriere & Borque, 2009). Hospitals have begun to measure job satisfaction and employee engagement in an effort to evaluate strategies for building strong internal communications.

A recent study from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2011) demonstrated a link between high performance work practices (HPWPs) and their impact on quality outcomes and patient safety. Common HPWPs included formal methods for internal communications practices, shared governance and prevalent employee recognition. Internal communication practices that included sharing the organization's priorities and mission, vision and values with employees were identified in high performing healthcare organizations which demonstrated quality outcomes. Engaging staff, especially in the area of communications,

accounted for differences in organizational performance and success in quality and safety outcomes.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to develop and evaluate the effect of three evidence-based internal communication practices on employee engagement for Kosair Children Hospital (KCH). The evidence based practices include: Employee Forums, Wednesday Weekly and a Communication Portal page. The Employee Forums are held quarterly for all KCH employees and a method for two-way conversations between employees and leadership. Each forum host about 8 different booths from leadership, human resources, foundation, and various other departments depending on need for communication from service lines. Staff members are encouraged to ask questions in a low threat environment and give feedback at each booth.

The Wednesday Weekly is an electronic newsletter that is emailed once a week to all employees. The newsletter has built in links for further details on each subject. The newsletter is archived on the Communication Portal Page for future reference.

The Communication Portal Page was built on the first page of the KCH internal website. This portal page contains the archives of the Wednesday Weekly and a schedule of upcoming events at KCH. It also includes two minute video clips from various leaders of KCH. Currently there are three clips archived on this page including messages from hospital President, the Chief Nursing Officer and the Director of Human Resources. New clips appear every two months.

Two questions were examined:

1. Will the implementation of evidence-based internal communications practices have a significant impact on employee engagement scores at Kosair Children's Hospital?

2. As compared to peer institutions within Norton Healthcare, will KCH demonstrate a greater increase in mean engagement scores from 2010 to 2011 as a result of these practices?

### **Literature Review**

The primary purpose of this review was to synthesize the current state of the science on internal organizational communications. Secondly, the author sought to explore the connections between internal communications processes and the enhancement of employee engagement. Although there are other outcomes of effective communications that could be related to organizational performance, this review was limited to the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement. This systematic review of current literature lends insight into leverage points organizations can use to improve internal communications practices, and subsequently, levels of employee engagement. Although much of the research reviewed was found in the business management and human resource literature, these new streams of knowledge offer a lens for healthcare organizations for developing innovative communication strategies and tactics.

A broad multidisciplinary approach was used to capture literature from various fields. Literature from human resources, business, psychology, management, and healthcare was examined. The databases searched included the following: *Academic Search Premier*, *Business Source Premier*, *Medline* and *PsycINFO*. The search was limited to articles published in English-language sources, using the keywords *internal communications*, *employee engagement* and *organizational performance*. The search was limited to articles with keywords appearing in the title, abstract, or both.

For each article included, level of evidence within the study was ranked using the Gerontological Nursing Intervention Research Center Research Dissemination Core (GNIRC, 1999). Level A evidence represents evidence from well-designed meta-analysis. Level B represents evidence from well designed controlled trials that include both randomized and nonrandomized populations with results that consistently support an intervention or treatment. Level C represents evidence from observational studies that include correlational descriptive studies or controlled studies with inconsistent results. Level D represents evidence from expert opinion or multiple case reports. (Appendix A)

A total of eleven studies were included in the review. Appendix A summarizes the reviewed articles. Presently, a minimal number of studies have been conducted around the topical areas of internal communication, employee engagement, and organizational performance. Moreover, while some research into the effect of internal communication on employee engagement and the performance of an organization has been conducted in large corporations around the world, empirical information about these processes is scant in the healthcare setting. The highest level of evidence found on internal communications and its effect on employee engagement or organizational performance was Level C, which included observational studies and surveys.

Articles were categorized into two main themes: (a) internal communication and its effect on employee engagement and (b) internal communication and its effect on organizational performance. An exploration of each theme follows.

### **Internal Communications and Its Effect on Employee Engagement**

According to a series of studies by Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2008, 2009, 2010), engaged employees are twice as likely to be top performers, miss 20% fewer days of work than

their less engaged counterparts, are more supportive of organizational change, and have lower turnover rates. Effective communication was found to be a key driver for employee engagement and an indicator of financial performance. The return on investment (ROI) for engagement includes an increase in staff satisfaction which leads to an increase in productivity. Increased productivity then drives value for the organization (HR Solutions, 2010). Similarly, HR Solutions (2010) engagement surveys found that employee engagement adds value to the organization by driving customer satisfaction, which in turn enhances customer loyalty and increases profitability and growth of an organization.

Research into the effect of internal communications on employee engagement has been carried out in the educational field, police departments, public service, and business organizations (Arif et al, 2009; Chen, 2008; Chong, 2007; Dolphin 2005; Sopow, 2008; Sudhaker & Patil, 2006; White et al, 2010); but only one study was found that took place in a healthcare setting; that being a land ambulance service (Carriere & Bourque, 2009). Most studies were conducted abroad in the United Kingdom, China, and Canada, with only one U.S. study conducted at the University of Tennessee. All of the studies found were observational studies that were conducted with the use of surveys and some measurement tool for employee engagement, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction.

Satisfaction with internal communications was found to be related to higher scores of employee engagement and organizational commitment (Carriere & Bourque, 2009, Taylor & Elsey, 2005, Sopow, 2008, Sudhakar & Patil, 2006). In addition to an increase in employee engagement, the study by White, Vance and Stafford (2010) found that internal communication satisfaction added a sense of community and gave employees a feeling of greater responsibility

to advocate for the organization at a personal level. Given these findings, it is not surprising that companies are placing more emphasis on internal communication channels.

There have been studies that link employee satisfaction with commitment to the organization and employee engagement, while other studies link communication satisfaction with employee satisfaction. There had not been previous research to determine if communication satisfaction mediates the relationships among internal communication practices, job satisfaction, and affective organizational commitment until the study conducted by Carriere and Bourque (2009). The data from this study showed that internal communication practices explained 49.8% of the variation in communication satisfaction, 23.4% of the variation of job satisfaction and 17.5% of the variation in organizational commitment. This suggests that internal communication systems that do not satisfy employees will in turn affect their job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Further research on the mediating role of communication satisfaction in internal communication practices can lead to the development of measurement tools for evaluating effective internal communication strategies.

In his study of Chinese corporations, Chen (2008) found that satisfaction with internal communication was related to job satisfaction. This study also identified that corporations with different cultures tend to differ from each other regarding communication channels. Chen found that two-way channels of communication, although not typical of Chinese organizations, help organizations reach a higher level of employee trust ( $p < 0.001$ ). A qualitative study by Dolphin (2005) found similar results that two-way communication develops trust and further commitment during times of stress or change. Both studies support the concept that future communication strategies need to focus less on disseminating information and more on developing relationships with employees.



Carriere and Bourque (2009) demonstrated that internal communication satisfaction affects overall job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In addition, White, Vance, and Stafford (2010) reported that employees who were most satisfied with internal communications placed a high value on face-to-face communications with their leaders and reported a variety of methods of communications in their organization. Employees in this study reported that hearing directly from leaders gave them a sense of full disclosure and made them feel important, even if the information was not needed to perform their job.

Watson Wyatt Worldwide repeated their ROI studies in 2009 and 2010 and reported that effective communication remains a driver of employee engagement and organizational performance. Successful organizations are paying attention to internal communications and applying their practices to meet individual needs of today's widely diverse employees. The Watson Wyatt Worldwide study found that companies who invest in effective communication programs and keep employees engaged had an average of 26% higher productivity rates and were three times as likely to exceed performance expectations as those with less-engaged coworkers.

### **Internal Communication and its Effect on Organizational Performance**

Organizational performance can be measured in many different ways depending on the industry of interest. Performance outcomes may include, but are not limited to; profits, retention of employees, and branding and recognition of company. The healthcare industry, like many other businesses, recognizes the need for effective communication to prevent errors and reduce costs. Building effective communication networks helps raise standards, share best practices, and develop cohesive teams (Quirke, 2005).

Only four studies were found that linked the role of internal communications to organizational performance. Studies by Arif et al (2009), Chen, (2008), Chong (2007), and Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2009, 2010), all found effective communication can enhance the performance of organizations. Three of the studies were conducted in very different settings: Chinese corporations, Singapore Airlines and Pakistani businesses (Chen, 2008, Chong, 2007, Arif et al, 2009). The studies included both qualitative and quantitative approaches that consisted of in-depth interviews, focus groups and surveys. The fourth ROI study was conducted worldwide with 328 organizations in various regions around the world.

Although all studies showed a correlation between internal communication and organizational performance, the definition of organizational performance was different in each case. Singapore Airlines viewed their international awards in innovation and service as outcomes in performance (Chong, 2007). The Chinese corporations measured their organizational performance on the job satisfaction and perceptions of trust between managers and employees (Chen, 2008). The Pakistani businesses measured their organizational performance by four aspects: quality of products or services, growth in sales, profitability and market share (Arif, Jan, Marwat & Ullah, 2009).

The Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2009, 2010) studies measured performance on financial indicators such as shareholder returns. They found that companies that were highly effective communicators had 47% higher shareholder returns. These studies also revealed that half of the highly effective communicators were providing management training in communication and improving engagement, which correlated to an average of 26% higher productivity. During the current challenging economic times, a focus on communication strategies can yield surprising results.

In summary, this review found that internal communications practices play an important role in employee engagement. Recent studies suggest that companies can benefit from ongoing evaluations of internal communication practices, two way communication practices and timely, consistent and effective methods of communication that satisfy employees. Therefore, this project was designed to develop a communication team to help assess internal communication practices, and create new evidence based internal communication practices, and evaluate their impact on employee engagement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Weick's Organizational Theory served as the framework for this project. Equivocality (unpredictability) in information is inherent in organizations according to Weick (2001). Weick is an American organizational theorist who is noted for introducing the notion of "sensemaking" in organizational communication. Weick believes that information is the common material that all organizations process. As Weick (1985) explained, "The problem is that there are too many meanings, not too few. The problem faced by the sensemaker is one of equivocality, not one of uncertainty. The problem is confusion, not ignorance", (Miller, 2005). Weick asserts that organizations are bombarded with information and may take an assertive role in helping employees choose an interpretation best suited to the organization's interests.

Weick (1995, 2001) identifies the following elements in his sensemaking model:

- Organizations exist in an information environment
- Individuals create their environment by processing information; that is "enactment"
- Different members will get information inputs with different meanings and help create their environment
- Equivocality (unpredictability) in information is inherent in organizations

- Members will use “assembly rules (procedures) and communication cycles” to help with sensemaking of information
- When sensemaking is effective, the result is retention

Miller (2005) explains equivocality removal as an interpersonal process which involves at least two members interlocking some behaviors to reach an agreement on the meaning of the new information. Equivocality is “the existence of multiple interpretations of the same event” (Miller, p. 211). So members of the organization may use communication to promote one interpretation over another. For instance, Norton Healthcare employees are constantly bombarded by messages each day. This large healthcare organization will decide to assign a meaning to equivocal information and then attempt to get the employees to see it “their way” through multiple methods of internal communications. Organizations create a culture of best practices by making decisions on interpretations of equivocal information. Weick (1995) asserts that humans strive to find the best processes to overcome equivocality by organizing information and minimizing the multiple meanings of equivocal information.

Weick believes that information has many levels of meaning and if humans are sure of the meaning of the information, then they turn to routine rules and procedures to handle the information. An organization can use Weick’s Organizational Theory to focus on highly equivocal information that humans must talk about to then agree on the preferred interpretation and turn to procedures to handle the information and begin to retain the information (Cragan & Shields, 1998, Shockley-Zalabak, 2009).

Weick identifies three major message structure concepts that people use to organize communication: enactment, selection and retention. To begin, people need to talk about the multiple meanings of information. The cycle of enactment serves to recognize the equivocal

information. Once it is recognized or selected, then members of the organization can interpret and act on the information provided. Finally, the retention concept allows members of the organization to use its collective memory to see if it has a standard procedure to handle this equivocal information.

### **Previous Applications of Weick's Theory**

According to Weick, Sutcliffe, and Sutcliffe (2005), sensemaking in organizations involves turning events into meaningful images that are discussed as serve as a springboard for action. To deal with multiple meanings of equivocal information, interdependent people in organizations search for meaning and once interpreted, act on the information. The empirical research on 700 employees at United Kingdom healthcare organization conducted by Yeomans (2008) demonstrated that internal communications contribute to the development of organizational learning through Weick's sensemaking process. Internal communications were shown to contribute to employee commitment and promote a sense of belonging to the organization.

Additional research by Allard-Poesi (2005) supported Weick's theory of sensemaking with internal communication practices, but further demonstrated that sensemaking must be a continual flow of processes. Allard-Poesi's analysis of the methodological approaches of Weick's conception of sensemaking reveals this theory is illustrative of an active and ongoing socio-constructive conception of sensemaking in organizations. Allard-Poesi suggests that new tools be invented to help make sense as organizations continue to change. Continual changes in complex healthcare organizations like Norton Healthcare give us reasons to evaluate internal communication practices in an ongoing fashion.

Studies by Luscher and Lewis (2008) and Tourish and Robson (2006) not only support the use of Weick's theory in internal communication practices but identify its application in upward communication and interwoven communication patterns. Action research was conducted by Luscher and Lewis (2008) during organizational change. Tourish and Robson (2006) studied the role of informal upward communication for organizational feedback. Both groups identify the evidence of sensemaking, but also support two way internal communications as a coping mechanism to reinforce understanding of complex organizational change. To provide workable certainty, the process of sensemaking with internal communication practices creates organized consistent messages that enable employees to understand change. Two way communications enable participants to understand the meaning of the company's message and empower them to participate openly in their work environment.

As defined by Cheney, Christensen, Zorn and Ganesh (2004), organizations exist as a network of energies and interactions, much of which is communication. Norton Healthcare is a large healthcare system that employees over 11,000 employees. As such, it is not simply buildings but a more complex fabric of relationships. Organizational communication is the thread that weaves and constructs the fabric.

Sensemaking can be understood as part of the cultural web of the organization and is an interpersonal process. According to Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005), communication is a central component of sensemaking. Improving internal communications practices can increase sensemaking among employees which in turn can increase employee engagement and job satisfaction; thereby increasing employee retention (Carriere & Bourque, 2009).

## **Methods and Procedures**

### **Description of Evidence-Based Internal Communication Interventions**

The KCH Communication Team was developed in January of 2010. The team's purpose was to assess the current internal communication practices and to develop evidence based modes of communication to all employees. The team's mission was to provide methods of internal communication that are effective and satisfy KCH employees. The team consisted of seven members from different disciplines. There were representatives from nursing, management, education, pharmacy, foundation, marketing, and the IT department. Formal communication planning, employee feedback, leveraging technology and measurement of internal communications all enhance business performances (Wyatt, 2008, 2009, 2010).

In March of 2010, the team launched a communication assessment survey (Appendix B) among all the employees at KCH. A total of 447 employees representing 42 different departments responded to the assessment survey. Ninety percent of the respondents were females and 84% were non-management. The results showed that only 22% of the respondents were very satisfied with internal communications, while 51% were usually satisfied. The most preferred method of communication was email (65%) compared to verbal, social media, ticker boards or text messages. Almost half (49%) of the respondents wanted their email formatted in bullet points, as compared to as much information as possible (18%). With information overload, it pays to know the communication preferences of different audiences and target messages to the needs of individuals (Sudhakar & Patil, 2008).

In April of 2010, Norton Healthcare launched its first Employee Engagement Survey. The communication assessment survey and the Employee Engagement survey gave the team KCH employees' preferences and served as a baseline for communication needs and engagement

levels. A literature review of successful internal communication practices among other organizations (Arif et al, 2009; Chen, 2008; Chong, 2007; and Dolphin, 2005) gave the team direction for new modes of communication. These included the Wednesday Weekly, the Employee Forums and the Communication Portal Page.

The electronic Wednesday Weekly was developed to reduce the volume of emails and was designed as a clear and concise message on a consistent day of the week. Email is still preferred electronically social media (Friedl & Vercic, 2011) for employee information. All news from any departments is sent to an Administrative Secretary who compiles all the news into an electronic newsletter with built in links for further details. The newsletter is previewed by the CNO, the Chair of the Communications Team, and the Marketing committee member. Each Wednesday, the electronic newsletter is sent to all employees per email account. Sending clear and concise messages is related to business productivity (Sudhakar & Patil, 2006). Too much useless information reduces morale and organizational effectiveness. Reducing the flood of emails enhances satisfaction with communication and allows for sensemaking among employees (Sopow, 2007).

The Employee Forums provide a venue to address equivocality of information and a method for two-way communications. The forums are held quarterly Tuesday through Sunday on different shifts throughout the week to enhance participation of employees. The previous Employee Forums were presentations by leadership and had demonstrated low attendance. Beginning in May of 2010, the Communication Team began to alternate each quarter, the presentation format with a new, more interactive booth format. The content varies from discussion of clinical practices, administrative strategic planning, updates on building enhancements, and Magnet readiness to updates from individual departments. Both the



presentation format and the new booth format included a theme, door prizes and food for participants. The interactive employee forums included six to eight booths, each providing information and leadership presence for staff to ask questions in a non-threatening manner. Each employee is encouraged to fill out evaluations and give feedback regarding the various topics and discussions. This evaluation form was also used for door prizes for attendance at forums. Forums offered another method of sensemaking for employees. Successful communication plans include two-way communications, employee engagement and evaluation of methods (Wolfe, 2005). Employees who felt they have an opportunity to provide feedback to leaders face to face have higher engagement factors and twice the job satisfaction (Sopow, 2007; Chong, 2007; Stein, 2006).

The Communication Portal Page was created as a site for storage of all communications for the employees of KCH. The portal page contains archived issues of the Wednesday Weekly, video clips of messages from leadership and a schedule of events for KCH. The portal page allows further sensemaking by allowing employees to re-read information or watch message video clips from leadership to enhance retention of information. Redundancy of communication channels leads to good internal communication (White, Vance, and Stafford, 2010).

These specific internal communication practices were developed to give structure for communication at KCH. Good internal communication programs have been found to improve staff retention and performance (Cooper-Warren, 2008; Zwarenstein et al, 2007). Employees who felt they were getting the right amount of information had twice the job satisfaction (Chong, 2007; Sopow, 2007).

## **Evaluation Design**

Based on review of studies in the literature, this project was the first known in healthcare that attempted to examine the relationship between internal communication practices and employee engagement. The evaluation design included a pre and post test comparison of engagement scores. The baseline scores collected in April 2010 were compared to July 2011 after the implementation of three evidence-based communication practices. Data are derived from engagement surveys administered by Norton Healthcare as part of their routine assessment of employees' satisfaction for improvement purposes.

## **Participants and Setting**

Implementation of the internal communication practices took place at Kosair Children's Hospital. KCH is the only free-standing pediatric hospital in the state of Kentucky and is licensed for 263 beds. KCH has provided care to the Louisville community for 120 years and had over 120,000 patient encounters in 2011. KCH is the only Norton Healthcare hospital that has current Magnet designation.

Staff from all five Norton Healthcare Hospitals participated in the surveys. The five hospitals include Kosair Children's, Norton, Suburban, Audubon and Brownsboro Hospitals. All five hospitals are located in Louisville, Kentucky. Employees from all departments including nursing, dietary, housekeeping, laboratory, pharmacy, administration, finance, and marketing were encouraged to complete the survey. There were 8,445 heterogeneous participants in 2010 survey (pre-test) and 9,019 participants in 2011 survey (post-test). Aggregate survey data were available by cost center units. Paired data were available for 2010 and 2011 for 128 cost units from all five hospitals in the multihospital system.

## Measures

### Engagement Survey

HR Solutions' the Sweet 16 Engagement survey was used to measure employee engagement. This survey measures factors regarding commitment and compensation along five separate dimensions: overall job satisfaction, organizational effectiveness, recognition/career advancement, supervisory/management and coworker performance/cooperation. HR Solutions (2010) reported the strength of the Sweet 16 was measured using the principle component factor analysis and found the tool reliable for measuring Employee Engagement. HR Solutions reported that a factor analysis was used to verify the validity of the survey.

The engagement survey includes 36 questions. Responses are based on a 5-point Likert type scale, with possible response options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The higher values indicate greater employee engagement. Mean scores are computed at the unit level for each question. Additionally, the overall percentage of employees who are classified as engaged, disengaged, or ambivalent is identified.

For the purpose of this study, 17 of the 36 questions were pulled into a separate subscale. This subscale was designed to measure engagement related to communication at both the unit and the organizational level (subscale 1). Total scores could range from 17-85. Additionally, 8 of the 17 questions that were related to organizational communications only, were also examined (subscale 2). Total scores could range from 8-40. The Communication Team's evidence-based interventions were focused on KCH's internal communication practices; therefore questions related to organizational communication were examined at a closer look.

Cronbach's alphas were run to assess the reliability of the subscales. Cronbach's alpha results for subscale 1 were .979 and .951, respectively for 2010 and 2011, showing strong

internal consistency of the subscale. A second set of Cronbach's alpha coefficients were run on subscale 2. A total of eight questions were included in this evaluation. For 2010 engagement scores; the Cronbach's alpha was .944 and for 2011 was .929, again demonstrating strong internal consistency of the scale.

### **Process Indicators**

#### ***Forum Attendance***

The Employee Forums attendance figures were maintained throughout this project and tallied for both the previous presentations format and the revamped interactive booth formats. Staffs were also encouraged to fill out forum evaluations at each employee forum. As an incentive, their evaluation form became the door prize ticket. These evaluations included open-ended questions to gather feedback regarding topics and format.

#### ***Wednesday Weekly Assessment***

During the project, one measurement was conducted to evaluate the impact of the Wednesday Weekly. At the end of the September 2011 Employee Forum, each staff member was asked to recall one thing that they had read in the most recent Wednesday Weekly. This response (whether correct or incorrect) became their door prize ticket.

### **Data Collection Plan**

The employee engagement surveys took place at Norton Healthcare during April 2010 and July of 2011. The surveys were sent electronically to all employees per email and each was conducted over a two week period. A door prize was awarded each time as an incentive to participate in this survey.

In order to compare KCH processes with those of other NHC facilities, an assessment of each facility's internal communication practices was conducted by the author. Chief Nursing

Officers (CNO) at each of the four peer institutions were interviewed in January 2012. A questionnaire (Appendix C) asked about specific internal communication practices of each hospital. The questions included:

- Does the hospital have a Communication Team that evaluates and plans internal communication practices?
- Does the hospital conduct two-way employee forums?
- Does the hospital have weekly newsletter? Is this newsletter stored for employees to refer back to?
- Does the hospital have a Communication Portal Page to store information? Does the page have video clips of hospital executives and recent messages for employees who like visual communication?

Specific internal communication practices were coded and used for comparison of internal communication practices among all five hospitals at Norton Healthcare.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed at the unit level. Unit mean scores for each of the 17(subscale 1) and 8 (subscale) questions were entered into SPSS for 2010 and 2011 by hospital unit. Only those units for which data were available for each time period were included in the analyses. Overall unit engagement scores for KCH were also included.

Descriptive statistics were run to describe the mean scores and the ranges of the mean scores for all hospital units. Descriptive statistics were also used to summarize attendance at each Employee Forum and the results of the pulse survey to evaluate the Wednesday Weekly. Paired *t*-tests were used to look at pre- and post-intervention differences in engagement for both subscales. A second paired *t*-test was conducted to look at overall percentage of engaged,

disengaged and ambivalent for only KCH hospital units. If significant, regression analysis was planned to determine the impact of each intervention.

### **Ethical Consideration and Risks to Subjects**

This project used aggregate secondary data (mean scores of departments) to evaluate the effects of internal communication practices on employee engagement. Individual participant scores were not used in this evaluation. Data were stored on a flash drive in the author's desk which was locked and secured. No staff members of the hospital had access to this office except security.

### **Resources and Cost of Project**

This project to evaluate internal communication practices on employee engagement had no estimated cost other than the labor involved in data collection and analysis. The resources that were needed were the availability of the Director of Employee Onboarding and the committee Chair, members and project consultant. The Communication Team had a budget of \$24,000 for 2010 and \$22,000 for 2011. Time was the most needed resource for this project.

### **Required Approvals Needed for Implementation**

Approval for this evaluation of internal communication practices was obtained from the Capstone Project Committee. Those committee members were Dr. Sherill Cronin, Dr. Linda Zapp and Dr. Ruth Wagoner. The project also had a consultant from the University of Louisville, Dr. Brad Shuck. Kosair Children's Hospital Chief Nursing Officer gave approval for the author to evaluate engagement scores for this project. The Norton Healthcare IRB was consulted and determined that the project did not meet the definition of research and therefore did not need Institutional Review Board approval.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Engagement Scores*

	Pre-Intervention (2010)				Post-Intervention (2011)			
	<i>n</i> = 157				<i>n</i> = 161			
	Mean	Median	Mode	<i>SD</i>	Mean	Median	Mode	<i>SD</i>
Engagement related to unit and organizational communication (subscale 1)	64.82	63.95	57.98	6.01	65.74	65.53	66.93	6.04
Engagement related to organizational communication (subscale 2)	31	30.55	30.27	2.58	31.13	30.49	32.82	2.88

**Results**

Descriptive statistics for engagement scores for subscale 1 and subscale 2 of 2010 revealed 157 mean scores of hospital units. There were 23 hospital units that were missing 2010 data. Descriptive statistics for engagement scores for 2011 revealed 161 mean scores for all hospital units. There were 19 hospital units that were missing 2011 data. Descriptive statistics for engagement scores are shown in Table 1.

The CNO interviews results are shown in Table 2. Individual interventions are identified with a “yes” or “no for each hospital. KCH was the only hospital having all five interventions and the only hospital that evaluates each employee forum.

Table 2

*CNO Survey Results*

NHC Hospital	Communication Team	Newsletter	Newsletter stored for future reference	Yes	No	Communication Portal Page
KCH	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Norton	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Audubon	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Suburban	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Brownsboro	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

**Impact of Evidence-Based Communication Practices**

To analyze whether KCH demonstrated an increase in mean engagement scores from 2010 to 2011 as a result of the interventions, a paired samples *t*-test was run for 2010 and 2011 engagement scores, using the 17 communication questions that included both unit level communication and organizational communication (subscale 1). There was no significance difference ( $p = .825$ ) between 2010 and 2011 scores. However, examination of the descriptive statistics, including the range of scores, suggests a ceiling effect may have influenced this non-significant finding.

A second paired sample *t*-test was employed on the 8 questions that were related only to organizational communication (subscale 2). Again, there was no significance difference ( $p = .704$ ) was found between 2010 and 2011. Because no significant differences were found in the



Table 3

*Engagement Scores Before and After Interventions*

Scale	<u>Pre-intervention</u>		<u>Post-intervention</u>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>(n=36)</i>		<i>(n=36)</i>			
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>		
Engagement related to unit and organizational communication (subscale 1)	65.24	7.52	65.55	5.12	-.223	.825
Engagement related to organizational communication (subscale 2)	31.33	3.086	31.10	2.23	.384	.704

*t*-test analyses for subscales 1 and 2, further regression analyses to determine the individual impact of the three evidence-based interventions were not conducted. Table 3 provides a summary of paired sample *t*-test analyses.

### **Comparison of Engagement scores across Hospitals**

To examine changes in employee engagement scores at KCH, a paired sample *t*-test was conducted to examine overall engagement for KCH. Three subscales of percentages of engagement, disengagement and ambivalent were included in this analysis. There was no significant change in the proportions of engagement ( $p = .629$ ). However, KCH did increase overall engagement percentage by 3%. In comparison, two of the peer hospitals increased by 2% and the other two hospitals had decreases of 1% and 3%. Table 4 provides a summary of the

Table 4

*KCH Engagement Before and After Interventions*

Scale	<u>Pre-intervention</u>		<u>Post-intervention</u>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>(n=36)</i>		<i>(n=36)</i>			
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>		
KCH engaged	33.67	14.57	32.60	13.21	.489	.629
KCH disengaged	9.2	7.82	8.4	5.26	.660	.514
KCH ambivalent	57.23	11.82	59.00	10.28	-1.018	.317

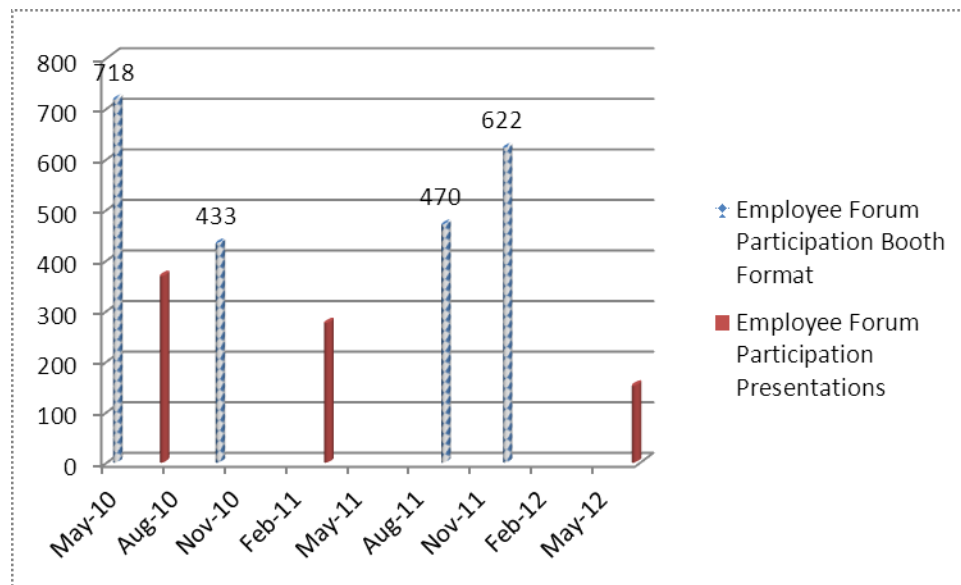
KCH paired sample *t*-test. Because there were no significant differences, individual interventions were not analyzed for impact.

### **Process Indicators**

Two process indicators were used for formative evaluation of project interventions. Participation numbers for Employee Forums were evaluated both in the interactive booth format and in the presentation format. Employee recall of Wednesday Weekly content was used to evaluate whether employees were reading the newsletter.

Before the Communication Team began its work, KCH had annual Employee Forums where formal presentations were given by Administration. Average level of participation at these forums was around 100 staff members. During the conduct of the project, the booth format had an average participation level of 560 and the presentation format had an average participation level of 265 employees. The participation level of the booth format was more than double the participation level of the presentation format. Figure 1 depicts the increase in participation at employee forums.

Figure 1 *Employee Forum Participation Levels*



To measure the impact of the Wednesday Weekly, a pulse survey was conducted during the September 2011 employee forums. Instead of completing the evaluation form for the forum, attendees were asked to answer two questions: (1) What is the Wednesday Weekly? (2) List one piece of news that you learned from your last Wednesday Weekly. A total of 387 responses out of 470 attendees (82%) were obtained.

The results from the survey showed 82% of total participants were able to correctly identify the Wednesday Weekly and 63% percent were able to recall recent news from the Wednesday Weekly. There were additional positive comments written on the pulse survey regarding the decrease in emails. Additionally, the Communication Team also tracked the number of saved emails each week that would have gone out as individual emails to the KCH employees. Over the past two years, the Wednesday Weekly has saved, on the average, 11 emails each week.

### **Barriers to Implementation and Sustainability**

There were no barriers to the assessment of employee engagement scores and implementation of new internal communication practices. There were no financial constraints to the Communication Team budget for 2011 or 2012, although the budget will be slightly decreased for 2013. Changes in the Communication Team leadership and membership could also affect the future direction of the team and its goals. This may result in replacing the current interventions with new internal communications practices. However, a new Communication Team Chair has been named and all members of the team remain for 2013.

### **Discussion**

Using Weick's theoretical organizational communication theory and evidence-based internal communication practices, the purpose of this project was to build three new internal communication interventions to enhance employee engagement. The project was designed to address the following questions: (1) Will the implementation of evidence-based internal communications practices have a significant impact on employee engagement scores at Kosair Children's Hospital? (2) As compared to peer institutions within Norton Healthcare, will KCH demonstrate a greater increase in mean engagement scores, as a result of these practices?

With regards to the first question, there was no significant increase in employee engagement for KCH as a result of the interventions. There were improvements in mean scores from 2010 to 2011, but due to a possible ceiling effect, statistical significance was not evident. To illustrate the ceiling effect, previous mean scores were already at 4.0 and the top possible score was 5.0, providing little room for improvement at a significant level.

With regards to the second question, KCH did not have a significant increase in mean engagement scores; however there was a 3% increase in their engagement percentages. KCH was

the only hospital that moved its overall engagement scores by 3%. As suggested by recent studies, companies benefit from evaluations of internal communication practices, two-way communications and effective and timely communications that satisfy employees and drive engagement (Carriere & Bourque, 2009; White, Vance and Stafford, 2010; Wolfe, 2005).

A number of factors may have contributed to the lack of significant findings. To begin, the healthcare industry struggles with turnover and retention. During this two year project, Norton Healthcare experienced changes in both executive leadership and unit-level management while attempts were made to measure employee engagement across the system. This variable, while not evaluated may have affected engagement scores, independent of the communication strategies.

Secondly, the overall timeline for the project was somewhat compressed. The Communication Team was formed in January of 2010 and spent the first three months conducting a literature search of internal communications strategies and their outcomes. The employee engagement survey was completed in April of 2010 and the first interactive Employee Forum was held in May 2010. The Wednesday Weekly began in October 2010 and the Communication Portal Page began in January 2011. The second employee engagement survey took place in July 2011, after only one full year of interactive employee forums, nine months of the Wednesday Weekly and six months of the Communication Portal Page. This compressed timeline may not have captured the full impact of all three interventions and is a possible limitation to this project.

Finally, another limitation to this project was the limited evidence available regarding effective internal communication interventions, with no evidence reported in the hospital setting. Without strong evidence to support internal communications interventions, more research may

be needed before applying to practice. Although studies suggest that companies who invest in effective communication strategies have higher engagement and organizational performance (Watson Wyatt, 2010); there are minimal studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of specific internal communication practices.

This project may also have benefited from repetition of the original communication assessment survey to evaluate employee communication satisfaction. As suggested by Carrier and Bourque (2009), communication satisfaction drives job satisfaction and employee engagement. It may have been possible to see the impact of the interventions on communication satisfaction, although their impact was not evident on employee engagement. Therefore, continued monitoring of future employee engagement surveys and communication practices at KCH may reveal further positive results of these practices.

### **Recommendations and Implication for Nursing**

In summary, the purpose of this project was to build and evaluate internal communication interventions that would enhance employee engagement. The desired outcome of the communication team's efforts was to show a significant increase in employee engagement for KCH, as compared to peer institutions. However, even though the impact was not significant, valuable information was obtained.

Recommendations derived from this project include the need for a communication satisfaction tool. Repeating the initial communication survey may have shown some satisfaction with communication as well as satisfaction with each intervention. As suggested by Carrier and Bourque (2009), internal communication practices explained 49.8% of the variation in communication satisfaction, 23.4% of the variation of job satisfaction and 17.5% of the variation

in organizational commitment. The development of a communication satisfaction tool for hospitals would be beneficial as hospitals today evaluate internal communications.

The participation levels at quarterly employee forums and the consistent evaluations at the end of each forum offered some indication of employee satisfaction in regard to one communication mode for KCH. This project demonstrated forum attendance is doubled with the interactive booth format as compared to the formal presentation format. Additionally, the recall of news from the Wednesday Weekly newsletter demonstrated the impact of another communication method. Staff members were reading the electronic newsletter and were able to recall the information. However, a reliable and valid tool to measure the effectiveness of hospitals' internal communications could add another measurement instrument for today's Accountable Care Organizations.

Further research on internal communication practices in the healthcare field could assist hospitals as they build effective internal communication practices and evaluate employee engagement. Quirke (2005) demonstrated that organizations that build effective internal communications networks raise performance work standards, share best practices and develop cohesive teams. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2011) demonstrated a link between high performance work practices (HPWPs) and their impact on quality outcomes and patient safety. Common HPWPs included formal methods for internal communications practices such as sharing the organization's priorities and mission, vision and values with employees were identified in high performing healthcare organizations which demonstrated quality outcomes. Engaging staff, especially in the area of communications, accounted for differences in organizational performance and success in quality and safety outcomes.

As healthcare reform continues, with emphasis on effective quality outcomes, the healthcare industry could benefit from more research to guide internal communication practices. This project offered a two year springboard of structured internal communication practices that enhanced employee participation at Employee Forums and resulted in some increase in percentages of engaged staff. Further analysis of communication satisfaction in hospital settings might reveal which internal communication practices have the most impact to drive employee engagement in healthcare.



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Author/Title	Purpose/Research Question	Methods: Setting, Sample, Design	Results/ Statistical Test	Grade of Evidence	Limits/ Notes
<p>Arif, M., Jan, K., Marwat, Z., &amp; Ullah, I. (2009). Performance enhancement through effective communication: A study of the role of external and internal communication. <i>Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business</i>, 1, 119-148.</p>	<p>The relationship among external and internal communication, and change in perceived organizational performance. The influence of organizational communication and its impact on organizational performance</p>	<p>Correlation study that tested hypotheses that 2 indep variables (internal and external communications) enhances organizational performance. Descriptive surveys of 34 companies and 136 respondents.</p>	<p>Demonstrated strong positive relationship among both internal and external communication and change in performance of business companies</p>	<p>C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires</p>	<p>Business world</p>
<p>Carriere, J. &amp; Bourque, C. (2009). The effects of organizational communication on job satisfaction and organizational commitment in a land ambulance service and the mediating role of communication satisfaction. <i>Career Development International</i>, 14, 29-49.</p>	<p>To gather insight into relationship between internal communication practices, communication satisfaction, job satisfaction and organizational commitment.</p>	<p>Quantitative correlation study. Participants at urban land ambulance service. Four measurement tools: Communication Audit Survey, Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire, Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire and Affective Organizational Commitment Scale. 91 participants</p>	<p>Internal communication practices explained 50% of variation in communication satisfaction, 23.4% variation in job satisfaction, 17.5% in organizational commitment. Means internal communication systems that do not satisfy employees will in turn affect job satisfaction and commitment.</p>	<p>C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires</p>	<p>Small sample size but supports previous literature regarding relationship between job satisfaction and communication practices. Adds further insight into relationship between internal communication practices and communication satisfaction, job satisfaction and commitment.</p>

Chen, N. (2008). Internal/employee communication and organizational effectiveness: A study of Chinese corporations in transitions. <i>Journal of Contemporary China</i> , 17, 167-189.	Evaluation of Chinese corporate internal communication: mode, channels, culture and the role communicators play. The effects of internal communication on job satisfaction.	Qualitative and quantitative study of Chinese corporations. Stratified sampling of 100 corporations, individual interviews and focus groups over 3 years	Two way communication channels reach higher levels of trust, job satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.	C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires	Study conducted in China corporations but supports other literature regarding channels of communication, internal communication satisfaction and job satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.
Chong, M. (2007). The role of internal communication and training in infusing corporate values and delivering brand promise: Singapore Airlines' experience. <i>Corporate Reputation Review</i> , 10, 201-212.	The role of internal communication and training plays in delivering commitment to organization's core values.	Qualitative and quantitative study with interviews and observations of 6270 Singapore Airlines staff and training crew.	Internal communication and training had significant effect on employees consistent deliverance of airlines brand promise and effectiveness of organization	C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires	Self reported surveys of delivering brand messages but also observations demonstrated effectiveness of training. Not sure of link between high performance of airlines and internal communication.
Dolphin, R. (2005). Internal communications: Today's strategic imperative. <i>Journal of Marketing Communications</i> , 11, 171-190.	Examine the role of internal communication in UK and commitment to organization. Examines role of internal communications during organizational stress.	Interpretive exploratory quantitative study with qualitative approach using open ended questions among 21 large UK organizations.	Deliberate value of communication with employees was affirmed. Effective internal communication help deal with uncertainty, allows employees to identify with organization. Demonstrated internal communications role with motivation of employee.	C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires	UK study in the business world. Small sample and unsure of representative of overall population.

Sopow, E. (2007). The communication climate change at RCMP. <i>SCM, 12</i> , 20-23.	The correlation between internal communication and engagement factors	Quantitative study of Royal Canadian Mounted Police in British Columbia, Canada. 1,080 respondents rated quality of 25 workplace engagement factors and internal communication strategies at workplace.	Employees who had high level of recognition had high engagement scores. Employees who felt information was shared openly at work had high engagement scores. Employee engagement and organizational effectiveness was related to feeling valued and listened to. Too much useless information decreased morale and job performance and getting right amount info increased job satisfaction.	C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires	Supports decreasing useless emails. Self reported and only Canadian mounted police who may not have choice for surveys.
Sudhakar, B. & Patil, S. (2006). Measuring up. <i>Communication World</i> , 32-35.	Will there be an increase in engagement using measurement tool to evaluate internal communications?	Case study of one Indian business organizations using surveys and tool to evaluate internal communications.	Profound preference for type of communication channels found among different work groups. Engagement scores rose 42% and employees contribute far more to success of organization.	C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires	Internal communications related to engagement and contribute to organizational success.
Taylor, M. & Elsey, G. (2005). Building commitment to a new business strategy at Sensis. <i>Strategic Communication Management, 9</i> , 14-17.	Move from one way to two way communication channels affects on engagement, comm satisfaction and performance	Focus groups to study internal communications, developed Comm Team at Australian advertising and search market business of 2,000 employees	Increased 2 way communications and improved engagement from 75%-81%, improved communication satisfaction from 52% to 81%, had new business acquisitions and new search products improving organizational performance.	C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires	One business in Australia now performing better than Australian norm. Different ways to measure engagement and performance.

<p>Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2008, 2009). Driving business results through continuous engagement. <i>WorkUSA Survey Report</i>, 1-28.</p>	<p>Is there a ROI on internal communications using over 300 organizations around the world?</p>	<p>Multiregional study of business and 13,000 fulltime employees using engagement scores and performances index</p>	<p>Internal communication efforts increase engagement scores, performances, but shows businesses are not investing in measurement tools</p>	<p>C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires</p>	<p>Internal communications related to engagement and performance.</p>
<p>Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2009, 2010). Capitalizing on effective communication. <i>Communication ROI Study Report</i>, 1-17.</p>	<p>Is there ROI on internal communications in organizations?</p>	<p>Multiregional study of 328 business and 5 million employees using engagement scores and performances index</p>	<p>Effective communication is leading indicator of financial performance and drives engagement. Effective us social media (37% compared to 14%). Engaged are 26% higher productive, miss less days, 3 x exceed performance expectations.</p>	<p>C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires</p>	<p>Internal communications related to organization performance and levels of engagement</p>
<p>White, C., Vanc, A., &amp; Stafford, G. (2010). Internal communication, information satisfaction, and sense of community: The effect of personal influence. <i>Journal of Public Relations Research</i>, 22, 65-84.</p>	<p>Relationship between perception of information channels from management, relationship with management and sense of community and information satisfaction and commitment to organization.</p>	<p>Random sample at large multi-campus geographically dispersed university. 20 employees from each category of workers were telephoned interviewed for 20min to 1 hr. Qualitative research with 147 interviews.</p>	<p>Getting info from top management is important to employee and makes them feel valued and prefer face to face style. (employee forums). Redundancy of communication channels leads to good internal communication (newsletters, staff meetings, etc.). Being in the know encourages commitment.</p>	<p>C-evidence from observation study and questionnaires</p>	<p>Only at university setting although complex. Supports face to face employee forums and internal communication enhances commitment.</p>

Communication Assessment Survey 2010

**1. What is your satisfaction level with the communication you are receiving from Kosair Children's Hospital?**

- Not satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Usually satisfied
- Very satisfied

**2. What employee communications method do you receive MOST OFTEN?**

- Email
- Phone/Voice Mail
- Verbal (meetings, conversations, shift huddles, etc.)
- Written (newsletters, memos, posters/flyers, etc.)

**3. Rank how would you prefer to receive information from Kosair Children's Hospital?**

*(1= most preferred method    6= least preferred method)*

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Email	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Facebook/Twitter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Verbal (meetings, conversations, shift huddles, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scrolling ticker board/TV monitor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Text messages	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Written (newsletters, memos, posters/flyers, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4. Please list any other new method(s) you would like to have implemented to receive communication from Kosair Children's Hospital. (i.e. social media, video messages, etc.)**

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**5. CURRENTLY, how much time does it take each day to get your Kosair Children's Hospital information (employee forums, benefits, events, etc.)?**

- 0-5 minutes
- 6-15 minutes
- 16-30 minutes
- 31 minutes-1 hour
- Over an hour

**6. How much time do you NEED each day to get your Kosair Children's Hospital information (employee forums, benefits, events, etc.)?**

- 0-5 minutes
- 6-15 minutes
- 16-30 minutes
- 31 minutes-1 hour
- Over an hour

**7. What format would you prefer when you receive an email from Kosair Children's Hospital?**

- Bullet points
- Single paragraph
- Link to webpage hosting complete article
- As much information as possible



**8. Which social networking website/s do you use? (check all that apply)**

- Facebook
  - LinkedIn
  - Twitter
  - MySpace
  - Other, please specify
- 

**9. What do you use your social networking website/s for? (check all that apply)**

- Not applicable-don't have accounts
  - Connect with friends
  - Support causes, groups, organizations
  - Receive news updates
  - Post opinions, comments, blogs
  - Other, please specify
- 

**10. Please list your gender.**

- Female
- Male

**11. Please select your highest education level.**

- Some or currently in high school
- High school diploma/GED
- Some college or associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate/PhD

**12. Please select your age group.**

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-50
- 50 and above

**13. Please list the department you work for at Kosair Children's Hospital (i.e. 4 West, ESD, Radiology, etc.).**

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**14. What is your job title?**

- Management
- Non-management

**15. How many years have you worked for Kosair Children's Hospital?**

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-15 years
- 16-25 years
- More than 25 years

**16. If you would like to be entered into a drawing for an iPod Nano, please list your name and contact information.**

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## **Chief Nursing Officer Questionnaire**

### **Regarding Internal Communication Practices**

- Does the hospital have a Communication Team that evaluates and plans internal communication practices?
  
- Does the hospital conduct two-way employee forums?
  
- Does the hospital have weekly newsletter? Is this newsletter stored for employees to refer back to?
  
- Does the hospital have a Communication Portal Page to store information? Does the page have video clips of hospital executives and recent messages for employees who like visual communication?