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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 155 (2014) 502 – 506

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

The International Conference on Communication and Media 2014 (i-COME'14), 18-20 October 2014, Langkawi, MALAYSIA

Leadership: Communicating Strategically in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper seeks to discuss the functions of communication in ensuring effective leadership in the 21st century organization. The definition concept of leadership often intertwines and this provides various dimensions which create challenges to define leadership which encompasses all traits. Further, this paper later expanded from concept and definitions of leadership to leadership communication models. This paper recommended that leadership is about setting direction and aligning people to desired direction. Significantly, future leaders must be able to ensure that the subordinates are treated as members of the organization, whereby consistency in providing sound leadership would determine employee motivation and performance.

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Peer-review under responsibility of School of Multimedia Technology & Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Keywords: Leadership; communication; leadership communication model; organizational communication

1. Introduction

Over the past centuries, many scholars have provided countless definition of leadership and many had successfully done so. This achievement could particularly be attributed to the abilities in relating the concept of leadership with current situation which provide various dimensions. As time and people progress, the definition of leadership also changes to adjust with latest trend in human relationship and how they manage the members. Undoubtedly, the difficulty to provide one concise definition of leadership that encompasses all traits remains unsolved. This unusual circumstance has resulted in the countless researches and studies carried out by the scholars

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in providing possible and concrete definition of leadership which stand through time.

In general, leader is regarded as a person with position of authority appointed or assumes power to lead an organization regardless of ability. More often, a leader is expected to provide a leadership in carrying tasks and take responsibilities. In the organization, leader is closely associated with the ability to manage the organization. Stephen R. Covey relates manager and leader by saying; Management is efficiency in climbing the ladder of success; leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall. In the changing world today, manager and leader is the key determiner in ensuring the success of the organization. Williams (2006) defined leadership as the process of influencing others to achieve group or organizational goals. This simply means that leadership is about setting direction and aligning people to the desired direction.

Leadership comes from a single word of leader which carries the meaning of a person or thing that leads. In this sense, leadership can be defined as the position, function and ability to lead other people to a greater success. Meanwhile, when discussing the relations between leadership and organization, it is the ability of individual to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute towards the effectiveness and success of the organization. Nevertheless, a leader in the 21st century must be able to ensure that the subordinate is being treated as member of the organization, not a mere worker that is ordered and instructed around. In this sense, a leader must be able to create a sustain climate of trust and a sense of community within the organization. Parallel to this perspective, leaders not to understand that strategic communication plays a key part for leaders in ensuring that their people to do the right thing instead of only doing things in the right way by carefully managing the internal and external relationship in supporting organizational growth (Zerfass & Huck, 2007). In their study, leadership was discussed as the medium of communicating the vision of the organizations, in both transactional and transformational leadership's model.

Member in the organization wants a leader that could motivate them and the skills to attain something that they cannot do. A leader is regarded as a person who not only exemplifies but most importantly possesses the ability to communicate the action loud and clear. In this sense, a leader must walk the talk. A superior-subordinate relationship is significant in ensuring that the decision made is accepted by everybody in the organization. Rost (1993) stated that in the twenty first century, leadership has embraced a different dimension, which includes collaborative efforts among group members. Therefore, the essence of leadership is not solely the responsibility of the leader, but the relationship between the leader and the subordinates.

2. Harnessing superior-subordinate communication

In the organization, communication among colleagues and fellow employees are carried out to disseminate and retrieve information timely and efficiently, coordinate and complete job tasks, for decision making and finally to minimize or solve conflicts in the organization. Communication in organizational life provides a basis for understanding virtually every human process which occurs in an organization such as conflict, cooperation, decision making, the use of power and authority, compliance gaining, resistance, morale and cohesion, and the creation and maintenance of relationships.

Organization; according to Littlejohn and Foss (2010) consists of at least two or more people with interdependence, input, throughput and output. They work cooperatively to produce, to sell or to serve other party better known as client, customer or public (Eisenberg, 2006). Meanwhile Beebe and Masterson (2011) stated that communication is the process of acting on information. It is also a process where messages are sent and received simultaneously – by which we make sense out of the world and share that sense with others. In most cases, in-person communication affords the best opportunity to clarify meaning and resolve uncertainty and misunderstanding. Several researchers have found that the way group members communicate with each other is crucial in determining what happens when people collaborate.

The roles of communication within the workplace are to control what goes in between the employer and employee, for motivation purposes, to balance the needs and goals of the organization and for decision making process. Then there are also the typical communication roles which include gatekeeper, liaison, as a bridge, isolate, cosmopolite and opinion leader. Today, it has become a requirement for any leader to master the communication skills. It has not become an option anymore instead a requirement to achieve greatness.

Leader must communicate. The performance of the members in the organization relies on the direction made by the leader. To decide on something is crucial but the implementation is another story. Therefore, it is empirical for leader to harness the communication skills. After all, leadership communication is about building relationship.

Kouzes and Posner (1993) outlined six highest characteristics namely honesty, forward looking, inspiring, competent, fair minded, supportive of admired leader. These are especially important in the superior-subordinate relationship because such traits allow people to close ranks regardless the status quo.

In addressing the issue of relationships between a leader and the members, the leader must be able to understand what communication is and how it contributes in ensuring the action is communicated. Eisenberg (2006) argued, that the communication processes that operate in organizations, the most important include those that regulate interaction between superiors and subordinates. The exercise of leadership in this sense tie with the superiority of the authority thus led to the responsibility not only to plan but most importantly leading and making sure that the subordinates abide to it. This later will translate into good rapport between leader and members. According to Gibb (1961), a supportive climate leads to subordinate satisfaction and accuracy in communication, while a defensive climate leads to dissatisfaction and distortion in communication.

Hence, the leader needs to know the communication structure in the organization so that the information can be communicated effectively. Daniel et al., (1997) explained, formal communication refers to communication through officially designated channels of message flow between organizational positions. Knowing the direction to which the communication flow and end is paramount as it determines the result of the message being communicated. It is a waste of time and effort should the members fail to comprehend the message; what more if it cost the organization its profit. When discussing formal communication flow, the hierarchy structure of the organization is the important element. To this, Daniel et al., (1997) stated, the concept of hierarchy is so ingrained in organizational life that formal communication usually is described in terms of the three directions of message flow within a hierarchical system: downward, upward and horizontal.

Leader must communicate to ensure that business transactions are carried out. These practices range from solving simple problems among stakeholders to highly important decisions that may cost millions on enterprise level. Again, at any levels of organization which crosses functions and actions, communication remains as key indicator for effective service, deliveries and development. To that extent, the way leader communicate to the members consist of many different types of delivery methods during the information flow. When a leader is able to manage communication effectively work relationships will become strong, well informed, and purposeful.

3. Leadership communication models: A reflection

Communication models assist in guiding communication process and as for leaders, this communication task extends beyond this; as leaders are managers of meaning to their subordinates and this communication task requires different levels of skills. In this section, we expand the discussion of leadership moving from definitions to several leadership communication models. Leader communication styles varies from high level of directives to low directive style and while most studies concentrated on the organizational outputs mostly found that high directives leadership produced more, leaders communication style is a primary factor affecting team performance (Sagie, 1996).

In discussing leadership communication certain themes remain consistent and one is that the issue of employee motivation and performance. Motivation is usually a reason or set of reasons for engaging in a particular behavior and Adair (2006) interprets the work of Herzberg and Maslow to mean that to motivate, one must be motivated and select people who are also self-motivated. Leadership is also often synonymous with influence where a leader influences the members to do something positive that helped the organization and that motivation is a perennial challenge built into leadership and it is a part of a manager's job (DuBrin, 2000). Thus, the combination of motivation and influence creates a dynamic leadership style and employees often rely on their manager's motivation to handle internal and external challenges to their job functions.

Perhaps the most well-known leadership model is the Blake & Mouton Managerial Grid model. Considered a classic, the model was developed in 1964 with the assumption that leaders are most effective when they exhibit both concern for people and concern for production. Blake & Mouton Managerial Grid leadership model is formed in a grid which concern for people and concern for production are gauged from low to high. Fossum (1989) wrote a book on learning how to understand and cope with organizational change and included the Blake & Mouton Managerial Grid model in the book and described by defining how individuals orient themselves with regards to concern to task and concern for people where these assumptions underlie how leaders intervene. Used as a self-assessment in determining styles best describes the characteristics of the supervisor, good communication remains an important factor in the overall leadership styles.

Transactional leadership is a concept introduced by sociologist Max Weber where it focused on leader's role in supervising and employees are very much motivated by rewards and punishment. Following this theory that relied heavily on the concept of chain of command, James McGregor Burns further developed the concept of transformational leadership where through the strength of their vision and personality, transformational leaders are able to inspire followers to change expectations, perceptions, and motivations to work towards common goals. Transformational leaders strategically communicate a collective vision among the employees and encourage them to sacrifice their self-interests for the good of the organizations, a proactive method that embraces the concept of intellectual stimulation, individualized considerations, inspirational motivation and idealized influence (Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher & Milner, 2012; James, 2013). A concept explored by Bass, transformational leaders incorporate this style by closely engaging themselves with the employees to fully understand their needs as well as practicing empowerment and delegation in decision making processes and in the study of employee satisfaction, transformational leadership that embrace interactive and engagement was found to have significant strong positive effects (Men, 2014). It is also noted individualized consideration is a component of transformational leadership, where transformational leaders recognize individual differences using them to develop potentials in achieving higher performance (Avolio & Bass, 1995)

Evidently, one of the most difficult tasks for any leader is to effectively communicate the changes and cascade it down to the members in the organization. Changes in organizations, internal or external impact every level of employees and preparing employees for these changes is a strategic activity on its own and strategic communication is beneficial. Zerfass and Huck (2007) discussed the leadership communication on innovation by applying the wheel of leadership communication on innovations model. Combining four dimensions namely cognitive, affective, conative and social, leaders act as communication promoter as well as change agents. This wheel suggests that the build up from cognitive dimension which is knowledge about the innovation, leaders continue to share their visions with other employees on the affective dimension before proceeding to their followers to participate in the innovation in line with the conative dimension. The last part of the wheel is the social dimension, where leaders integrate followers to incorporate the spirit of innovation. The combinations of these dimensions encompass the idea of leaders as promoters and agents in strategically communicating change to employees.

On top of managerial functions of leaders, it is worthwhile to note that a leader's interpersonal communication style is an influence to the overall outcome of leadership communication. In their study, De Vries, Bakker-Pieper and Oonstenveld (2010) defined a set of interpersonal communication skills that is imperative to support the hierarchical link in achieving organizations objectives and this charismatic leadership includes communication styles with positive influence such as preciseness, assuredness, supportiveness, argumentativeness and lack of verbal aggressiveness.

As evidently discussed, leadership communication models convey a constant message that is leaders need to strategically plan and execute efficient leadership strategically through the communication process. When the leader comes into full term with what communication can do, and then only leadership will be able to complement management as leadership too is about coping with change.

4. Conclusion: Leadership is about setting direction

For any organization to remain effective, leadership is seen as the essential factors ensure the success and relevancy of organization's operation. Through leadership and supervision, the organization goals can be achieved as it provide the skill to initiate structure as well as clear directions for subordinates to perform their tasks. When it comes to steering the organization, the setting of directions is a fundamental task in the leadership. It also means that the ability to communicate direction is equally important as both determine the accomplishment of organization objective with varying degree of effectiveness.

In relation to this, Mai and Akerson (2003) also provide a useful tactics for setting clear direction to the subordinates:

- Focus on a single objective whenever possible but make sure it is shown clearly how it fits in with everything else.
- Limit the discussion to two or three key points.
- Prioritize the key points.
- Translate strategy to operating terminology.

- Repeat yourself.
- Expose the reasoning behind any actions or decisions.
- Invite questions – and wait for them.
- Summarize.

Once these steps are taken, it will not only enhance trust levels, but most importantly make communication more actionable and instil the sense of loyalty to the subordinates. These particular action may also be carried out spoken or written as long as it nurture clearer understanding regarding action to be taken.

Ultimately, effective leadership is the backbone of any organization. Leader must able to inspire the member to act in a manner of which will embody the work culture in them. When acting as a facilitator, leadership will require the selfless act of motivating and inspiring which in return shall satisfy the needs of the member and drive them to perform even better. Equipped with the effective leadership communication model, a leader will be able to communicate effectively while provide direction across the organization, notwithstanding subordinate alone in coping with stakeholder's expectations and perceptions for the betterment of the organization.

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