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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT.

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Abstract

The study examines the role of effective communication as a strategic tool for managing organizational conflict. The objectives of the paper amongst others are to: (i) Established whether there is any significant impact of effective communication in managing organizational conflict; and (ii) Ascertain whether the communication skill of the manager or the communicator is vital in managing organizational conflict. This paper uses survey method with structured questionnaires distributed between two multinational organisations in Lagos, Nigeria and three hypotheses that were later tested with appropriate test statistics. Finding shows that effective communication is vital in reducing organizational conflicts and that the communication skill of the communicator is crucial in managing organizational conflict amongst other. The paper recommends the need for organizations to properly communicate their goals and objectives to staff that will help in actualizing their vision; it believes that organizations must endeavor to reduce communication barriers, create good rapport between management and staff; and that organizations must constantly promote upward communication within the system as a way of facilitating feedback information, amongst others.

Keywords: Effectiveness; Communication; Manage; Organizational; Conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a major means by which the leading and controlling functions of management are primarily accomplished. Communication in management is a major challenge and most top managers sometimes don't just see it as a major problem. Sometimes this is a matter of understanding communication difficulties and techniques. But, at times, it is not just a communication problem at all, but a problem of knowing who to communicate with, and how. In other case, it may be a problem of not having the right things to communicate, since people usually want to know what is expected of them, where the enterprise is heading and why, and how they can get goals accomplished. Communication deficiencies can also be due to lack of planning and control. However, there is much to be appreciated about the nature of communication itself, the barriers that often exist, the principle to follow and the fact that communication represents a restricted network in a social system.

Communication is seen as a process through which information is exchanged and understood by two or more people usually with the untended to motive or influence behaviour. Robbins (2011, p.342) sees communication as transfer of information from a sender to receiver with the information been understood by the receiver.

Robbins (2011, p.336) believes that communication serves four major functions, which are for control, motivation, emotional expression, and information. Effective communication is transfer of message followed by feedback from the receiver to the sender indicating the receiver's understanding of the messages. Communication can help to minimized conflict in an organization and also prevent unnecessary misunderstanding. Effective communication is important in supervision because it promotes understanding between superiors and subordinates.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM: Managers of resources world over especially human resources are often faced with handling and managing conflict that exists within the workplace. They are often faced with the challenge of finding out whether communication is necessary in reducing conflict and whether effective communication can actually reduce conflict within an organization. A major challenge is the place of the skill possessed by the communicator (Robbins 2011, p.432). Many studies have existed on communication and conflict generally. Fewer of these studies, if any, locally, have really attempted to investigate

the effect of effective communication in reducing conflict in an organization. This paper therefore intends to fill that missing intellectual gap.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY: The general objective of this study is to show how effective communication can be used to manage organizational conflict.

However, the specific objectives include: (i) To find out whether there is any significant impact of effective communication in managing organizational conflict. (ii) To ascertain whether the communication skill of the communicator is vital in managing organizational conflict.

In order to achieve the above stated objectives, the paper makes two propositions stated in the form of null hypotheses which are: (i) There is no significant impact of effective communication in managing organizational conflict. (ii) There is no significant impact of the skill of the communicator in managing organizational conflict.

LITERATURE REVIEW.

Communication applies to all phases of management, it is particularly important in the functions of leading and controlling. There is general agreement about the necessity of effective communication, yet there is less agreement on an exact definition. Adler and Elmhorst (1996) asserted that “communication is the exchange of information and the transmission of meaning is the very essence of a social system or an organisation.” Adeleke (2001,p.75) views communication as “the transfer of information from the sender to the receiver with the information being understood by the receiver.” This definition then becomes the basis for the communication process model that focuses on the sender of the communication, the transmission of the message, and the receiver of the message.

Over the years, many authors have recognized the importance of communication in an organized effort. Buchanan and Hnczynski (2004, p.203), for example viewed communication as the means by which people are linked together in an organisation to achieve a common purpose. This is still the fundamental function of communication. Indeed, group activity is impossible without communication because coordination and change cannot be effected.

We take communication for granted because we believe we just do it automatically. We think about communication only when it fails. In a way, living in organizations provided the jobs and careers at which we spend our days and by which we earn our living. We belong to clubs,

churches, societies, all of which are organizations. Our governments are organizations. Our families are organizations. Because one lives in and through organizations, one tends to take their existence and their nature for granted. A competent organisational communicator needs to understand contemporary ideas about communication and to recognize how they relate to interactions among members of organizations. And competent organisational communicator needs to understand contemporary concepts of organisational structure and management and to recognize how they affect organizations communication. The competent communicator must also understand and appreciate the place of feedback. “What we need is better communication.” This phrase is offered every day in organizations as a diagnosis and a prescribed solution for organisational problem, almost every executive rightly believes that better communication would improve the functioning of her/his organization. Similarly, all professionals working in organizations usually encounter occasions when they would be individually more effective if they possess greater skill in communication.

Much of what organizations do is accomplished through communication processes that are enacted by individual organization members. To function effectively as a professional member of an organization, one must develop an understanding of organizational communication processes and the skills required to participate in those processes. The practice of human communication changes with new technologies and with new economic and social conditions. One’s understanding of communication must shift and grow with understanding of new information systems and techniques of communication.

Communication is a process of creating structure, relationship and meaning through the design and exchange of business message. Organisational communication involves the exchange to facilitate structure, working relationships and shared meaning, among members.

The word “communication” has a rich and complex history. It first appeared in the English language in the fourteenth century, taken from the Latin word *communicare*, which meant to impart, share or make common. Over the course of the 20th century, the term has been used with a broad variety of meanings ranging from the simple transfer of information to the utopian ideal of a place where “nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open and expression is uninhibited” (Pamela & Taeanna, 2004).

Drawing upon John Locke's thought, communication can be defined as the sharing of information, ideals, feelings and intentions among human. A more contemporary and precise definition focuses on three basic terms that are fundamental to the communication process. Adler and Elmhorst (1996) viewed communication as managing message for the purpose of creating meaning. The term managing includes all the activities of creating, encoding, sending, receiving interpreting and giving feedback. Messages are what humans send and receive when we communicate. Meanings are carried in messages. They are what we intend to share when we communicate.

Communication from various sources must be integrated and coordinated to enhance and develop a unified brand image. (Robbins 2000, p.285) hence the total communications effort must be a process of understanding these complex interactions taking place and an attempt to integrate the effects of each of elements to bring about the desired total communications effect (Kotler et al., 2002) Communicating effectively is not trying to say all one knows, rather, saying only what the audience needs to know in order to affect greater productivity by motivating and influencing their behaviour.

Communicating Effective questions opens the door to knowledge and understanding. The act of question lies in knowing which question to ask.

The Purpose of Communication: In the broadest sense, the purpose of communication in an organization is to effect change to influence action toward the welfare of the organization. Business, for example, requires information about prices, competition, and government activities. This knowledge is the basis for decision affecting product lines, production ratios quality, marketing strategy, the mix of productive factors and internal information flow. The immediate digestion of information and action in response to it, however, become extremely difficult in a large enterprise where several thousand or more people are involved.

Communication is essential for the internal functioning of an organization because it integrates the managerial functions such as planning, organizing, staff, leading, controlling. Specifically, communication is needed for a number of purposes among which are:

- i. To develop plans for the attainment of organizational goals
- ii. To establish and disseminate goals of an organization

- iii. To organize human and other resources in the most effective and efficient way.
- iv. To select, develop and apprise members of the organization
- v. To lead, direct, motivate and create a climate in which people want to contribute.
- vi. To control performance
- vii. Relay information
- viii. Sell ideas
- ix. Educate the receiver
- x. To resolve conflict
- xi. Obtain input
- xii. Express feelings
- xiii. Effect changes in behavior etc.

The above views are also supported by Esuh, (2004); Olayinka & Aminu, (2006 P.226), amongst others.

Communication also relates the organization to its external environment. It is through information exchange that managers become aware of the needs of customers, the availability of suppliers, and the needs of community which the organisation later meet through social responsibility. It is through communication that an organization becomes an open systems interacting with its environment. It is generally known that managers determine the organization climate and influence the attitudes of organization members. This is done mainly through communication initiated by top management. However, leaders in an organization have a major responsibility to set the right tone for effective communication; every person in an organization also shares this responsibility.

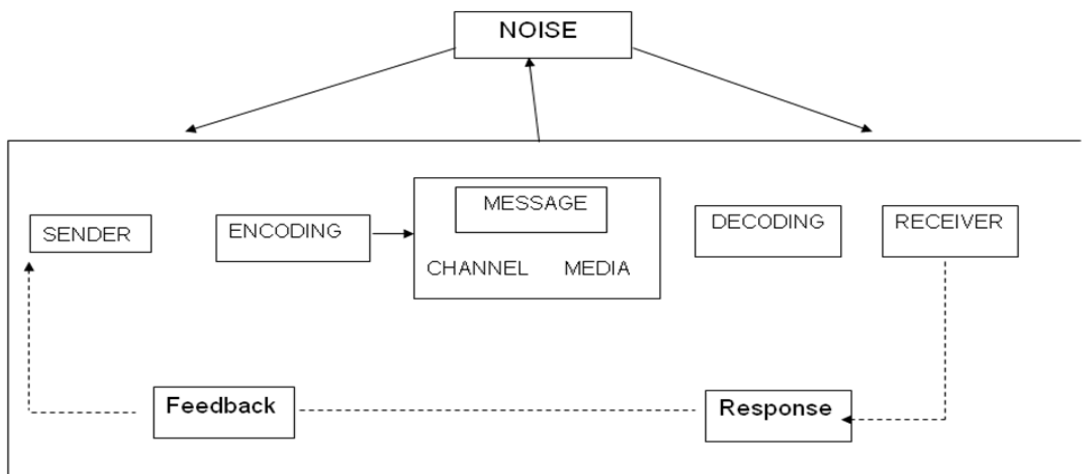
It must be pointed out here that Communication is a two-way process in which every one is both an originator and a receiver of communication. Information flows vertically along the chain of command and crosswise. Crosswise communication, as used here, involves the horizontal flow of information among persons on the same or similar organizational levels, without superior – subordinate relationships.

The Communication Process: The communication process involves the “sender” who “transmit a message” over a selected channel to the “receiver”. However, to gain better insight into communication, it is necessary to examine closely the specific steps in the process.

Communication begins with the sender who has a “thought” or an idea, which is then “encoded” in ways that can be understood by the receiver. One usually thinks of encoding a message into the English Language, but there are many other ways of encoding, such as translating the thought into computer language. The sender also communicates nonverbally through facial expression or gestures.

Problems with communication can pop- up at every stage of the communication process (which consists of sender, encoding, channel, decoding, receiver, feedback and context – see the diagram below).

The communications process



Source: Adeleke .A. (2001) *Management: Concepts and Application*. Lagos, Nigeria. Concept publication limited. P.79

To be an effective communicator and to get one’s point across without misunderstanding and confusion across to target audience, the goal must be to make the communication message at each stage of this process with clear, concise, accurate, well- planned communications. There are five things needed for effective communication to take place. These, according to kehinde (2009, p.80) are:

- A Sender
- A Message
- A Channel

- A Receiver
- A feedback

Noise and Feedback in Communication: Unfortunately, communication is affected by what has been called “noise” It is anything whether in the sender, the transmission, or the receiver that hinders communication. Noise is that thing that affects or obstructs communication from being effectively understood.

Benefits of Effective Communication: Communication is one of the basic functions of management in any organization and its importance can hardly be overemphasized. It is a process of transmitting information, ideas, thoughts, opinions and plans between various parts of an organization. Managers cannot have sound human relations without communication. However, good and effective communication is required not only for good human relations but also for good and successive business. According to Kohn (2001), effective communication brings a number of added benefits to the communicator and the organization he represents amongst which are: -

Communication for manager and employee relations: Effective communication of information and decision is an essential component for management – employee relations. The manager cannot get the work done from employees unless they are communicated effectively of what he wants to be done? He should also be sure of some basic facts such as how to communicate and what result can be expected from the communication. Most of management problems arise because of lack of effective communication. Chances of misunderstanding and misinterpretation can be minimized with proper communication system.

For motivation and employee morale: Communication is also a basic tool for motivation, which can improve morale of the employees in an organization. Inappropriate or faulty communication among employees or between manager and his subordinate is the major cause of conflict and low morale at work. The Manager should make clear to employees about what is to be done, how well they are doing and what can be done for better performance to improve their motivation. He can prepare a written statement, clearly outlining the relationship between company objectives and personal objectives and integrating the interest of the two.

For increase productivity: With effective communication, one can maintain a good human relation in the organization and by encouraging ideas or suggestion from employees or workers and implementing them whenever possible, one can also operate at low cost.

For employees: The effective communication promotes upward flow of information in the organisation. It is through the communication that employees submit their work reports, comments, grievances and suggestions to their seniors or management. Organization should have effective and speedy communication policy and procedures to avoid delays, misunderstanding, confusion or distortions of facts and to establish harmony among all the concerned people and departments, (Kohn, 2001).

The communication flow: In an effective organization, communication flows in various directions downward, upward, horizontal and diagonal. Traditionally, downward communication was emphasized, but there is ample evidence that if this is the only direction of communication, problem will develop. Communication also flows horizontally, that is between people on the same or similar organizational levels and diagonally, involving people from different levels who are not indirect reporting relationship with one another.

Michael and Mary (2001) identified five basic types of communication from the superior to the subordinate:

- Directives from handling tasks
- Information for understanding the relationships of the tasks
- Procedures and enterprise – practice information
- Feedback about the performance of subordinates
- Information about enterprise goals

Unfortunately, information is often lost or distorted as it comes down the chain of command. Top management's issuance of policies and procedures does not assure communication. In fact, many of these directives are not understood or even read. Downward flow of information through the different levels of the organization is time-consuming. Indeed, delays may be so frustrating that some top managers insist that information be sent directly to where it is required.

Upward communication:

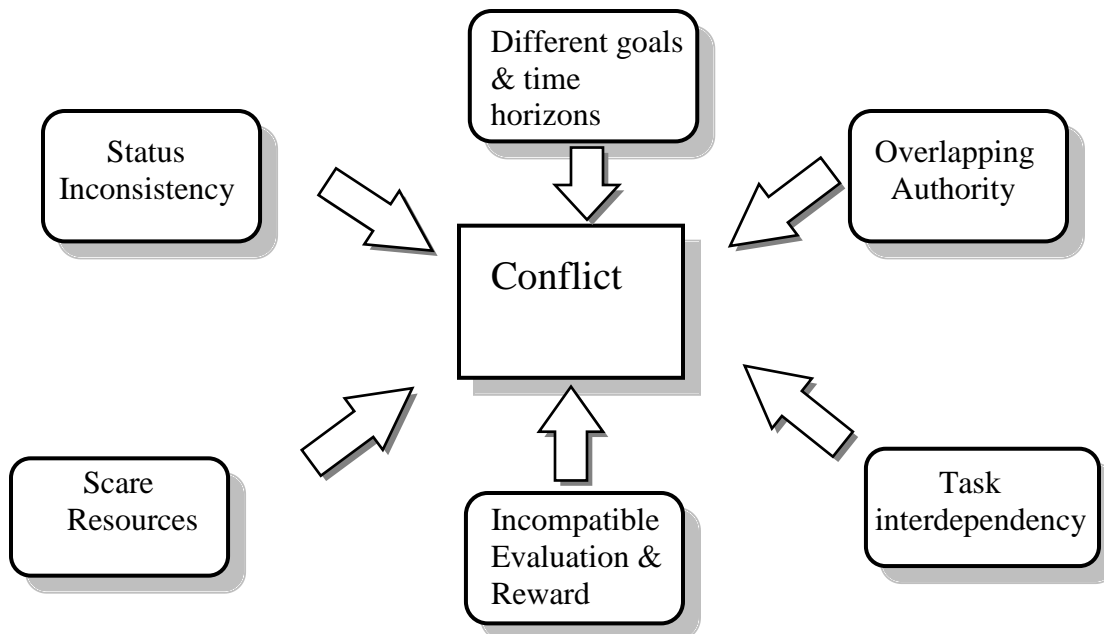
Upward communication travels from subordinates to superiors and continues up the organizational hierarchy. Upper management needs to know specifically about production performance, marketing information, and financial data, what lower – level employees are thinking and so on

SOURCES OF CONFLICT TO ORGANIZATION: The assertions in this section are concerned with particular causes of conflict. We do not attempt an exhaustive coverage of the many potential sources of conflict. Such attempts may be found elsewhere. For example, Daniel, Daniel and Charles (1989) listed the following issues involved in conflicts:

- Control over resources;
- Preferences and nuisances, where the tastes or activities of one party impinges upon another;
- Values and where there is a claim that a value or set of values should dominate
- Beliefs, when there is a dispute over facts, information, reality, etc;
- The nature of the relationship between the parties.

Kare (1994) groups the conditions under which conflicts arise as:

- Communicational, including insufficient exchange of information, noise and the semantic differences that arise from selective perception and difference of background;
- Structural, which includes the goal compatibility of members of the group, jurisdictional clarity, and leadership style;
- Personal factors, including individual value systems and personality characteristics.



Source: Richardson, J.M (1991). *Management of Conflict in Organizations*: Journal of Physician Executive. Pp 19-21.

FORMS AND LEVELS OF CONFLICTS.

Given these basic concepts, together with the notion that the parties to a conflict may be of either the same structural type or different structural types, Easterbrook (1993) distinguishes the following kinds of social conflicts:

- i Conflict between or among persons
- ii Boundary conflicts between groups (spatially segregated groups)
- iii Ecological conflict between groups (Spatially intermingled groups)
- iv Homogenizing organization conflict (e.g., between organizations of like character and purpose, such as state vs. state, state, sect vs sect, union vs union, etc.)
- v Homogenizing organization conflict (e.g between unlike organizations, such as state vs church, union vs corporation, university vs. church or state, etc)
- vi Conflicts between a person and a group (mainly socialization conflicts, as person vs. peer group, person vs. hierarchical superiors or inferiors, etc.
- vii Conflicts between a person and an organization (mainly role conflicts)
- viii Conflict between a group and art organization

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Karen, (1997) identifies the following major types of conflicts and they are:

Interpersonal Conflict: Between individuals based on differing goals or values

Intragroup Conflicts: Occurs within a group team

Intergroup Conflict: Occurs between two or more teams or groups. Managers play a key role in resolution of this conflict

Interganizational Conflict: Occurs across organizational. Managers in one firm may feel another is not behaving ethically

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING CONFLICT.

Richardson (1991, p.20) identifies a number of communication strategies for handling conflict among which are: -

- **Don't push too close:** When considering how fast to move in suggesting a “final offer” or order of agreement, learn towards moving slower, especially at first.

- **Have a main spokesman:** If there is more than one person representing your interests, have one person take the lead in discussions.
- **Don't assume they readily see the picture you are presenting:** Do not presume the person recognize the benefits regarding what you are proposing. Take time to vividly describe them in their terms.
- **Don't offer what you can't accept:** Do not bluff in making an offer you cannot live with, if accepted.
- **Make the same offer in a different way:** Do not overlook rearranging the same elements of an offer to find amore mutually attractive compromise.
- **Walk your talks:** Find ways to reflect your values in how you approach work and your personal life. Your mission provides daily context and boundaries.
- **Be present:** As many contests require, “You have to be present to win. “ Keep grounded and involved in what is happening right now, what is being said at the moment, glancing to the past and future only for context and balance.
- **Consider how you say what you say:** Consider the other perspective in how you make any request. For example, a priest once asked his superior if he could smoke while praying, which led to a denial of his request. Yet if he'd asked if he could pray while smoking he might have received a positive response.
- **Make and Keep agreements:** In an often unpredictable world, you build an “ emotional deposit: of trust when your roads and actions aren't contradictory. Then when you make mistakes, as you will, they have built up a level of trust to help them forgive your lapse.
- **Have larger visions of yourself as your reference point for making daily choices:**
Establish your central life purpose and core values and let your actions reflect them. Your choices are much easier to make, you will inspire loyalty and attract others to act out their best side when around you.
- **Take your high road:** Have a core set of values and a vision of your service and role in your life; relate your vision to the mission of your organization, your role among family and friends and your actions in reaching agreements.
- **Show them the positive longer view:** Many seemingly foolish disagreements band negotiation are simply acting to prevent looking foolish later on. The best peacemakers work hardest to allay the other person's worries first.

- **Look for the real source of the anger:** When someone is angry with you, consider that he might be upset with himself before you respond.

The above view is also supported by Kohn (2001) Michael and Mary, 2001 and (McShane & Glinow, 2005).

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION SKILL IN AN ORGANIZATION

When delivering important organizational news to employees, make sure you provide them with the information they need. Here are some tips:

Robbins (2000, pp.302-303) in his text of organizational Behaviour makes an insightful presentation as regards how one's communication skills can be improved upon thereby leading to synergy effects of improving the organization's performance. Below are some of the tips.

- **Be clear:** Make it easy for everyone to understand the key points of your message. Keep your language simple and free of jargon. Be specific and get to the point. Let employees know how information affects them and how it will specifically apply to their role.
- **Be concise:** Keep your message short. Stick to relevant information. Don't provide details that aren't necessary to get the point across. The extra, irrelevant details may cause confusion or information overload.
- **Be correct:** Make sure the information you relay is accurate. If you don't know all the answers, be honest with your employees and tell them you don't know. Then try to get the answers for them.
- **Be complete:** Give employees all of the information they need to understand a situation. Don't withhold key facts if you're able to provide them. If you're not sure, if it's appropriate to share certain information, check with your manager first.
- **Be positive:** Avoid gossip, complaining and negativity. Your staff looks unto you to set an example.
- **Create an atmosphere of open communication:** Let your employees know that you're not too busy to be interrupted for concerns or unexpected issues that arise.
- **Encourage employees to be open and candid in conversation with you:** it's easier to get to the bottom of an issue if everyone is comfortable expressing their views. As a manager, you need to set aside judgment and keep an open mind.

- **Tailor the message to the audience:** Try to present the message to the receiver in the way the receiver will appreciate it.
- **Put yourself in the position of the audience:** This helps you to fashion your communication in an easy way that the audience will understand you better.
- **Remember the value of face-to-face communication.**
- **Match your words with action:** Don't do the opposite of what you are advocating.
- **Using multiple channels:** When you use multiple channels such as written, oral, signals etc to convey a message, you improve the likelihood of better clarity.
- **Learn to listen:** Being an effective communicator is not just about providing information to employees. It's important to also be a good listener. This means paying close attention to others so you can really "hear" and understand what's being said.

METHOD

The paper uses survey method with structured questionnaires, which were distributed among sample respondents from two multi-national companies in Lagos, Nigeria. Two null hypotheses were raised and they were later tested with regression test statistics. Findings show that Effective communication was actually necessary in reducing organizational conflicts. Moreover, finding reveals that effective communication can actually reduce conflict, which exists within an organization. Of fundamental importance is that finding further reveals that the skill possessed by the communicator is vital in reducing conflict within an organization.

HYPOTHESIS ONE

There will be no significant impact of communication on organizational conflict management.

Table 1: **Simple regression** impact of communication on organizational conflict management

R=. 649 R ² =. 421 Adj. R ² =. 396 Std Error=1.93116						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	588.6254	1	588.6254	40.252	.05
	Residual	3451.146	236	14.6235		
	Total	4039.7714	237			

Source: Field survey, 2012.

The hypothesis one which stated that” There will be no significant impact of communication on organizational conflict management was rejected at $R=.649$, $R^2=.421$, $F_{(1, 237)} = 40.252$.; $p<.05$.

HYPOTHESIS TWO

There will be no significant impact of the skill of communicator on organizational conflict management.

Table 2: Simple regression showing impact of skill of communicator on organizational conflict management

$R=.844$ $R^2=.712$ $Adj. R^2=.648$ $Std Error=2.59437$						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4828.48	1	4828.48	25.92	.05
	Residual	43962.6464	236	186.2824		
	Total	48791.1264	237			

Source: Field survey, 2012.

The hypothesis two which stated that” There will be no significant impact of skill of communicator on organizational conflict management was rejected at $R=.844$, $R^2=.712$, $F_{(1, 237)} = 25.92$.; $p<.05$.

Findings show that Effective communication was actually necessary in reducing organizational conflicts. Moreover, finding reveals that effective communication can actually reduce conflict, which exists within an organization. Of fundamental importance is that finding further reveals that the skill possessed by the communicator is vital in reducing conflict within an organization.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Managers of organizations should note that effective communication, as well as interpersonal communication is essential if the organization is to achieve its goals and

objectives in an effective and efficient manner. Conflict can only be reduced when proper communication is put in place by the organization's management across to its staff.

Without effective communication, human interaction would be practically impossible and organizational goal will result in a paralyzing of social, economic and political activities in the society.

The essence of effective communication is the ability of the organization to ensure that proper information reaches the right people at the right time.

Communication is essential for the internal functioning of an organization because it integrates the managerial functions. The communicator must add skill and proficiency into what he communicates.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper makes the following recommendations:

- i Organizations must try to effectively communicate their goals and objectives to staff who will help in actualizing their vision.
- ii Management of organizations should try to eliminate or reduce all the communication barriers within the organization. Also, management should try to use communication skill in order for the staff to have respect for them and listen to the message they are about top pass to them.
- iii Management of organizations should try to create a good rapport between them and the staff, this will make the staff to feel free to express their opinions or views about how the organization can progress.
- iv The communicator must always make the message to be clear and concise without ambiguity.
- v There is need for the communicator to always tailor the message to the audience in such a manner that the audience will understand and appreciate the message.
- vi Organizations must endeavour to promote upward communication within the system. This is a major way of getting feedback from employees.
- vii Where possible, the communicator must use multiple channels such as written, oral, notice boards, internet etc.
- viii As communicators, we must learn to always listen to our audience. This promotes feedback from the audience

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