Workplace Communication during the Pandemic situation

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Abstract
Workplace communication plays an important role in the successful implementation of any project. During the pandemic, disruption had happened not only in operations but in the front of communication too. Modern organizations have very different kind of crisis (Fink, 1986; Perrow, 1984; Bozeman,2011) The covid19 pandemic had created a great havoc on the normal life and its impact on organizations had been huge including negatives changes in productivity. Mazzei, Kim and Dell'Oro (2012) is of the opinion that it is important for an organization to build trust within the organization during the crisis as this would ensure good relationship, enhanced productivity and better finance. This research had adopted the case study methodology to bring forth the communication challenges during covid19 in a manufacturing organization. Silliconnect, a supply chain solutions company had been following rigorous quality improvement methods. Employee awareness on issues related to quality was provided periodically as it determines the success of the quality journey (Anithakumari & Gayathri, 2018). This is a fictitious case study, designed for class room teaching on the concept of workplace communication during crisis.
Keywords : Workplace communication, crisis, pandemic, quality, virtual communication

Introduction

Raghav, the Operations Head, was in a pensive mood looking outside his cabin. The bright bougainvillea shrubs lining the compound wall of his office and the gentle breeze failed to capture his attention. Raghav had just now returned from a virtual meeting with the Departmental heads wherein the HODs had presented a challenge that they were uniformly facing during the Covid 19 crisis. Ramkumar, the production head, (addressed by people as Ram) had explained the challenge of communication gap in the company. Though this was in the initial stage, there was a high probability that this may snowball into a greater challenge, in the near future.

Siliconnect is a supply chain solutions company situated in the Sipcot Industrial estate of Oragadam. The company offers design, manufacturing and distribution to the original equipment manufacturers of mobile handsets and it is the supplier to major mobile companies in India and abroad. Four hundred employees were working for the company. Silliconnect had been rigorously following the concept of Total quality management. The company regularly drove Business improvement initiatives which included Kaizen (or continuous improvements), 5S and Lean manufacturing.

The communication Challenge

Any event that may threaten the expectations of stakeholders, that is likely to create negative outcomes and has an impact on the organization's performance is termed as crisis (Coombs and Halloday, 2010). The covid19 had clearly created a communication crisis here. Prior to the Pandemic, there was a meticulous top down communication approach. The Top management used to have meetings for discussing Strategic plans and Annual business goals with the Managing director (MD). In turn, the MD communicated and discussed the goals with the CEO, Functional heads and HODs in the annual goal setting meeting. The HODs in turn used to have meetings at departmental levels with the Team members and Supervisors. The Supervisors used to have the daily sun rise meeting with workmen in their respective areas in the shopfloor. There was also Quarterly Town hall meeting, wherein the performance for the quarter used to be presented to all employees including the workers. Kaizens used to be presented and the contributors' names were announced. The Quarterly town hall meetings helped nurture the continuous improvement culture. People who contributed Kaizens used to feel recognized. Further, the scope for horizontal deployment where ever possible, was openly shared for awareness of all.

When the first Lockdown was announced in Tamil nadu on March 23, 2020, the Silliconnect momentarily stopped its operation for two days. After the Government clarified that all manufacturing companies producing essential goods, continuous process industries and export units could operate, Siliconnect started its operations, immediately. Covid19 was no excuse for a manufacturing company like them. The significant demand for their products and export orders made even temporary shut downs, impossible for the company.

The communication strategy adopted

While the company had started its usual operations, they had the huge responsibility of gaining the confidence of its employees. Initially, there was no apprehension in the minds of employees about coming to work. However, the news about the spread of the virus and its consequences had intimidated them and they were subjected to undue stress and anxiety. The management of the company felt it was very critical to alleviate the fears of its employees by effective, clear Communication. They formulated a quick, clear and empathetic communication strategy. Virtual meetings were arranged with employees across levels in different time slots to dispel all myths and rumors on the virus and about general precautions to stay safe during the pandemic.

Safety protocols were laid in place to ensure a safe working environment. The company understood the fact that any crisis would limit people's capacity to absorb information initially. So the updates on covid19, safety protocols were communicated clearly through online mode and repeated at frequent intervals. Flyers on covid19 updates, workplace safety were placed at strategic points in the company for display. The top to bottom communication was precise, periodic and clear. Department wise video calls were held to ensure that there is no communication gap. The managers were transparent about where things stood. The challenges ahead during the crisis were discussed in detail. The transparency and honesty in communications helped in building the needed trust and loyalty.

Ram empathized with the employees and drove home the point that the fundamental idea was to stay safe. With the help of his social media team, he created short videos and creatives depicting clear instructions on physical distancing, emphasizing the usage of masks, sanitizers and washing hands frequently. New policies were framed to give better clarity on break times, overtime, time off and operational guidelines. All updates on covid19 policy guidelines, safety measures were positively framed. Instructions were framed as "Dos" rather than "Don'ts". Ram clearly recalled from a study that during the previous epidemic breakouts like Zika, research indicated that interventions focusing on best practices were more effective than those based on counter information. Instead of messages like, "Don't forget to wash your hands, Do not come to work if you have fever/cold, messages were framed with a positive intent, like: "Wash your hands every 30 minutes, "Maintain physical distancing for your safety", "Stay at home when you are ill". This had a positive influence and workers followed it diligently.

The quality journey in progress

During every November, being the 'Quality month' Siliconnect would conduct various competitions for employees to increase their awareness on quality. These competitions included painting, storytelling on best practices, creating taglines on quality, contribution of Kaizens to name a few. Ram had adopted this method now during the pandemic, to share their stories on overcoming the anxiety and stress due to covid19. These stories and paintings were true and simple ones narrating the experience of employees on coming safe to work, maintain safety protocols, wearing face masks, dealing with anxiety, the habits they followed for good health, immunity and hygiene practices, etc. the workers felt a sense of belonging and took pride on their work due to these kind of practices.

Gemba walk was another tool employed by department heads to get an idea on what is actually going on at the workplace. The department heads formed a team and had regular gemba walks with their gemba checklist. During the pandemic, they were in no mood to sacrifice their gemba walks. Instead of going in teams, the HODs went as single person, taking turns. The processes were keenly observed and documented as usual. However, during the walk, no communication was carried out. Instead, as and when needed, the processes were recorded with smartphones. The gemba walks was then followed by virtual meeting with HODs, where the observations and suggestions were shared.

The changes made during the pandemic

On the operational front, physical communication had been replaced by virtual meetings. However, the shift handover meetings after every shift was made physical with adequate physical distancing and task updates were communicated. Similarly, the workers and middle level managers did not miss the regular quality control meetings. To maintain quality assurance and provide solutions to quality related issues, remote specialists were roped in for the meetings. Periodic statutory and Quality systems audits too were conducted virtually, leveraging technology. The employees found these measures extremely supportive and beneficial.

Siliconnect was doing fairly well with the virtual mode of communication with the aid of video conferencing. On the operational front, lot of feedback was needed on a daily basis. Ram-wanted acknowledgements and suggestions from the shop floor employees on the new safety protocols and Standard operating procedures (SOPs). Email had been the most preferred mode of communication for information sharing. The problem here was that the operational level employees seldom acknowledged or replied to these routine mails. Ram often felt stuck as he was not able to get replies for his mails and he was not able to give timely updates to Raghav. Though his peers replied, the shop floor supervisors had not replied. Also, they were not following a proper system in updating shift details to make it available to the next shift supervisor. When enquired on this, the supervisors replied that they were not used to the habit of constantly checking and replying to mails. The workers were not aware of the email features and refused pointblank as this change was stressing them more. Mobile phones were not allowed during work hours and could be used only during breaks. They were not ready to use their break hours to reply or acknowledge mails. Though this sounded fair to Ram, he has to make his supervisors update him on work schedules, lags and delivery plans. Scheduling frequent video calls was time consuming and affecting productivity. They already had weekly and Quality circle meetings through video calls.

Communication Choices Ahead

One of the junior engineer, Ms.Ramya, suggested the formation of whatsapp groups for different departments. Though there were informal groups in the organization, a formal whatsapp group may better help in sharing information, obtaining feedback (through Google forms) and instant replies. Ram and Raghav had concerns on using whatsapp group as they still considered it as an informal medium of communication. There was always the possibility of easily sharing, forwarding and taking screenshots of sensitive and confidential information. This would affect the privacy of communication and might result in misuse of information and they did not want to open a Pandora's Box during the pandemic.

One other suggestion given by Ram was the usage of Daily work management (DWM) checklists by the Shopfloor Supervisors to ensure effective daily work management and a seamless information sharing between shift supervisors of all shifts. This in turn would enable the shift output details and feedback on key shop floor metrics to flow upwards. Ram also suggested to revive as well as monitor the weekly physical work council meeting with workers in

small groups, sectionwise, which would ensure social distancing in the pandemic and at the same provide the personal touch to workers, and enable them to openly share feedback on production or process issues and other issues pertaining to the SOPs, machinery or tools, safety protocols etc. This would ensure regular feedback to Ram and in turn to Raghav.

Any organization is expected to face these kind of crisis and they should have specific communication strategies so that stakeholders are updated about all needed information (Fearn-Banks, 2010).The crisis situations easily create avenues for communication gaps and threaten the relationship between organization and public. This could also lead to communication challenges within the organization (Coombs,2004).Raghav was now in a quandary of selecting among email, whatsapp or the DWM checklist method for effective communication at Supervisory levels and in a dilemma to resume physical meetings with workers in the time of Pandemic. He knew very well that his choices were very limited during the crisis.

Questions

1. How does communication affect the implementation of TQM? Quote examples from this case.
2. Is it advisable for a manufacturing organization to use Whatsapp for workplace communication?
3. Do you think that there would be resistance among the employees for usage of daily work management checklists?
4. Is it advisable to resume to physical meetings with workmen, for communication of goals and for receiving feedback from them on shop floor issues?
5. Comment on the overall communication strategy of Siliconnect Pvt Ltd.

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