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Evaluating gaps in interdepartmental communication and assessing their relation to employee motivation: An action research study

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ABSTRACT

The study examined members of administrative staff of a leading international school in New Delhi to identify the underlying causes of gaps in interdepartmental communication and find probable solutions to overcome them. A Professional Learning Community (PLC) of 3 members was formed which undertook action research and presented the findings at the administrative staff In-Service Education and Training (INSET) in January 2020. The paper explores the factors that influence flow of communication within the workplace and how effective internal stakeholder communication is a great contributor to employee satisfaction. Outcomes suggest that the efficacy of interdepartmental communication is directly proportional to people's understanding and appreciation of the work that other departments do, and their relationships with people and teams.

Keywords— *Interdepartmental communication, internal stakeholders, employee satisfaction, professional learning community and action research.*

1. BACKGROUNDS AND MOTIVATION

Being a top, award winning educational institution, effective communication forms the foundation of establishing and developing strong partnerships at the school, both internally and externally. Over the last three years, the school aligned its communications strategy with its vision and mission to focus on communicating with a solution-oriented approach.

While a lot of emphasis had been placed on external facing communications, feedback received from 2018 and 2019 INSETs from members of the administrative and the senior leadership teams indicated that interdepartmental communication needed more focus and streamlining. It was recommended that an action research project be undertaken to recognize the underlying issues, identify probable solutions to overcome them and present the findings in an interactive session to administrative staff using a combination of theoretical and exercise-based approaches.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Employees are by far the most significant resource for a workplace. They bring with them skills, knowledge, energy and diversity to help the organisation achieve its goals, build the brand and give it a critical competitive advantage.

Successful completion of any project requires expertise, which is often distributed across teams making interdepartmental communication an essential component of achieving organisational objectives. Broadly, interdepartmental communication is recognized as a channel through which teams work together collaboratively to achieve a greater goal. It takes place across the organisation in three basic forms: downward, linear and upward. The fundamental role of internal communications is to 'build and nourish employee relations, establish trust, providing timely and reliable information and thereby contributing to general motivation, particularly in times of change and stress' (Dolphin, 2005). Berger defined internal communication as a central process by which employees share information, create relationships, make meaning and construct organisational culture and values (Berger, 2008). He also stressed that internal communication helps individuals and groups coordinate activities to achieve goals, and is vital in socialization, decision-making, problem-solving, and change-management processes.

Departments rely on one another for receiving timely information. Hence, if a workplace lacks effective communication, it is impossible to build and nurture productive relationships. Often however, guidelines and expectations around internal communication are not established and employees are left to navigate their own ways to get information through to other departments. Rules surrounding internal stakeholder communication are often ambiguous and left open to interpretation. They

may have developed organically as a byproduct of teams having worked collaboratively or been handed down historically. There may be unsaid agreements, unwritten rules and indigenous systems that exist and are followed diligently, but there is generally a lack of guidelines that are articulated, communicated, understood and followed. Tench & Yeomans (2006, p.337) observed that public relations scholars pay very little attention to internal communication yet it is viewed as part of an organisation's strategic communication function. Internal communication has two main roles: spanning provision of information and creating of a sense of community within organisations (Friedl & Vercic, 2011).

According to Welch (2012) 'Internal communication underpins organisational effectiveness since it contributes to positive internal relationships by enabling communication between senior managers and employee'. A study by Men & Stacks (2005) argued that authentic leadership as an antecedent factor plays a critical role in nurturing an organisation's symmetrical and transparent communication system, which in turn, cultivates quality employee-organisation relationships. They also asserted that transparent communication, characterised by information substantiality, accountability and employee participation, largely contributes to employee trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction.

The following diagram depicts how effective interdepartmental communication brings in efficiency and develops a cohesive work culture.

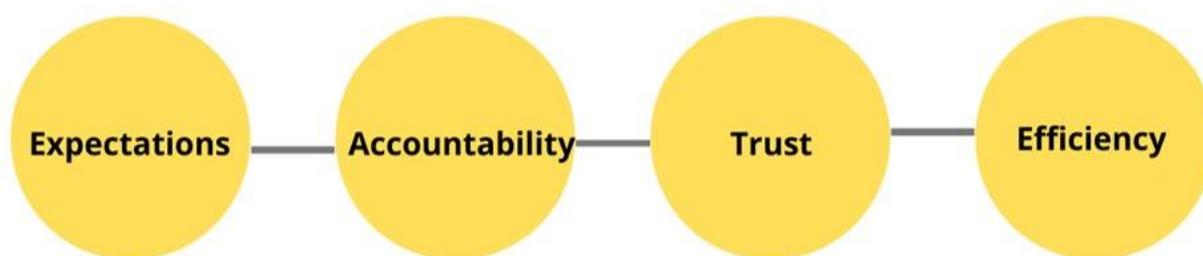


Chart. 1: Developing efficiency and a cohesive work culture through interdepartmental communication

Defining expectations at the outset helps bring clarity to both employees and leaders and creates alignment across all levels encouraging people to take individual and collective responsibility for processes. Further, when teams work collaboratively towards a common goal, they are able to hold one another accountable for any tasks that are running behind. This is primarily because everyone is equally involved and vested in seeing the project through.

Internal communication facilitates assistance in areas like: encouraging people to work in teams, reinforcing decision processes and eradicating the obstacles between different departments (Ada, 2007). Having absolute clarity on the role and expectations also correlates to job security. Employees who feel secure are not afraid of taking risks, which means they go out looking for creative solutions to everyday tasks which brings in more efficiency and productivity. Further, in a workplace where effective communication prevails, employees will have a clear understanding of their role in the context of its contribution to the overall strategic priorities of the organisation enabling them to perceive themselves as valued collaborators.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction to PLCs

PLCs are groups of people who come together for collaborative study to analyse current levels of achievement, investigate specific topics for professional development, set goals, share strategies, and research best practices to bring about continuous improvement in staff performance and student learning. By nature, PLCs are research led and follow an evidence based approach.

A volunteer group of 3 administrative staff members was formed to undertake action research on the subject and present learnings and outcomes to produce ongoing improvement.

3.2 Research approach and setting

The PLC worked in a consultative manner over five months during which they conducted interviews with staff and undertook wider readings to aid their research and evaluation.

The approach of purposive sampling ensured inclusion of participants with interdepartmental liaison responsibilities from across the school. 16 members of staff were handpicked based on the department, seniority level, gender and number of years spent in the school. In order to understand in-depth the degree to which gaps in internal stakeholder communication were present in the system, 5 questions were drafted, namely:

- 1) What are the roadblocks you face when communicating across departments in the school?
- 2) How do you think this can be improved?
- 3) Do you think mindset has a role to play in creating these barriers?
- 4) Does your team communicate effectively with people in other departments?
- 5) Does key information travel across teams in a timely manner?

Respondents were briefed beforehand about the purpose and scope of the study and interviews were held on a one-to-one basis. Open ended questions allowed for in-depth and qualitative discussions to take place focusing on perceptions and experiences of staff members. Participants were asked to focus on internal stakeholders while answering.

3.3 Analysis and trends

An inductive approach using flat coding frame was followed to analyse the non numerical dataset that was collated. Interviews were transcribed on to a matrix verbatim, following which phrasal recurrences and common thematic references were manually drawn and summarised on a separate sheet. The transcripts were sorted at sentence level and categorised further into initial and final coding frameworks, as the table below illustrates.

Table 1: Transcript analysis into initial and final coding framework

Transcript	Initial coding framework	Final coding framework
There is little awareness about each other’s role and most people make no effort to find out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding • No accountability • Hesitation to do additional work • Looking for personal gain 	It’s not my job
Many staff members don’t respond or respond very late. It can be because they are already working on something.		
Some people don’t take messages or tasks seriously		
When we have to follow up on routine tasks that one is expected to do, it shows a lack of accountability		
We have no clarity on what people in other teams really do		
A lot of staff don’t like taking the responsibility of updating people because they are already busy		
We are very approachable and have an ‘I can do this for you’ attitude but many people pass the buck		
People can say no to work if they are busy or if there is no exposure for them in it		
Updating everyone and closing the loop should be seen as essential not a burden		
Sometimes staff don’t share information because of personal conflicts or petty reasons. This affects work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Block flow of information • Mistrust • Bias • Inequity • Using a mediator 	Conflict due to past experiences
At times departments snatch credit. It creates a rift and is very demoralising		
What you perceive and what you see depends upon your past experiences		
Personal preferences and poor past dealings can get in the way of working together		
I do go out of the way and help but many people don’t		
There are trust issues as people think they are overworked but not getting compensated the same as others		
It is demotivating that our team is positive and solution oriented but other teams are not		
I have had people use me as a buffer to talk to someone they don’t get along with		
Sometimes people don’t want to work with a person and prefer to not communicate with them directly		
Sometimes staff members are not open to new ideas as they are used to their own ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close minded • Insecurity • Fear of disruption in routine • Threat of losing one’s relevance 	Resistance to new ideas
Many people who have been here too long are reluctant to accept changes		
Long serving staff can find change upsetting making implementation difficult		
People save their own selves for survival instead of thinking of the school		
Change in systems can be viewed as a threat to own position		
Some people are naturally loud and that can create a negative impression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barrier • Making assumptions • Nonverbal communication 	Language and tone
Many people are reluctant to ask questions so they make their own meaning if they don’t understand something		
Sometimes some people come across as rude whereas that is just their personality		
If body language doesn’t match what is being said, I rely on the message the body language gives me		

The final coding framework highlighted 4 key areas that affected employee productivity and motivation:

- **It’s not my job:** It was observed that people were likely to turn down extra work if it was not deemed part of their core job or if they did not see any overt learning or upskilling for themselves in the process. Other reasons cited were genuinely being overworked and having prior deadlines. It is interesting to note that several respondents who highlighted this as an issue felt they were stretching themselves to support others but the same behaviour was lacking in other people. Participants did not necessarily take any steps to overcome gaps in understanding the working of other teams.
- **Conflict due to past experiences:** The root of the roadblock was drawn back to having had disagreements in the past, however, the reasons cited for friction were varied such as failure to meet their end of the bargain on part of a team or an individual, or inequity in perceived workload and compensation. Respondents also recounted having used a mediator to get through to people with whom they had had differences in the past. This is noteworthy because creating a buffer to communicate is a way of avoiding interaction with the said person while maintaining the semblance of teamwork.
- **Resistance to new ideas:** Participants reported resisting change if they felt it was upsetting or threatening. The blind spots made them unable to see that such behaviour could negatively impact organisational productivity. This was particularly felt to be reflective of people who had been at the school for a considerable amount of time making them set in their way of operating. There was general consensus that people and teams perform better when communication flows easily. However, they agreed that

a perceived threat to one's image or position could give rise to insecurity making people block or delay the flow of information on purpose.

- Language and tone: It was reported that vocal characteristics such as modulation, inflection and pitch influenced the way information was received and decoded. In addition, selective perception coloured by personal interests, expectations and preferences also affected the way messages were comprehended. Participants acknowledged that if there was inconsistency in nonverbal cues vis-a-vis the words being used to relay the message, they would use their own judgment to infer meaning and evaluate what was not being said.

It was discovered that the above concerns were being felt across teams but they were not being discussed openly. Respondents agreed that one or more of the above affected their morale and the enthusiasm with which they operated.

4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The outcomes report on the relationship between the quality of internal communication and employee satisfaction. We learnt that working closely across teams helps members develop an understanding of not only what other departments do but also the limitations within which they operate, the challenges they face and the creative process they go through to overcome those challenges. Besides, understanding each other's work develops empathy and respect for one another culminating in building a cohesive work culture.

Hence it can be inferred that the achievement of organisational objectives is dependent upon factors that influence flow of communication within the workplace. The paper proposes the creation of an interdepartmental communication protocol which can be supplemented by a communication matrix. Communication protocol is a formal structure created to support upward, downward and linear flow of information within a workplace. It should identify the person responsible for communicating, its recipients, frequency and methods of communication. The development of such a collaborative structure can contribute significantly towards strategies designed to improve productivity and the quality of work life for employees.

The study also recommends appointing a communication leader in each department who can be in charge of getting information out to other teams. This may be done in a structured manner as per an established routine or as and when new information that needs to be shared emerges.

Finally, internal stakeholders' understanding of establishing communication channels and creating a culture of collaboration is integral to achieving organisational goals. Future research could broaden the scope to include cross communication between educators and administrative members of staff.

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