

Communication Constraints Faced by Staff in Kenyan Public Universities

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate effective communication constraints faced by staff in public universities. The study location was in Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST), Kenya. The study sample involved 152 academic and administrative staff. Stratified random sampling techniques based on the respondents' job descriptions were employed. Data collection involved use of questionnaires and secondary data for example, the University Act of 2007 and the employee survey findings of 2006. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and findings revealed that MMUST staff had experienced constraints in effectively communicating to other members of staff. The study identified the constraints in conveying messages citing lack of adequate working equipment and office space.

Key Words: *Communication constraints, public universities, Kenya.*

Introduction

Effective communication is an important ingredient within the university management structure. Anyakoha et al. (1995) observe that effective communication within the university is crucial because it enables the various actors to clarify individual perceptions and discern institutional norms. It helps individuals to produce the co-operation needed to reach institutional goals. Communication within the university is likely to affect the staff in all they do, as they organize and establish goals for their work, interact with students, balance their diverse responsibilities, participate in institutional affairs, and proceed through their careers.

Poor communication among within the university community has been identified as contributing to the conflict situations that characterize universities in Africa. Anyakoha et al. (1995) note that some of the conflicts often lead to work stoppage or even closure of universities and they stemmed from poor communication. Kenyan public universities have also experienced riots and conflicts usually between students and managers or staff and managers. For instance in March, 2009 at Kenyatta University, students rioted and destroyed property which leads to its closure and interruption of academic programs (Daily Nation, 18th March 2009). In May the same year, Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) was also

locked in disputes with University Councils over pay issues (The Standard, May 25, 2009). MMUST has also had disputes between staff and administration, students and administration over different issues for instance, Privately Sponsored Students Program (PSSP) payment, attachment fees payment, lack of enough teaching and laboratory facilities, delayed salaries, among others which have been attributed to communication breakdown. Distribution of information to MMUST centers and campuses have also been a problem leading to delayed decision making or working behind deadlines.

The organizational structure of MMUST is based on the University Act of 30th December 2006. The University is run by the University Council as the supreme organ with the day to-day activities run by Senate, chaired by the Vice Chancellor. The Senate comprises of the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans of Faculties, Directors of Institutes, Schools and Centres, Chairpersons of Academic Departments, the University Librarian, representatives of Librarians, faculty representatives, professors, student representatives, trade union representatives and Coordinators of Campuses and other directorates. At all levels of administration and management, there is usually upward, downward horizontal and lateral communication. There are issues of concern that require managers and administrators to consult over and make decisions that guide provision of services as promised in the service charter. The coordination of administrative, financial, academic functions of the University is placed in the offices of the Deputy Vice Chancellors supported by professional experts. Therefore, this study sought to investigate effective communication constraints faced by staff in public universities

Literature Review

Huber (1991) suggests that communication is one of the most complex and strategic activities of human beings. It may have limited effectiveness for two interacting reasons. The first obstacle to effectiveness is the lack of congruence between the sender (source, persuader, and speaker) and the receiver (recipient, addressee, and listener). As many contributions have emphasized, the latter is unlikely to trust the former's statement or recommendation if their interests diverge.

A'la Holmstrom (1982) asserts that the acts of formulating and absorbing the content of a communication are privately costly:

- (i) The sender must expend time, attention and other resources to communicate effectively her or his knowledge. Since the same message may convey different meanings to different receivers, the sender must address the receiver's knowledge (absorptive capacity, language, perspective). Similarly, the message should not be so concise as not to convey the relevant information, but should also not include information that is redundant, or irrelevant so as not to distract attention or discourage absorption.
- (ii) Conversely, the receiver must pay attention, decode, understand, and rehearse the acquired knowledge. He must decode the literal meaning, and, like the sender, take the properties of the other side into account in order to make a proper inference of what the intended meaning was.

Anyakoha et al. (1995) conclude that problems encountered in universities result from miscommunication. What recipients understand of a message may not always be the message intended by the sender. A number of barriers can distort effective communication. Sillars (1999) reiterates that, however carefully an organization or an individual plans acts of communication, it is inevitable that the breakdowns will sometimes occur. They can be classified into two groups as follows; those caused by people or organizations concerned with communicating, and those which are due to external factors.

Saiyadain (2000) identifies three categories of communication barriers namely; human factors, context or mode factors and organizational factors and explained them as follows;

(i) **Human Factors**

include filtering, that is, the information is manipulated to suit the receiver. The major determinant of filtering is the number of levels in an organization structure. Another factor is the selective perception where the receivers selectively see and hear as on their needs, motivation, experience, background and other personal characteristics.

(ii) Content or Mode Factors

These factors are included in the content, process of encoding and decoding and the mode of content communication. Among the factors is the communication overload where individuals have more information than they can sort out and use. They tend to select out, ignore, pass over or forget information. Regardless of the cause, the result is lost information and therefore less effective communication.

(iii) Organizational Factors

These are factors such as hierarchy, status and overall climate, which contribute to the pattern of communication in the organization. For example, as Singhal (1993) states that the level in bureaucracies distorts and delays information due to screening or additional information relating to idiosyncrasies.

With all the problems, potential and real, in the communication process, it is obvious that a “perfect” communication system is unlikely. Although perfection might not be achieved, organizations can have mechanisms by which they can attempt to keep the communication system as clear as possible. Downs (2004) indicates that several devices can be available to reduce the distortions and other complications in the communication process.

Some organizations have turned to “project groups” as a means of solving communication problems. These groups consist of personnel from a variety of organizational units who develop a new product of service for the organization. Katz & Kahn (1982) explain that one analysis of research and development project groups composed of scientists and engineers found out that such groups became increasingly isolated from key information sources within and outside their own organizations.

Hall (2003) states that advanced communication technology were not the cure for organizational communication problems. These problems are rooted in the nature of organizations, their participants, and their interactions with their environments. On the other hand, Nzuve (1999) gave the solutions to communication barriers as sending messages effectively and listening to messages attentively. While sending messages one should set communication goals to be accomplished and should use appropriate language which has been clarified for easy understanding, and practice emphatic communication where the sender should understand the received message, and improve sender credibility. Dull (1981) contends that staff needed to be cognizant of barriers to communication. These would not enable them to eliminate all roadblocks in communication, but would enable them to skillfully handle communication barriers which could add significantly to the efficiency in communication over a period of time. The quantity and quality of supervisor-staff communications would be basic determinants to organizational effectiveness. Greenberg & Baron (2007) assert that an individual can improve their communication skills when simple and clear language is used, when one listens attentively, when one avoids information overload and when one gives and receives feedback. Most barriers to communication are experienced due to the above highlighted reasons. However, MMUST can come up with ways of encouraging staff to give feedback at different levels and receive feedback from them, as well as other stakeholders. Suggestion systems could also be used including; corporate hotlines, informal meetings and employee surveys are also other ways in which the University Administration could use to curb the constraints faced in communication at the University.

Methodology

MMUST has twenty six (26) departments at the time of the study. These departments were divided into two major strata, that is, twenty one (21) teaching and five (5) non-teaching departments. Out of these ten (10) departments (37%) of the population was selected using random stratified sampling. The strata were further subdivided based on members sharing a specific attribute or characteristic for instance lecturers, administrators, secretaries, technicians among other cadres of staff. A random sample from each stratum was taken, in a number proportional to the stratum's size when compared to the population. These subsets of the strata were then pooled to form a random sample. The subjects from the selected population were selected to ensure that they were a representative of the population in terms of such critical factors as sex,

faculties, years of experience and rank. Sixty (60) lecturers, forty (40) administrators, eleven (11) secretaries, five (5) accountants, ten (10) technicians, twenty (20) office assistants and six (6) other staff were purposively sampled. A total of one hundred and fifty two (152) members of staff were sampled. A questionnaires consisting of both open and closed ended questions were employed to collect data.

Results and Discussion

Efficiency of Communication In Relation To the Respondents' Job Designation

Respondents were asked to indicate their job designations and their perception of efficiency of effective communication in the university.

Table 1: Efficiency of Communication as per the Respondents' Job Designation

Job Designation of the Respondents	Does information about work get to you on time?	
	Yes	No
Lecturers	75.0%	25.0%
Administrators	55.6%	44.4%
Secretaries	66.7%	33.3%
Accountants	100.0%	.0%
Technicians	50.0%	50.0%
Office Assistants	75.0%	25.0%
Others	36.4%	63.6%

(Source: Research Data, 2012)

The results in Table 2 illustrate the efficiency of communication at MMUST in relation to the Respondents' Job Designation. All the cadres of staff agree that information gets to them on time as follows;75.0% of the Lecturers 55.6% of Administrators,66.7% of Secretaries,100% of Accountants,50% of Technicians and 75% of Office Assistants. The other category of staff did not agree and 63.6% said no. The following reasons were given as explanations to the respondents' negative answer; that it resulted in delayed information and thus delayed decision making. This was as a result of receiving information late due to the delay in distribution of memos to all the staff concerned for a particular meeting and also lack of a centralized notice board where information is put for all to read. At MMUST, notices are stuck on walls of buildings therefore some staff misses the information since they are unable to read all the information on all walls of the University buildings. In addition to the above sentiment, decision making is delayed due to information not getting to the staff concerned in time.

The respondents cited wrong channel of communication for instance grapevine as the cause of delayed information. According to the respondents, communication through grapevine was not permanent and lacked clarity, therefore did not convey the information in reality thus confusing the staff on the type of decision to make in case of a crisis. In other cases, a phone call might be made to pass across the information and since the recipient of the call was not the intended receiver of the information, it got distorted by the time it gets to them. However, nearly all the information within the grapevine is undocumented and is thereby open to change and interpretation as it moves through the network. The informal organization is less permanent and less stable (than the formal organization) because its leaders and patterns of action change readily. This occurs because of the dependency of the network on personalities, whereas the formal network is set up through structured policies nondependent on individuals. According to Goldhaber (1983), the grapevine has both good and bad tendencies but its most significant characteristics indicate that it is fast and can be highly selective and accurate though always incomplete. It (the grapevine) is considered desirable in an organization because it could give management some insight into the attitude of employees and help spread useful information.

However, the respondents who agreed that information always got to them on time explained that it was due to their closeness with their supervisors and that they had a good working relationship with other staff. The formal network, made up of memos, reports, staff-meetings, departmental meetings, conferences, university newsletters, official notices, were highly documented and as such had very little chance for change. Therefore, staff usually in touch with their supervisors had a great advantage over those who were not. Barriers of communication exist at MMUST depending on the channel and nature of communication being passed across to staff with different job designations.

Barriers to communication in Relation to the Respondents’ job Designation

Respondents were asked to indicate their job designations and their perception of barriers of effective communication in the university.

Table 2: Barriers to communication in relation to the respondents’ job designation

Job Designation of the Respondents	Barriers to Communication	Frequency			
		1	2	3	4
Lecturers	language		50.0%		50.0%
	channel used	100.0%			
	head of department	33.3%		66.7%	
	All barriers		50.0%		50.0%
Administrators	language	16.7%		50.0%	33.3%
	channel used	33.3%	50.0%		16.7%
	head of department	42.9%	14.3%	14.3%	28.6%
	All barriers	20.0%	20.0%		60.0%
Secretaries	ranking language	12.5%	25.0%	62.5%	
	channel used	75.0%	12.5%	12.5%	
	head of department	50.0%	40.0%	10.0%	
	All barriers				100.0%
Accountants	language		50.0%		50.0%
	channel used	100.0%			
	head of department			100.0%	
	All barriers		100.0%		
Technicians	ranking language	50.0%	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%
	channel used	33.3%	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%
	head of department		33.3%	50.0%	16.7%
	All barriers	16.7%	33.3%		50.0%
Office Assistants	language	25.0%	25.0%	50.0%	
	channel used	75.0%	25.0%		
	head of department	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%	
	All barriers	33.3%			66.7%
Others	language	12.5%	25.0%	62.5%	
	channel used	70.0%	30.0%		
	head of department	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	
	All barriers				100.0%

(Source: Research Data, 2012)

Results in Table 2 illustrate the respondents' job designation in relation to the barriers to communication experienced at MMUST. Lecturers ranked one the channel used and Head of Department at 100.0% and 33.3% respectively. They ranked two the Language and All barriers at 50.0% each. The Administrators ranked one the Head of Department, Channel used, all barriers and Language at 42.9%, 33.3%, 20.0% and 16.7% respectively. Secretaries ranked one the Channel used, Head of Department and Language at 75.0%, 50.0% and 12.5% respectively.

Accountants ranked one the Channel used at 100.0%, Language and All Barriers were ranked two at 50.0% and 100.0% respectively while Head of Department was ranked three at 100.0%. Technicians ranked one the Language, Channel and All Barriers at 50.0%, 33.3% and 16.7% while Head of Department was ranked two at 33.3%. Office Assistants ranked one Channel, All Barriers, Head of Department and Language at 75.0%, 33.3%, 25.0% and 25.0% respectively. The Other Categories of Staff ranked one Channel, Head of Department and Language at 70.0%, 33.3% and 12.5% while All Barriers was ranked four at 100.0%.

From the results above, it was determined that the most barriers to communication experienced by all cadres of staff were Head of Department and Channel used. The respondents agreed that not all barriers listed were experienced but from the results it is realized that different cadres of staff experienced different barriers. According to the respondents, the effects of barriers of communication on MMUST operation were as follows; reduced staff productivity, morale and performance leading to lack of direction due to erroneous information therefore making wrong decisions.

The above were as a result of delayed communications which led to wastage of man hours and in ability to plan ahead. On the other hand, the respondents suggested that the best method of overcoming the communication constraints was that the university management should be organizing for meetings with all staff to enable them to express their sentiments openly and without fear. These meetings would precipitate a good working environment for all the staff at the university. In addition to that, the channels of communication should be chosen correctly to avoid distorting the intended information to the recipients. Also they were of the opinion that the Heads of Departments should be interacting with members of staff often to curb the different status and lack of trust between the staff and their Heads of Sections.

To overcome information overload, it was noted that it is important to realize that some information was not necessary, and make necessary information easily available. Also, the sender should give information meaning rather than just passing it on, and set priorities for dealing with the information flow. It was proposed that to overcome the barriers to communication for complex messages, the sender should keep them clear and easy to understand. He/she should guide readers by telling them what to expect, use concrete and specific language, and stick to the point.

They should be sure to ask for feedback so that one could clarify and improve on their message. Lastly, the respondents suggested that to overcome structural barriers, the university management should offer opportunities for communicating upward, downward, and horizontally (using such techniques as employee surveys, open-door policies, newsletters, memo, and task groups). Hierarchical levels should be reduced in order to increase coordination between departments, and encourage two-way communication.

Conclusions

The objective of the study was to determine the constraints faced in communicating messages at MMUST. The heads of department were cited as a barrier to communication since it was explained that they attended meetings and failed to communicate the deliberations of the meeting to their staff in time leading to the staff being informed late or not at all on important matters at the university. On the other hand, language as a constraint was only mentioned by a few respondents who explained that most written communication was either heavily worded or scantily worded making the recipients unable to understand the information.

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