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Improving Industrial Harmony and Staff Performance in a School Organization through Effective Communication

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Abstract

Communication is vital to any social system as it creates an environment of trust, harmony and proficiency. It promotes effective management practices and motivates staff to greater productivity. Communication is an inevitable and important tool of management. Organizations that withhold information or give it grudgingly may breed conflict, mistrust, suspicion, confusion, or crisis. From this perspective, management must communicate with staff regularly to achieve industrial peace and harmony and increase worker performance. This paper discusses effective communication, industrial or organizational harmony, the essence of communication, and the school manager and communication. This paper also discusses how to use communication to improve both industrial harmony and staff performance. Finally, it recommends encouragement of constant bottom-up communication, in addition to top-down communication, to ensure that the views of subordinate staff are well understood and incorporated in decision-making.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is crucial to worker involvement so as to increase mutual understanding between management and subordinates and enhance personnel productivity. Evidence abounds that employees need information as much as management need feedback from employees. Through communication, management can establish mutual understanding and exchange of ideas, information, experience and innovation for peaceful co-existence, conflict resolution, and cumulative development, progress and well-being of the organizational structure. A good communication network in a school, therefore, helps to orient workers, and increase staff involvement and commitment to the main objectives of the system. Braimoh (1985) notes that communication is not only prescribed as the panacea for almost all ills in an organization, but also a means of improving understanding among those engaged in industry, business, government, and other organizations. Communication among management, staff and students in a school system is imperative for the growth of ideas and so as to achieve effective the interpersonal relationships needed for the seamless operations of the school organization.

Despite the aforementioned evidence, a good percent of organizations, both industrial and educational, find it difficult to organize and motivate subordinates due to ineffective communication networks or channels. According to Iwanbe (2002), most organizations are either lukewarm to information meant for workers or they communicate in a haphazard manner so that the intended message never reaches the employees or students (in the case of school organizations) in a manner they can properly decode. This in turn mars the communication machinery of the school or organization and the school fails to realize its set goals and objectives. It is in this way that inadequate communication in a school setting can breed misunderstanding, suspicion, mistrust, rumours, and ultimately, conflict or crisis.

In recent times, Nigerian educational institutions have experienced disharmony, instability and other forms of industrial conflict. This situation has resulted in low productivity in the schools. Most of these problems have been as a result of poor communication (Enyi, 2001). According to Nworgu (2005), most Nigerian universities have experienced a series of crises caused by poor communication between students and university administrators. Udeajah (2001) notes that when the appropriate organ does not provide the required information, substitute communication develops in the form of rumours, gossip and falsehoods. These, in turn, have the potential to generate conflict within the institution. Thus, Cherrington cited in Nworgu (2005), observes that conflicts between groups can be an indication of a lack of effective communication and positive interaction. Conversely, when used properly communication enhances the prompt detection of internal strain, serves as preventive factor in conflict situations, and increases worker productivity. It is thus imperative that school administrators realize the potential for communication to improve industrial harmony and workers performance.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the meaning of effective communication, the essence of communication in a school organization, and the relationship between school managers and communication. It surveys how to use communication to improve industrial harmony and staff performance in a school organization.

INDUSTRIAL/ORGANIZATIONAL HARMONY

Industrial/organizational harmony refers to a friendly and cooperative agreement on working relationships between employers and employees for their mutual benefit (Laden, 2012). According to Puttapalli and Vuram (2012), industrial/organizational harmony is concerned with the relationship between management and employees with respect to the terms and conditions of employment and the work place. In effect, it is a situation where employees and management cooperate willingly in pursuit of the organization's aims and objectives. Industrial/organizational harmony requires that:

- All management personnel understand their responsibilities and what is required of them, and have the training and authority necessary to discharge such duties and responsibilities efficiently;

- Duties and responsibilities for each group of employees are stated with clarity and simplicity in the organizational structure;
- Individual employees or work-groups know their objectives and are regularly kept informed of progress made towards achieving them;
- There is an effective link in the interchange of information and views between senior management and members of the work group;
- Supervisors are briefed about innovation and changes before they occur so they can explain management's policies and intentions to the work-group;
- Employers cooperate with trade unions in establishing effective procedures for the negotiation of terms and conditions of employment and for the settlement of disputes;
- Employers encourage the establishment of effective procedures among member organizations for the settlement of grievances and disputes at the level of the establishment or undertaking;
- Employers take all reasonable steps to ensure the organization observes agreements and agreed upon procedures; and
- The organization maintains a communication system which secures the interchange of information and views between different levels in the organization and ensures that employees are systematically and regularly kept informed, factually and objectively, of changes and progress in the system.

Industrial/organizational harmony thus covers four broad areas of cooperation: responsibilities, employment policy, collective bargaining, and communication and consultation. Industrial/organizational enhances labour productivity and in turn improves performance in the education sector, achieving economic growth, and enhancing living standards and quality of life. It creates a peaceful working environment conducive to tolerance, dialogue and other alternative (to strike) means of resolving industrial/labour disputes in Nigeria (such as negotiation, mediation, arbitration, conciliation and litigation or court adjudication) (Laden, 2012). This creates a high level of employee satisfaction.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Communication is the exchange of information and meanings between or among those who are communicating through a common system of symbols. Communication is a means of passing information from one person or organization to the other. It is an avenue for impacting knowledge or discussing views and opinions with others. All communication has one major goal, changing the consciousness and behavior of the message encoder and decoder to the extent that the decoder responds with feedback to the encoder. Effective communication thus occurs when the receiver successfully decodes the sender's coded messages (symbols) and sends positive feedback to suggest that his/her subsequent behavior is congruent with the shared experience contained in the communicated message. In other words, there must be a relation between the sender and the receiver of the message through the appropriate channels that will cause him/her to respond. Here, response or reaction to the message is referred to as feedback.

In communication, a message is deemed effective when it is sent, received and well-understood by both parties (encoder and decoder). There is the need, therefore, for an administrator to systematically and carefully choose the medium and language or words to be used in passing information to employees. In ascertaining communication effectiveness, Ezeocha (1989) averred that communication is effective when it reveals the understanding of the ideas or contents of information or accurate interpretation of all that is contained in the information. Effective communication is thus not just the giving of information, sending of a telegram, writing of a memo, or face-to-face conversation, rather it is the sending of a clear message and receiving and understanding the intent of the message.

Effective communication according to Fashoyin (1999) requires the continual dissemination of management's policies to workers and vice versa. Omolayole, as cited in Fashoyin (1999), stated that in the process of policy formation management must be prepared to see ideas flowing not only downwards but also upwards in a two-way communication system. Every educational institution thus needs to ensure that there is effective communication between those who manage the school and those who are charged

with the administrative and teaching tasks. In this way, communication becomes the "live-wire" of any human organization and will promote more effective management practices and greater trust between management and workers.

ESSENCE OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is important to an educational institution because it is the means through which messages, instructions and information are provided to staff and students and vice versa. Communication enhances organizational productivity, reduces conflict and leads to an effective teaching and learning environment. It can also lead to the realization of organizational goals. Hence, Lesiker in Peretomode (1991, 226) emphatically stated that:

> Communication is the ingredient, which makes organization possible. It is the vehicle through which basic management/administrators functions are carried out. Managers and administrators direct through communication; they coordinate through communication and they staff, plan and control through communication. Hardly an action is taken in any organization without communication leading to it.

Communication between management and staff can increase their involvement in organizational activities, as well as, their commitment to the main objectives of the organization. As noted by Ezeocha (1989), a communication network is an important part of decision-making. In a simplified stimulus-response situation a message is sent out to the environment based on an expectation about how the environment behaves. When the environment responds, an adjustment can be made if any errors were detected in previous expectations. Communication thus enables people to attempt to create a commonness of understanding between them. Through communication, management can easily secure the agreement and commitment of staff and their representatives to the organization's objectives, plans and policies. It is imperative for linking together different departments, programmes, activities and services in a school organization. According to Lesley (1978), information is not one-way and should not be conceived as a mere instrument of relaying orders from the management to "passive" workers. Rather, it is something that should be upward, downward and horizontal.

Admittedly, in any organizational setup good communication is essential for raising the level of employee motivation (Clark, Ross & Shackleton, 1993). In the absence of full and accurate information transmitted through formal channels, uncertainty and rumour may become widespread. Good communication can also significantly reduce feelings of neglect, disempowerment and alienation by increasing a sense of belonging and importance.

Communication is an important variable that determines healthy and cordial relationship in a school as it clarifies roles and duties and enhances industrial harmony. As such, administrators (Vice-chancellor, Provost, Rector, Principal, or Headmaster) must establish and maintain effective communication links with staff and students. Information for staff should be passed to them through unit heads to minimize the risk of workers receiving the wrong information or distorted messages. This also ensures that staff receive the information that is required to make good decisions in a timely manner.

THE SCHOOL MANAGER AND COMMUNICATION

As schools in Nigeria are in a constant state of expansion, communication has become particularly crucial in the control and coordination of groups, subgroups and individuals in the school system. Communication is essential to the school manager as it serves as an instrument to link management (decision centres) with the employees (often the executors of decisions). School managers should aim to maintain diverse information channels with employees to ensure harmony and instill a deep sense of belonging among workers (Iwambe, 2002). School managers should regularly disseminate information to share changes, progress and new developments in the school. According to Ezeocha (1989), members of the school (teachers, pupils, as well as the ancillary staff) need to know what the school is all about – its

purpose, aims and objectives. They also need to be aware of national and state educational policies and changes to these policies. He noted that the total effectiveness of any school system (as with other organizations) depends considerably on the extent to which members share and understand information.

Lucey in Obi (2004) identified a number of the tools used by managers to disseminate information to staff. These include face-to-face conversations, telephone calls, informal and formal meetings, conferences, memoranda, letters, report tabulations, posters and handbills. School managers must know when it is appropriate to use each of these channels or media. In the case of general staff meetings, for example, the managers and other major officers in the school are able to brief workers on various occurrences or new developments in the school. It should be noted that letters, memos, reports and notices meant for staff must be presented in clear language and devoid of jargon.

USING COMMUNICATION TO IMPROVE INDUSTRIAL HARMONY AND STAFF PERFORMANCE

Effective communication helps to promote harmonious relations between the school manager and staff and is critical to productivity in a school organization. An administrator best achieve these objectives by adopting the inverted triangular system of communication which brings management closer to the workers thus smoothing the relationship between the two and easing the decision-making process. Unachukwu (1997) goes further and argues for upward, downward, and lateral communication channels between the principal and subordinates. The principal should make him or herself accessible to teachers and students, delegate some functions to them, and actively pursue feedback. Unachukwu (1997) maintains that effective communication facilitates meaningful interaction and exchange of information or ideas among group members. Communication should be open and administrative functions coordinated harmoniously.

The free flow of information, according to Olagunju (1999), is an important factor in creating understanding in an organization. In his view, managers have a responsibility to ensure not only that they are understood but that they in turn understand other members of the organization. School managers can be well understood if they maintain a commitment to openness. Management should ensure that staff members are kept well informed about issues such as salary structure, conflict and dispute resolution procedures, safety, staff development and training, and so on. To prevent duplication of instructions, management should also ensure that all unit heads are fully aware of their areas of responsibility.

School mangers must avoid denying access to information. Fashoyin (1999) maintains that many cases that lead to employee grievances are associated with poor communication in the labour-management relationship. This creates acrimony and distrust. Workers should not be denied information and management should not show lukewarm attitude towards information dissemination. Managers and/or administrators must be well versed in communication theory and practice if they are to enable employee access and understanding thereby promoting harmonious relationships between management and staff and among the staff themselves.

CONCLUSION

Effective communication is one of the basic ingredients in the effective operation of an organization given the propensity for periodic conflict in human relationships. Open and productive communication sets the stage for industrial harmony and the realization of the organization's objectives. An effective communication system is thus central to maintaining healthy work relationships among personnel. In order to ensure that communication does not pose any unnecessary challenges, a good organizational structure should be put in place. All staff and management should be instructed in the existing links of communication: who to report to, who to give instructions to, where to get what from and who is to be given what. Memos, emails, notice boards, telephone calls, circulars, and meetings all aid communication in the school organization.

In effect, wherever there is a need to organize, communication is a necessity; in a situation where effective communication ceases, organized behaviour also ceases and gives way to chaos which is antithetical to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. As such, conscious efforts must to ensure that different audiences being communicated with are identified and that there is a consistency and clarity of messages so that receivers can come to place trust in the message and the sender. Achieving peaceful working relations between management and employees is, not surprisingly, a product of an effective communication network within the organization. It recognizes workers and their contributions as an integral part of the system, allowing and inviting them to participate in the decisions that affect their lives within that organization. It can make them feel capable, relevant and useful. The increased employee motivation gained as a result of good two-way communication will facilitate the achievement of common organizational objectives.

School managers must regularly communicate with both internal and external audiences and stakeholders. Theirs is often a job characterized by uncertainty and complex administrative issues that render clear communication all the more important. School managers must thus take regular account of what is to be communicated, who is responsible for communicating it, to whom the information is directed, and the most appropriate form in which to present it.

Recommendations

1. School administrators should encourage constant bottom-up communication, in addition to top-down communications, in order to know the perspectives of employees and to be able to seek and incorporate their input in decision-making.

2. School administrators should foster good interpersonal communication as this will not only discourage rumours, but create an atmosphere where feedback from the receiver of the message is welcomed and encouraged.

3. School administrators should encourage the use of a multi-channel communication system. This will go a long way to reducing conflict situations, feelings of insecurity, confusion and resentment among staff.

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