

Exploring the strategic potential of internal communication in international non-governmental organisations

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Abstract

The role and importance of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) has increased with globalization and the growth of global institutions. Despite this growth, academic research into INGO management remains limited and, due to their unique characteristics, management theories developed for for-profit organisations cannot be applied as is to INGOs. Internal communication is a critical area of management that has been proven to have a major impact on an organisation's effectiveness, particularly when managed strategically. Therefore this article explores the strategic management of internal communication within the INGO context. This study synthesised the current literature on this topic and included five case studies to understand the current state of internal communication within INGOs. It was determined that INGOs do not manage internal communication strategically. However, there is evidence that the implementation of strategic internal communication could help INGOs address several of their challenges and have an impact on their over-all effectiveness. This study is exploratory and further research to identify the process for strategic internal communication in INGOs is needed.

Keywords:

Strategic communication
Internal communication
Non-governmental organisations

1. Introduction

With a growing impact on the social and economic welfare of people in modern society, the performance and management of INGOs is of increasing importance. Over the last two decades alone, globalisation has led to a rise of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) (Katsus, 2004). In 1981, there were 13,000 known INGOs worldwide. In 2001, this number had increased to over 47,000 (Anheier, 2005). Yet, while academic research into the management of NGOs has increased over the last decade, it has not kept pace with the growth of the sector (Anheier, 2005; Salamon, Sokolowski, & List, 2004).

Scholars like Anheier (2005) and Lewis (2007) argue that NGOs are a distinct type of organisation with specific management needs. They possess a set of unique characteristics that impact their management (Lewis, 2007). These characteristics do not excuse them from having sound management practice, but they do mean that management practices, generally developed for for-profit organisations, need to be evaluated within the unique context of NGOs. Internal communication is one domain in corporate management that needs to be evaluated within the NGO context.

Strategic internal communication has been called both the "promised land" (Oliver, 2000) and the "secret weapon" of successful organisations, particularly when managed strategically (Yates, 2006). Internal communication can be defined as strategic when it is managed for the purpose of aligning internal stakeholders with the organisation's strategic intent. When

this occurs, strategic internal communication can lead to improvement in organisational performance as identified through the following indicators: increased employee engagement, commitment to and enhancement of the corporate reputation and organisational prestige (Dolphin, 2005; Meyer & De Wet, 2007). Yet, academic research on the process of internal communication generally (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Yeomans, 2006) and in INGOs in particular is not readily available.

This article aims to report on the main findings from a study that investigated both the gaps in literature on the strategic management of communication within INGOs and current practices of INGOs. The results of these two objectives are reported on in this article in order to provide insights into the current state of affairs in INGOs.

2. Theoretical background

This article depends on the synthesis of ideas from the INGO context *per se*, INGO management theory and strategic internal communication theory.

2.1. The INGO context

INGOs are the primary actors within global civil society, one of the three spheres of society, the others being the state and the market (Van Tulder & Van Der Zwart, 2006). All organisations within civil society are “organized, private, not profit-distributing, self-governing, [and] voluntary” (Salamon et al., 2004). In addition, INGOs are civil society organisations working in two or more countries and concerned with development (Salamon et al., 2004). Development is here defined as “improving the social, cultural, and economic well-being of certain sectors of society” (Swilling & Russel, 2002).

Despite these common characteristics, INGOs have diverse structures and roles. Van Tulder and Van Der Zwart (2006) identify three types of INGO structures: networks generally located in one country but operate internationally through networking and collaboration (Anheier, 2005); centralised global organisations with national offices tightly controlled by headquarters (Van Tulder & Van Der Zwart, 2006); and federations with a central coordinating body and a loose structure of associated organisations in various countries (Van Tulder & Van Der Zwart, 2006).

INGO roles can also be divided broadly into three categories: an operational service-oriented role providing aid delivery and development assistance (Lewis, 2007); a global policy and advocacy role playing “a key role in supporting democratic processes in the political sphere” (Lewis, 2007); and a counter-hegemonic activist role working outside government structures towards real social transformation (Lewis, 2007). A single INGO can often take on more than one of these roles, although this can lead to tensions within the organisation.

2.2. INGO management

Some NGOs have resisted the application of management principles because management evokes images of control and hierarchy, which contradict many INGO values (Lewis, 2007; Mustaghis-Ur-Rahman, 2007; Walsh & Lenihan, 2006). However, INGOs are increasingly criticised for failing to live up to expectations of their effectiveness. This lack of success can be attributed at least in part to underdeveloped management structures (Ossewaarde & Nijhof, 2008; Walsh & Lenihan, 2006). Therefore, the role and form of NGO management is now the focus of more attention and debate.

NGO management is not synonymous with business management. Campbell (in Lewis, 2007) showed that to understand NGO management both their organisational characteristics and their wider context need to be considered. For example, strategic management, and thus strategic internal communication, has been an uncomfortable fit for INGOs because of environmental and organisational characteristics.

The complexity and constant change of the INGO environment makes it difficult for INGOs to develop strategies for the three to five year period usually recommended in traditional strategic management approaches (Wilson-Graua, 2003). In addition, several INGO characteristics, including its values, its lack of a solid bottom-line and the vagueness of its mission make it necessary for INGOs to constantly strive to maintain their legitimacy. The unique characteristics of INGOs suggest that a postmodern strategic management approach may be appropriate for these organisations.

From the postmodern perspective, strategic management is no longer seen as a tool with definable steps and objectives, but rather a self-organising ever-changing process built through discourse and guided by complex and chaotic relationships and environments. Using the metaphor of a journey, Franklin (1998) describes the postmodern strategic management process:

“As we journey along our strategic route we remain ever alert to the need to change our pace and our direction as new events and unexpected futures cause us to reconsider, re-evaluate and re-strategize our future destination and take a new route on our eternal journey.”

This quotation serves to illustrate several key components of postmodern strategic management. The metaphor of an eternal journey highlights the need to approach strategic management as an on-going process rather than a distinct, time-limited tool. This characteristic fits well with the complex and changing environments of INGOs. The postmodern strategic management process is not a static top-down management approach, but rather a dynamic underlying process which

constantly guides an organisation as it selects methods and tools to use with each new issue and challenge it faces. It thus can be aligned with the democratic and participatory values often found in INGOs.

2.3. *Strategic internal communication*

The Excellence Study for Public Relations established internal communication as both a component of and a prerequisite for excellent public relations (Grunig, 1992) and strategic communication. Internal communication is primarily concerned with the relationship between the organisation and its employees: each is the other's most important public and a productive relationship is necessary for them to achieve their goals (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006). Strategic internal communication remains concerned with this relationship but is focused on the strategic functioning of internal communication. Internal communication needs to be managed strategically to be as effective as possible in pursuit of the organisation's mission. A review of the literature identifies the following characteristics strategic internal communication must possess.

First, the purpose of internal communication must be strategic alignment of internal stakeholders with the organisation's strategic intent. This requires strategic discourse across the organisation and at all levels to raise individual and collective strategic consciousness (Puth, 2002). Through strategic consciousness, individuals and work groups interpret and implement the strategic intent within their own area of work.

Second, strategic internal communication plays a role in strategy development by ensuring that the views of internal stakeholders are incorporated into the strategy (Verwey, 2003) and in strategy implementation by communicating the strategic intent to those same internal stakeholders. From a postmodern perspective, this process is an on-going dialogue around strategic issues in order to constantly re-develop and re-align the organisation with its strategic intent and environment. In order to fulfil this role effectively, internal communication must have a position as part of the senior management of the organisation.

Third, the senior communicator must have knowledge of internal communication's strategic role in order to fulfil it. As Grimshaw and Mike (2008) note, one of the main reasons why organisations do not have effective strategic internal communication functions is because of a lack of knowledge of what strategic internal communication looks like.

Finally, the content of internal communication must focus on the organisation's strategic intent. Puth (2002) identifies four key components of strategy that need to be communicated with all internal stakeholders in order to achieve alignment: the context within which the strategy develops, where the strategy is taking them, where they currently are and how they are going to get between the two. Therefore, a clear strategic intent is necessary for strategic alignment.

All of these elements must be present for internal communication to function strategically. This study therefore defines strategic internal communication as follows: *the strategic management of communication to align the organisation's internal stakeholders with its strategic intent.*

This definition incorporates the strategic intent as the content of the communication, and strategic alignment as its purpose. The position of the internal communication is implied in the term strategic management.

When considering the process of strategic internal communication, the literature also identifies several factors that need to be included. First, it must be integrated into the overall communication strategy of the organisation. Second, as Puth (2002) points out, strategic internal communication requires committed and inspiring leadership at all levels of the organisation. Third, internal communication should be symmetrical (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). Finally, strategic internal communication requires a holistic infrastructure that identifies the appropriate communication tools to achieve strategic alignment with the target audience.

2.4. *Strategic internal communication within INGOs*

Taking into consideration all of the above, this study considers strategic internal communication within the context of INGOs. Implementing strategic internal communication in INGOs has the potential to assist them overcome many of the barriers and challenges they face. These are discussed next.

INGOs have multiple, complex environments over which they have very little direct control (Anheier, 2005) reducing their ability to predict long-term needs and goals. For strategic internal communication, Puth (2002) highlights the necessity of communicating with all internal stakeholders not only the strategic intent but also the context within which the strategy develops in order to achieve alignment. By ensuring that internal stakeholders are aware of the external environment and how it impacts the organisation, strategic internal communication ensures that the workforce is able to adapt to changing contexts, understands the reasons behind decisions and remains aligned behind the organisation's strategic intent.

INGOs have several identifying characteristics which can lead to particular challenges. For example, INGOs have difficulties establishing legitimacy because of the subjectivity of the values on which their missions are based. In addition, INGOs often have ambiguous missions open to multiple interpretations which can lead to ambiguity, goal displacement, a lack of cohesion and even contradiction in their strategic intent (Glasrud, 2001). By viewing internal communication as a process, INGOs can negotiate the different interpretations of their mission and their values within the organisation to achieve strategic alignment, thus improving internal legitimacy.

In their structure, INGOs face the challenge of balancing the need to be flexible and adaptable with the need to remain focused on pursuing a cohesive strategic intent. Mismanaging that balance can lead to ineffectual bureaucracy on one hand or mission displacement on the other. In addition, programme silos, encouraged by the programme based funding in

INGOs (Srinivasan, 2007), can pose barriers to establishing strategic alignment (Puth, 2002). By encouraging a central focus on strategic intent, strategic internal communication provides a centre point around which an organisation can achieve flexibility without loss of focus.

As Lewis (2007) notes, NGOs generally do not have a single culture but rather multiple cultures centred on different job tasks and nationalities. In addition, INGOs often have cultures focused on action, where it is more important to be doing something than necessarily taking the time to make sure it is either effective or efficient (Lewis, 2007). This can be detrimental to the development of strategic internal communication because it is focused on long-term results and its value is not immediately evident. This makes it less appealing in a culture focused on action.

The INGO workforce has several characteristics that can pose challenges for management including a strong commitment to the INGO mission (Maneerat, Hale, & Singhal, 2005), lower than market-level remuneration, a mixture of paid and voluntary employees and diversity in terms of nationality, culture and work tasks (Anheier, 2005). Overall, the diversity of the INGO workforce can have negative effects on workforce productivity and the performance of the organisation but it can also have positive effects in terms of creativity and innovation. Internal communication can assist international organisations take advantage of the diverse backgrounds of their employees (Appelbaum & Belmusth, 2007). Through strategic alignment and dialogue, strategic internal communication can help improve understanding and cohesion among diverse staff.

Several communication challenges are shown to be common among INGOs. For example, it is difficult for INGOs to communicate a single consistent image or brand that satisfies the diverse groups of stakeholders who have varying degrees of contact with the organisation (Lewis, 2005). In addition, INGOs tend to face very high expectation of their performance. As Lewis (2005) notes, "the public seems to expect that such organisations will and should accomplish their missions without spending much on themselves." Strategic internal communication helps to create a cohesive internal brand based on the organisation's strategic intent, thus assisting in maintaining the organisation's reputation and building clear expectations.

By encouraging strategic dialogue throughout the organisation, strategic internal communication has the potential to help address the many challenges an INGO faces. In this manner, while not the solution to all of an INGO's problems, strategic internal communication can help improve its performance.

3. The research question

This study is centred on the following research question: *Does internal communication in INGOs function strategically?*

4. Methodology

4.1. Qualitative research approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach to the research question. Qualitative research techniques are better situated than quantitative research to examine phenomenon in their natural environments (Babbie & Mouton, 2001); are more flexible in the inquiry in each particular context (Trochim, 2006) and allow for greater detail (Trochim, 2006). Since, strategic internal communication is complex and firmly embedded in its environment, a qualitative approach helps to explore all aspects of the phenomenon within its natural environment in a greater level of detail.

4.2. Research design

This study used a multiple case study research design. Case study research was chosen given the importance of context to strategic internal communication. Evidence is generally more compelling and the study more robust in a multiple-case study (Yin, 2003); therefore, in order to provide more compelling conclusions that reflect the diversity among INGOs, a multiple-case study design was adopted.

4.3. Collection of evidence

Five case studies were selected on the basis of the criteria of an INGO and for a diversity of size, structure and sector. Given the researcher's location, the pool of potential cases was limited to those with offices in Gauteng province in South Africa. Within each case study, two sources of evidence were used: semi-structured interviews with local senior communicator and organisational documents.

4.3.1. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect evidence from the most senior communicator in INGOs in South Africa. All of the interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes and were conducted face to face except for one which was conducted over the phone. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

As described by Berg (2001), the semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a list of pre-determined questions, but the interviewer did probe beyond these with additional questions that arose from the conversation. The interview schedule was structure around the major themes to be covered: the criteria for strategic internal communication, the internal communication process and the INGO context. As suggested by Yin (2003), a pilot study was conducted to refine

Table 1
Evidence available per case study.

	Interview	Website	Annual report	Organogram	Organisation strategy	Comm. strategy	Internal comm. strategy
Case A	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X	X
Case B	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	X
Case C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
Case D	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Case E	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X

the content of the evidence collection tools and the procedures to be used. This resulted in several modifications to the interview schedule to remove redundant questions.

4.3.2. Organisational documents

As suggested by Yin (2003), organisational documents were used to corroborate and augment the evidence from the interviews. The documents were chosen to fulfil two functions: (i) annual reports and organisation websites provided contextual background and (ii) the organogram, corporate strategy, communication strategy and internal communication strategy provide further evidence on the strategic contribution of internal communication. Not all case studies possessed all documents (see Table 1).

4.4. Analysis of evidence

The four cognitive phases of qualitative analysis proposed by Morse and Field (1995) were used to organise and analyse the evidence in this study. Post-coded thematic analysis, where the themes developed from the data during analysis rather than being pre-determined by theory (Henning, 2004), was used for the comprehending phase. It helped develop an understanding about internal communication in each case. During the synthesising phase, themes were reviewed across cases to identify areas of commonality and difference. For the theorising phase, this study used process matching, as described by Yin and Moore (in Berg, 2001) wherein each theoretical element of strategic internal communication was examined for whether it is supported the evidence. Finally, the recontextualising phase built on the theorising phase to generalise from the case studies to the current theory in the field.

4.5. Criteria for scientific soundness

Lincoln and Guba (in Babbie & Mouton, 2001) developed criteria for evaluating qualitative research based on trustworthiness, which they identify as establishing the merit of the research with the researcher's audience. In order to establish its trustworthiness, this study used data triangulation and kept an audit trail. Data source triangulation meant collecting evidence from multiple sources – both interviews and organisational documents – to increase the likelihood of the research findings accurately mirroring the 'reality' within the organisations in this study. The audit trail, consisting of various elements, including raw data, various research notes, proposals and draft documents, is provided to allow another researcher to establish for themselves the trustworthiness of the study. These elements are available from the researcher.

4.6. Limitations

First, this study is limited to the concept of strategic internal communication as defined herein and may not be relevant to internal communication with any other goal but strategic alignment. Second, the results of this study capture only the views and challenges of managers not employees. This limitation was deemed acceptable given the exploratory nature of this study. However, as a result, the conclusions of this study should be viewed only as an initial foundation on which to build future studies. Finally, only using INGOs in South Africa as case studies, the transferability of the study to INGOs more broadly may not be possible.

5. Results and interpretation

The results of the case studies and subsequent interpretation are considered against the theoretical elements of strategic internal communication with additional observations on the communication of corporate strategy within each case study and the barriers and challenges each case experienced as it relates to internal communication. It is important to note that five case studies covered all three structures for INGOs: federations, global organisations and networks. Of the three roles for INGOs identified, an operational service-oriented role, a global policy and advocacy role and a counter-hegemonic activist role, only the first two were represented in the case studies.

Table 2

Comparison of the characteristics of internal communication in all cases.

Type of organisation	Purpose	Position	Knowledge	Content	Process
Theory	Strategic alignment	Part of senior management	Strategic	Strategic intent	Symmetrical, holistic
Networks					
Case A	Information sharing	Not part of senior management, Manager	Tactical	Task related	Asymmetrical, cascading, online
Global organisations					
Case B	Information sharing	Not part of senior management, Tactician	Tactical	Resources	Asymmetrical, cascading, online
Case E	Information sharing	Not part of senior management, Tactician	Tactical	Project information	Asymmetrical
Federations					
Case C	Communication culture	Part of senior management, strategist	Strategic	Strategic	Asymmetrical, online
Case D	Collaboration, internal branding, information	Not part of senior management, advisor	Strategic	Task-related	Asymmetrical (vertical), online

5.1. Elements of strategic internal communication

Of the five cases, only two, Cases C and D, had formal internal communication functions. Case B had internal communication responsibilities assigned to the broader communication function. Case A had a communication function but internal communication was not officially part of its responsibilities, while Case E had no communication function at all. Despite the wide range in the formalisation of internal communication in each organisation, for each case it was possible to construct the purpose, position and content of the function, the knowledge of the internal communicator and the process of internal communication. Table 2 summarises each of the cases' positions along these dimensions as well as the normative ideal from the theory.

5.1.1. Purpose of internal communication

Overall, a primary purpose for internal communication across the case studies was knowledge management and information sharing. Both federations strongly emphasised, and were echoed by Case A, a network, that it was not internal communication's purpose to gather information and distribute it, but rather to facilitate the process and build a culture of open communication and collaboration in the organisation. This view reflects what Foreman (1997:18) described as strategic internal communication's concern with developing a culture or atmosphere of on-going communication.

To be strategic, internal communication should be driven by an overall goal of strategic alignment (Doorley & Garcia, 2007). In all the case studies, the senior communicator and/or the organisational documents did recognise to some degree the role of internal communication in achieving strategic alignment. However, despite this, only the federations undertook internal communication activities that were directly designed to achieve strategic alignment and even for them this was not their main focus. Internal communication in the case studies was not centred on a core strategic goal.

5.1.2. Position and role of internal communication

The exact position of the communication and internal communication functions varied in each case study. In the global organisations, communication was generally centralised in the head office: a characteristic in line with general description of the organisational form. In the federations, there is a more decentralised communication function, aligned with the multi-domestic strategy of these organisations, although there is still a central communication structure. Finally, Case A, the network, only had the one communication function in the secretariat but relied on their members and partners for a significant amount of its communication activities.

In most of the case studies, the senior communicator was not formally part of the senior management of the organisation. The federations, Cases C and D most closely reflected the ideal. In Case D, the internal communication manager was an advisor to senior management while in Case C, the senior communicator was identified as having a seat at the 'cabinet table'. However, a theme across all the organisations was that the position of the communication function generally, and internal communication in particular, was unstable and subject to devaluation. As the interviewee in Case C describes:

"We're not curing people of cholera, we're not shipping relief into disasters zones and our value is not as immediately apparent and it's very easy for us to be marginalised so we have to really earn our seat at the table."

In other words, even where communication had a good relationship or was part of senior management, this was not formally structured into the organisation and required constant vigilance to maintain.

Unfortunately, Steyn (2007) notes that when the senior communicator is not part of senior management it is not able to fulfil its strategic role. The case studies support this as in most cases the communication function was not closely involved in either the strategy development or strategy implementation process. In order to be strategic, internal communication must play a role in both aligning the strategy with internal stakeholders and aligning internal stakeholders with the strategy. Of all the cases, Case C is the case that most closely reflects the normative ideal position and role for strategic internal communication. However, it only plays a relatively minor role in either strategy development or implementation.

5.1.3. Knowledge of the most senior communicator

In terms of internal communication, the functions in the network and global organisations appeared to solely focus on tactics with little knowledge of the strategic function of internal communication. This reflects Grimshaw and Mike (2008) who argue that one of the main reasons for the poor strategic function of internal communication is because of the lack of knowledge of its strategic role. Lack of both human and financial resources in the networks and global organisations is a potential explanation for the tactical focus of their internal communication. In these cases, the communication staff must be generalists, in order to fulfil all the roles they are assigned. Only in the larger federations did there appear to be a sound knowledge of the strategic role the function should play, and these two cases are also the only two cases with dedicated internal communication staff.

5.1.4. Content focus of internal communication

Components of all the case studies' internal communication were centred on non-strategic content such as task-related communication and information resources. In order for internal communication to be strategic, its content and messages need to centre on the organisation's strategic intent. Both global organisations, Cases B and E, as well as the network organisation, Case A, described issues with their strategic intents making it difficult for the content of their internal communication to be strategically focused.

Only the two large federations, Cases C and D, had clearly developed strategic intents. These two organisations are also the only two organisations with formal internal communication functions. While both these functions were involved in the communication of corporate strategy, strategic intent was only the centre content element in Case C, Case D still focused primarily on task-related communication. However, in both cases, strategic intent was still viewed as content to be communicated.

Federations generally adopt multi-domestic positions where national affiliates have significant autonomy over their own affairs (Van Tulder & Van Der Zwart, 2006). In this context, a strong strategic intent is mandatory to maintain the coherence of the organisation. This can explain the formal internal communication functions in these organisations and their focus on strategic intent. However, a clear strategic intent is equally important in both networks and global organisations in order for the entire organisation to work towards a common goal. It is possible that the smaller size and fewer resources of these cases have resulted in less well-developed strategies and internal communication functions.

5.1.5. Internal communication process

Unlike the theoretical ideal, the process of internal communication in the case studies had a very weak strategic orientation. Only one case, Case D, had a specific internal communication strategy and this is not linked to the organisation's communication strategy, as the function is housed in a separate department. In addition, only Case D had clearly identified objectives for the function. None of the case studies identified high-level involvement of senior leadership in internal communication. Argenti and Forman (2002) identify senior leadership as the most valuable asset for internal communication, but this was not apparent within the case studies.

The internal communication infrastructure in each of the case studies involved a wide variety of channels and media. The most commonly identified tools across the case studies were face-to-face meetings, tele- and video-conferencing, and cascading communication from senior management to line management to employees. A large emphasis was placed on email with three of the five case studies highlighting its major role in internal communication in their organisation. In addition, four case studies were either using or planning to use various forms of online tools to improve the information sharing, and in some cases dialogue and collaboration throughout the entire organisation. In this regard, there was some recognition of the importance of facilitating informal communication as well, suggesting a holistic view of the internal communication infrastructure.

In the federations, they used decentralised networks of communicators to undertake internal communication throughout the organisation. It was also in these large organisations with a dedicated internal communication function that internal communication campaigns and strategies were incorporated into the overall process of internal communication. In addition, these organisations were the only case studies that provided evidence that the organisations' were selecting their channels and media with consideration for their internal communication goals and audience. In the smaller networks and global organisations, internal communication appeared to operate on an ad hoc basis with tactics being implemented as needs were identified.

Overall, internal communication appeared to be asymmetrical, with communication flowing primarily from top to bottom. It was only in the smaller network and at the regional level of global organisations that evidence of symmetrical

communication and dialogue was apparent. However, the move to new online communication platforms was indicated by both federations as means of improving the dialogue across horizontal and vertical divisions in the organisation.

5.2. *Communication of corporate strategy*

In all the case studies, the communication function was not identified as playing a major role in the strategy development process. Similarly, a common theme was the major role played by external stakeholders, such as the board of directors, the organisation's members and donors, in developing the strategy. For example, the interviewee in Case E describes the relationship with one influential donor: "they have the ability to kind of say 'what about this', 'why don't we do this', and we can say 'No' but it's not in our interest to do so."

Particularly in the network and global organisations, the role of the Board in developing and adopting the organisation's strategy was emphasised. Overall, in the global organisations and the federations, the strategy development process was not very participative, although in some cases, there was room for feedback and input from different levels of the organisations. The smaller network did appear to have more room for dialogue around the development of the organisation's strategic intent.

In all the case studies, there was more participation in strategy implementation. The primary form this took was in the alignment of the organisation's strategy with specific regional or programme strategies. Both global organisations noted that this was not easy to do because of poor understanding of the organisation's strategic intent. In the federations, the formal internal communication functions were identified as undertaking internal communication campaigns to assist in this alignment process. Again, there was more evidence of dialogue and a participative process in the smaller networks than in the larger cases. This dialogue is a necessary component of developing strategic consciousness which leads to well-understood strategic intent.

There was some evidence in the case studies to support a post-modern strategic management process. The network, Case A, a global organisation, Case E and a federation, Case C, all noted the need for flexible and adaptable strategies that can adjust to meet local and changing contexts. As describe by the interviewee in Case A: "it's less of a let's think three years ahead [about strategy because] . . . our circumstances change [and] also to be able to react to whatever happens in the climate." An on-going process of strategy development and dialogue was identified as assisting in achieving this flexibility. However, there was little evidence of this process being implemented in the cases, except in Case A and Case E which conduct regular strategy reviews in light of changing external contexts.

Overall, the case studies showed indications of attempts at participatory strategy development and implementation process but they were primarily top-down driven.

5.3. *Barriers and challenges*

The case studies highlight five categories of challenges and barriers for strategic internal communication.

5.3.1. *Context-related barriers and challenges*

Both the theoretical and empirical phases of the study confirmed the existence of such barriers and challenges. The contexts in which the cases operate contain a wide array of stakeholders with different demands and expectations of the organisation. This mirrors the challenge identified in the literature regarding conflicting expectations from different stakeholders (see Chesters, 2004). The main impact of this identified in the case studies is that these stakeholders have significant influence on the development of strategy, limiting the space for internal participation. As described by the interviewee in Case C: "*sometimes it looks like our core business has changed, we're constantly reinventing ourselves and restructuring because priorities shift very quickly, funding shifts very quickly, the expectations of our donors shift very quickly.*"

This impact reflects the theory that INGOs have little control over the influence of the external environment (Anheier, 2005). Thus, the challenge identified both in theory and practice supports the argument for a postmodern strategic management approach in INGOs which allows them to engage in on-going dialogue and negotiation with their stakeholders to maintain a flexible yet cohesive strategic intent.

Cases C, D and E noted an additional contextual barrier; namely differences in access to internal communication tools because of different levels of access to the internet and other technologies. This challenge for internal communication was not highlighted in the literature, potentially because of the focus on for-profit organisations that may not face the same resource constraints as INGOs.

5.3.2. *Form-related barriers and challenges*

To start with, resource constraints were identified as a challenge for all cases, echoing Burnett's (2007) characterisation of CSOs as having limited resources. The interviewee in Case B states: "We have such limited resources that internal communication done well and effectively maximises . . . or mobilises the limited resources we have." However, she also says: "*The challenges are that everyone is wearing so many different hats that . . . we'd rather not delve too deep into what could be the reasons why something [internal communication] is a consistent challenge because that means we need to commit resources and manage human capital resources and time and financial resources.*"

Second, four of the cases studies identified a challenge related to their strategic intent. These challenges ranged from a very broad strategic intent in Case C to a complete lack of an organisation-wide strategic intent in Case E. This reflects the observation in the literature that CSOs generally and INGOs in particular have vague value-based missions (Glasrud, 2001). A clear strategic intent is a pre-requisite for internal communication to function strategically. By improving internal communication, particularly through the use of dialogue around strategic intent, these organisations may be able to further refine and negotiate their strategic intents to develop a cohesive understanding among internal stakeholders.

Finally, there was evidence in three cases, the network and the federations, that the organisation was not living up to its values in all its actions. For example, the interviewee in Case D described the following situation: *“You’ll still find men will keep women in certain positions and not support their promotion or leadership development and all that sort of thing . . . even though that is an area that we very much try to push, at the end of the day, what we do as an organisation and what individuals do will not always align as closely as you would like them to.”*

This failure can impact on the perceived internal and external legitimacy of the organisation. Lack of legitimacy is a major critique of CSOs and INGOs (Long, 2008). None of the interviewees made the link between the conflict between their values and actions, their legitimacy and ultimately their organisation’s reputation, which is a problem for many INGOs (Laidler-Kylander & Simonin, 2009). However, this conflict is a major challenge that can have ramifications for its funding, reputation and the commitment of the workforce.

The structure and particularly the funding structure in INGOs (Srinivasan, 2007) can pose challenges and barriers for developing strategic alignment through internal communication. In four of the case studies, there are indications that programme funding and silo structures result in the primary focus being on specific projects, programmes or regions instead of organisation as a whole. Thus it is a challenge for internal communication to build commitment to the organisation as a whole despite these barriers.

5.3.3. Cultural barriers and challenges

This category includes action culture, multiple cultures and static cultural attitudes (Lewis, 2007). In the case studies, only action culture was evident as a challenge. In three of the five case studies, the network, one global organisation and one federation, there was evidence of an action culture. The evidence suggests that the result of this action culture in these organisations was that less importance was given to activities with less tangible and immediate results, such as internal communication. For example, as described by Case A: *“Ultimately we’ve got to be getting stuff out . . . and stay fairly sane and so I think it is something that ultimately when you’re doing what’s urgent and what’s important, I feel [internal communication] does slip off the urgent and important box and it will be on your work plan and it might just not get done.”*

This reflects the theory around the NGO culture of action, described by Lewis (2007). Du Plooy-Cilliers (2003) argues that an organisation needs to become a learning organisation in order to shift from this ‘action’ orientation to a focus on long-term learning and improvement. However, only Case D, with a specific impact planning and learning unit, showed evidence of moving in this direction. Case D also did not have any evidence of an action culture.

5.3.4. Workforce-related barriers and challenges

Examples of this category include language issues and coordinating work across time zones were identified as a challenge in three of the five cases. In the networks and the global organisations, regular changes in the workforce, around retention and growth, were identified as another major challenge and reflects what has been found in other studies (see Hume & Hume, 2008). This challenge was not apparent in the federations. One reason for the difference could be the resources available. For example, as noted by the interviewee in Case B, the lack of financial rewards results in poor retention rates and low staff morale in the organisation. This opinion reflects the theory which identifies lower-than market level remuneration as a characteristic of CSOs (Anheier, 2005). This characteristic is further compounded in INGOs where expatriate staff tends to have poorer retention than local staff (Walsh & Lenihan, 2006). However, the case studies did not indicate that this second reason was an issue for them. Overcoming the barrier posed by poor retention is a challenge for internal communication.

5.3.5. Communication barriers and challenges

Of the three challenges identified in literature pertaining to this category, only information management was also found in the case studies. Three of the five case studies noted a tendency for individuals and groups to hoard information, which, coupled with a lack of realisation of what information should be shared across the organisation, can result in poor communication flows between different sections of the organisation. Strategic internal communication has a role to play in overcoming this challenge by raising strategic consciousness so that individuals and work groups interpret and implement the organisation’s strategic intent within their own area of work (Puth, 2002) argues. By helping each programme gain a greater understanding of the organisation’s strategic intent, internal communication helps them to see how the information they hold may be useful to other parts of the organisation.

The literature identified brand and reputation management in INGOs as being particularly problematic (Laidler-Kylander & Simonin, 2009). The large federations both mentioned internal branding when discussing their internal communication function; however, they did not link this internal function with the overall reputation of the organisation. In addition, the literature noted the difficulty of building realistic expectations of an INGO among both internal and external employees. However, the primary view of internal communication within the case studies looked only at how it could facilitate task-accomplishment and not its integrated role with external communication and stakeholder management.

The primary communication-related challenge and barrier identified in the case studies was the poor understanding of the role of internal communication itself. This challenge reflects the literature which identified poor knowledge of the strategic role of communication and internal communication as one of the primary reasons these functions do not fulfil their potential (Grimshaw & Mike, 2008:28; Steyn & Puth, 2000). In both federations this lack of clarity on the role of internal communication was identified as a major issue that posed various challenges including: work being given to the function that should not be its responsibility, the function not being involved in activities it should be, and impossible expectations from internal stakeholders that the function cannot meet. Both interviewees in these cases emphasised the need to address these expectations. They argue that this involves building understanding in the organisation regarding internal communication's role as a facilitator and not the sole implementer of communication within the organisation.

Neither global organisation mentioned this challenge and the network only hinted at it. However, the less developed nature of internal communication in these organisations could mean that this more specific challenge for the function has not yet appeared. That said, all the cases did note the need to improve overall internal stakeholder engagement in the internal communication process.

6. Recommendations

This article suggests that INGOs would benefit if their internal communication functioned more strategically. By integrating their internal communication activities under the banner of strategic alignment, these activities would build cohesion and commitment within the organisation. As Puth (2002) describes, through strategic discourse, employees learn to implement the organisation's strategic intent within their own area of work ensuring that the entire organisation works together towards the same goals. The internal communication infrastructure needs to be considered holistically so that the actions and words of senior leadership and the values of the organisation are reflected in all communication channels.

INGOs are challenged by their complex environments, their vague missions and their foundation on values (Anheier, 2005). The theory, with support from the empirical evidence of this study, suggests that INGOs would benefit from adopting more flexible, process-orientated strategic management that emphasised dialogue among stakeholders over top-down communication and directives. This form of strategic internal communication could help INGOs negotiate their complex environments, strengthen their vague missions and remain true to their core values.

A major challenge for internal communication in INGOs is the lack of knowledge among both communicators and the organisation as a whole regarding the function's strategic role. INGOs could provide additional support and training for their communicators to strengthen their knowledge and give them the tools to build a communication culture within the organisation. Finally, communicators may benefit from more emphasis on internal communication within communication management curricula. While internal communication should not be over-emphasised, it is important that the unique needs and considerations for this function are included in education and training.

7. Conclusion

The empirical evidence from the case studies shows that internal communication in the INGOs studied does not fulfil the criteria for being strategic identified in the literature. Instead, internal communication fulfils primarily tactical and managerial roles, as defined by Steyn and Puth (2000). There is some evidence that, in larger INGOs, internal communication does function more strategically, but even in these cases, it did not completely fulfil the theoretical criteria.

The reasons for the non-strategic focus of internal communication in INGOs include a lack of knowledge and understanding of the strategic role of internal communication (Grimshaw & Mike, 2008); limited time and finances (Burnett, 2007; Lewis, 2007) that, combined with an action culture (Lewis, 2007), results in poor investment of resources in the function; and elements of context and stakeholder pressure (Anheier, 2005) that prevent internal communication from playing the role it should.

The implication of internal communication not functioning strategically in INGOs is that there is a high potential for a lack of strategic alignment within the organisation. The literature identifies a wide variety of benefits if internal communication functions strategically, including employee commitment (Dolphin, 2005; Meyer & De Wet, 2007), improved morale, increased retentions and an overall benefit to its financial bottom-line (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Yates, 2006). For INGOs, strategic internal communication has the additional theoretical benefit of helping the organisation navigate its complex environment and negotiate adherence to its core values in order to build a cohesive organisation working to achieve a single strategic intent. The empirical evidence, however, does not show this occurring in current practices for contextual, structural and cultural reasons.

Over the last two decades, NGOs and INGOs have become more integrated into the social fabric of society around the world. As governance and power take on increasingly global aspects, INGOs, as the vehicles through which the voices of the poor, the vulnerable and the local can reach the global stage, are ever more important. There is a need to look beyond traditional management techniques developed for for-profit organisations to identify management practices that can help these organisations meet these challenges. By addressing INGO challenges and negotiating a shared strategic intent, strategic internal communication can help INGOs achieve the change they want to see in the world both internally and externally.

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