

**THE PERCEPTION OF TOP COMMUNICATORS OF  
SENIOR MANAGEMENT'S EXPECTATIONS OF  
EXCELLENT COMMUNICATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN  
ORGANISATIONS**

by

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## SYNOPSIS

Communication departments may have the core knowledge to practise excellent communication, but senior management must also share a common understanding of the role and function of communication and communication managers in an organisation for communication to be excellent.

The need for this study originated from the perception that the top communicator is often not at the table when strategic decisions are made. Yet, public relations specialists often have expertise that can contribute to organisational decision-making. They can, amongst others, facilitate dialogue between key publics and members of senior management in order to enhance understanding of the vision and goals of the organisation and the needs of the organisation's clients and stakeholders. This form of two-way symmetrical communication is the basis of excellent communication. Most practitioners agree that the best place for the top communicator is within an organisation's senior management – taking part in strategic decision-making through two-way communication (Dozier, Grunig, L & Grunig, J, 1995).

The three spheres of communication excellence – as identified in the *Excellence Study*, the largest and most intensive investigation ever conducted of public relations and communication management – include the knowledge base of communication departments; shared expectations between the top communicator and senior management; and the culture of the organisation.

The middle sphere of shared expectations between the top communicator and senior management, has three components which will be investigated in this study. The first component is departmental power – the ability to influence members of senior management. Sometimes top communicators are members of senior management, participating directly in strategic management and planning. In other cases, they exert informal influence as providers of information and as process facilitators to senior management. The power of the public relations department is associated with the value members of senior management attach to public relations as a function, as well as the strategic contribution the top communicator and the communication department make to organisational decision-making.

The second component of excellence in this sphere is the demand-delivery loop. Senior managers in excellent organisations demand two-way public relations practices from their communicators to persuade and negotiate, and top communicators are aware of this. This sets up a loop of repeated behaviour, with senior management demanding and communicators delivering excellent communication programmes. In this study, top communicators in South African organisations are asked about their perceptions of these expectations.

The third component of excellence in this sphere is the organisational role played by the top communicator. Top communicators may have formal decision-making authority for communication policy and may be responsible for programme success or failure, which means that they play the manager role. On the other hand, top communicators may play an informal role as senior advisors who outline options and provide research information needed for decision-making by other senior managers. Both manager and senior advisor role-playing, contribute to communication excellence.

However, senior management can also expect the top communicator to play the technician role. Top communication departments from the *Excellence Study* combine knowledge of both manager and technician roles to provide the requisite foundation for excellence. To actually achieve excellence, however, top communicators must play advanced organisational roles of communication manager and senior advisor.

One of the objectives of this study was to establish whether the top communicator in the South African organisation does indeed contribute to excellence in the organisation by being involved in the organisation's strategic management process. For top communicators to be part of the strategic management process, a positive relationship must exist between themselves and senior management. This relationship is investigated by questioning the top communicator on the three components of the sphere of shared expectations, namely departmental power, the demand-delivery loop (and the practising of the four models of communication) and the organisational role played by the top communicator.



The empirical study was undertaken amongst top communicators in South African organisations. A clear exposition is given of the methods and procedures used in the study. Hypotheses have been developed and the testing of these hypotheses attempts to provide a contribution to the scientific knowledge of communication excellence in the South African organisation.

The following assumptions can be made about the findings of the study regarding the perceptions of top communicators in South African organisations in respect of the beliefs and expectations of senior management of the top communicator and the communication department:

- It is the perception of top communicators that senior management expects them to make a strategic contribution to organisational decision-making by playing the public relations manager role.
- Senior management expects those top communicators predominantly playing the public relations manager role to make use of two-way public relations models in organisational decision-making and communication activities; and those predominantly playing the public relations technician role to make use of one-way public relations models.
- The top communicator predominantly playing the public relations manager role and using two-way public relations models, can make a strategic contribution to organisational decision-making. This can lead to excellent communication and can contribute to the communication function being valued and supported by top management.
- Top communicators do not perceive reporting lines to the chief executive officer (CEO) (or any other manager) or senior management (or middle management) to be very good indicators of their strategic contribution to decision-making. These findings support the communication theory that reporting relationships are necessary, but hardly sufficient for making a strategic contribution to organisational decision-making as indicated by Dozier et al (1995:84). The critical factor is not whom one reports to, but rather whether one has access to any of the senior (corporate) officers at will.
- Top communicators in small and in large organisations can make a strategic contribution to organisational decision-making.
- The top communicator can make a bigger strategic contribution in large communication departments, where technical tasks can be delegated.

- Small and large public relations departments predominantly use one-way public relations models in their communication activities, but large departments also use two-way public relations models. It can, therefore, be assumed that two-way public relations models will be practised more frequently in large departments where the top communicator will also be expected to make a strategic contribution to organisational decision-making (by playing the public relations manager role).
- The highest qualification of the top communicator is a weak indicator of the strategic contribution the top communicator makes to organisational decision-making. This could indicate that senior management values skills and knowledge, rather than qualifications, when the top communicator makes a strategic contribution to organisational decision-making.
- Senior management, furthermore, expects the top communicator with many years' experience in the communications field to make a bigger strategic contribution than the top communicator with a few years' experience in this field.

## SINOPSIS

Vir kommunikasie om uitnemend te wees moet personeel in kommunikasiedepartemente oor die nodige kennis beskik om dit uitnemend te bestuur en senior bestuur moet begrip toon vir die rol en funksie van kommunikasiebestuurders in die organisasie.

Die behoefte aan hierdie studie het ontstaan uit die persepsie dat die topkommunikator dikwels nie by die tafel is wanneer strategiese besluite geneem word nie. Kommunikasiespesialiste het egter dikwels die kundigheid om 'n bydrae tot organisasiebesluitneming te maak. Hulle kan onder andere dialoog tussen sleutelpublieke en senior bestuur fasiliteer om sodoende begrip vir die organisasie se visie en doelwitte, en vir die behoeftes van kliënte en belangegroep te bewerkstellig. Hierdie vorm van tweerigting simmetriese kommunikasie vorm die grondslag van uitnemende kommunikasie. Die meeste praktisyns is dit eens dat topkommunikators deel van 'n organisasie se senior bestuur behoort te wees sodat hulle deur middel van tweerigting kommunikasie 'n bydrae tot strategiese besluitneming kan maak.

Die drie sferes van kommunikasie-uitnemendheid, soos geïdentifiseer in die *Excellence Study* (Dozier, Grunig L & Grunig J, 1995), die grootste en mees intensiewe ondersoek wat tot nog toe oor skakel- en kommunikasiebestuur gedoen is, sluit die kennisbasis van kommunikasiedepartemente; gedeelde verwagtinge tussen die topkommunikator en die senior bestuur; en die kultuur van die organisasie in.

Die middelste sfeer van gedeelde verwagtinge tussen die topkommunikator en senior bestuur het drie komponente wat in hierdie studie ondersoek word. Die eerste komponent is departementele mag - die vermoë om lede van senior bestuur te beïnvloed. Soms is topkommunikators lede van senior bestuur en neem hulle direk aan strategiese bestuur en beplanning deel. In ander gevalle oefen hulle informele invloed uit as verskaffers van inligting en as prosesfasiliteerders vir senior bestuur. Die mag van die kommunikasiedepartement word geassosieer met die waarde wat senior bestuur aan die kommunikasiefunksie heg, sowel as met die strategiese bydrae wat die topkommunikator en die kommunikasiedepartement tot besluitneming in die organisasie maak.

Die tweede komponent van uitnemendheid in hierdie sfeer is die vereis-verskaf kringloop. Senior bestuurders in uitnemende organisasies vereis tweerigtingpraktyke van hulle kommunikaturs om te oorreed en te onderhandel en topkommunikators is hiervan bewus. Dit stel 'n kringloop van herhaalde gedrag daar, met senior bestuur wat vereis, en kommunikaturs wat uitnemende programme aanbied. In hierdie studie word topkommunikators in Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies oor hul persepsies van hierdie verwagtinge uitgevra.

Die derde komponent in hierdie sfeer is die rol wat die topkommunikator in die organisasie speel. Topkommunikators mag formele besluitnemingsbevoegdheid vir kommunikasiebeleid hê en mag vir die sukses of mislukking van kommunikasieprogramme verantwoordelik wees, wat beteken dat hulle 'n bestuursrol vertolk. Alternatiewelik mag topkommunikators die informele rol van senior adviseur vertolk. In die vertolking van laasgenoemde rol word geleenthede uitgewys en navorsingsinligting verskaf wat vir besluitneming deur ander senior bestuurders benodig word. Die vertolking van die rol van bestuurder en/of dié van senior adviseur dra tot kommunikasie-uitnemendheid by.

Senior bestuur kan egter ook verwag dat die top kommunikator die tegnikusrol vertolk. Uitnemende kommunikasiedepartemente in die *Excellence Study* kombineer kennis van beide die bestuurs- en tegnikusrol om die vereiste grondslag vir uitnemendheid te vorm. Om uitnemendheid te bereik moet topkommunikators egter gevorderde organisasierolle van kommunikasiebestuurder en senior adviseur speel.

Een van die doelwitte van hierdie studie is om te bepaal of die topkommunikator in die Suid-Afrikaanse organisasie tot uitnemendheid in die organisasie bydra deur by die strategiese bestuursproses in die organisasie betrokke te wees. Vir topkommunikators om deel van die strategiese bestuursproses te wees, moet 'n positiewe verhouding tussen hulself en senior bestuur bestaan. Hierdie verhouding word ondersoek deur topkommunikators uit te vra oor die drie komponente van die sfeer vir gedeelde verwagtinge, naamlik departementele mag, die vereis-verskaf kringloop (en die beoefening van die vier modelle van kommunikasie) en die organisasierol wat die topkommunikator vervul.

Die empiriese studie is onder topkommunikators in Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies onderneem. 'n Duidelike uiteensetting word gegee van die metodes en prosedures wat in die studie gebruik is. Hipoteses is ontwikkel en die toetsing daarvan poog om 'n bydrae tot die

wetenskaplike kennis van kommunikasie-uitnemendheid in die Suid-Afrikaanse organisasie te maak.

Die volgende aannames kan gemaak word oor die bevindinge van dié studie ten opsigte van die persepsies van top kommunikaturs in Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies, met betrekking tot senior bestuur se verwagtinge van die topkommunikator en van die kommunikasiedepartement in die organisasie:

- Topkommunikators is van mening dat senior bestuur van hulle verwag om 'n strategiese bydrae tot organisasiebesluitneming te maak deur die kommunikasiebestuursrol te vertolk.
- Senior bestuur verwag van topkommunikators, wat hoofsaaklik die kommunikasiebestuursrol vertolk, om tweerigting skakelmodelle in organisasiebesluitneming en kommunikasie-aktiwiteite te gebruik. Hulle verwag dat topkommunikators wat hoofsaaklik die kommunikasietegnikusrol vertolk, eenrigting skakelmodelle sal gebruik.
- Die topkommunikator wat hoofsaaklik die kommunikasiebestuursrol vertolk en tweerigting skakelmodelle gebruik, kan 'n strategiese bydrae tot organisasiebesluitneming maak. Dit kan tot uitnemende kommunikasie lei en kan daartoe bydra dat die kommunikasiefunksie deur die dominante koalisie waardeur en ondersteun word.
- Topkommunikators beskou nie rapporteringslyne na die hoofuitvoerende beampte (of enige ander bestuurder) of senior bestuur (of middelbestuur) as goeie indikaturs van die lewer van 'n strategiese bydrae tot besluitneming nie. Hierdie bevinding ondersteun die kommunikasieteorie dat rapporteringslyne nodig is, maar nie voldoende is om 'n strategiese bydrae tot organisasiebesluitneming te maak nie, soos aangedui deur Dozier et al (1995:84). Die kritiese faktor is nie aan wie gerapporteer word nie, maar of die topkommunikator toegang tot senior korporatiewe beamptes het.
- Dit is topkommunikators se persepsie dat 'n strategiese bydrae tot besluitneming deur topkommunikators in groot en klein organisasies gemaak kan word.
- Die topkommunikator kan 'n groter strategiese bydrae in groot kommunikasiedepartemente lewer, waar tegniese take gedelegeer kan word.
- Klein en groot departemente gebruik hoofsaaklik eenrigting skakelmodelle in hulle kommunikasiedepartemente, maar groot departemente gebruik ook tweerigting modelle. Daar kan dus aangeneem word dat tweerigting skakelmodelle meer dikwels in groot

departemente gebruik word waar dit ook van top kommunikaturs verwag word om 'n strategiese bydrae tot organisasiebesluitneming te maak (deur die kommunikasiebestuursrol te vertolk).

- Die hoogste kwalifikasie van die topkommunikator is 'n swak indikator van die strategiese bydrae wat die topkommunikator tot organisasiebesluitneming maak. Dit kan daarop dui dat senior bestuur eerder aan vaardighede en kennis waarde heg wanneer die topkommunikator 'n strategiese bydrae tot organisasiebesluitneming maak, as wat hulle waarde aan kwalifikasies heg.
- Senior bestuur verwag verder van die topkommunikator met baie jare ervaring in die kommunikasieveld om 'n groter strategiese bydrae te lewer as die topkommunikator met min jare ervaring in dié veld.