

**THE APPLICATION OF INFORMAL FEEDBACK INTERVENTION
AS A COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT TOOL
IN LEARNING ORGANISATIONS**

by

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Synopsis

Feedback is an essential component of the communication process. Feedback reveals how participants assign meanings and how these meanings are negotiated through interaction (Verwey, In: Lubbe and Puth 1994:64). Feedback also ensures the success of the communicated message and determines whether the objectives of the intended communication have been achieved (Seitel 1995:109). Communication feedback also contains information in all its formats. In the current information age, it is often believed that information is power and that those who have information at their fingertips are more powerful than the rest.

In communication management literature, writers and researchers often emphasise the significant role of communication feedback. Feedback plays a vital role in communication management, in particular, as a strategic management function. One example is the two-directional symmetrical model, described by Grunig (1992), where *feedback* and *mutual adaptation* play an important role.

In most management theory the collection of communication feedback is mainly seen as an active, *intentional* and *formal* research process that is initiated by corporate communication and marketing departments. In this sense much has been written about formal research (for example, surveys and environmental scanning) by means of quantitative and qualitative research methods as well as the solicitation of formal customer feedback. However, informal, unintentional and almost accidental *casual* communication feedback input (informal feedback) is often neglected and regarded as being unimportant by organisations, and is therefore not measured or captured in a data system.

At the same time stakeholder engagement and dialogue has become quite a contemporary issue in the corporate governance of organisations. This study agitates for the cultivation of informal feedback intervention as a method of obtaining improved stakeholder engagement that ultimately leads to inclusive corporate governance.

This research study investigates *informal feedback* and defines it as all of communication feedback (into the system - the organisation) that occurs spontaneously via media such as the telephone, e-mail, fax and through internet services, such as internet chat rooms, and even feedback obtained from the organisational grapevine, rumours and gossip.

Stakeholders or interest groups deliver informal feedback without the organisation making a formal effort to collect it.

The empirical research was conducted amongst 55 inspiring South African learning organisations as identified by The Corporate Research Foundation (CRF) in its publication *The Best Companies to Work for in 2004*. Organisations have to learn to be smarter to survive. Learning organisations are characterised by conscious and intentional learning, openness to inquiry, experimentation and the sharing of knowledge.

The applied research design consists of a dual investigation, with both exploratory and descriptive characteristics, of the management of informal feedback and the possible existence of informal feedback intervention methods in these organisations. In this qualitative investigation, content analysis was firstly used to determine the current degree of “openness” (accessibility) to informal feedback input in these organisations’ corporate web pages. This was supplemented by the results of a questionnaire as completed by the communication managers/ marketing managers of the same organisations.

This research study aims to determine whether informal feedback, the ongoing management of the feedback process and systematic analysis thereof can be regarded as one of the critical communication management tactics of *learning organisations*. The study also aims to determine how *informal feedback intervention* can be integrated into corporate communication strategy. It suggests that modern learning organisations should make an effort to provide proper channels and favourable environments to increasingly receive informal feedback input from all stakeholders and thereby facilitate ongoing learning and continuous improvement. This study concludes that communication managers have a vital role to play in explaining feedback inputs to management in terms of its impact on existing corporate communication and business strategies.

This study also defines *informal feedback intervention* as the communication management process by which all informal feedback input is collected, sorted and grouped, evaluated and described according to applied and relevant impact on strategy. The intervention lies in the *impact* and *outcome* envisaged as well as the adaptation of the organisation’s strategy and change of course. A framework that aims to systemise the informal feedback intervention process - *The Multi-Layer Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* – is subsequently proposed. This framework aims to provide intervention suggestions (feedback interventions) to management.

The framework is also applied in an anonymous case study of a major South African company - *Company X*.

It is concluded from this case study that the *Multi-Layer Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* also acts as a forecasting tool by providing communication managers with feedforward.

The *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* assists the communication manager in assessing everyday feedback issues and identifying emerging suggestions of informal feedback interventions to management. It, therefore, assists communication managers to be proactive, early warning agents for their organisations.

The meta theoretical background of the systems approach, systems thinking and the general systems theory, as well as the management notion of the learning organisation, form foundations for exploring the relevance and application of the concept of informal feedback intervention.

Opsomming

Terugvoer is 'n belangrike komponent van die kommunikasieproses wat onthul hoe deelnemers betekenis toewys en hoe dit deur interaksie onderhandel word (Verwey, In: Lubbe and Puth 1994:64). Terugvoer verseker ook die sukses van die kommunikasieboodskap en bepaal of die doelwitte van die bedoelde kommunikasie suksesvol was (Seitel 1995:109). Kommunikasieterugvoer bevat ook inligting terwyl in ons huidige inligtingsera geglo word dat inligting mag is en dat diegene wat oor inligting beskik magtiger as die res is.

In kommunikasiebestuursliteratuur beklemtoon skrywers en navorsers dikwels die belangrike rol van kommunikasieterugvoer. Terugvoer speel veral 'n belangrike rol in kommunikasiebestuur as 'n strategiese bestuursfunksie. Een voorbeeld is die tweerigtingsimmetriese model, deur Grunig (1992) beskryf, waar *terugvoer* en *wederkerige aanpassing* 'n groot rol speel. In die meeste bestuursdenke word die insameling van kommunikasieterugvoer hoofsaaklik as 'n aktiewe, *doelgerigte* en *formele* navorsingsproses gesien wat deur die korporatiewe kommunikasie- en bemarkingsafdelings van organisasies geïnisieer word.

Hieroor is daar reeds baie geskryf en ook oor formele navorsing (byvoorbeeld, opnames en omgewingsverkenning) deur middel van kwantitatiewe en kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetodes asook die ontginning van formele kliëntterugvoer. Maar, dikwels word informele, ongerigte en amper toevallige informele kommunikasieterugvoer (informele terugvoer) in organisasies afgeskeep, as onbelangrik beskou en daarom nie gemeet of vasgevang in 'n soort datastelsel nie.

Hierdie navorsingstudie ondersoek *informele terugvoer* en definieer dit as alle kommunikasieterugvoer na die stelsel (die organisasie) wat spontaan geskied via media soos die telefoon, e-pos, faks, internetdienste (soos internetgeselskamers) en selfs deur riemtelegramme, gerugte en skinder. Belanghebbers of belangegroepe lewer dit sonder dat die organisasie self 'n formele poging aanwend om dit te versamel.

Die empiriese navorsing is onder 55 inspirerende, Suid-Afrikaanse, leerorganisasies (*learning organisations*) gedoen soos geïdentifiseer deur die *Corporate Research Foundation* in sy publikasie, *The Best Companies to work for in 2004*.

Organisasies moet leer om slimmer te raak en te oorleef en daarom word leerorganisasies

gekenmerk deur bewustelike en doelgerigte leer, openheid tot vrae, eksperimentering en die deel van kennis.

Die toegepaste navorsingsontwerp bestaan uit 'n tweeledige ondersoek, met beide ondersoekende en beskrywende eienskappe, van die bestuur van informele terugvoer en die aanwending van informele terugvoer-intervensiemetodes in hierdie organisasies. In die kwalitatiewe ondersoek word inhoudsanalise eerstens aangewend om die huidige mate van openheid (toeganklikheid) vir informele terugvoerinsette van hierdie organisasies se webwerwe te bepaal.

Belanghebberbetrokkenheid en dialoog het ook onlangs 'n gewilde en tydige aangeleentheid in die korporatiewe bestuur van organisasies geword. Hierdie studie betoog vir die bevordering van informele terugvoerintervensie as 'n metode om beter belanghebberbetrokkenheid te bewerkstelling wat uiteindelik tot inklusiewe korporatiewe bestuur sal lei.

Die navorsingstudie het ten doel om vas te stel of informele terugvoer, die voortgesette bestuur van die terugvoerproses en die sistematiese ontleding daarvan, as 'n kritiese kommunikasietaktiek van leerorganisasies beskou kan word. Die studie wil ook bepaal hoe informele terugvoerintervensie in korporatiewe kommunikasiestrategie geïntegreer kan word. Dit stel voor dat moderne leerorganisasies behoorlike kanale en gunstige omstandighede moet skep om toenemende informele terugvoerinsette van alle belanghebbers te verseker en sodoende voortgesette leer te fasiliteer. Die studie kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat kommunikasiebestuurders 'n belangrike rol te speel het in die verduideliking van terugvoerinsette aan bestuur in terme van impak op bestaande korporatiewe kommunikasie- en sakestrategieë.

Hierdie navorsingstudie definieer verder *informele terugvoerintervensie* as die kommunikasiebestuursproses waardeur alle informele terugvoerinsette versamel, sorter, groepeer, evalueer en beskryf word volgens toegepaste en relevante impak op strategie. Die intervensie lê opgesluit in die *impak* en *uitkoms* wat visualiseer word, die aanpassing van die organisasie-strategie asook die verandering van koers. 'n Raamwerk – *Die Veellaag Informele Terugvoer Intervensie Wiel (The Multi-Layer Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel)* – wat ten doel het om die informele terugvoerintervensieproses te sistematiseer, word vervolgens voorgestel.

Die raamwerk help met die verskaffing van intervensievoorstelle aan bestuur en word ook

toegepas in 'n anonieme gevallestudie met 'n groot Suid-Afrikaanse maatskappy - *Organisasie X*. Daar is tydens hierdie gevallestudie ook tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat die *Informele Terugvoer Intervensie Wiel* as voorspellings-instrument optree deur kommunikasiebestuurders van vooruitvoer (*feedforward*) te voorsien.

Die meta-teoretiese agtergrond van die sisteembenadering, sisteemdenke en die algemene sisteemteorie, asook die bestuurskonsep van die leerorganisasie, vorm die fondament vir die ondersoek van die relevansie en toepassing van die konsep van informele terugvoerintervensie.

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