■ CHAPTER SIX ■

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1.   INTRODUCTION

Modern information technology has created a new corporate communication landscape where everything, from communication channels to audience identification, methods of communication, message content and communication feedback, has changed. It has also impacted on the shared meaning of messages. Computer technology has altered the power structure and relationship between companies and their publics, stakeholders and the media (Ihator 2001:199-210).

At the beginning of this research study the researcher stated the overall research problem by sketching the broader background, influences and complexities relating to the field of study. The broader objective stated was to add to the existing knowledge base of the notion of feedback, informal feedback and feedback intervention. The role of informal feedback intervention as a communication management tool and as a learning agent and provider of predicting feedforward within the broader concept of learning organisations, was also investigated.

The following research objectives were stated in Chapter One:

1. To contribute to the body of knowledge about informal feedback examination and describing the current existence and applications of informal feedback intervention in South Africa's *Best Companies to Work for in 2004* as identified by The Research Foundation.

2. To determine how informal feedback intervention can best be applied and integrated into the corporate communication strategy of learning organisations, in particular.

3. To determine how informal feedback intervention should ideally be conducted and how it can contribute to the integrated sustainability of the organisation.

4. To determine what contribution the communication strategist can make to the informal feedback intervention process.

5. To determine how the *Multi-Layer Informal Intervention Wheel* can be applied as a framework and tested in a case study with a South African company.

6.2. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.2.1. Conclusions and recommendations on research method one

We learned from the literary overview in Chapter Three that if organisational change is to be effective, the communication process must include openness, dialogue and honesty (Henderson and McAdam 2003:776). We also learned from that chapter that more and more small companies are mining the internet for business intelligence.

The data and customer feedback they obtain in this way often sets them ahead of the pack. For those organisations that are willing to invest time, the internet is an inexpensive way to get online with customers, suppliers and competitors and to use the arising opportunities for controlling damages, providing services and support and to collect feedback.

Research method one involved a content analysis of 54 corporate websites of mostly learning organisations. It must, however, be stressed that this content analysis of the organisations' websites was made during early 2004. It, therefore, represents the situation as at that moment in time. As websites are supposed to be living publications that are updated daily, several changes could be expected by the time that this study design was completed. However, the analysis was repeated in a second phase that was conducted during December 2004.

The overalll performance of the population of organisations was noticeably better during phase two with regard to feedback accessibility.

South African organisations do not really tune in to the voice of all their stakeholders on their corporate websites as far as informal feedback opportunities are concerned. Organisations concentrate selectively on those stakeholders who are directly and obviously linked with their financial stability. This is, however, a very short-sighted vision and strategy as ignoring hidden and latent stakeholders may cost the organisation dearly.

This is naturally limited to the 55 websites of *'The best Companies to Work for in South Africa* investigated in this study. However, if this is the case with regard to the best companies to work for, similar characteristics could probably be found in other South African organisations as well. There is, however, no scientific proof at this point in time. A more comprehensive follow-up study could provide evidence to generalise these initial findings to a much broader spectrum of South African organisations.

The findings from the content analysis of 55 organisations' websites provide us with answers to research question three (*How do the targeted learning organisations utilise their internet as a useful and accessible way of providing stakeholders with opportunities for informal feedback input?)* as stated in the beginning of Chapter Five.

The investigated sites are by far not sensitive enough to provide an ear to the feedback, complaints, suggestions, queries or general opinions, fears and voices of customers and other organisational stakeholders.   The majority of those websites that do provide opportinities for feedback in the broader sense, concentrate on customers and investor contacts.   Other than this, their websites are limited to distributing and obtaining information about their products and services and providing information to investors.

Very few organisations use their websites to invite and motivate feedback from a broader stakeholder community. From a corporate communication point of view, homepages and websites offer the ideal opportunity to state the organisation's willingness and openess to receive feedback from anybody who wishes to air their opinion and make their voice heard.

Websites serve as living advertisements stating the corporate image, intentions, values and therefore the soul of the organisation. Too many corporate websites still aim to provide primarily information to customers, and sometimes other stakeholders as well, with too little emphasis on listening to what members of all stakeholder groups may have to say.

It will only take a few small fine tunings and adaptions to the majority of corporate websites to make them more feedback-friendly to all stakeholders. From the content analysis and also the preceeding literary study, the following suggestions can be made regarding informal feedback opportunities on corporate websites:

- Live buttons for both *'Contact Us'* as well as *'Feedback'* should be provided on the entry level of corporate websites, namely the homepage. This will provide a primary opportunity for feedback to all stakeholders and at the same time boost the organisation's image by stating its willingness and openess in welcoming informal feedback.

- *'Contact Us'* should be used to list all telephone, fax and cell numbers (if preferred), personal e-mail addresses, toll free numbers as well as postal and physical addresses. It also makes perfect sense to list directions to offices and road maps here.

- The 'feedback' button should specifically be used to provide a structured online form, with a few questions, followed by an open field where the stakeholder can list his or her feedback. This form should be preceded by an invitation that motivates the website user to provide any kind of feedback - be it a suggestion, comment or question.

    The following statement is an example of what the accompanying text should contain and provides an ideal feedback motivating statement:

    We (or name of company) are committed to open and transparent dialogue with all our stakeholders. We value and welcome any feedback, be it concerns, complaints, queries or suggestions and will gladly listen to what you have to say.

    Please feel free to use our online feedback form to share your views and ideas with us. We will respond to your contribution as soon as possible.
    Thank-you for your interest in us.

- It is recommended that the word 'feedback' is always used as a collective noun, but that the separate concepts such as suggestions, comments, views and even questions also be named in addition to the concept of 'feedback'.
- Websites should be relatively simple to navigate with easy navigation buttons and logical links on the homepage. Companies should stay away from complicated graphics and especially animation on their homepages. These take too long to download and may frustrate users, especially those with slower computers.

From the preceding content analysis of 55 corporate websites, the best website as far a motivating text to provide feedback is concerned belongs to MTN and its section called 'Speak 2 MTN'. Microsoft SA also provides very good motivational text for sending feedback. PriceWaterhouseCoopers also emerged as a provider of excellent feedback opportunities on its website during the second phase analysis. During this analysis it was found that Microsoft moved its '*Contact Us*' button in under '*Corporate Info',* which made it more difficult to find. There is also an absence of feedback reference or branding on their homepage.

The best execution of both contact and feedback opportunities belongs to Cashbuild and Flight Centre. Kumba Resources and Railit Total Transport later (with the second content analysis) also separated their *Contact* and *Feedback* buttons on their homepages.

The websites with the least openess and opportunities for feedback belong to Exel Petroleum (this organisation has since been taken over by Sasol), Fresh Produce Terminals, Matrix Vehicle Tracking and Ingwe Collieries. At the time Exel's website was a good example of a visually striking homepage with little more to offer regarding feedback. The organisation has since ceased to exist.

Sometimes the distinction between informal feedback (as defined in this research study) and soliciting more formal feedback opportunities becomes less obvious.

One good example is Absa Bank who launched a television advertisement in November 2004 in which their Group Chief Executive Officer personally urged Absa clients to make suggestions and comments on how the bank could deliver a better service to its customers. In the advertisement a central e-mail address for feedback is also provided.

Although Absa solicited feedback by motivating its customers to provide feedback by e-mail, it is still regarded as informal feedback. This is because Absa could not get a direct response and had no control over which customers would adhere to the CEO's call to provide the feedback (and when). This is further complemented by the simple feedback terminals installed at service points in Absa Bank branches as well as on their website where more direct requests for suggestions are made. This is an excellent example of how organisations can use elements of informal as well as slightly more formal or solicited feedback opportunities to stimulate feedback input into the organisation. Absa should be commended for this strategy. Absa's campaign was followed by one by Nedbank in which they emphasised Nedbank's abillity to listen.

In the second analysis of the 54 websites during December 2004 it was found that no less than 18 websites underwent significant changes. Of these websites, five (SAB Miller, Barloworld, SARS, Railit and Netcare) had major improvements where the feedback/contact offering moved from a secondary listing to a primary listing on the homepage. Others underwent minor improvements and two had deteriorated in their feedback offerings to stakeholders.

Like Esrock and Leichty (2000) the researcher feels obliged to warn organisations against the absence of feedback mechanisms on their corporate websites. Stakeholders can easily interpret it as a statement by the organisation of the kind of communication relationships the organisation prefers with its various stakeholders. On the other hand, in agreement with Cilliers (2003:109), one has to emphasise that feedback does not constitute only having a feedback button on an organisation's website, but implies an interactive relationship between the sender and receiver.

The internet and World Wide Web became a new way of communicating with stakeholders. If used to its full potential it provides ample opportunity to facilitate two-way communication with members of different stakeholders in a very cost-effective way.

Too often websites are designed by either IT managers or graphic designers without consulting the communication manager. Communication managers should make sure that the communication opportunities are fully utilised. Organisations should grasp this opportunity and apply this communication tool to its full potential.

As determined in Chapter Three, the openness and willingness to constantly learn from all stakeholders is a prerequisite for learning organisations in order to survive today's hostile business environment. Fritz's (1994:112) view, summarised in Chapter Three, indicated to us that organisations can renew themselves and become rejuvenated only if they can learn. If they are capable of learning they can transform themselves into new entities capable of greater heights of achievement. Allowing all stakeholders' informal feedback into the organisational system is an obvious and relatively inexpensive way to optimise learning.

Fritz's (1994:125) view is also supported by the fact that a prerequisite for becoming a learning organisation is that the organisation has to make a commitment to change its fundamental way of life or total orientation. This should be visible on organisations' windows to the world, their websites, as well. The researcher supports Thompson's (1995:96) view that multiple feedback opportunities are one of the critical success factors and conditions for building a learning organisation.

Murphy (1987:59) also emphasised elements of this in Chapter Three of this research study where he was quoted suggesting that we should listen to *context* and *content* in order to listen more effectively. He also suggested listening to suggestions and comments and even tune in to body language and written communication as well. McGill (1994:5) taught us that the critical issue is not what to change but what and how to learn from it.

Organisations' verbal and text statements with regards to their willingness and openness to all kinds of communication feedback (including informal feedback) on public arenas, in brochures, newsletters and advertisements are often not adequately supported by their web page offerings. The reasons behind these phenomena are not known and could form an interesting subject for a follow-up study. But there are welcome exceptions, as illustrated in the content analysis of the websites described in this chapter.

6.2.2. Conclusions and recommendations of research method two

It can be concluded from the findings of research method two (questionnaire) that in general the responding organisations believe in the value of informal communication feedback and its potentially strategic impact.

The passive solicitation of feedback (informal feedback) from all stakeholders is generally high on the agenda of marketing and communication managers and is pursued and stimulated, although not on a daily or weekly basis. There are, however, some exceptions.

The grapevine is also mainly regarded as a helpful and existing phenomenon in organisations. The learning organisations that were included in the study population, mainly attached significant value to information (informal feedback) obtained from the organisational grapevine. Almost 77 (76.66%) of the respondents indicated that they make use of the grapevine as a source for informal feedback while 60% make use of word of mouth, rumours and gossip.

This was further emphasised in Table 18 where the majority of respondents indicated that the grapevine is an important source of informal feedback and that it should be used to the advantage of the organisation, and that much can be learned from the grapevine.

However, a lot of uncertainty exists regarding the specific role and use of the grapevine and gossip as part of an overall communication and specifically an informal feedback collection policy. Additional evidence for this uncertainty lies in the high percentages that value three (3) (uncertain, where 1 = disagree totally and 5 = agree totally) scored throughout the statements about the grapevine from V34 to V47 (Table 18), with the exception of V43.

There needs to be more deliberation and training in this area. Respondents were, for example, generally unsure about the specific application of the grapevine with regard to its ability to influence and entertain, to distribute routine information, to build morale and job satisfaction and to facilitate knowledge transfer in organisations.

Respondents' lack of knowledge about the application of the grapevine as a source of informal feedback is further confirmed by their disagreement and uncertainty about the fact that management can feed the grapevine with information they choose. Compare the results of V49 in Table 18.

One should also take into consideration that 30% of respondents agreed that they merely see the grapevine as gossip with not much value for the organisation (Table 18). Yet, more than 76% (V9) indicated (Table 13) that they use the grapevine as a method of obtaining informal communication feedback.

One generally gets the impression that, although the grapevine is seen as something that happens spontaneously and is worth taking note of, the perception prevails that it cannot really be successfully used and even 'manipulated' to the advantage of better communication management in the organisation. This is in contrast with what the literature presented us with in the previous chapters of this study design.

Evidence also prevails in research method two that the majority of the participating organisations are indeed good examples of modern learning organisations. These findings, together with the preliminary analysis of Annexure A, prove that the investigated 55 organisations show extensive characteristics of learning organisations.

The following tables represent a summary of those scores and values that are particularly in contrast with the quoted literary views and the conclusion that the researcher draws from this.

Table 29: Conclusion: Time frames for collection of informal feedback input

V5		freq	%
4	Ad hoc – depending on the perceived importance of the feedback input.	**12**	**40.00**

As stated earlier, organisations should really make an effort to perceive all received informal feedback as potentially important and should regularly collect this feedback.
A further concern lies in the subjectivity of deciding which informal feedback is important and which is not.

Table 30: Conclusion: The perceived strategic role of informal feedback

	Informal feedback:	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
V24	Is merely worth taking note of.	5 17.24	9 31.03	**9** **31.03**	**4** **13.79**	2 6.90
V26	Can lead to strategic change in the organisation.	1 3.33	**5** **16.67**	**4** **13.33**	12 40.00	8 26.67

The 31.03% of respondents that are neutral on this statement in V24, as well as the 13.79% that agreed, are of concern to this researcher because informal feedback should be considered to play a much more important and strategic role. This confirms the researcher's earlier view, which stated that a significant part of the respondents do not attach much value to the strategic contribution of informal feedback although they recognise its existence and even its limited application and role in the organisation.

These conclusions are also in essence our answer to research question one: (Is informal communication feedback considered and viewed as relevant and of potential strategic importance to the identified *"Best Companies to Work for in South Africa"* (inspiring learning organisations?).

Similarly the 16.67% that disagreed with the statement in V26 as well as the 13.33% that were neutral, calls for serious attention. As concluded in the literary overview, some informal feedback should indeed lead to strategic change in organisations.

Table 31: Conclusion: The stimulation of informal feedback

	My organisation:	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
V28	Knows that stakeholders will find the means to provide feedback themselves.	2 7.14	6 21.43	**13** **46.43**	4 14.29	3 10.71
V29	Stimulates informal feedback from stakeholders only from time to time when regarded as necessary.	5 17.24	8 27.59	**7** **24.14**	**9** **31.03**	-

It was concluded from the literary study that organisations should stimulate the collection of informal feedback by providing optimal and sufficient means and methods that make it easier for all stakeholders to provide feedback. It is, therefore, of some concern that 46.43% of respondents were neutral on the statement in V28.

Organisations should do much more to stimulate informal feedback than just rely on stakeholders to find the means themselves.

A similar argument can be applied to V29.   Informal feedback should be stimulated continuously and not only from time to time when regarded as necessary. The question stands: Who decides, on behalf of stakeholders, when it is necessary and when not.

Table 32: Conclusion: Views on the organisational grapevine

		1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
V34	The grapevine is merely seen as gossip with not much value for the organisation.	3 10.00	10 33.33	**8** **26.67**	**6** **20.00**	**3** **10.00**
V38	The organisational grapevine is about emotional issues and not factual issues and therefore should not play an important role in communication management.	3 10.00	12 40.00	**8** **26.67**	**6** **20.00**	1 3.33
V39	The grapevine only flourishes when the formal communication structure is inadequate.	2 6.67	12 40.00	6 20.00	**6** **20.00**	**4** **13.33**
V40	The grapevine can be used to release tension among employees.	**3** **10.71**	**5** **17.86**	7 25.00	12 42.86	1 3.57
V41	The grapevine can be used to build morale and job satisfaction.	**6** **20.00**	**7** **23.33**	7 23.33	8 26.67	2 6.67
V42	The grapevine may provide answers to employees' unanswered questions.	**5** **16.67**	**8** **26.67**	8 26.67	8 26.67	1 3.33
V43	The grapevine is especially good in distributing routine information fast and accurately.	**9** **30.00**	**12** **40.00**	6 20.00	2 6.67	1 3.33
V45	The grapevine acts as an important creator and maintainer of human relationships in the workplace.	4 13.79	10 34.48	8 27.59	5 17.24	2 6.90
V46	The function of the grapevine is to influence or entertain.	**4** **13.33**	**10** **33.33**	**9** **30.00**	5 16.67	2 6.67
V47	The function of the grapevine is to provide information.	**7** **24.14**	**11** **37.93**	**9** **31.03**	2 6.90	-
V48	The grapevine should be used to facilitate effective knowledge transfer in organisations.	**11** **36.67**	**8** **26.67**	3 10.00	8 26.67	-
V49	Management can feed the grapevine with information that they choose.	**8** **26.67**	**7** **23.33**	7 23.33	8 26.67	-
V50	The role of the grapevine is supportive to more formal communication.	**4** **13.33**	**8** **26.67**	6 20.00	11 36.67	1 3.33

As stated earlier, major uncertainty with regard to informal feedback lies with the grapevine as a source of informal feedback.   Respondents were generally indecisive about the grapevine and opinions differ widely.   This is also evident from the high scores that the neutral score of three received in this section of the results.

The grapevine is an area of which respondents have little knowledge.   It is also generally considered as having little true use in corporate communication.   The studied literature, however, teaches us a different story.

With regard to the above statement, it was concluded from the reviewed literature that the

grapevine indeed flourishes whether formal communication structures are inadequate or not; it can be used to release tension among employees and to build morale and job satisfaction; it provides answers to employees' unanswered questions; it is good in distributing routine information quickly and accurately; and it acts as an important creator and maintainer of human relationships in the workplace.

The reviewed literature also teaches us that the function of the grapevine is to influence, entertain and provide information; it should be used to facilitate knowledge transfer in organisations; management can feed the grapevine with information and that the role of the grapevine is supportive of more formal communication.

6.2.3. **Conclusions and recommendations of research method three: a case study**

The management of and optimal engagement and dialogue with stakeholders are no longer luxuries, but rather necessities for modern organisations. If organisations, and even more so learning organisations, wish to justify their conduct and build a reputation of good corporate governance and ethical responsibility, ongoing attention to stakeholder issues becomes one of the prerequisites for survival.

Listening involves more than just providing an ear to all possible stakeholders. It also involves true commitment for inducing change to the core of the organisation. Even little known or marginalised stakeholders, who have little interaction with the organisation, need to be acknowledged and monitored on a regular basis.

This is, however, not an easy task. Unlike formal surveys, with the collection of informal feedback the organisation is not in control of collecting data and the time frames attached to it. The biggest advantage of informal feedback is, however, the honesty and therefore intrinsic value of it.

A stakeholder who goes through the trouble of providing the organisation with this kind of feedback really feels quite strongly about it. In contrast with this, participation in more formal surveys often involves some degree of irritation and a careless attitude. In this

light, the honesty of informal feedback from stakeholders becomes a valuable tool in the hands of communication managers in conducting issue management and stakeholder engagement.

Too often, problematic procedures, bureaucratic structures and policies are ignored and communication is instead applied as a quick fix for much deeper obstacles in organisations. Communication, and in this instance informal communication feedback, merely indicates what stakeholders observe, find problematic, irritates them or have praise for.

The *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* assists the communication manager in taking the management of informal feedback issues to the next level, a level where it becomes a real indicator for intervention and ultimately leads to change in the organisation. This study, therefore, strongly agitates for the cultivation of informal feedback intervention as a method of obtaining improved stakeholder engagement that ultimately leads to inclusive and participative corporate governance. It is a tool for promoting the participation of stakeholders and has a positive contribution to make in enhancing the organisation's reputation.

The Wheel, as framework, also applies structure to the chaotic appearance of bundles of informal feedback issues. Although this case study goes a long way in describing how to capture these feedback issues in a Feedback Capturing Database, it makes good sense to explore faster computer software in order to save time and resources. This may also form part of follow-up research. As the end results and suggestions for interventions take some time to be fully realised, it may also make good sense to explore this advantage further with dedicated follow-up studies.

At the time of the investigation for the case study Company X was in a very difficult time of their existence. A new era was dawning where their monopoly in providing certain services to South African people would come to an end. This led to wide-spread uncertainty and suspicion internally as well as externally. Company X were severely criticised on their customer service and service in general.

Towards the end of the case study investigation at least six managers within the Corporate

Communication Department received severance packages and left Company X. This resulted in a minimal impact on the outcomes of the case study as it was already in the final phase and very near completion.

It became clear from the case study at the time, that communication and feedback (informal and formal) but also the general manner in which the top management of Company X deals with internal stakeholders in particular, needed to be criticised. Although the delivery of new products, the installation and repair of existing products and services has certainly improved much in recent years, informal feedback issues mainly reported about poor service delivery. The other main issue that came out in informal feedback issues, dealt with the apparent high costs of services and products offered by Company X. Together with internal communication challenges, these formed the basis of most feedback issues captured during the period.

Applying the *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* against this background resulted in a flood of possible feedback issues that could be used. The researcher, therefore, decided to make a representative selection from certain possible media in order to have a manageable presentation. The feedback issues used in the case study are by no means an all-inclusive version of all possible informal feedback issues available during the period of the study.

It quickly became clear that the *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel's* power lies in its ability to force managers to make time and structure informal feedback issues in a certain way. It forces the communication manager to give attention to each and every single piece of informal feedback and to predict its impact on policy, structures, strategies and systems.

As the impact of these issues often impacts on other departments and divisions in the organisation, it is of utmost importance that the corporate communication department has a clear mandate from top management to communicate these impacts to the relevant divisions. It is also important that management buys into the concept and process suggested by the Intervention Wheel and expects divisions to address these issues.

The *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* enables corporate communication divisions to

fulfil its mandate of boundary spinner and early warning agent. It provides a way to at least give attention to pertinent informal feedback issues that could otherwise be ignored. The case study with Company X ultimately confirmed the researcher's earlier suspiscion that there is no quick way of dealing with informal feedback issues. The nature of informal feedback makes it widely spread and difficult to collect from all possible media.

It was also very useful to apply the framework to Company X because of the sheer size of the organisation and the multiple corporate and informal feedback issues that boiled to the surface in recent months. This made it possible to investigate a variety of informal feedback issues ranging from compliments, complaints and comments to the grapevine and certain observations. This might not have been possible should the case study have dealt with a much smaller organisation. The timing of the investigation also made for an interesting experience. Of particular interest was the dynamics of the organisation in the midst of uncertainty and the organisation's prominent position on the public agenda. Company X currently enjoys one of the most recognised brands in South Africa.

The *Score of Change* of the case study, and especially determining the exact interventions and outcomes achieved, has by no means been completed. It is an ongoing process where Company X is still determining what interventions to apply and, over time, what the exact outcomes of these interventions are. This will take some time and may be completely documented in a follow-up investigation. Fine-tuning the measurement of the outcomes induced by informal feedback interventions must also receive further attention in such an investigation.

To summarise, the *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel*, as a framework, is of particular significance for the following reasons:

- It provided a way and structure for capturing an overwhelming number of feedback issues;
- It gave structure and order in the processing and evaluation of informal feedback issues;
- It produced meaningful documents that can be followed-up and can be used for statistical analysis;
- It forced communication managers to spend time on individual informal feedback issues and therefore pay attention to them;

- It followed a natural path in which thoughts and facts were directed from raw input to the production of interventions with outcomes, causes, change and the measurement of results;

- It guided communication managers in their thinking to anticipate possible interventions that should produce desired outcomes;

- It provided communication managers with a tool and evidence of measured impact capabilities to the organisation's bottom line that can help them in convincing top management to act appropriately;

- It provides possibilities for feedforward, which may assist communication managers to predict future outcomes and therefore help management to successfully anticipate possible actions and reactions of stakeholders before they occur.

A drawback of this process is the time needed to capture all informal feedback issues and to prepare them for application to the Intervention Wheel. Depending on the size of the organisation, at least one dedicated staff member is required to specifically give attention to the process of monitoring informal feedback. It is, therefore, also recommended that the methods and ways of computerising the informal feedback collection be further investigated.   Existing software, like ExpressFeedback, needs to be examined and investigated.   It might also be worthwhile to investigate the possibility of developing dedicated software to complement the Intervention Wheel.

The role of the *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* as provider of both feedforward as well as suggestions for interventions to existing policies, structures and strategies (feedback) is a very exciting outcome of this study. This means that, based on past informal feedback inputs, the *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* may also become a forecasting tool for predicting the potential actions and reactions of stakeholders even before it happens. This opens up exiting possibilities for further research into the application of the framework in providing feedforward predictions and trends in organisations.

6.2.4. Deliberating the research questions

To summarise the findings in this research study we have to look at the research questions that were stated in Chapter One once again.

Research question one:

Is informal communication feedback considered and viewed as relevant and of potential strategic importance to the identified *"Best Companies to Work for in South Africa"* **(inspiring learning organisations)?**

It was concluded earlier that the majority of respondents (13/43.44%) collect informal feedback inputs as and when received and that 40% of respondents (12) attend to informal feedback in an ad hoc manner, depending on the perceived importance of the feedback input. The concern was expressed that the perceived importance of the informal feedback is limited and subject to the judgment of one person, that could result in communication managers overlooking the latent strategic impact potential of a particular issue.

Respondents emphasised the importance of informal feedback with the main stakeholder groups: customers, investors and staff members, while more than 53% of respondents agreed that informal **feedback issues of all stakeholders** are perceived to be important. Almost 74% of respondents indicated that informal feedback could lead to strategic change in their organisations.

It is clear that although respondents generally realised the potential strategic importance of informal feedback, they are not always consistent in their realisation of the application of certain types of informal feedback inputs. Examples of this are some views expressed regarding the grapevine and rumours.

Research question two:

What views, media and methods currently prevail in the investigated learning organisations with regard to their provision for informal communication feedback opportunities?

Table 13 mainly provided the answer to this research question. It was concluded that the four main media and methods used by the respondents in obtaining informal

communication feedback were: Through direct observation of customers or staff (80%); Web page with structured feedback / "contact us" forms / mailto e-mail addresses (77%); information obtained from the organisational grapevine (77%); and through voluntary comments made at functions or parties (74%). The use of telephonic means also drew almost 67% of the response.

Letters to the press (60%) as well as word of mouth, rumours and gossip (60%) were also fairly popular as media and methods of collecting informal feedback. Although 77% of respondents indicated that they use their web pages for soliciting informal feedback, this was not supported by the findings of the content analysis of the same population.

It must be agreed with Esrock and Leichty (2000) in their warning against the absence of feedback mechanisms on corporate websites. Stakeholders can easily interpret it as a statement by the organisation of the kind of communication relationships the organisation prefers to have with its various stakeholders. An advantage of regularly obtaining feedback from the internet is the instant nature of the feedback that also leads to instant interactivity. This is an essential factor in relationship marketing.

Research question three:
How do organisations utilise the internet as a useful and accessible way in providing stakeholders with opportunities for informal feedback input?

The answers to this research question were discussed at length earlier. In general it was concluded that the investigated websites are by far not sensitive enough to provide an ear to the feedback, complaints, suggestions, queries or general opinions, fears and voice of customers and other organisational stakeholders. The majority of those websites that do provide opportunities for feedback in the broader sense, concentrate on customers and investor contacts.

It was also concluded that very few organisations use their websites to invite and motivate feedback from a broader stakeholder community. Too many corporate websites still aim primarily to provide information to customers and sometimes other stakeholders as well, with too little emphasis on listening to what members of all stakeholder groups may have

to say. Organisations can do much more in giving their stakeholders an active voice and to listen to these voices.

Organisations' verbal and text statements with regards to their willingness and openness to all kind of communication feedback (including informal feedback) on public arenas, in brochures, newsletters and advertisements are often not adequately supported by their web page offerings.

Research question four:

How can informal feedback inputs best be collected and organised and how can informal feedback intervention be integrated into corporate communication strategy?

and

Research question five:

How can we logically differentiate between informal feedback inputs with regard to its impact level on corporate strategy?

The *Multi-Layer Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* as well as the application of the *Informal Feedback Yardstick*, described in Chapter Four, provided answers to research questions four and five.

From this lengthy discussion it was concluded that the benefits of applying the *Informal Feedback Yardstick* are its objectivity and its categories of feedback issues and systemised thinking with regard to the bigger picture sketched by the *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel.*

It also forces communication managers to systemise and document feedback input and to give attention to all feedback input on a regular and ongoing basis. The *Informal Feedback Yardstick* assists communication managers in forming well thought through opinions about different informal feedback issues and to make unbiased decisions

regarding the potential strategic impact of a certain informal feedback issue.

This is further illustrated in practice by the application of the *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel* in a case study with a major national company.

Research question six:

What role do the grapevine, rumours and gossip play in inspiring learning organisations as forms of informal communication feedback?

The views of respondents regarding this research question were summarised in Table 18. The results of views expressed by respondents differed vastly according to the specific statements stated in the questionnaire. The results often did not totally correlate with one another. This can be due to the lack of knowledge about the role of the grapevine and especially the application of informal feedback obtained from the grapevine in certain areas of communication management.

In general, respondents vastly agreed that the informal feedback obtained from the grapevine should be monitored and used and is seen as an important source of information. They also indicated that much could be learned from the grapevine. However almost 30% also felt that the grapevine is not useful as a source of informal feedback.

In general, respondents did not agree on whether the grapevine is about emotional issues and whether it should play an important role in communications management or not. Almost 64% of respondents did not believe in the ability of the grapevine to facilitate effective knowledge transfer in organisations.

Almost 40% of respondents indicated that they do not believe that the grapevine is supportive of more formal communication.

As indicated, this is of concern because communication managers should at least know that the grapevine is indeed supportive of formal communication. In contrast to this, almost 87% of the respondents agreed that the grapevine can act as an early warning system in their organisations.

From all the results, it can be concluded that, although communication and marketing managers generally aknowledge the role of the grapevine, rumours and gossip, they do not agree on the application and value thereof.

Research question seven:

What role do relationship-building strategies play in the cultivation of informal feedback opportunities?

More than 86% of respondents indicated that the nurturing of relationships *with all stakeholders* was important for their organisations.

The distribution of results on views about the management of relationships with different stakeholders in Table 17 correlated with the distribution of scores about the importance of informal feedback with the same stakeholders as indicated in Table 14. From this it was concluded that views on the importance of informal feedback seem to be positively linked to views on relationship-building. If relationships are regarded as important, informal feedback will also play an important role as a means of nurturing these relationships.

It must be agreed with Grunig (In: Grunig 1992) that corporate communication practitioners play their most valuable role by identifying and establishing relationships with strategic stakeholders. Practitioners also identify and manage the publics and activists that emerge around issues, thereby reducing conflict and uncertainty in strategic decision-making. Building strategic relationships should, therefore, form the centre of corporate communication activity. Beneficial relationships, in turn, lead to the provision of useful informal feedback.

This is further emphasised by Kent and Taylor (1998) in stating that two-way symmetrical communication as a theoretical approach necessitates organisations to provide the procedural means whereby the organisation and its stakeholders can communicate interactively. Organisations must devise systematic processes and rules for proper two-way symmetrical communication to take place.

6.2.5. The strategic value of informal feedback intervention

To give and receive feedback has long been considered an essential skill for leaders. Leaders also need feedback from, amongst others, employees in the form of suggestions on how to improve procedures and processes, innovative ideas for new products and services and input on their leadership abilities (Goldsmith 2003:38).

The role of informal feedback in communication issue management should not be under-estimated. Informal feedback intervention is a significant tool for communication managers whereby they are empowered to be early warning systems for the organisation. Communication managers should, therefore, also have knowledge of industry trends and issues and should also know the company's financial situation well enough to recognise potential problems. Informal feedback inputs, however, also assist managers to effectively determine and predict trends and enable them to act as early warning agents and as indicators of potential damage to the corporate reputation.

One of the major strategic roles that informal feedback intervention as a communication management tool can play is that of an early warning signal device of emerging issues of concern to management. Cummins (2003:730) calls this *"spotting the storm clouds and raising a red flag of warning".* Informal feedback intervention has a major role to play in preventing communication disasters in advance. This occurs by focusing the attention on emerging issues before it becomes a major concern.

The King Report (King 2002:98) indicated earlier that active engagement with stakeholders helps fuel strategic planning and the management of risk. The more actively the organisation engages with its broadest possible groups of stakeholders, the easier it becomes to pick up early warning indicators through informal feedback inputs.

Ample informal feedback opportunities can provide the base for starting to build much-needed trustworthy relationships with stakeholders.   The alternative – not monitoring all informal feedback inputs – may have daunting consequences. Organisations such as Intel and Ford can vouch for this.

In contrast with feedback that mainly concentrates on past experiences*, feedforward* is much more expansive and dynamic in providing suggestions for the future of the organisation. In this sense the organised suggestions of the *Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel*, described in Chapter Four and Five, become a significant prediction or forecasting tool in the hands of communication managers.   Messages can be rephrased in advance even before stakeholders receive them.

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 the communication manager to be proactive early warning agents for their organisations. These suggestions, based on first-hand stakeholder feedback and derived feedforward, are particular powerful because tey are trustworthy, honest and frank and not yet contaminated with institutional norms, values and the blindness of the organisations' managers, which prevents them from observing emerging issues. Stakeholders' efforts to put their concerns in writing often indicate that they really care.

Fritz (1994:112) indicated earlier that organisations can renew themselves and become young again, become rejuvenated, if they develop the ability to continuously learn. Organisations that can't learn can't change. Informal feedback is a relatively cost-effective and trustworthy way in which organisations can constantly learn. Learning is already a competitive advantage for organisations, because those who can learn faster will survive. The more the organisations understand the systems that affect them, the better they will be able to anticipate results and changes. This assists decision-making that has the most positive impact on the organisation (Frydman *et al.* 2000:24).

On another level, much of the organisational climate can be observed by tuning into the grapevine and by tapping feedback as a barometer of the general level of morale in an organisation. Specific areas that need attention may emerge and can be addressed before more serious problems develop. Obtaining feedback through the grapevine is one way in which feedback input can serve as early warning signs for management's attention. Feedforward can also be of assistance here in anticipating stakeholders' future reactions to new policies and announcements.

Akande and Odewale (1994:28) state that the grapevine can be a valuable source of feedback and can be valuable in assessing the reaction of employees to an announcement before it is made through formal channels. When open, honest and complete communication takes place through the official networks, the grapevine can be a useful way of dealing with softer issues and employees' sense of belonging. It can be particularly useful in providing early warning feedback input to management of potentially dangerous or threatening issues.

Informal feedback is also very important for doing business. Thompson and Strickland (2004:285) suggest that organisations be prompt in adapting to changing market conditions, customer needs, buyer wishes, alternative emerging technology and competitors' new initiatives. It is often with the help of informal feedback input that early indications become clearer. McGill (1994:126) states that the quality of learning in an organisation is a direct product of the quality of feedback generated by the organisation's systems. If there is no feedback, there will be no learning, and where feedback is inaccurate and untimely, learning is limited. The aim of smarter organisations should be to create systems that provide quality feedback to management, which they can use to change experiences.

Communication managers identify and manage the publics and activists that emerge around issues, thereby reducing conflict and uncertainty in strategic decision-making. (Grunig, In: Grunig 1992). Nowadays online customer feedback occurs much more frequently and is especially useful in streamlining product design and development processes. Online customer feedback helps find bugs early, reducing the risk when the product is launched. Involving the customer in the development process sets the organisation in the right direction from the start and eliminates the need for expensive changes at a later stage (Sampson 1998:78).

6.2.6. Last words

In conclusion of this research study it can be stated that informal feedback is indeed an essential component of communication management in organisations, especially in aspiring learning organisations.

In agreement with Littlejohn (1983:35), open systems indeed receive content and energy from their environment as well as send content and energy to their environment while it is focused on life and growth. Biological, psychological and social systems follow an open model and organisations should not operate differently. The open systems approach demands research abilities to monitor stakeholders and other environmental powers as well as the powers within the organisation (Cutlip, Center and Broom 1984: 222).

As stated in Chapter Two, the open systems approach enables communication practitioners to fulfil either a functional or managerial role (or both) while they systematically plan and manage communication programmes, and they are part of the dominant coalition, where they counsel and advise, as well as make strategic policy decisions. Management needs strategic information in order to make strategic impact decisions. Stein (2003:6) states that the role of *the corporate communication strategist* should be to seek and listen for information (feedback) from the environment so that the organisation can adapt to stakeholder views and societal norms.

Just as with communication feedback in general, informal feedback also contains information that is believed to possess power in the current information age. The active pursuit of informal feedback intervention has a significant role to play in strategic communication management and in following the two-directional symmetrical model of communication management. This information is often provided by communication managers who act as boundary spanners, frequently interacting with the organisation's environment and who gather, select and relay information from the environment to decision-makers in the dominant coalition. The communication manager therefore stimulates learning, in essence the aim and lifeblood of learning organisations.

Informal, unintentional and almost accidental casual communication feedback inputs should be treated with utmost importance and measured and evaluated for its potential strategic significance. Informal feedback intervention as a tool should be integrated into the corporate communication strategies of organisations in order to be pro-active in relationship-building with all stakeholders.

It is suggested 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 therefore facilitate ongoing learning. Communication managers are the only ones in organisations with a holistic view of organisational structures, policies, strategies and processes and are therefore in a unique and excellent position to monitor and explain feedback inputs to management in terms of its impact on existing corporate communication and business strategies. It forms, together with feedforward possibilities, a powerful empowering tool for communication managers' roles in organisations.

Open systems organisations can respond much faster to new challenges and opportunities, be sensitive to emerging markets and changing consumer needs as well as threats from pressure groups. Internal structures and processes should be aligned with these environmental demands. The *Multi-Layer Informal Feedback Intervention Wheel,* as a framework, described towards the end of Chapter Four, aims to assist in providing intervention suggestions (feedback and feedforward interventions) to management.

Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:162) argued in Chapter One that communication management actually facilitates successful strategic change management and that communication managers should take leadership roles by facilitating participation through dialogue. They can be research experts in organisations by providing information on emerging issues around which the organisation needs to adapt.

As stated earlier, the King Report on Corporate Governance in South Africa (King 2002:98) also suggests that organisations should recognise and consider all stakeholders such as the community in which it operates, its employees and its suppliers, amongst others. All of these stakeholders should be considered when developing strategy for the organisation.

This inclusive approach should also be drawn through to stakeholders relevant to the organisation's business.

Although some of the findings in this research study cannot be generalised to all organisations, results provide a broad and general understanding and insight of the trends and applications of informal feedback intervention strategies in some of the best-managed organisations in South Africa. The majority of these organisations also proved to be learning organisations.

McIntosh *et al*. (1998:75) says that corporate citizenship asks organisations to be aware of their social responsibilities and that this is only possible if these organisations are learning organisations. Stakeholders and key relationships with them are sources of innovative ideas and strengths for organisations.

From all the preceding deliberation it is clear that informal feedback intervention has a significant role to play in modern communication management strategies of organisations. This is even more true in the existence of learning organisations. It should, therefore, receive the attention and consideration that it deserves in organisations' corporate communication strategies. This research study cannot conclude otherwise than in agreement with Murphy (1987:88) when he states that *"letters* (also read informal feedback in general) *often help us see what we couldn't hear."* Letters are often a symptom of a more deeply rooted problem or concern and no matter what your intended message, putting it in writing says that you care (Murphy (19987:158).

Indeed, this is also true of organisations' accessibility to informal feedback. It is often more important for the organisation to listen to its stakeholders than to make stakeholders listen to what the organisation has to say.