

A Leonard  
AF Grobler

## **Communicating affirmative action in three South African organisations: a comparative case study perspective**

### *ABSTRACT*

Problems associated with the management of communication (in the broadest sense of the word) are a recurring theme in both Corporate Communication Management and Human Resource Management literature and in research on the implementation of affirmative action<sup>1</sup> as part of the Employment Equity Act<sup>2</sup> in the South African context. Therefore, the following research question was formulated: "How do South African organisations manage communication about affirmative action (against the backdrop of employment equity<sup>3</sup>)?"

This article provides an overview of some dimensions of an exploratory qualitative study that investigated this research question. The ever-increasing strategic importance of organisational performance regarding the EEA highlights the need for research in this area. This study is one of only a few empirical studies in the field of Corporate Communication with the emphasis on topics related to the management of communication in this specific transformational context.

Since this study focused on aspects that had not been researched previously (or verified empirically), an exploratory approach had to be followed, with the purpose of gauging possible current trends related to the management of communication about AA in a selection of South African organisations. A case study comparison of three organisations yielded the following results on four sub-questions derived from the overarching research question. The organisations researched (1) comply with their legal duty to inform and consult with stakeholders about the process of EE as stipulated in the Code of Good Practice for the EEA (Department of Labour, 1999); (2) the management of EE is viewed as a transformational change process, as opposed to a once-off incident; (3) the

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*Anné Leonard is a lecturer in the Department of Marketing and Communication Management at the University of Pretoria. This paper is based on a component of her MPhil (Communication Management) dissertation research. Prof Anské F Grobler is the Head: Communication Management in the same department and acted as the supervisor for this study.*

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as AA.

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth referred to as EEA.

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth referred to as EE.

management of communication in this context is viewed as a critical success factor, but a disparity exists between the emphasis placed on strategic external and internal communication efforts; and (4) leaders at all hierarchical levels have different communication responsibilities in relation to this transformational process.

Based on the results of this study, the major recommendation for the management of affirmative action communication pertains to the need to address the perceived gap between internal and external communication efforts. Since strategic internal communication is not only viewed as critical for the dissemination of information, but also as the vehicle through which transformation is facilitated, the value thereof should not be underestimated.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The first democratic general elections in South Africa in 1994 set in motion what was arguably the most significant political and societal transformation in this country's history. More than a decade later the process of social and political transformation continues. Societal transformation depends on people's commitment to the appreciation of everyone's human dignity, as opposed to the acceptance of racial segregation and biases. A key reason for the rather slow pace of transformation in the workplace is the fact that "most people were not psychologically prepared for the type or level of change required of them" (De Beer, 1998:2). Deep-seated values and beliefs previously upheld by the political dispensation would only change over time.

The government has thus taken on the responsibility of speeding up the transformation of areas believed to be critical in placing South Africa on the road of global competitiveness. One such key area is the development of the country's human capital (Horwitz, Bowmaker-Falconer & Searll, 1996: 131-135). Business was granted the opportunity to transform the employment environment voluntarily through, among other initiatives, affirmative action since 1994. This was the so-called bottom-up approach. The comprehensive transformation process envisaged, however, did not occur speedily (King Report II, 2002:114). The government started to enforce the transformation of the EE environment through legislation shortly after the first democratic political elections in 1994. Conflicting views across the board existed (and still exist) about the relevance of AA in a post-apartheid South Africa. Despite conflicting views or ideologies, the government promulgated the EEA in 1998.

The EEA (55/1998) differentiates between "designated groups" (including Africans, coloureds, Indians, women and people with disabilities) and "non-designated groups" (whites). Individuals from the designated groups should receive preferential treatment in terms of recruitment and selection, while reasonable adjustments to jobs (as a developmental effort) for candidates from these groups are also ensured by the EEA. The same Act also refers to "designated employers" - all employers with more than 50 employees have to comply with the EEA.

The essence of the EEA focuses not only on mechanisms to redress the imbalances of the past, but also strives to bring about an equitable work environment. Diversity is a key value of this Act and encompasses an appreciation of race, gender and religion as well as recognition for people with disabilities. The preamble to the EEA (55/1998) emphasises the sentiment that the discriminatory laws of apartheid had created such disadvantages for certain categories of people that "... simply repealing those laws will not effect the constitutional right to equality and the exercise of democracy".

The EEA was therefore tabled in 1998 and the AA measures described in this Act came into effect on 1 December 1999. The goal of the EEA is fivefold: (1) the elimination of unfair discrimination in employment; (2) the implementation of EE to redress the effects of discrimination; (3) the achievement of a diverse workforce, broadly representative of the South African population demographics; (4) the promotion of economic development and efficiency in the workplace; and (5) compliance with the obligations for members of the International Labour Organisation.

The government anticipated the complex nature of communication about the implementation of the EEA and published the Code of Good Practice for the EEA in 1999 (Department of Labour, 1999), which serves as a guideline document. The complexity of implementing the processes and procedures of EE also led to Thomas and Robertshaw's (1999) strategy for EE and a framework for the management of communication about EE.

Controversy and confusion abound, and little research on the management of communication (strategic or technical) about AA (as a transformational process) has been completed in the South African context. Based on an extensive review of literature and database searches, it seems that communication research previously focused on the sub-fields or sub-topics of the management of corporate change (Barrett, 2002; Du Plooy-Cilliers in Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003; Grobler in Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003; Ströh, 1998), including transformational change (Cummings & Worley, 2001; Keene, 2000; Puth, 2002), and the nature and place of communication therein (Puth, 2002; Ströh, 1998; Ströh & Jaatinen, 2001). But, the nature of the efforts by the corporate communication function regarding the implementation of AA, specifically in the South African context, however received relatively little attention. Previous research includes reports or current projects by IDASA (1995:135-13), Mwafongo (1997), Pillay (1999), Seroka (1999:178-181), Siddo (in the press), Van Sittert-Triebel (1996: 280-286), and Visagie (1997:660-667 & 1999:148-162).

## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The process of determining how South African organisations manage communication about affirmative action encompasses four interrelated sub-questions that flow from the overarching research question, as indicated in Table 3. The first sub-question pertains to how organisations implement their "duty to inform and consult with employees and reporting to government", as stipulated in Sections 16, 18, 21 and 25 of the EEA (Department of Labour, 1999). The second, third and fourth sub-questions respectively pertain to (2) how organisations approach the management of EE as a transformational

change process; (3) how they approach the management of communication related to EE in this process; and (4) which approach is followed regarding leadership communication in the process of managing EE.

Understanding the four sub-questions requires a more detailed description of the contextual realities in the South African situation. However, before the complexities surrounding these questions are described, the key concepts of the study are presented.

### 3. KEY CONCEPTS

**Transformational change** requires significant changes to the cultures of organisations, and to people's behaviour and mindsets, resulting in profound change (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 39–40; Gouillart & Kelly, 1995:6; Grobler in Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003:191). According to Gouillart and Kelly (1995:6) corporate transformation involves the renewal of the corporate spirit, the reframing of the corporate mind, the restructuring of the corporate body and the revitalisation of both the corporate body and the environment. Transformation is driven by change. It does not focus on incremental, process-driven adjustments, but on the modification of behaviour based on people's internalisation of changes (Cummings & Worley, 2001:498). Transformation also differs from other forms of change in the sense that people's transformation (profound change) is an infinite process, thus requiring continuous thought and psychological commitment (French & Delahaye, 1996:6). Finally, corporate transformation has a unique meaning in the South African context: whereas "transformation" would often be associated with business buzzwords like Total Quality Management (TQM), downsizing and Business Process Reengineering (BPR), this concept often refers to the dramatic social and political changes that have been taking place in the post-apartheid era.

**Transformational change communication** is a means for sharing meaning and thus facilitating an understanding of the corporate complexities related to corporate transformation. Communication serves as the vehicle for achieving either synchronic (synchronising the behaviour of a public with that of an organisation) or diachronic objectives (negotiating a situation that is beneficial to both the organisation and a public), as defined in Grunig (1992:287).

**Affirmative action** (AA) refers to a collection of specific measures that designated employers should implement to achieve EE, as stipulated by the EEA. AA should not be confused with or used interchangeably with EE, or concepts such as Black Advancement, Black Economic Empowerment or Diversity Management (Du Plessis, Fouché & Van Wyk, 2002:80; King Report I, 1994:24; Thomas & Robertshaw, 1999:143; and Visagie, 1999: 150–151).

**Transformational leadership** refers to both formal and situational (informal) roles and the diffusion of innovation (or transformation) as well as the critical questioning of, and participation, in the creation of a corporate vision, as described by Puth (2002:21–22). Communication is intrinsically linked to leadership and critically important for transformational leaders since such individuals are faced with both leading from the

front (envisioning the transformational state) (Puth, 2002:78-81) and facilitating self-directed leadership and continuous participation of non-leaders in this process (Ackerman & Anderson Ackerman, 2001:181-187). Both of these approaches to leadership hinge on effective communication. Finally, transformational leadership is defined as a "thinking science" since such leaders have to remain flexible in order to adapt to the dynamic business environment, thereby embracing the central tenets of the Chaos and Complexity theories (Anderson & Anderson Ackerman, 2001:181-187).

#### **4. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

The context of the research problem is best described by means of the following theoretical aspects: a discussion of some key dimensions of corporate transformation and transformational change communication; a description of affirmative action as a corporate transformation phenomenon; understanding current AA practices as a top-down approach; and recent developments regarding the management of communication about EE in the South African context.

##### **4.1 Key dimensions of corporate transformation and transformational change communication**

The following five dimensions give an indication of the complex nature of corporate transformation both nationally and internationally.

###### *4.1.1 Organisational complexity*

Grundy (1998:55-58) and Jick & Peiperl (2003:218) define organisational change as a complex process since each organisation's collective reaction to change (or transformational) efforts is unpredictable. The time it takes for change or transformation to be fully accepted is directly dependent on the complexity of the linkages within the organisation. The complexity of organisations also means that no "magic bullet" hypothesis about communication or implementation formulae can be applied to all divisions or units of organisations, thus refuting oversimplified, linear thinking: "Each level has to go through its own process of comprehending the change and coming to terms with it" (Jick & Peiperl, 2003:218).

###### *4.1.2 Multiple stakeholders*

Cummings & Worley (2001:513) further argue that transformational change also affects a multitude of stakeholders. Therefore, they suggest that much consideration should be devoted to balancing the interests of various stakeholders. Goodijk (2003), Post, Preston & Sachs (2002), Scholes & Clutterback (1998), and Wheeler & Sillanpää (1998) also emphasise the importance of a strategic stakeholder approach, while pointing to the implications for the management of communication. Large-scale transformation (including corporate culture reorientation) may take anything from three to seven years in complex organisations. Apart from organisational complexity, two other reasons may explain such a time lapse. Firstly, the benefits of the required changes cannot always be observed quickly, and secondly, change (or transformation) often entails "false starts, derailments and the necessity to start over in some places" (Jick & Peiperl, 2003:218).

#### 4.1.3 *Transformational leadership*

Transformational change requires more active leadership and an extraordinary understanding of communication compared to all other change aspects. The role of transformational leadership has moved away from the conceptualisation of strictly hierarchical “leader–follower”, or merely a list of inherent personal characteristics such as charisma, to leaders that “must attend to people as much as they attend to content” (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2001:45).

According to the same authors, transformational leaders are mainly responsible for three dimensions of organisational transformation, namely envisioning, energising and enabling. The articulation of a new vision and setting an “energising example” are core tasks of the transformational leader. These tasks cannot be fulfilled without communication (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2001:45; Carnall, 1999: 131–132; Conrad & Poole, 2002:122–124; Cummings & Worley, 2001; and Puth, 2002:27–28).

#### 4.1.4 *Corporate culture and organisational transformation*

Cummings & Worley (2001:501–502) view corporate culture as the most common terrain of organisational transformation. They also define this phenomenon as the answer to three common questions: “What really matters around here?”, “How do we do things around here?” and “What do we do when a problem arises?” These authors contend that new corporate strategies often fail since the corporate culture either cannot accommodate the desired change, or if the corporate culture itself is not addressed, it will not reflect the desired transformed state.

#### 4.1.5 *Continuous organisational learning*

Lasting transformation is the result of continuous learning by all employees regarding the newly desired behaviour through which the new strategy (or strategic direction) can be achieved. Du Plooy-Cilliers (in Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003:32) refers to organisational learning as the process through which “people transform themselves”. This learning process occurs at all levels of the organisation and does not have a definite end (Cummings & Worley, 2001:501). This is mainly because continuous external changes occur while the organisation might still be “learning” about a particular strategy or philosophy internally. Cummings & Worley (2001:501) and Teare (1997:323) are convinced that organisational learning is a key capacity since it will help organisations to cope with the continuous nature of change.

## 4.2 **Affirmative action as a corporate transformation phenomenon**

The almost axiomatic assumption that communication about AA is complex needs to be supported by an explanation of AA as a corporate transformation process.

Two dimensions of the EEA confirm that the implementation process of an EE strategy is transformational. Firstly, the EEA is aimed at bringing about lasting societal transformation by enforcing certain measures on designated employers. Appointing employees from designated groups is not merely a temporary, superficial or structural change issue, but transformational. De Beer (2002:ii) and Thomas & Robertshaw (1999:9) also view AA

measures not only as mechanisms for facilitating the equitable representation of previously disadvantaged groups in society, but also as measures that will result in a workforce that represents diverse individual values, group values, group cultures and contributions (De Beer & Radley, 2000:5-7). In this context, diversity is all-encompassing as explained previously. Diversity per se cannot be reversed: once it is embedded in an organisation, it affects every fibre of organisational life permanently (De Beer, 2003). The permanent nature of the corporate values and cultures that is based on the appreciation of diversity is truly transformational. Secondly, individuals and groups across different race groups often have to alter deep-seated beliefs about one another in accepting AA measures in South African organisations. Such a process requires a paradigmatic transition as described by De Beer (2002:ii), Grobler (in Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003:192) and Madi (1993:ix). These changes have to permeate an organisation.

De Beer (2002:ii) further differentiates between individual, group and organisational levels of transformation. Individual attitudes, values, stereotypes, prejudices and personality factors need to be transformed in accordance with the desired (or acceptable) paradigm. Cultural differences, ethnocentrism and inter-group conflicts need to be addressed at group level. At organisational level, human resources management systems and procedures need to reflect the legislative requirements of the EEA, while structural and informational integration should occur (De Beer, 2003; De Beer & Radley, 2000:52-55; and Thomas & Robertshaw, 1999:17-47). Finally, this transformational effort should incorporate the two underlying themes of AA, as described by Van Jaarsveld (2000:7-8). The first is justice and the second, equality. Although the previous author emphasises the fact that these legal and philosophical concepts are open to debate, they need to be accepted in the wider society in order for related legislation to function properly.

#### **4.3 Top-down or bottom-up affirmative action and the implications thereof for the management of communication**

The differences between a bottom-up and top-down approach to AA are highlighted in Table 1. The rationale for the top-down AA approach was that organisations would not empower sufficient numbers of black employees through their free will (De Beer, 1998:47). From this perspective, the number of black employees to be included in organisations by means of the EEA is unknown, while the timeframe for ending this practice is unspecified (EEA, 55/1998). This top-down approach to AA would have an unpredictable influence on corporate culture and it focuses on modernisation (De Beer, 1998:53-54).

<b>Bottom-up</b>	<b>Top-down</b>
Enforcement by consent	Enforcement by legislation
Power primarily obtained through personal growth and work skills development	Power primarily obtained through positional advancement
Productivity and work standards usually considered in the empowerment of the disadvantaged	Productivity and work standards often not considered in the empowerment of the disadvantaged
Senior management/organisation driven Work skills, empowerment and personal growth as important as positional empowerment	Government driven Positional empowerment more important than work skills
Proactive interventions	Reactive interventions
Both input and output policies equally important	Output policies slightly favoured above input policies

**Table 1: Differences between bottom-up and top-down affirmative action**

Source: De Beer (1998:48)

Furthermore, resistance against AA may be validated if the perception that AA does not take productivity and work standards into consideration was previously addressed in South African organisations (De Beer, 1998:47; Human, 1993; Madi, 1993; and Thomas, 1996). Since the implementation of EEA is also linked to punitive measures for organisations that do not achieve their annual EE targets, the forced appointment of employees from designated groups may once again lead to racial polarisation and mistrust (De Beer & Radley, 2000:3).

The normative, overarching vision for organisations that implement the EEA is the fair reflection of the South African population demographics based on tolerance, mutual respect and trust between all individuals. Even though the EEA is currently enforced as a top-down process, organisations realise that the successful implementation thereof requires a change in the “hearts and minds” (spiritual essence) of employees (French & Delahay, 1996; Puth, 2002: 78 & 88-89), mainly by accepting a new set of corporate values reflecting the demographic profile of the country (De Beer, 2003). The information to be communicated internally should be aimed at helping individuals make a transition towards these newly desired values on corporate diversity.

#### **4.4 Recent developments regarding the management of communication about employment equity in the South African context**

Two noteworthy guideline documents were published shortly after the promulgation of the EEA, namely the Code of Good Practice for the EEA (Department of Labour, 1999) and an EE strategy (including a framework on the communication thereof) by Thomas and Robertshaw (1999). Both have the advantage of incorporating lessons that were learnt by a number of organisations before the government’s top-down approach to EE. Based



on the overarching research question and the four sub-questions as well as the need to manage the communication of transformation in South African organisations strategically, both of these guideline documents are explored further.

Apart from including elements from both these documents in the measurement instruments (of this study), a critical issue became clear because of this investigation. If organisations opt for communication only to comply with the minimum requirements regarding their legal “duty to consult and inform”, lasting organisational transformation (both at individual and corporate culture levels) is arguably unlikely.

#### *4.4.1 Code of Good Practice for the EEA (1999)*

The Code of Good Practice for the EEA was published at the end of 1999 by the Department of Labour. The Commission for EE (appointed by the Minister of Labour) formulated this code. This document comprises nine components that include both guidelines for the overall planning of the process as well as communication, awareness and consultation – these aspects are also stipulated in legal terms within the EEA (55/1998). According to this code, employees should be made aware of, and informed about, the need for the involvement of all the stakeholders in order to promote positive outcomes; the content and application of the Act as preparation for their participation and consultation; EE and anti-discrimination issues; the proposed process to be followed by the employer; and the advantages to employees of participation in the process.

According to the Code of Good Practice for the EEA (Department of Labour, 1999) employers should also consult with internal stakeholders with regard to conducting an EE analysis, the preparation and implementation of the EE plan as well as the submission of EE Reports to the Department of Labour. Managers should also be informed of their obligations in terms of the Act, and training should be provided to them where particular skills do not exist. Examples of required training could include diversity management, coaching and mentoring programmes (Department of Labour, 1999). According to this code, consultation would include the request, receipt and consideration of relevant information; the opportunity to meet and report to employees and management; reasonable opportunity for employee representatives to meet with the employer; and adequate time allowed for each of these steps.

Finally, the Code of Good Conduct for the EEA (Department of Labour, 1999) refers to the disclosure of relevant information by designated employers as vital for the successful implementation of the EE plan, including the following specific aspects: (1) information relating to the relevant economic sector or industry; (2) the particular business environment and circumstances of the employer; (3) relevant local, regional and national demographic information relating to the economically active population; (4) the anticipated growth or reduction of the employer’s workforce; (5) the turnover of employees in the employer’s workforce; (6) the degree of representation of designated employees in each occupational category and level in the employer’s workforce; (7) the internal and external availability for the appointment or promotion of suitably qualified people from the designated groups; and (8) the employment policies and practices of the employer. The description of the consultation process and possible content concludes with an observation that highlights

the overall approach to this transformational process: “All parties should, in all good faith, keep an open mind throughout the process and seriously consider proposals put forward” (Department of Labour, 1999).

#### 4.4.2 *The Employment Equity strategy of Thomas and Robertshaw (1999)*

Thomas and Robertshaw (1999:9-12 & 29-35) firstly suggest that the EE process be managed as a business strategy, and they provide guidelines on the incorporation of all relevant legislation. Secondly, these authors provide a framework for the management of a communication strategy for the EE process. These two components respectively form the basis for the strategic alignment of EE with the overarching corporate strategy as well as the alignment and implementation of EE strategies by means of communication, as illustrated in Table 2. The level of detail of this framework, presented in four phases, is rather comprehensive, making it a possible suitable benchmark for South African organisations that implement EE strategies.

Phase 1 should ensure that the **organisation** is **positioned** strategically through communication, including a stakeholder map. This view is congruent with Steyn and Puth's (2000:76) conceptualisation of the place of stakeholder maps in relation to corporate strategies and specifically a corporate communication strategy. Communication is also viewed as the means through which organisations articulate their strategic intent and involve different stakeholders in relation to such a transformational vision.

Phase 2 focuses on the role of **management consensus** about, and commitment to, this transformational effort. Phase 3 of the strategy focuses on **communication with employee representatives**, which is based on the goal of obtaining support for the transformational communication effort, before proceeding with it. Employee communication structures, the approach to communication and suggested discussion topics represent the ideals of two-way symmetrical communication. The development of a vision and clarification about the role of the EE Committee are also embedded in this phase.

The obvious ideal would be to arrive at some (even loose) form of consensus on this matter. Whether such a vision would ultimately move the organisation forward would have to be tested empirically. The theoretical merit of existing perspectives should also be appreciated. Communication with employee representatives should also include discussions about the roles and responsibilities of the EE Committee. Clarity about the place of this important organisational mechanism seems to be a key requirement from the perspective of the Code of Good Practice for the EEA (Department of Labour, 1999).

Phase 4 suggests **ongoing communication with employees at programme level**. The conceptualisation of communication plans flowing from a communication strategy again reflects the thinking of Steyn and Puth (2000:76-91). The contents described in this phase should not only be disseminated once or only to a select few.

The overall value of this framework for communication lies in its consideration of the different needs of internal stakeholders and a multitude of communication channels as well as an open two-way communication climate. This provides concrete advice to any practitioner. From a corporate communication perspective, the suggestions from the framework should be viewed as strategic advice.

**Phase 1: Positioning the organisation**

- Communication is pivotal
- Each organisation's stakeholder map will be unique

**Content of the communication framework**

- Rationale for strategies that go beyond legislative requirements, including the moral, legal and business imperatives
- Commitment by top management to employment equity
- Logistics of the process, including the development of strategies
- Statement of acknowledgement that employees may have concerns about employment equity
- Statement of acknowledgement that affirmative action will create greater diversity and that everyone will have the opportunity to strive for corporate goals
- Details of how barriers to employment equity will be identified and how the culture of the workplace will be addressed to achieve the aforementioned
- Reassurance of the commitment of management to openness and participation in the formulation and implementation of the Employment Equity Policy and Plan
- Reassurance of regular feedback and communication relating to the progress of the employment equity initiatives

**Phase 2: Management consensus**

- CEO and top management commitment to the process must be visible
- Criteria for communication:  
The message must come from the top, and be consistent, accurate, regular and never just a once-off message that may be perceived as "flavour of the month".

**Phase 3: Communication with employee representatives**

- Overall goal:**  
To obtain the full support of all members of this group before proceeding any further
- Employee structures:**  
Workplace forums, trade union representatives and other elected bodies of employees
- Approach to communication:**  
Never present a mere blueprint for the way forward  
Seek input regarding strategies to achieve employment equity within the parameters of the legislative framework
- Suggested mechanisms:**  
Discussion groups
- Suggested discussion topics:**  
Trade union philosophy and vision of employment equity  
Company philosophy and vision of employment equity  
Developing a shared vision of employment equity  
Legislative requirements  
Employment Equity Committee, including its roles and responsibilities

**Phase 4: Ongoing communication with employees at programme level**

- ❑ **Tactics:** One or more senior managers must be present at face-to-face discussions
- ❑ **Contents:**
  - Key points of legislative requirements
  - Distinctions between the terms “Employment Equity”, “Affirmative Action” and “Leading” or “Managing” diversity
  - The rationale for employment equity, including:
    - National and regional demographics
    - Business imperatives
    - The concept of nation building
    - Legislative requirements
- ❑ **Consideration of the target audience:**
  - Fully representative of the workforce in terms of race, gender and disability
  - Interpreters should be used if language barriers exist
  - Discussions should be pitched at an appropriate level of complexity in relation to each discussion group
- ❑ **Communication climate:**
  - Trust: Employees should feel free to raise their fears and questions freely
- ❑ **Communication channels:**
  - Regular reports from the management board; monthly management reports; regular briefings from the CEO in person; monthly top and line management feedback in person; quarterly feedback from employee representatives; pamphlets on the EEA policy; regular items in internal newsletters; highlighting statistics on, and progress made towards, EE in all management reports; publication of milestones achieved in special reports; intranet updates; open discussion forums; notice-board updates; hot lines; videos; roadshows by senior management to state and demonstrate commitment to EE.

**Table 2: The communication strategy for Employment Equity of Thomas and Robertshaw (1999)**

Source: Thomas & Robertshaw (1999:29-35)

## 5. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to explore how a selection of three South African organisations manages communication about affirmative action (within the context of employment equity) during transformational change. This aim was operationalised from the overall research question into four related sub-questions. The relationship between the overarching research question, the four sub-questions and the 11 objectives reported on in this article is summarised in Table 3.

<b>Overarching research question</b>		
How do three South African organisations manage communication about affirmative action (within the context of employment equity)?		
<b>Sub-question</b>	<b>Objective number</b>	<b>Objectives</b>
<b>Sub-question 1:</b> How do three South African organisations comply with their duty to consult with, and inform stakeholders about, the process of employment equity?	1, 6, 8, 9 and 10	1. To describe the purpose of AA in three South African organisations
		2. To compare the views of the most senior Communication, Human Resources and EE practitioners in three South African organisations about the strategic value of communication in the management of AA
<b>Sub-question 2:</b> What approach do three South African organisations follow in the management of Employment Equity as a transformational change process?	1 and 5	3. To compare the views of the most senior Communication, Human Resources and EE practitioners about the strategic value of communication in the management of AA across three South African organisations
		4. To identify the key role players (both departments and designated individuals) responsible for managing communication about AA in three South African organisations
<b>Sub-question 3:</b> What approach do three South African organisations follow in the management of communication about employment equity as a transformational change process?	2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10	5. To identify the key responsibilities of the most senior Communication, Human Resources and EE practitioners in managing communication about AA in three South African organisations
		6. To compare the views of the most senior Communication, Human Resources and EE practitioners about the specific contribution of the corporate communication function in managing communication about AA in three South African organisations
<b>Sub-question 4:</b> What approach do three South African organisations follow regarding leadership in the process of managing employment equity as a transformational process?	4, 5, 6, 7 and 10	7. To identify communication management responsibilities of departmental leaders, other than the most senior Communication, Human Resources and EE practitioners, in managing communication about AA in three South African organisations
		8. To identify what three South African organisations, represented by the views of the most senior Communication, Human Resources and EE practitioners, regard as the most important content about AA that is communicated to internal stakeholders
		9. To identify what three South African organisations, represented by the views of the most senior Communication, Human Resources and EE practitioners, regard as the most important content about AA that is communicated to external stakeholders
		10. To describe, by means of the qualitative content analysis of corporate communication strategy documents, which content components of Thomas and Robertshaw's (1999) framework for an EE communication strategy, three South African organisations communicate to various stakeholders
		11. To provide a general comparison of how three South African organisations manage communication about AA by means of a comparative case study analysis along the inherent dimensions of objectives 1-10

**Table 3: The relationship between the overarching research questions, four sub-questions and objectives**

## **6. RESEARCH STRATEGY**

The nature of the research question (the ontological and epistemological assumptions about transformational change management and communication in a selection of South African organisations) was the deciding factor in following a qualitative research strategy.

### **6.1 Case study research**

Case study research is viewed as the means by which the researcher would have the ideal opportunity to achieve the objective of discovery rather than confirmation, as required for exploratory research. The steps that were followed in operationalising this study are similar to the five steps described by Yin (1994), i.e. design, pilot study, evidence collection, evidence analysis and report writing.

### **6.2 Multiple case study design**

Three case studies, each representing an organisation in a specific industry, were included in the study. It was decided to include organisations from various sectors in order to point to some provisional indicators of trends pertaining to how these South African organisations are currently managing communication about AA. No attempt is however made to extrapolate the findings either to the industries of these organisations or to the general South African situation, because according to Yin (1994), findings from case study designs are not meant to be generalised to the population, but should be compared and generalised to theory. Two sources of evidence were used in each case study, i.e. partially structured personal interviews and a content analysis of corporate strategy documents.

## **7. SAMPLING DESIGN**

### **7.1 Sampling technique**

The sampling technique followed is consistent with the Babbie & Mouton (2001:287) description of theoretical sampling – categories are theoretically defined before conducting the fieldwork. Criteria for inclusion were formulated based on the review of Change Management and Human Resources literature, as well as the overall research aim. These criteria were: (1) organisations had to adhere to the criteria for the status as “a designated employer”, as per the EEA, and (2) organisations had to have a Corporate Communication, Human Resources and Employment Equity function. An extensive review of Change Management and Human Resources literature suggests that three key role players should be involved in the implementation of AA measures, i.e. the most senior Communication practitioner, the most senior Human Resources practitioner and the most senior Employment Equity practitioner.

### **7.2 Case study realisation**

Almost 40 organisations from a list of randomly selected organisations were approached during the fieldwork stage. A synopsis of the planned study was emailed to each of the

organisations that indicated an interest in participating in the study. Telephone calls to each of these companies were made to establish contact with the correct responsible department and/or individual(s). The criteria for inclusion were also made clear during the initial contact. After expressing further interest in participation, the project background was emailed to the appropriate individuals.

## **8. DATA COLLECTION**

### **8.1 Partially structured personal interviews**

At the start of each interview, it was made clear that the interviewees could at any stage of the interview decide not to participate if they felt the need to withdraw. This was done in accordance with Mason's list of considerations about informed consent (2002:81). All the interviews were recorded electronically, while the interviewer (researcher) made cryptic notes.

### **8.2 Corporate strategy documents**

The Employment Equity Communication Strategy of each case study organisation was chosen as the document that would potentially yield the most appropriate evidence in relation to the research question.

### **8.3 Pilot study**

The exploratory nature of this study necessitated the completion of an extensive pilot study. Several lessons were learnt from the pilot study, including aspects pertaining to the sampling strategy, the development of the interview schedule, experimentation with evidence analysis and reporting. The possible sensitive nature of the research topic became evident during these interviews. This insight contributed to the refinement of the questions included in the final interview schedule. The structure for reporting on each case study (summarised in Table 4) was also finalised as part of the pilot study.

### **8.4 Development of final interview schedule**

The results of the pilot study led to changes to the interview schedule, including the elimination of a number of unnecessary questions, finalising the order of items, the elimination of complex questions, and refining items in terms of corporate communication terminology. Whereas the first interview schedule consisted of 18 items, the final interview schedule consisted of nine items.

## **9. STRUCTURE FOR CASE STUDY ANALYSIS**

The broad categories for reporting each case are described in Table 4. This structure was used to help organise the findings, since no exact guidelines were found in any previous research – the latter is regarded as a complicating factor in the current study.

**Part 1: Organisational profile**

- Core business
- Overview of history and nature of ownership
- Number of employees
- Scope of operations

**Part 2: Reporting and analysis of evidence**

- Interviews: Reported and interpreted per theme (interview question and research objective)
- Corporate strategy document: Summary of themes in comparison with the theoretical framework for a Communication Strategy by Thomas and Robertshaw (1999)
- Interpretation of comparison with theoretical framework

**Table 4: Structure for individual case study reports**

The analysis process for interviews was preceded by the development of various possible display formats. The analysis of responses relied on post-coded themes as described by Henning (2004:104-109). The complete response to each question for each interview was read at least four times: (1) for completeness and to check for typing errors, (2) to encircle pertinent issues that could ultimately serve as themes, (3) to number themes and separate themes from examples, and (4) to reconstruct reality from the perspective of the interviewees.

**10. CRITERIA FOR METHODOLOGICAL SOUNDNESS**

The absence of previous examples of research on affirmative action and the possible sensitive nature of the topic necessitated the rigorous application of the criteria for methodological soundness to this exploratory study.

**Credibility** was ensured by clearly defining the parameters of the three dimensions of the study, i.e. the setting, population and theoretical framework. A measure of **transferability** to theory was achieved by indicating the relationship between the theoretical framework, concepts and frameworks, evidence collection and analysis, as suggested by Babbie and Mouton (2001:277-278). As stated before, the limited number of case studies included prohibits the generalisation of the results. Demonstrating **dependability** implicitly demonstrated confirmability: the study supervisor of the original exploratory qualitative study, from which this article stems, acted as an inquiry auditor who considered the internal coherence of the study. The **coding validity** was critically reviewed by considering three possible sources of invalidity, i.e. definition, category and sample. **Inter-coder reliability** was ensured through the involvement of an independent, second coder. In this study, the second coder holds a PhD in Corporate Communication. Holsti's reliability formula, as described by Stacks and Hocking (1999:178) and Miles and Huberman (1984) was applied to two sets of evidence, i.e. that of the researcher and that of the second coder:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$



M refers to the number of coded units about which the coders agree.  $N_1$  and  $N_2$  represent the total number of units coded by the two coders. The formula yielded a reliability level of 97,5% about the 192 themes, sub-themes and examples. The high level of reliability confirms that the researcher's categorisation of responses into themes, sub-themes and examples was not the result of a purely subjective process. Finally, **confirmability** was ensured by means of a "confirmability audit trail", as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (in Babbie & Mouton, 2001:278).

## **11. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The comparison of evidence across the three cases yielded the following findings in relation to each of the specific objectives:

### **11.1 Objective 1: Describing the purpose of AA**

Three findings that pertain to the corporate values, the terminology used and the approach followed to this transformational process are presented.

Firstly, corporate values influence the manner in which organisations approach the management of AA. The selected three South African organisations implement AA measures as part of EE strategies and as a means to bring about an equally representative workforce. The spirit of the EEA and BEEA are appreciated and incorporated into the corporate values of these organisations. The notion of "reversed discrimination", as suggested by De Beer and Radley (2000:28-32) was not a motivating factor in any of these organisations.

Secondly, the terminology that these organisations use to manage the process reflects both the corporate values and the evolution of the government's approach to this process. The terminology "affirmative action" is not used. The fact that employees hold strong negative emotions about this concept confirms that organisations should indeed manage EE matters from the perspective of appreciating diversity. The management of diversity is favoured as the approach that will bind employees together instead of again creating a psychological division. The reactions toward AA further suggest that ten years since the first democratic elections is perhaps a short period for people from all races to truly grow beyond the fear/resentment that divided them previously – a fact that supports the De Beer and Radley (2000:5-7) interpretation of the challenges that ordinary people would face in relation to "race-based" corporate transformation.

Thirdly, the implementation of an EE strategy was found not to be a matter of mere legal compliance, which highlights these three organisations' awareness of their role or place as responsible corporate entities, as suggested by the King Report II (2002). This awareness of their role in societal development may stem from the fact that corporate reputation in relation to EE is extremely important.

## **11.2 Objective 2: Comparing the views of the most senior Communication, HR and EE practitioners in each organisation on the strategic value of communication**

Each of the three organisations viewed the strategic value of communication differently. In addition, the unique circumstances of each organisation were the main reason for such varied views. These views are best illustrated by an overview per case study:

### *11.2.1 Case study 1*

Case study 1 emphasised the need for communication, which should be managed in a “narrow” strategic manner, thus specifically excluding “PR” or publicity-driven efforts. Communication plays an important role insofar as information needs to be disseminated, thereby reflecting the underlying “spirit of the EEA”. Communication in this context should adhere to the criteria of thoroughness and consistency based on a “systemic approach to all communication, including marketing”: all the activities related to EE need to reflect the values that are associated with this organisation’s trademark.

### *11.2.2 Case study 2*

Perceptions about the organisation (its credibility) played an important role in case study 2 since the organisation was part of local government and was thus both under pressure from municipal clients, political parties and internal stakeholders. These were strategic issues, since the organisation was previously managed by white, Afrikaans males and the perceptions existed that a “new order” would lead to the collapse of all the systems. Communication (both internal and external) needs to clarify the intentions and details of AA to employees, while helping them to appreciate diversity. Communication of the strategic intent of this organisation was complex, while party politics affected the organisation more directly than the other two organisations included in this study. Conversely, the importance of credibility among consumers was also highlighted since this organisation needed to make commercial sense – something that is arguably impossible without the trust of clients.

### *11.2.3 Case study 3*

Internal communication was regarded as pivotal in case study 3. Employees should have been informed about the business and moral imperatives of EE measures, as well as the related technical details of the implementation process. However, a gap existed between the internal and external communication efforts.

In terms of external communication, opportunities were actively sought, with the chairman and board members playing important symbolic roles. The focus was on the reputation of the organisation in this context.

The gap between internal and external efforts defied the logic of aligning all communication with the transformational vision, as suggested by Puth (2002:206-210). However, the corporate focus on individual empowerment (also through information and communication) and the EE communication strategy seemed to have provided a vehicle for the internal stakeholders to be as informed as the external stakeholders. This organisation was the only one to boast a culture of individual empowerment and self-directed leadership.

**11.3 Objective 3: Comparing the views of the most senior Communication, HR and EE practitioners across organisations on the strategic value of communication**

Results from the Communication practitioners’ views are presented in Table 5, after which those of the HR and EE practitioners appear in Tables 6 and 7 respectively.

According to the **Communication practitioners**, the purpose of communication was to share (disseminate) information, either in the internal or external context, thereby facilitating understanding among different stakeholders. Feedback was mentioned by means of various examples (such as email forums) and it proved that the three organisations consulted did not rely only on one-way communication in the internal communication context.

Case Study 1		Case Study 2		Case Study 3	
1.	Nature of external communication	1.	Perceptions about affirmative action	1.	Importance of communication
2.	Comparison with other organisations	2.	Addressing fears	2.	Reasons for the lack of strategic focus on communication
		3.	Central message about the process	3.	Communication tools
		4.	Inclusive communication	4.	Leading department
		5.	Structure of communication process	5.	Remedies for situation
				6.	Gap between internal and external communication efforts

**Table 5: Communication practitioners’ perspectives on the strategic value of communication**

Some degree of symmetry appears to govern the internal communication of all three organisations. Communication efforts appear to be predominantly two-way asymmetrical. The three organisations initiated all the communication, based either on their legal obligation or as part of the corporate transformation process. In addition, dialogue about AA, EE and BEE was facilitated based on the organisations’ transformational strategies, not the other way around. Only speculation about the predominant model for the management of internal communication (as conceptualised by Grunig, 1992:44) is appropriate. The degree to which each (or all) of the organisations facilitated feedback, and/or the degree of satisfaction with feedback among the internal stakeholders could have contributed to a more definite inference about this matter. EE forums played an active communication role in two of these organisations.

External communication was utilised to inform the stakeholders about the progress and to contribute to corporate reputation. The responses from all three organisations suggested that achievements in the area of BEE or EE were important, but that a potential minefield existed since publicity could lead to the unrealistic expectations of job seekers or to window-dressing in terms of numbers or targets. Two organisations preferred a conservative approach to external communication, as articulated by the most senior communication practitioners.

The importance of a positive reputation in relation to EE and BEE matters point to two possible interpretations: firstly, reports on the progress in these areas are key elements of the legislative framework, and secondly progress has become part of the framework against which organisations are judged in the minds of external stakeholders. The current focus on the so-called triple bottom-line (Post et al., 2002) and the manner in which organisations have to report on their achievements (King Report II, 2002) may also contribute to this sense of corporate responsibility.

Human Resources practitioners regarded communication as serving both a technical and strategic purpose: information about the process needed to be disseminated to internal stakeholders in order to facilitate an understanding of the transformational goal (vision). Table 6 provides a summary of central themes from the responses of these interviewees:

Case Study 1		Case Study 2		Case Study 3	
1.	AA as a transformational process	1.	Transformational goal	1.	Transformational goal
2.	Communication as a tool	2.	Understanding the process	2.	Understanding the process
3.	Criteria for communication	3.	Emotional nature of the process		
		4.	EE forum		

**Table 6: Human Resources practitioners' perspectives on the strategic value of communication**

The differences and similarities between the views of the three most senior EE practitioners are summarised in Table 7. The interviewees emphasised the legal requirements (both content and procedural) more than the other groups of interviewees. The strategic value of communication is interpreted as the sharing (dissemination) of details about the EE process and/or strategy. Moreover, in comparison to the most senior Communication practitioners, this group of interviewees did not mention communication in relation to the management of external stakeholders, mainly since they were rarely responsible for corporate reputation efforts other than progress reports to the government.

Case Study 1		Case Study 2		Case Study 3	
1.	Importance of communication	1.	Communication department	1.	Terminology
2.	Understanding	2.	Own role	2.	Transformational communication
3.	Beyond legislative requirements			3.	Purpose of communication
				4.	Content
				5.	Understanding
				6.	Business imperative
				7.	Diversity
				8.	Model of communication

**Table 7: Employment Equity practitioners’ perspectives on the strategic value of communication**

Four findings are presented in relation to the strategic value of communication. Firstly, the specifics of an organisation’s approach to AA determine the focal point of the views that each of these designated individuals has about the strategic value of communication. Secondly, communication was viewed central to the transformational process. Agreement existed about the importance of communication in both the internal and external contexts, which confirmed the theoretical relationship between transformational change and change communication: transformation cannot come about without communication (Grobler & Puth, 2002: 1-29; Ströh & Jaatinen, 2001: 148-165). The notion of communication as a vehicle for transformation was also confirmed.

Thirdly, internally, communication predominantly served the purpose of conveying details about the corporate programme for the implementation of AA to all employees. Organisations were fulfilling their obligation to “inform and consult” as suggested by the Code of Good Practice for the EEA (Department of Labour, 1999). Both the Human Resources and EE departments further expected the Corporate Communication function to advise them on the appropriate management of communication in this context. Finally, external communication served the purpose of informing stakeholders about the progress of the process. The management of corporate reputation falls within the realm of external communication, while organisations recognised both the opportunities and threats of such communication. The overarching view was that external communication about false achievements in the area of EE is a risk – as was explained under section 11.3. These facts confirmed the notion that the broad or national approach to the management of EE is complex: political pressure existed in many forms and had a definite influence on whether

organisations were perceived as responsible corporate citizens, if only by virtue of complying with legislation.

#### **11.4 Objective 4: Identifying the key role players for the management of communication**

Different levels of leadership and individual organisational leaders had a responsibility for managing communication (or the flow of information) about AA in these three organisations. At departmental level, the Human Resources, Corporate Communication and EE departments were central to the process. These departments were responsible for corporate strategy initiatives, either in their specialist areas or in an integrated manner, and, as was suggested previously, EE forums served as an important link between the EE strategy and the monitoring of progress in two of the three organisations.

#### **11.5 Objective 5: Key responsibilities of the most senior Communication, HR and EE practitioners**

Two levels of responsibility existed across all three cases, namely corporate and departmental. Corporate responsibilities refer (but were not limited) to the dissemination of information about the process, including the business and moral imperatives, and the organisational vision for EE. Departmental responsibilities refer (but are not limited) to setting numerical EE targets; setting an example for others as a leader; addressing fears and concerns from designated and non-designated groups; disseminating information about the EE process; and facilitating dialogue about the process.

#### **11.6 Objective 6: Contribution of the corporate communication function**

The corporate communication function was expected to provide tactical and strategic advice to the Human Resources and Employment Equity departments irrespective of the type of organisation. The role of the Corporate Communication department would ideally not be to initiate communication about this organisational effort, but to be involved right from the start of the development of an employment equity strategy or plan. None of the organisations were satisfied with the manner in which internal communication about EE matters in general were managed – a matter that was addressed in section 11.3.

However, in two of the three organisations, the corporate communication function was seen as having neglected internal communication in favour of external communication – as explained in sections 11.2 and 11.3. The management of corporate reputation was largely viewed as strategically more important, and perceived as such by those who complained about the disparity between internal and external communication efforts. Activities/achievements in the arena of EE and BEE were important for corporate reputation management. Internal communication was regarded as important for the transformational effort, but the importance of the external environment may be explained by the commercial survival of organisations. This fact highlights the difficulty of balancing the interests of different stakeholders and responsible corporate citizenship.

### **11.7 Objective 7: Communication responsibilities of other departmental leaders**

Organisations still conceptualised transformational leadership in a relatively narrow or mechanistic manner: leaders are predominantly responsible for information dissemination within hierarchical structures. This also reflects the ideas by Thomas and Robertshaw (1999) about leaders in this transformational context. But the hierarchical communication system was by no means a guarantee for effective communication. Only one of the three organisations formally supported self-directed leadership through the philosophy of empowerment.

Finally, legal compliance guides the range of responsibilities that leaders currently have in this transformational context, across all three organisations. Evidence also highlights the thin line between strategic (business) imperatives and legal compliance, one of the overarching themes that emerged from the study.

### **11.8 Objective 8: Content for internal stakeholders**

The purpose of internal communication would firstly be to facilitate the transformational process associated with an EE strategy: all employees ought to embrace the process as non-negotiable and a natural phenomenon in the workplace. This finding is consistent with the findings in section 11.1. Secondly, the internal stakeholders of the three organisations should be – and were – informed about the moral and business reasons for implementing AA as part of the EE strategy.

Thirdly, the technical details of the process in organisations, together with progress reports, should be communicated to all levels of employees. Content for internal stakeholders seemed to reflect more than the minimum requirements, as formulated in the EEA (55/1998) and the Code for Good Practice for the EE (Department of Labour, 1999).

### **11.9 Objective 9: Content for external stakeholders**

In two of the three organisations, the information that the external stakeholders received was similar to the information that the internal stakeholders received. The advent of the EEA and BEEA has influenced the relationship that organisations forge with external stakeholders – a relationship that hinges on communication. Since organisations need to monitor equity in their business ventures, including dealers, suppliers and contractors, these traditional external relationships have been re-defined as “internal”. Such stakeholders are often provided with exactly the same information as the employees, which still constitutes the traditional internal stakeholder grouping. The suggestions by Post et al. (2002) on the need for a new appreciation of stakeholders in a turbulent environment are therefore also validated.

### 11.10 Objective 10: Content analysis of communication strategy

Organisations seemed to value communication strategies pertaining to EE matters, but only one of the organisations actually had such an operational document. This strategy consisted of the following components: (1) Introduction; (2) Purpose of communication strategy; (3) Communication principles; (4) Communication levels and focus; (5) Communication tools; (6) Communication objectives; (7) Communication feedback; and (8) Next steps. All the dimensions of the Thomas and Robertshaw (1999) framework for a communication strategy were reflected in this strategy document. Thus, the findings are also presented according to the four-phase structure presented in Table 2.

#### □ Phase 1: Positioning the organisation

The communication strategy did not pertain to external communication and the traditional notions of positioning the organisation, but focused on the internal communication efforts. The internal focus confirmed that the rationale for EE needed to be communicated internally.

The introduction to this communication strategy explicitly referred to the fact that EE was a transformational process and not a legal burden. EE was also labelled as a business imperative. The purpose of this communication strategy was formulated as an initiative that should "... promote a clear understanding and acceptance of EE initiatives in the [organisation] group of companies". "Golden rules" for communication were also described at the outset of the strategy. These rules reflected the ideal criteria for communication and included reference to the EE forum's role; the need for continuous communication vs. "knee-jerks" reactions; consistency with key messages; simplicity in communication and the need for dialogue about the process. Communication about EE matters also had to be integrated with the rollout of the corporate values.

#### □ Phase 2: Management consensus

The visibility of senior management in the communication efforts appeared as an objective of the strategy. The statement of intent was equally important – the commitment of the senior management team was central to the statement of intent.

#### □ Phase 3: Communication with employee representatives

Apart from the four elements from the Thomas & Robertshaw (1999) framework, this strategy also referred to two levels of communication, i.e. active and passive communication. Active communication represents interaction between different employees, while passive communication refers to "support communication", i.e. media or mechanisms like the balanced scorecard. The key requirement that is stated clearly in relation to this strategy is that of active communication. The strategy emphasises the need for (and importance of) face-to-face communication in this transformational context. The EE process needs to be explained by means of "face-to-face presentations".



#### ❑ **Phase 4: Ongoing communication with employees at programme level**

Although details about the logistics of the EE policy did not appear as part of the communication strategy, the need for communication about such details was mentioned in two of the interviews. The Statement of Intent regarding EE also reflected such details. Details about the process were not neglected in this organisation's communication efforts. The statement of intent regarding EE also described the principle of consultation with specific reference to different role players, including the EE forum, divisional managers and the Human Resources function. According to the same document, the role of the organisation's leadership and Board of Management was related to the monitoring of this process.

The EE committee was central to the management of the EE process, as illustrated by the numerous references to this structure. Feedback was also important in this strategy, with at least three techniques being mentioned, i.e. question and answer sessions, random email audits and verbal feedback.

#### **11.11 Objective 11: Overall comparison of cases**

Corporate values and culture determined the manner in which organisations approached the management of communication about affirmative action in the context of employment equity. External communication efforts were managed more strategically than internal communication, therefore causing frustration among the communication experts.

The EE committees were seen to be central to the success of the facilitation of information and feedback about EE matters. Finally, although communication as a function was perceived to be the key ingredient in this transformational process, the Corporate Communication division was not the leading department in this context, since this transformational context is more directly associated with the policies and processes from the Human Resources and Employment Equity functions. However, these three divisions cooperate in the management of communication about affirmative action in the context of employment equity.

#### **12. LIMITATIONS**

The results of this exploratory study cannot be generalised to all instances of communication about AA. The limited number of organisations (three case studies) that participated in the study is neither representative of the wide spectrum of industries in South Africa nor of similar organisations in the particular industries. Therefore, the findings should be viewed as provisional because they are merely indicative of current trends in the management of communication about AA in the specific organisations in the industries of the participating organisations, i.e. higher education, local government and the automotive production and sales industry.

The exploratory nature and scope of this study also excluded an investigation of the possible impact that the different approaches pertaining to the four sub- questions (and

related implementation strategies) could have had on this transformational effort. A causal relationship between approaches and effects would be appropriate if the research problem were to be investigated in its entirety.

### **13. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The exploratory nature of this study implicitly emphasises the heuristic value of the methodology and the results. Further recommendations are therefore provided.

#### **13.1 Empirical recommendations**

Three empirical recommendations are proposed: firstly, methodologies that would lead to the true generalisation of the results ought to be implemented in a similar study. Yin (1989) suggests that in multiple case study designs, each of the cases should ideally be selected so that it either predicts similar results or produces contrary results, but for predictable reasons. Therefore, between six to ten cases are suggested in order for a study to progress beyond theoretical generalisation.

The study could be replicated by also including a panel interview with the three interviewees from the three organisational functions of the current study. This would improve the quality of the connections between the major themes since interviewees would, as in a focus group, be able to yield richer responses to the interview questions and comments from one another.

Furthermore, a future study could include a focus group discussion with the different EE committees/forums. Responses from such a discussion would serve as the last element in the communication loop, i.e. a perspective from other role players that need to convey messages about EE matters. More importantly, these committees/forums are central to the management of formal feedback about the process, an element that was not adequately pursued in the current study, as indicated in the delimitation of the original study.

#### **13.2 Research topics**

Three research topics deserve further attention. Firstly, the impact of the BEEA could be researched from various perspectives associated with the field of Corporate Communication, i.e. the manner in which organisations manage a broad spectrum of external stakeholders could be a specific topic in this field of study. Secondly, the relationship between reputation management and BEEA measures could also be researched. The last area for future research lies in the potential of managing communication in a fully integrated manner, which will encompass other organisational functions.

### **14. CONCLUSION**

The three organisations of this study seemed to be fulfilling their legal obligation regarding information about the EE process according to the Code of Good Practice of the EEA as suggested by the Department of Labour, via various communication means. The

interpretation of the strategic value of communication in relation to EE, however, differed in these organisations and these differences impacted negatively on the status of internal communication in this context.

EE is viewed as a business imperative across these organisations, but each organisation faced unique challenges, ranging from the balancing of party-political interests and corporate reputation, to strategically focusing on external communication about EE and BEE so as not to fall victim to “window-dressing” achievements in this transformational arena.

Communication was viewed as the key ingredient in corporate transformation – without which organisations are not able to comply with their information responsibilities towards stakeholders, or implement their unique EE strategies. Communication was also seen to be critical for all spheres of leadership.

Transformational leaders are expected to fulfil the role of “leader-as-disseminator-of-information” in these organisations. In many instances, information about EE needs to be filtered through these individuals, thus validating the view that these three organisations still approach transformational leadership and leadership communication from a hierarchical perspective.

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ACTS *see* South Africa

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