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Achieving employee engagement through effective internal communication

ABSTRACT

Internal communication is a prerequisite for organisational success as it underpins organisational effectiveness. Previous research (Albrecht, 2010; Andrew & Sofian, 2012; Hayase, 2009; Mamdoo, 2012; Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Meng & Berger, 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Welch, 2011) has linked this process to employee engagement, which generally refers to “a positive fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption.” To illustrate how employee engagement can be achieved through internal communication, a quantitative research approach was used to obtain data from a sample of 300 respondents identified by means of systematic random sampling from a population of 1 322 employees from the case organisation. The findings point to the critical role played by internal communication in the achievement of employee engagement and specifically investigated the relationship between employee engagement and constructs such as: participative organisational culture; supportive communication climate; participative leadership communication; quality and reliability of information; two-way asymmetrical communication and two-way symmetrical communication.

Keywords: Internal communication, employee engagement, organisational culture, communication climate, leadership communication

INTRODUCTION

Internal communication provides an avenue through which employee engagement can be achieved (Hayase, 2009:9). Contemporary research has presented convincing evidence for links between effective internal communication and employee engagement, listing internal communication as one of the key drivers of employee engagement (Kang & Sung, 2017:86). As such, this process has become a prerequisite for organisational success (Ruck & Welch, 2012:294).

Internal communication is concerned with communication taking place within the boundaries of an organisation, where strategies are used by individuals to communicate with each other (Mazzei, 2010:221). It has also become a pressing issue for organisations as they strive to achieve organisational effectiveness and employee engagement (Welch & Jackson, 2007; Welch, 2011). The latter has become a concern for leaders in public, private and voluntary organisations where the concept generally refers to the extent to which an individual employee is psychologically present in a particular organisational role (Saks, 2006:601; Kang & Sung, 2017:86). Employee engagement is also defined as a state where individual employees are emotionally connected to others and are cognitively vigilant while conducting their job tasks; Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002:269) refer to employee engagement as the clarity of expectations, feelings of contribution to the organisation, sense of belonging, and opportunities to progress and grow.

Effective internal communication can also be linked to business performance, since the effectiveness of internal communication can enhance bottom-line results. According to Mersham and Skinner (in Soha 2010:32), communication within an organisation has a crucial role to play as it permeates all activities; represents an important work tool through which individuals can understand their organisational role; and coordinates and facilitates organisational sub-units. In congruence with this view, Welch and Jackson (2007:177) maintain that effective internal communication is crucial for successful organisations, since it affects the ability of strategic managers to engage employees and to achieve objectives. Young and Post (in Dolphin, 2005:171) also concluded that internal communication has become “a new top management priority”.

Against this background, Verheyden (2017:11) states that “several authors have lamented the lack of theory building in the field of internal communication”. Sebastião, Zulato and Trindade (2017:865) posit that Welch (2013) has furthermore identified the “fragilities of academic education on internal communication, despite its importance to employee engagement and organisational effectiveness”. This study aimed to address the need for theory building by hypothesising relationships between relevant constructs of internal communication and employee engagement, thus contributing to the body of knowledge in the area of internal communication.

The general aim of this study was to investigate how internal communication contributes to the achievement of employee engagement. The primary research objective is: To determine the role played by internal communication in achieving employee engagement. The literature review provided the theoretical background for the concepts and constructs of internal communication and employee engagement. It also delineated the hypotheses that were addressed through a quantitative empirical study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of communication in the context of an organisation has been emphasised by various authors (Neher, 1997; Barker & Angelopulo, 2006; Coetzee, 2008). Barker and Angelopulo (2006:3) describe it as the glue that holds organisations together. Various authors refer to organisational communication as employee communication, internal communication, intra-organisational communication, internal relations, and internal public relations (Dolphin, 2005:172; Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012:225; Welch & Jackson, 2007:178). For the purpose of this study, the term internal communication was adopted to refer to communication taking place within an organisation.

Four theories, namely systems theory, the social exchange theory, relationship management theory and stakeholder theory have been identified to assist in understanding the links between internal communication and employee engagement. Barker and Angelopulo (2006:118) describe a system as any set of interrelated elements that form a unified or complex whole. From this perspective, systems theory is defined as “a set of interacting units that endure through time within an established boundary by responding and adjusting to change pressures from the environment to achieve and maintain goal states” (De Beer & Rensburg, 2011:210). Neher (1997:105) argues that when taking a system view of an organisation, it is important to consider the overall patterns of interrelationships and interlocking behaviours covering all members and units. Coetzee (2008:29) furthermore asserts that systems theory is characterised by two aspects, namely: interrelatedness and interaction.

According to social exchange theory, organisations are forums for transactions (Cropanzano, Preher & Chen, 2002:327). Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005:874) argue that social exchange theory is one of the most influential conceptual paradigms that enable the understanding of workplace behaviour. Theorists in the field of social exchange agree that it involves a series of interactions that are interdependent and generate obligations for interacting parties.

Relationship management theory originates from the general principles of public relations which highlight the management of relationships as the core task of public relations (Barker & Angelopulo, 2006:202). De Beer and Rensburg (2011:217) state that the foundation of relationship management theory focuses on managing organisation-public relationships to

generate benefits for organisations and publics alike. The effectiveness and ability of an organisation to achieve its strategic goals is also affected by the relationship it has with key stakeholders, in this case, employees.

Seltzer, Gardner, Bichard, and Callison (2012:128) state that employees are a key stakeholder group that requires the attention of organisational management. Welch and Jackson (2007:183) also call for the identification of employees as a stakeholder group that is considered to be important in an organisation. From this perspective, the worldview of this study is a stakeholder approach to internal communication and employee engagement. In terms of stakeholder theory, De Beer and Rensburg (2011:212) define a stakeholder as: "... any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives ...". Seltzer et al. (2012:128) furthermore identify employees as key stakeholders in any organisation.

The stakeholder approach emphasises the importance of the identification of stakeholders and their sub-groups (Welch & Jackson, 2007:183; Seltzer et al, 2011:128). In the case of internal communication, employees should be identified and treated as important stakeholders who are made up of different sub-groups. L'Etang (in Welch & Jackson, 2007:183) criticises the propensity of internal communication practitioners and writers who regard employees as a single entity. The stakeholder approach to internal communication calls for particular attention to internal stakeholder needs and expectations at different levels, which Welch and Jackson (2007:184) identify as: "...all employees, strategic management, day-to-day management, work teams and project teams". Communication has also become more than just information sharing - it has gradually become a dialogical process between management and employees.

The new era of management practices requires of managers to engage employees more often in an attempt to build mutually beneficial relationships. According to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005:875) these interactions have the potential to generate high-quality relationships, which is the purpose of employee engagement. The stakeholder approach places both manager and employee at the centre in an effort to build these relationships and calls for the strategic management of communication. Strategically managed communication implies that communication activities are aligned to the organisational strategy; and that it is purposeful, planned and is part of strategic management in an organisation (Steyn, 2000).

Meng and Berger (2012:347) found strong evidence of a relationship between internal communication and employee engagement in their research on measuring the return on investment of organisations' internal communication efforts. One of the findings of a comprehensive study on the topic was that the following four aspects can be considered as the most valuable ones in assessing the effectiveness of internal communication programmes:

1. Explaining and promoting new programmes and policies,
2. Educating employees about organisational culture and values,
3. Providing information on organisational performance and financial objectives,
4. Helping employees understand the business.

Employee engagement

Employee engagement is built on the foundation of earlier concepts, such as job satisfaction, employee commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Markos & Sridevi, 2010:89). Welch (2011:328) posits that the concept of employee engagement has become a matter of concern for leaders and managers in organisations globally and has been recognised as a critical element influencing and affecting an organisation's effectiveness, innovation and competitiveness. Employee engagement has been likened to organisational citizenship behaviour; role expansion; proactive behaviour; demonstration of personal initiative; job involvement; and commitment to the organisation.

Markos and Sridevi (2010:90) argue that, since its introduction, there has not been a solitary definition of employee engagement. Kahn (1990:700) defined employee engagement as: "... the simultaneous employment of and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performance...". Three psychological conditions necessary for engagement during role performance are: physical, cognitive, and emotional. Welch (2011:333) define employee engagement as: "... a positive employee attitude towards the organisation and its values, involving awareness of business context and work to improve job and organisational effectiveness...". These authors emphasise the point that effective employee engagement is a two-way relationship between employer and employee.

Omillion-Hodges and Baker (2014) state that employees are positioned to serve as either ambassador of the organisation or as liabilities depending on the way they speak about the organisation. Internal communication therefore becomes a channel or tool through which employees are engaged. Engaged employees understand the vision of the organisation; are informed; and feel a sense of belonging and commitment towards the achievement of strategic goals. Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter and Taris (2008:187) furthermore state that engaged employees have higher levels of energy and identify strongly with their work.

Kang and Sung (2017:86) argue that: "Prior to this recent interest in employee engagement and the subsequent effort to understand its role in overall organizational communication contexts, excellent internal communication had been recognised as something that can affect an organization's ability to engage its employees". They also state that "... employee engagement was strongly affected by organizational characteristics, such as good internal communication, an innovative culture, and a reputation for integrity".

Dimensions of employee engagement

Employees who are engaged at work have a positive, fulfilling and work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption. Engaged employees demonstrate high levels of energy, a sense of significance and are deeply engrossed in their work (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzales-Roma & Bakker, 2002:73-75). Schaufeli *et al* (2002:74) later defined employee engagement as “a positive fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption.”

Vigour: Vigour is characterised by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working; includes the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004:295). Engaged employees are energetic and involve themselves mentally in performing their work roles; persevere during difficult times in performing job tasks; go beyond the call of duty; and perform extra roles that promote the effective functioning of the organisation (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011:5).

Dedication: Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one’s work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004:295). Engaged employees are dedicated to their work; derive satisfaction with self as they conduct their job tasks; find their jobs challenging and stimulating; and conduct their job tasks with enthusiasm. Schaufeli *et al.* (2002:74) state that dedication is characterised by strong involvement, which leads to psychological identification with one’s work that goes a step further than the usual level of identification.

Absorption: Absorption is characterised by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one’s work, whereby time passes quickly, and one has difficulty detaching oneself from work. In their qualitative study on employee engagement, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004:295) found that engaged employees have high levels of energy and are enthusiastic about their work. Absorption refers to the immersion, concentration, engrossment and pre-occupation with something or an event.

Internal communication

Internal communication has become a critical and an independent field of study under public relations and corporate communication. It has been synonymously equated to organisational communication, employee communication, intra-organisational communication, internal relations, and internal public relations (Dolphin, 2005; Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012; Welch, 2013; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Verheyden (2017:13) posits that “organisations increasingly recognise internal communication as a strategic function of the communication office”. Carvalho (2013:357) adds that “internal communication is known to be one of the main problems which affects overall performance and stakeholders’ satisfaction in any organisation”;

while Vercic *et al* (2012) state that the field is "...among the fastest growing specializations in public relations and communication management."

Literature reveals various definitions of internal communication. Given its stakeholder approach, this study adopts Welch and Jackson's (2007) definition of internal communication, as a process between an organisation's strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designed to promote commitment to the organisation; a sense of belonging to it; awareness of its changing environment; and understanding of its evolving aims. Welch and Jackson (2007:180) differentiate between internal communication and organisational communication, stating that the former takes a stakeholder approach, while the latter takes a transactional approach. Internal communication reflects a series of strategies used by employees to communicate with each other – it can be regarded as the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within organisations (Welch & Jackson, 2007:183). This definition of internal communication supports Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier's (2002:480) view that internal communication is a catalyst for organisations to achieve their goals and objectives, as it enables them to effectively develop structure and culture.

Vercic *et al.* (2012:225) state that: "Aligning the goals of individual employees to organizational goals is also seen as a task for internal communication. Such alignment helps organizations build strong cultures. Internal communication is the aspiration (starting from the vision and proceeding to policy and mission statement and eventually to strategy) of achieving a systematic analysis and distribution of information at all strata simultaneously coordinated in the most efficient way possible." Internal communication is also regarded as "... the exchange of information among employees or members of an organisation to create understanding..."; and to be "...in charge of information dissemination."

The importance of effective internal communication is evident from the literature where it has been linked to job satisfaction, improved productivity, increased levels of innovation, and higher quality of services and products (Clampitt & Downs, 1993). Defining internal communication is challenging given the different roles that it is expected to play in organisations. Contexts such as organisational culture, communication climate, functions, goals and expectations of the dominant coalition usually influence the definition of internal communication adopted by a particular organisation.

Participative organisational culture

Organisational culture refers to common experiences among members of a group that are formed over time and therefore become the property of that particular group. Culture represents the accumulated learning of a group that describes ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving the world - organisational culture is driven by the learned, shared and tacit assumptions on which people base their daily behaviour (Schein, 1999:13-24). According to

Sadri and Lees (2001:853) some sets of norms emerge as dominant and guide the way in which work is accomplished within organisations, which give rise to organisational culture. The latter dictates how the organisation should function and therefore has an impact on how internal communication is implemented.

Sebastião et al. (2017:865) studied the relationship between internal communication and organisational culture and argue that the former has established its strategic relevance in employee relations “resulting from a co-creational approach of sense making through communication.” They also posit that communication develops within a cultural context, whether macro or meso – i.e. societal or organisational. The strategic use of communication instruments in different communication processes in the organisation highlight the importance of face-to-face and interpersonal communication between employees and members in the hierarchy.

Grunig *et al.* (2002) differentiate between authoritarian and participative organisational cultures. The participative organisational culture is characterised by teamwork and is open to ideas from both the external and internal environment. Various divisions within an organisation with this kind of culture work together towards the achievement of the same goals and objectives.

H1: There is a relationship between participative organisational culture and vigour (H1a), dedication (H1b) and absorption (H1c).

Supportive communication climate

Communication climate is a multidimensional construct made up of five factors, namely: superior-subordinate communication, quality of information, superior openness, opportunities for upward communication and reliability of information (Guzley, 1992). Bartels, Pruyn, De Jong and Joustra (2006:173) found that communication climate has the strongest link with employee identification or organisational commitment, which is an outcome of employee engagement. Goldhaber (in Bartels *et al.*, 2006:177) furthermore defined communication climate as the perception of employees with regard to the quality of mutual relations and communication in the organisation.

This study differentiates between defensive and supportive/participative communication climates. A supportive communication climate facilitates efficient and effective message transmission, while a defensive climate hinders the successful transmission of messages. In a supportive communication climate, employees are encouraged to be innovative when solving problems and feel a sense of belonging as organisational members; while a defensive communication climate is likened to a negative climate, where employees unduly criticise or are not satisfied with the communication environment (Ireland, Van Auken & Lewis, 1978:5).

H2: There is a relationship between supportive communication climate and vigour (H2a), dedication (H2b) and absorption (H2c)

Participative leadership communication

Sebastião *et al.* (2017:865) refer to results of the European Communication Monitor and emphasise the “transformative and symmetrical role of internal communication in approaching leaders and employees; [in] employees’ motivation; and in the workforce perception of organisation inclusiveness.” In the Delphi study conducted by Vercic *et al* (2012:227) the ‘credibility of leaders’ also came up as an important issue.

Leadership communication encompasses, amongst others, managerial communication and management communication. Effective leadership depends on effective communication and it is through the latter that leaders are able to guide, direct, motivate and inspire their subordinates (Mmope, 2010:49). Conte, Siano and Vollero (2017:273) argue that leadership communication builds alignment with stakeholders; assists in executing strategy; and supports the achievement of superior corporate performance. Two main theoretical paradigms are relevant to this type of communication: in one the focus is on the transmission of information, while the other is meaning centred, and focusses on the formative power of language for communicative purposes.

Researchers have examined the links between leadership styles and performance (Ogbonna & Harris, 2000:766) and found that leaders play an important role in structuring the work environment and in providing information and feedback to employees (Somech, 2005:779). Somech (2005:778) defines a participative leadership style as: “... joint decision making or at least shared influence in decision making by a supervisor and his or her employees...”. Other benefits of participative leadership include an increase in the quality of decisions; the quality of work; and the motivation and satisfaction of employees.

Conte *et al.* (2017:274) state that Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) contribute to “creating the corporate culture, setting the tone of communication, defining and spreading the corporate vision, thus resonating with the expectations of different stakeholders.” From this perspective, “strategic leadership communication requires an integrated approach which involves different communication functions related to specific objectives and channels ...”.

To encourage employees’ information seeking and sharing behaviour, for organisational effectiveness, organisations should behave in authentic ways – be trustful, transparent and consistent – and build both communal and exchange relationships (Lee & Kim, 2017:236).

H3: There is a relationship between participative leadership communication and vigour (H3a),

dedication (H3b) and absorption (H3c).

Quality and reliability of information

In a Delphi study conducted by Vercic *et al* (2012:225) the highest level of agreement among respondents was that internal communication is in charge of “information dissemination”, which still underscores the importance of one-way communication in organisations.

Lee and Kim (2017:239) explicate that “not only employees themselves, but also the information selectively generated and circulated by employees who are cognitively motivated to engage in communicative actions, have importance for an organisation”. They use the term megaphoning to describe “the extent to which employees voluntarily forward or share organisation-related information”; and the term scouting to define “employees’ voluntary efforts to acquire external information relevant to tasks, management and other related issues (without benefit to themselves), and to share this information with their organisation.” While the information created by megaphoning can be regarded as evaluative information (opinions or affective statements), scouting brings factual information which can be of higher quality than evaluative information.

Quality and reliability of information form part of the dimensions of communication climate. Quality of information refers to the extent to which information is perceived to be timely, accurate, adequate and complete. Quality of information plays a central role in the achievement of organisational effectiveness, employee performance and motivation (Karanges, 2014:36-38).

Reliability of information, on the other hand, refers to the trustworthiness of the sender and the channel used. From the recipient’s view, reliability of information is understood as the perception about the credibility of the sender of the information. If the recipient views the sender or the channel as lacking credibility, it follows that the information received will be regarded as not being reliable (Hayase, 2009).

H4: There is a relationship between quality of information and vigour (H4a), dedication (H4b) and absorption (H4c).

H5: There is a relationship between the reliability of information and vigour (H5a), dedication (H5b) and absorption (H5c).

Two-way communication models

One way of achieving an understanding of a phenomenon is through models (Steinberg,

1995:20-21). Verheyden (2017:11) alluded to the four public relations models in his research on social media in the context of internal communication. He describes the four models as an “evolutionary pyramid”, with the two-way symmetrical model at the top and argues that the other three models all place an emphasis on the organisation or the PR professional, whereas the two-way symmetrical model assigns all parties equal power/position in the communication loop. However, some authors argue that even this model does not guarantee equality in power.

In a two-way asymmetrical model, organisations listen to their stakeholders but use the information obtained to tailor their communication strategies to allay concerns of stakeholders, however, they do not attempt to change their own behaviour. Information obtained is used to ensure that communication activities are seen to be responding to the needs of the publics. Two-way symmetrical communication on the other hand, uses bargaining, negotiating, and strategies of conflict resolution to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes and behaviour of both the organisation and its publics, in this case, the employees. This model allows both parties in a relationship to contribute to and benefit from the relationship (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang & Lyra, 1995:169).

Over and above the two-way communication models, Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995:48) found that although knowledge of two-way symmetrical communication practices is important, the knowledge of two-way asymmetrical practices equally plays a role in helping an organisation achieve communication excellence. These authors proposed a rethinking of symmetrical and asymmetrical communication as parts of a “mixed-motive” model where both parties pursue their own interests, but both also realise that outcomes must be satisfactory to both.

Kang and Sung (2017) tested the mediation effects of employee-organisation quality between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement and demonstrated that: employee/internal communication management is linked to employee engagement; and employee engagement enhances supportive employee communication behaviour and reduces turnover intention. The mediation results also showed a strong mediation of employee-organisation relationship on the effects of symmetrical internal communication on employee engagement.

H6: There is a relationship between two-way asymmetrical communication and vigour (H6a), dedication (H6b) and absorption (H6c).

H7: There is a relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and vigour (H7a), dedication (H7b) and absorption (H7c).

METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive in nature and adopts a quantitative research methodology. The method is identified as suitable to address the problem statement and research objectives, and to test the hypotheses, is a quantitative survey conducted in the case organisation.

Quantitative methodology

According to Mamdoo (2012:62), quantitative methods involve collecting data through questionnaire surveys which can be used to provide numerical data for precise research. The author suggests that quantitative research is a collection of data from a large number of individuals, which is intended to generalise results to a broader population. This therefore implies that quantitative research is used to explain, describe, infer and resolve problems using numbers. It regards the relationship between theory and research as deductive; follows a natural science approach in general (and positivism in particular); and prefers an objectivist conception of social reality (Bryman, Bell, Hirschsohn, Dos Santos, Du Toit, Masenge, Van Aardt & Wagner, 2014:31). According to Babbie and Mouton (2001:49), a quantitative method is used to measure the properties of the phenomenon, such as attitudes of individuals towards a certain topic.

The use of a structured questionnaire is based on its advantages – it promotes anonymity; existing scales can be used in designing a data collection tool; and the questionnaire makes data collection quick and easy. The questionnaire for this study was designed to determine if internal communication plays a role in the achievement of employee engagement - items in the questionnaire were based on constructs of internal communication and employee engagement.

Population and sampling

In order to quantify the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire targeting employees from employment levels 6 to 15 within the case organisation. The data collection instrument consisted of a combination of different scales, previously validated to measure the impact of internal communication on employee engagement. Survey research designs are said to be suitable when the primary research objective is to obtain the attitudes, beliefs, opinions and behaviours of a large number of research participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:232).

The units of analysis were the individual employees. From the total population of 2 041 employees, some groups were excluded from the study due to literacy and accessibility challenges. This exclusion yielded a total accessible population of 1 322 employees. A sample of 300 respondents was drawn, which, according to Saunders *et al.* (2012:266) can be considered as representative of a population of 1 322. To ensure representation at all

levels, the sampling frame was sorted alphabetically according to surnames. Each case in the sampling frame was allocated a unique number starting from 0 to 1 322. The sampling fraction, which is the proportion of the total population of $1/4$, was then determined.

Data collection and measurement

Prior to the distribution of the final questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted to pre-test the instrument among a convenience sample of 10 employees. Once the accessible population of the study was defined, a random sample of 300 respondents was drawn. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, a small pilot study was conducted with respondents conveniently selected by the researcher. The aim of the pilot study was to test if the data to be collected will indeed enable the investigative questions to be answered. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012:451) state that the purpose of a pilot test is to refine the questionnaire in order to ensure that respondents have no difficulty in answering the questions. Data for the main study were collected over a period of a month.

The measuring instrument was divided into seven sections where employees had to indicate their experience with constructs of internal communication as well as employee engagement. The instrument items were based on the hypotheses formulated in line with the study objectives.

Existing scales were utilised to improve validity of the study. Factor analysis, which is a statistical method for data reduction was used to establish construct validity. Kumar (2005:156) maintains that a consistent instrument produces consistent and stable results, which allows the researcher to make precise and predictable findings. The scales and sub-scales were subjected to the Cronbach's alpha coefficient to establish reliability.

The measuring instrument used the basic five-point Likert scale design, which ranged from: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). The instrument was drawn using previously tested scales, namely: Dennis' Communication Climate Survey (1979); Dozier et al's, 1995 practice of excellent communication; Grunig et al's, (2002) organisational culture; Management Practices Survey from Kim and Yukl (1996); and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale from Schaufeli and Bakker (2004). The questionnaire also included demographic information, namely: age, gender, race, job level, and years of experience.

The results have been analysed using a variety of SPSS version 23 statistical analysis techniques, such as: Pearson's correlation coefficients analysis, one-way and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), factor analysis, Cronbach's alpha coefficient analysis, t-tests as well as parametric and non-parametric techniques.

RESULTS

Factor analysis was conducted to establish the underlying structure of the scale items of the measuring instrument. The principal axis factoring method was used to extract the factors and the Promax with Kaiser Normalization for rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was conducted for each construct to measure the sampling adequacy using Bartlett's test of sphericity. Pallant (2007:182) asserts that the KMO index ranges from 0 to 1, with .6 as the suggested minimum value for a good factor analysis; and the Bartlett's test should be significant at $p < .05$. In order to determine factors to be extracted, Pallant (2007) proposes the Kaiser's criterion, which focuses on factors that have an eigenvalue of 1 or more.

The construct 'communication climate' obtained a KMO value of .937 which is an indication of a good factor analysis and the Bartlett's test was significant at $p=.000$. Only one factor was extracted. The 'quality and reliability of information' construct obtained a KMO of .874 and the Bartlett's test was significant at $p=.000$. Two factors were extracted here, namely: 'quality of information' and 'reliability of information'.

The two-way communication models of public relations obtained a KMO of .794 and Bartlett's test was significant at $p=.000$. Three factors were extracted. The first two factors were identified as: 'two-way asymmetrical communication', and 'two-way symmetrical communication'. The third factor extracted dealt with communication research issues and was named 'communication research'.

The 'organisational culture' construct obtained a KMO of .872 and Bartlett's test was significant at $p=.000$. Two factors were extracted, namely: 'perception of organisational culture at organisational level' (organisational culture-1) and 'perception of organisational culture at individual level' (organisational culture-2). The 'leadership communication' construct obtained a KMO of .876 and Bartlett's test was significant at $p=.000$. Only one factor was extracted, namely 'leadership communication'. The 'employee engagement' constructs obtained a KMO of .902 and Bartlett's test was significant at $p=.000$. Three factors were extracted, namely: 'vigour', 'dedication' and 'absorption'.

Table 1 below provides a summary of the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for each scale and sub-scale. All the scales and sub-scales used to measure internal communication and employee engagement were found to be reliable as they exceeded the acceptable value for Cronbach's alpha of .7.

Scale / Sub-scale	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Communication climate	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9 and 1.10	0.94
Quality of information	2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 and 2.7	0.90
Reliability of information	2.6, 2.8, 2.9 and 2.10	0.74
Two-way symmetrical communication	3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5	0.87
Communication research	3.6 and 3.7	0.88
Two-way asymmetrical communication	3.8, 3.9, 3.10 and 3.11	0.71
Organisational culture - 1	4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4	0.88
Organisational culture - 2	4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8 and 4.9	0.83
Participative leadership communication	5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6	0.90
Vigour	6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6	0.85
Dedication	6.7, 6.8, 6.9, 6.10 and 6.11	0.91
Absorption	6.12, 6.13, 6.14, 6.15, 6.16 and 6.17	0.88

Table 1: Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient

Hypothesis testing

The hypotheses formulated, predicted relationships between different dimensions of internal communication and employee engagement. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was used to test the relationships; and the independent samples test, analysis of variance and the Kruskal-Wallis test were used to determine statistically significant differences. The results of the hypothesis tests are as follows:

H1: There is a relationship between participative organisational culture and vigour (H1a), dedication (H1b) and absorption (H1c).

Participative organisational culture at organisational level was found to be moderately and positively related to vigour at $r=.45$, dedication at $r=.34$, and absorption at $r=.46$. It was further found that participative organisational culture at individual level was also moderately and positively correlated to vigour at $r=.47$, dedication at $r=.40$, and absorption at $r=.38$. These correlations were all significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). Therefore, the null hypotheses for H6a,

H6b and H6c can be rejected.

H2: There is relationship between supportive communication climate and vigour (H2a), dedication (H2b), and absorption (H2c).

Supportive communication climate was found to be moderately and positively related to vigour at $r=.43$; dedication at $r=.40$, and absorption at $r=.43$; which were all significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). Therefore, the null hypotheses for H2a, H2b and H2c can be rejected.

H3: There is a relationship between participative leadership communication and vigour (H3a), dedication (H3b) and absorption (H3c).

Participative leadership was found to be strongly and positively correlated to vigour at $r=.55$; moderately and positively correlated to dedication at $r=.48$; and with absorption at $r=.43$. All three correlations were significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). Therefore, the null hypotheses for H7a, H7b and H7c can be rejected.

H4: There is a relationship between quality of information and vigour (H4a), dedication (H4b) and absorption (H4c).

Quality of information was found to have a moderate positive relationship with the dimensions of employee engagement (vigour at $r=.48$, dedication at $r=.34$, and absorption at $r=.47$). All three relationships were significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). Therefore, the null hypotheses for H4a, H4b and H4c can be rejected.

H5: There is a relationship between the reliability of information and vigour (H5a), dedication (H5b) and absorption (H5c).

Reliability of information received was found to be strongly and positively related to vigour at $r=.57$, which was significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). There was a moderate positive correlation between reliability of information, and dedication and absorption (at $r=.45$ and $r=.37$ respectively). Both were statistically significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). Therefore, the null hypotheses for H5a, H5b, and H5c can be rejected.

H6: There is a relationship between two-way asymmetrical communication and vigour (H6a), dedication (H6b) and absorption (H6c).

Two-way asymmetrical communication-1 was found to have a weak but positive relationship with vigour at $r=.24$, which was statistically significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). A positive correlation was found between two-way asymmetrical communication-1 and dedication at

$r=.15$ which was statistically significant at $p<.03$ (one-tailed). A weak but positive relationship was found between two-way asymmetrical communication-1 and absorption at $r=.28$ which was statistically significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). It can be concluded that two-way asymmetrical communication-1 is positively and significantly correlated with levels of employee engagement and therefore, the null hypotheses for H6a, H6b, and H6c can be rejected.

H7: There is a relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and vigour (H7a), dedication (H7b) and absorption (H7c).

Two-way symmetrical communication was found to have a moderate positive relationship with vigour at $r=.41$ which was significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). Dedication was found to be moderately and positively correlated with two-way symmetrical communication at $r=.41$ which was significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). A strong positive correlation was found between two-way symmetrical communication and absorption at $r=.54$ which was significant at $p<.0$ (two-tailed). Therefore, the null hypotheses for H7a, H7b, and H7c can be rejected.

FINDINGS

The summary below outlines the findings and the implications for the communication industry and future research.

Research objective 1: To investigate the relationship between participative organisational culture and levels of employee engagement.

From a systems theory perspective, the overall patterns of interrelationships and behaviour of members of an organisation are important when investigating the relationship between participative organisational culture and employee engagement. As a system, the organisation constantly balances the interaction between the internal and external environment. The results point to a positive relationship between participative organisational culture and levels of employee engagement. The acceptance of H1 indicates that a participative organisational culture at organisational level, as well as at individual level, was found to be moderately and positively correlated with vigour, dedication and absorption respectively. Employees are therefore more engaged and work with more vigour, are more dedicated and are more absorbed when working and forming relationships in a team; when working with ideas from the internal and external environment; and when different divisions in the organisation work to achieve the same goals and objectives.

Research objective 2: To investigate the relationship between supportive communication climate and levels of employee engagement.

According to social exchange theory, organisations are forums for transactions, which involves interactions that are interdependent and generate obligations for interacting parties. The results of H2 confirmed a positive and significant correlation between supportive communication climate and the levels of engagement among employees. It can therefore be concluded that an employee's perceived support from a superior yields higher levels of vigour, dedication and absorption. In a supportive communication climate where efficient and effective message transmissions take place; where employees are encouraged to be innovative when solving problems; and where they feel a sense of belonging as organisational members, employees will work with more vigour, be more dedicated and be more absorbed in their work.

Research objective 3: To investigate the relationship between participative leadership communication and levels of employee engagement.

Stakeholder theory, relationship management theory and social exchange theory can be applied to this research objective. The stakeholder approach places both manager and employee at the centre in an effort to build mutually beneficial relationships. In participative leadership communication the management of relationships with employees become important and the interactions that take place between interactive parties also generate certain obligations. H3 supported positive relationships between participative leadership communication and the three dimensions of employee engagement. Where participative leadership communication is practised, employees will work with much more vigour; will be more dedicated to their work; and will be more absorbed in their work. Vigour, dedication and absorption will increase, where leaders allow joint decision-making to take place.

Research objective 4: To investigate the relationship between quality and reliability of information and levels of employee engagement.

The social exchange theory is relevant here, since reliable and quality information is necessary for organisations to act as forums for transactions. The results confirmed a positive and significant relationship between quality and reliability of information respectively, and levels of employee engagement. A significant moderate and positive relationship was found between quality of information and levels of employee engagement (H4); as well as between reliability of information and levels of employee engagement (H5). It can be concluded that the more employees perceive information to be of quality and to be reliable, the more they would feel engaged at work and as a result, the more vigour they would express; the more dedicated they would be; and the more absorbed they would be in their work. Quality and reliability of information can furthermore be regarded as dimensions of communication climate. When information is timely, accurate, adequate and complete, it is usually of good quality and can lead to more engaged employees who express more vigour, are more dedicated and are more absorbed in their work. If the sender of the information is perceived as being credible,

information will also be regarded as reliable and as a result, employees will be more engaged and work with more vigour, dedication and absorption.

Research objective 5: To investigate the relationship between two-way asymmetrical communication and levels of employee engagement

The public relations model of two-way asymmetrical communication explains the findings of this research objective. The results confirmed a weak but statistically significant correlation between two-way asymmetrical communication and employee engagement (H6). It can therefore be concluded that employees who work in an environment where two-way asymmetrical communication is predominantly practised, will, to a lesser extent, display vigour, dedication and absorption. This confirmed the assertions of Dozier, et al. (1995) that organisations that practice two-way asymmetrical communication do listen to their stakeholders, but they also use the information obtained to tailor their communication strategies to allay concerns of stakeholders and do not attempt to change their own behaviour.

Research objective 6: To investigate the relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and levels of employee engagement

The public relations model of two-way symmetrical communication can be applied here. The results confirmed a moderate to strong positive and significant relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and the levels of engagement among employees (H7). It can be concluded that two-way communication where both parties contribute and benefit from a relationship, could lead to employees expressing more vigour; being more dedicated and being more absorbed in their work. Using bargaining, negotiating, and conflict resolution strategies to bring about changes in ideas, attitudes and behaviour could positively affect vigour, dedication and absorption as dimensions of employee engagement.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study support the assertions in the literature that identifies internal communication as one of the key drivers of employee engagement. The study found that internal communication indeed contributes to the achievement of employee engagement, since correlations were found between the constructs of internal communication and employee engagement.

Findings allude to the fact that employees could be more engaged; work with more vigour, be more dedicated and be more absorbed when working in a team; when working with ideas from the internal and external environment; and when different divisions in the organisation work to achieve the same goals and objectives. It can be concluded that support from a superior

yields higher levels of vigour, dedication and absorption. In a supportive communication climate where efficient and effective message transmissions take place; where employees are encouraged to be innovative when solving problems; and where they feel a sense of belonging as organisational members, employees will work with more vigour, be more dedicated and be more absorbed in their work.

Where participative leadership communication is practised, employees will work with much more vigour; will be more dedicated and will be more absorbed in their work. The more employees receive quality information that is also reliable, the more they will feel engaged. Employees who work in an environment where two-way asymmetrical communication is predominantly practised, will, to a lesser extent, display vigour, dedication and absorption; while the use of two-way symmetrical communication could lead to employees expressing more vigour; being more dedicated; and being more absorbed in their work.

This study supported a relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, and managers and communication managers responsible for internal communication can apply the above principles when engaging employees to improve the business performance and overall success of the organisation.

Appendix A

Data collection instrument

Please read each statement carefully and then indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree that the statement describes your communication and engagement experiences within the organisation. Mark your answer with a cross in the relevant box.

1. Questions on communication climate (Dennis' Communication Climate Survey, 1979)		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1.1	My supervisor makes me feel free to talk to him or her.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.2	My supervisor is a really competent, expert manager.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.3	My supervisor encourages me to let him/her know when things are going wrong on the job.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.4	My supervisor makes me feel that the things I tell him/her are really important.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.5	My supervisor is willing to tolerate arguments and to give a fair hearing to all points of view.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.6	My supervisor has my best interest in mind when she talks to his/her boss.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.7	My supervisor listens to me when I tell him/her about things that are bothering me.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.8	My supervisor is frank and candid.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.9	I feel free to tell my supervisor that I disagree with him/her.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.10	I can communicate 'bad news' to my supervisor without fear of retaliation on his/her part.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

2. Questions on quality and reliability of information received (Dennis' Communication Climate Survey, 1979)		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
2.1	I think people in this department say what they mean and mean what they say.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.2	People in this department are encouraged to be really open and candid with each other.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.3	In this department people freely exchange information and opinions.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.4	I am always informed about how well the departmental goals and objectives are being met.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.5	Executive management provides me with the kinds of information I really want and need.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.6	I receive information from the sources that I prefer (e.g. my supervisor, unit meetings, co-workers, newsletters).	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.7	I am satisfied with explanations I get from executive management about why things are done as they are.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.8	My job requirements are specified in clear language.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.9	I think that information I receive from management is reliable.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2.10	I think that information received from my colleagues (co-workers) is reliable.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

3. Questions on public relations models (practice of excellent communication) (Dozier; Grunig & Grunig,1995)		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Two-way symmetrical communication: <i>The word department in the questions refers to the National Department of Health</i>						
3.1	The purpose of communication in the department is to develop mutual understanding between management of the organisation and employees.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

3.2	Surveys are conducted to find out how leadership and employees understand each other.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3.3	The purpose of communication in the department is to change attitudes and behaviour of both leadership and employees.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3.4	The purpose of communication in the department is to help leadership to be responsive to the problems of other employees.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3.5	Most communication between leadership and employees in the department can be said to be two-way communication.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Two-way asymmetrical communication					
3.6	In the department, research on effectiveness of communication in changing attitudes is regularly conducted.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3.7	Attitude surveys are conducted regularly to make policy related decisions.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3.8	The goal of communication in the department is to persuade employees to behave as the department wants them to behave.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3.9	Communication in the department is mainly in written format.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3.10	Communication in the department is mainly one-way from leadership to employees.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
3.11	I seldom get feedback when I communicate to the leadership	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

4. Questions on organisational culture (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002)		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
4.1	The department celebrates its success with employees.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
4.2	Participative culture of the department promotes innovation among employees.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
4.3	Senior leaders in the department care deeply about employees.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
4.4	Senior leaders in the department believe in sharing of power and responsibility with lower-level employees.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

4.5	The department is usually willing to negotiate with employees for mutual understanding.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
4.6	As an employee, I feel I have personal influence on decisions and policies of the department.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
4.7	My opinions make a difference in the day-to-day decisions that affect my job.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
4.8	Most employees in the department share a common vision and strive towards its achievement.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
4.9	Most decisions in this department are made after thorough discussion between all people who will be affected in a major way	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

5. Questions on leadership communication Management Practices Survey (Kim & Yukl, 1996)		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
5.1	My supervisor encourages and supports me when I have a difficult or stressful task.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
5.2	My supervisor backs me up and supports me in difficult situations.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
5.3	I receive credit for helpful ideas and suggestions.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
5.4	Leadership consults with me to get my suggestions before making a decision that affects me.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
5.5	I am provided with opportunities to develop my skills.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
5.6	My supervisor expresses confidence in my ability to carry out a difficult task.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

6. Questions on employee engagement at work Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003)		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Vigour						
6.1	When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.2	At work I feel bursting with energy.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.3	At work I always persevere, even when things do not go well.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

6.4	I can continue working for very long periods at a time.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.5	In doing my job, I am very resilient mentally.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.6	In doing my job, I feel strong and vigorous.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Dedication					
6.7	To me, my job is challenging.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.8	My job inspires me.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.9	I am enthusiastic about my job.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.10	I am proud of the job that I do.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.11	I find work I do full of meaning and purpose.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Absorption					
6.12	When I am working, I forget everything else around me.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.13	Time flies when I am working.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.14	I get carried away when I am working.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.15	It is difficult to detach myself from my job.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.16	I am immersed in my work.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
6.17	I feel happy when I am working intensely.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

7. Demographic information (please indicate your relevant demographic information).

1. What is your age?

2. Please indicate your gender?

3. What is the number of years that you have been employed in the Department of Health?

4. Please indicate your race?

Asian	Black	Coloured	White
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)

5. What is your current job level?

Administration (level 6-8)	Junior Management (level 9-10)	Middle Management (level 11-12)	Senior Management (level 13-14)	Executive Management (level 15-16)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

After completing this questionnaire, please drop it off in a box placed on the ground floor in front of the library.

Thank you.

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