



International Journal of Current Research and Academic Review

ISSN: 2347-3215 Volume 4 Number 1 (January-2016) pp. 178-183

Journal home page: <http://www.ijcrar.com>

doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2016.401.017>



Effective Communication and Discipline in Public Service

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KEYWORDS

Effective
Communication,
Discipline,
Public Service

A B S T R A C T

The paper discusses effective communication and discipline in public service. The main objective is to assess the link between effective communication and public service discipline and performance. The information used was gathered from secondary sources. It is recommended that effective communication devices be provided to aid public service performance and discipline.

Introduction

Nigro and Nigro (1973) maintained that the ability to speak, read, write, nod, frown, blink and communicate through a wide variety of sophisticated devices differentiated man from animal. However, few organizations of humans were characterized by effective communication. Chester Barnard specifically related communication to the managerial function when he noted that the first function of the executive is to establish and maintain a system of communication.

Likert (1973) believed that communication was a complex process involving many dimensions. One is the transmission of material from the sender to the audience. Another is its reception and comprehension.

A third is its acceptance or rejection. In view of the complex process and varied character of material, it is not surprising that communication process often breaks down resulting to poor performance of the organization. Furthermore, unfavourable attitudes on the part of members of the organization creates serious block to the transmission and acceptance of information.

Hostility, fear, distrust and similar attitude tend not only to reduce the flow and acceptance of relevant information, but also evoke motive to distort information both upward and downward. These are some of the factors that hinder performance in an organization. According to Likert (1973), for communication to function effectively

and increase performance in an organization, there should be reciprocal; confidence and trust on the part of the members of an organization.

On the other hand, the first thing most people associate with the concept of discipline is the act of punishment. This is so because, discipline in its narrowest sense, is used to refer to the act of imposing penalties for wrong behaviour. However, it is important to remember that this negative expression is only part of the meaning of the word discipline. Discipline means orderliness, obedience and maintenance of proper subordination among employees and to check or restraint on the liberty of the individuals or group to observe certain rules, regulations and procedures that are considered to be necessary for the attainment of an objective.

Objectives of the Paper

The two principal objectives of the paper are; to examine the extent of communication in public service with a view to determine if it can be effective communication. And also to determine whether effective communication may enhance discipline in public service.

Types of Communication

Communication falls into two basic categories - formal and informal, and they are easily defined. Formal communication is written while informal communication is oral, though not all informal communication is verbal. There are two factors that foster the use of formal communication. One factor is organizational and the other factor is public character.

Public organizations tend to rely more heavily on formal communication than do the private (Nwachukwu, 2006).

The advantage of formal communication is that it fosters accountability. Formal communication makes for uniformity and makes people to follow standard procedure. Formal or written communication allows everyone concerned to receive the same message and to check back on it, if he or she is at any time uncertain as to what it says. Written communication also allows information to be more fully developed.

Formal communication saves time. It will be difficult to issue all instructions orally in any large organization.

The disadvantage of formal communication is that it is expensive in terms of resources, it results in lack of delegation, self protection and to impress others (Eisenberg, 2010).

Informal communication does not occupy a lot of space and is not expensive. Traditionally, downward communication has always been emphasized but there is ample evidence that if this is the only direction of communication problems will develop. Downward communication deals with the directives that originate from the top of an organization and are transmitted down through the hierarchy and through the intervening levels of supervision to the lowest ranking workers in the chain. The downward communication is based on the assumption that the management is in position to take decisions that are in the best interest of the organization and the workers (Keyton, 2011).

The types of downwards oral communication include instructions, speeches, meetings, the use of telephone, loud speakers and etcetera. Examples of written downward communication are memoranda, letters, handbooks, pamphlets, company newspapers, bulletin, boards, policy statements, periodicals and etcetera.

Katz and Kahn (1976) identified five basic types of communications from the superior to the subordinate:

Directives for handling tasks; information for handling tasks; information for understanding; the relationships of the tasks; procedures and enterprise practice information; feedback about the performance of subordinates; information about enterprise goals (Koonts and O Daniel,1976).

Most often, information is lost or distorted as it comes down the chain of command, Infact, many of these directives are not understood or even read. Consequently, a feedback system is essential for finding out whether information was perceived as intended by the sender. Downward flow of information through the different levels of the organization is time-consuming. Delay may be so frustrating that some top managers insist that information be sent directly to where it is required.

Likert, Gunning and Schwarb maintained that, one of the greatest problems militating against performance in an organization was that occasionally, superiors failed to make clear to subordinates, precisely what the job was and what was expected of them, Moreover, subordinates did not tell the superiors about the obstacles and problems they encountered in doing the job. These discrepancies result from .differences in perception between the superiors and subordinates especially in the areas of planning; organizing, problem solving and execution of decisions and plans. The existence of this communication gap does not augur well for public service or organizational performance. The removal of this communication gap or challenges will result in effective communication in public service and enhance its performance.

Upward communication travels from subordinates to superiors and continues up the organizational hierarchy. Unfortunately, this flow is often hindered by managers in the communication link who filter the message and do not transmit all the information - especially unfavourable news to the bosses. Typically, means of upward communication are as follows -chain of command, the grievance procedures, counselling, morale questionnaires, an open door policy, exit interview, the organizational grapevine, labour unions, informers, ombudsmen, etc.

Upward communication is very necessary in order to promote good human relations. It is through this means that the management monitors the feeling of employees and takes appropriate action to correct what would have otherwise lead to costly labour management dispute. Open door policy tends to encourage the feeling of belonging and being appreciated.

The problems of distortions and filtering identified as problems of downward communication are also present in upward communication but exacerbated by status difference. The fact that superiors possess greater power and authority than their subordinates results in unique pressures that add further distortion to the serial transmission of information.Nigro and Nigro (1973) contended that subordinates were wary of reporting anything that might displease the superiors even if they could prove that they were not responsible for the particular difficulty. They also maintained that, good news ascended the hierarchy much more easily than bad news. The tendency was to edit the reports in order to present a brighter picture. It was suggested that since individuals often feel that the relinquishment of sole possession of

information decreases their power, there is pressure to hoard information,

Lateral Communication and Crosswise Communication

Lateral communication takes place among workers of the same level in the hierarchy or in different organizations or departments. Lateral communication will frequently go from one agency to another and is not restricted to inter-agency relationship. It ranges from the informal meeting of the company bowling team and lunch hours spent together, to the more formal conferences and committees and board meetings. This kind of communication also occurs when individual members of different departments, are grouped into task teams or project organizations, 'Communication cuts across organizational boundaries when staff which has an advisory function interacts with line managers. Thus, a prime problem of horizontal and crosswise communication "is its quantity and quality" .A second problem is that of conflict, such conflict may be caused by the development of different perceptions of relevant factors within the various departments or goal based. Whatever its cause, conflict is an inevitable result of interdepartmental interactions.

Barriers and Breakdowns in Communication

Communication breakdowns are the most important problems of public service. Poor planning might be the cause for uncertainty in public service. The first set of communication barriers focuses on the sender, the second on the transmission of the message and the third on the receiver.

Lack of Planning to Communicate

Good communication does not happen by chance. A lot of people start talking and

writing without prior thinking, planning and stating the purpose of the message. By giving the reason for directives, selecting the most appropriate channel and choosing proper timing can greatly improve understanding and result in effective communication.

Unclarified Assumptions

There are uncommunicated assumptions that underlie some messages. For example, a customer may send a note that she will visit a vendor's plant. Then she assumes that the vendor will meet her at the airport, reserve a room and make transportation available whereas the vendor may assume that the customer is coming to town mainly to attend a wedding and will make a routine call at the plant. These unclarified assumptions in both instances may result in confusion and the loss of good will.

Badly Expressed Messages

No matter how clear the idea in the mind of the sender of the communication, it may still be marred by poorly chosen words, omissions, lack of coherence, poor organization of ideas, awkward sentence structure, unnecessary jargon and a failure to clarify the implication of the message. This lack of clarity and precision which can be costly can be avoided through greater care in encoding the message.

Distrust, Threat and Fear

Distrust, threat and fear undermine communication. In conditions like these, messages will be viewed with skepticism. Distrust can be due to past experiences in which the subordinate was punished for honestly reporting unfavourably but true information to the boss. Similarly, in the light of threats whether real or imagined - people tend to light up, become defensive

and distort information. You need a good climate of trust to hasten, open an honest communication. Sometimes, poor listening and premature evaluation may also contribute to poor communication and perhaps to communication breakdown.

Most often, environment, culture, tradition, noise, language, religion, and etcetera, constitute barriers to effective communication

Effective Communication

Communication can be improved by means' of audit. Effective communication extends the concept of communication to require that transmitted content is received and understood by someone in the way it was intended and to goal directed to attempt or enhance the achievement of the goal or objective of the public service.

The goals or objectives of effective communication include creating a common perception, changing behaviours and acquiring information. Effective communication begins with encoding or the skill or relaying a message in a clear, direct way, that allows the receiver to correctly decode the message. The key to properly encoding a message is knowing your audience while active listening is required to correctly decode a sent message for a goal or an objective.

Modern methods of communication gadgets e.g. telephones, cell phones, radio and television, computers, satellites, communication and disabilities -sign languages contribute to effective communication.

Contrarily, discipline cannot be maintained merely with the help of legislative sanctions. It requires persuasion on a moral plane. The concept discipline emerges from your interaction with your subordinates. Your

interaction with the subordinates is governed by various orientations, training, formal and informal rules and regulations .But these formal rules are not sufficient to cover the wide range of interaction that you and your subordinates are engaged in the complex context of public service or organizations. A large part of your behaviour and interaction with your subordinates is governed by informal and unwritten rules and norms (Brownell, 2009). These informal rules and norms that support and legitimize practice are based on convention and culture of the public service or organizations.

For every misconduct and act of indiscipline, you as a manager will have to take a disciplinary action against the concerned worker. However, there is no hard and fast rule to deal with indiscipline. The positive approach to discipline, calls for self-discipline. This approach assumes that most of your subordinates, if not all, generally behave reasonably following orientations, trainings and procedures. To institute this kind of discipline, you must ensure that you use your authority and powers in a manner that is easily acceptable to your subordinates;

- i) Rules and regulations are reasonable, legitimate and clear
- ii) Subordinates are involved in framing rules and regulations so that they will willingly accept them
- iii) Prior and clear notice is given of the consequences of breaking rules.
- iv) There is consistency and uniformity of punishment
- v) You as a manager should set high standards, in addition, you check indiscipline through counseling and educating your subordinates.

Finally, formal system for dealing with indiscipline often call for judicial approach.

Strategies like job enrichment to increase commitment (motivation) among your subordinates, effective and efficient grievance handling procedures, opportunities for development of subordinates may assist to avert disrespect in public service or organizations.

When your subordinates know that you care for them, they will be loyal to your authority. Public service operates bureaucratic system, which has as one of its tenets hierarchy. Bureaucracy presupposes that respect is given to seniors. A look at the organogram of the organization shows that while some people are on top, there are some below. In a bureaucratic system like public service, seniority is emphasized.

Such bureaucratic arrangement calls for respect for your seniors, those that are senior officers. The respect does not really go to the individual occupying constituted position but to the office. It is important to note that the core and statutory function of public servants cannot be performed effectively and efficiently if workers do not subscribe to code of ethics that regulate their functions. The code of ethics in Nigerian Public Service rule expressly states the duties and moral obligations of public servants. These include: dedication to duty, honesty, respect, respect for superiors and constituted authority, etc.

Conclusion

The removal of most of the communication challenges as enumerated above will result

in effective communication in the public service. Effective communication enhances discipline. The availability of effective communication and discipline may increase the chances of the realization of goals and objectives of the public service or organization. It is important to note that the core and statutory functions of public servants cannot be performed effectively and efficiently, if workers -do not subscribe to the code of ethics that regulate their functions. Every necessary communication device should be provided to aid administration to have effective communication at work place. Public Service rules and other supportive documents should be made available to staff, to guide their conduct and behaviour at work.

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How to cite this article:

Nwachukwu, B.I., and Nwosu, I.M. 2016. Effective Communication and Discipline in Public Service. *Int.J.Curr.Res.Aca.Rev.* 2016.4(1): 178-183
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2016.401.017>