Avoiding School Management Conflicts and Crisis through Formal Communication

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Abstract
This paper examined how conflicts and crisis can be avoided through formal communication. It was necessitated by the observation that most of the conflicts and crisis which tend to mar school management today are functions of the inconsistencies arising from "grapevines, rumours, and gossips" generated through informal communication processes. It does not however mean that formal communication doesn't generate conflicts and crisis; or that informal communication does not help in avoiding conflicts and crisis in school management. The argument is that in formal communication, there are control measures that filter the flow of information and guide against or properly manage the information that could have caused conflicts and crisis in school management. Thus, it is recommended that as efforts are geared towards avoiding school management conflicts and crisis through formal communication, informal communication should not be ruled out; instead strategies should be devised to properly manage it and explore the benefits.

Methodology
Documentary research design was applied in this study. The researcher used textbooks, internet materials and journal publications in gathering relevant information and data. These literatures were sourced from libraries and internet websites. In order to elicit the information and data relevant to the study, the contents of the literatures gathered were thoroughly read, simplified, summarised, classified and assessed with focus on the issues investigated. Consequently, the conclusions made were based on the interpretations and logical inferences drawn from the information and data generated from existing literatures.

1. Introduction

Communication refers to the process of exchanging information between or among individuals, groups, institutions, and/or organisations in oral, written, or sign forms through any available media. It refers to the sharing of information for a variety of purposes including *informing*, *persuading*, *motivating* or *influencing* people. Effective Communication is very essential in the avoidance, prevention, resolution and management of conflicts and crisis in human society. This is because it (communication) bridges the gap where misperceptions and misunderstanding could thrive.

There are two main communication channels in every institution or organisation: the formal and informal communication channels. Formal communication is organized and managed information that is shared with relevant individuals in order to secure coordinated action throughout the organization (Baker, 2002). Formal communication channels are based on individual's role in the organization and distributed in an organized way according to the established chain in organizational charts.

On the other hand, informal communication in the workplace satisfies a variety of needs, particularly *social* and *emotional*, and is not based on the positions individuals occupy within the organizations. As a result, informal communication is not managed or planned in any organized fashion but based on social contexts and emotional disposition. It's more relaxed, casual and tends to be spread by word-of-mouth quickly throughout a department or organization because it's not restricted to approvals and an established path of distribution. Probably the most common term used for the informal communication in the workplace is "*grapevine*" and this communication that is sent through the organizational grapevine is often considered *gossip* or *rumour*. While grapevine communication can spread information quickly and can easily cross established organizational boundaries, the information it carries can be changed through the deletion or exaggeration crucial details thus causing the information inaccurate – even if it's based on truth. The use of the organizational grapevine as an informal communication channel often results when employees feel threatened, vulnerable, or when the organization is experiencing change and when communication from management is restricted and not forthcoming.

2. Avoiding Conflicts and Crisis through Effective Communication

The extent to which conflicts and crisis can be avoided largely depends on the effectiveness of communication flow between or among the parties involved. Hence, the roles of communication in conflicts and crisis cannot be underestimated. The emergence, escalation, de-escalation, resolution, and management of conflicts and crisis all depend on the information sent and received, how they are interpreted, and how they are perceived accordingly (Jean Monnet Group, 2006). This is essentially so because the nature of the information sent through the

communication process (whether formal or informal) helps information analysts and decision makers in an organization or institution to probe the minds and intentions of the senders. Myers and Myers (1982) as well as Baker (2002) summed the several functions of communication into: coordination and regulation of production activities, socialization, and innovation. In other words, communication affects receiver knowledge or behaviour by informing, directing, regulating, socializing, and persuading individuals in formal and informal organizations to behave in a specific way towards achieving stated goals and objectives (Myers and Myers, 1982). Similarly, Neher (1997) identified the primary functions of organizational or institutional communication as:

- (i.) Compliance-gaining
- (ii.) Leading, motivating, and influencing
- (iii.) Sense-making
- (iv.) Problem-solving and decision-making, and
- (v.) Conflict management, negotiating, and bargaining.

In this line of thought, communication is a vital instrument for peace in every society, organizations, or institutions. Nevertheless, it is observed that communication generates conflicts and crisis as much it helps to avoid it depending on the relationship between the sender and the receiver, as well as the perceptions or interpretations of the contents. Importantly, whereas informal communication carries with it, a lot of emotion-based information which could be true or false; formal communication contains officially approved information and data for organizational administration which may only be changed through due process. Hence, it is believed that formal communication helps to avoid conflicts and crisis much more than informal communication spread through "rumours and gossips" (Wilhelm, 2011). Nevertheless, informal communication cannot be avoided and should not even be avoided because it can:

- spread information quickly throughout an organization
- serve a social purpose (development of team spirit)
- reduce stress and anxiety
- can be used to identify problems or lack of satisfaction in the workplace.

Hence, owing to some positive roles played by informal communication, efforts should be geared towards not avoiding, but managing it, in such a way that the negative effects like conflicts and crisis would be minimized. The management of informal communication can be partly achieved by providing information through good, effective formal communication channels and creating formally established informal interaction fora where tension, anxiety, and stress can be dissipated.

3. Formal Communication and the Avoidance of School Management Conflicts and Crisis

Formal communication can be carried out through several means like meetings, face-to-face discussions, memos, letters, e-mails, reports etc., through official channels (Baker, 2002). Essentially, formal communication process is well established and planned through administrative charts such that there are no role confusions which most of the time cause conflicts and crisis (Gibson, 1985). It is seen as the easiest way to communicate in the workplace, because it's all predefined by the organizational or institutional structure (Harvard Business Review, 1993). The chart lays out the reporting structure, lines of authority and channels of communication which must be strictly followed and observed religiously. The typical organizational structure looks like a pyramid, at the top you find the *big boss*, the position that hold the greatest authority, power and responsibility over the rest in the organization (Baker, 2002). Within the framework of the organizational structure, the formal channels of communication include Vertical (downward and upward), horizontal and matrix (Diagonal) communication (Baker, 2002). **Downward** communication is the communication that flows down the chain of command: *orders, directives, coaching, counseling, disciplinary actions, and general information*. **Upward** communication is the communication that flows up the chain of command: *reports, concerns, questions, statuses, and general communication*. **Matrix (Diagonal) communication** doesn't follow the organizational chain of command but super-imposes it. Matrix communication is considered formal communication because it has been pre-approved and agreed upon by people in positions of authority. Matrix communication includes *project communication, task force communication and committee communication*. Project Communication is based on a pre-established and agreed upon project team membership, which can include members from multiple departments and multiple levels.

At times, formal communication may be ineffective in addressing school management conflicts and crisis for some reasons which McCelland (1988) identified as:

- i.   Fears of reprisal – people are afraid to speak their minds.
- ii. Filters – employees feel their ideas/concerns are modified as they get transmitted.
- iii. Time – managers give the impression that they do not have the time to listen to employees whereas they hold critical information.

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Essentially, avoiding conflicts and crisis in school management through formal communication can be done in two ways: Observing the rules of engagement, and effective management of formal communication channels,

3.1 Observing the Rules of Engagement in Formal Communication
Formal communication in organizations has rules, some of them spelled out and some of them are not stated (Wilhelm, 2011).
The explicit rules include:
- provide accurate, respectful and timely information
- Go through the proper channels
- Adhere to orders and direction coming from above

The unspoken rules include:
- Avoid badmouthing your boss; because it will get back to him/her sometime, somehow. If you must complain about your boss, then do it with someone outside the organization. Unless of course, it's a formal complaint, then use the proper organizational channels for that.
- In social settings, when you interact with others outside the communication structure, use good judgment on what you discuss and who you talk about. It is improper to feel that having an access to your boss's boss in a social setting gives an opportunity to discuss workplace issues. Indeed, it does, but your boss is likely to take issue with it.
- Avoid badmouthing your subordinates with your boss. Your boss is likely to think (and tell you) that it's a problem for you to solve.

3.2 Effective Management of Formal Communication Channels
Meanwhile, Wilhelm (2011), Larkin and Larkin (1994), Myers and Myers (1982), as well as White and Chapman (1996), strongly share the view that conflicts and crisis can also be avoided through formal communication by:
i. Opening the lines of the formal communication channels to receive feedback and concerns. Respond to these as quickly as possible. If concerns are submitted from staff and no response is given by management, rumours through grapevine communication will begin to fill in the communication gap which was created by management.
ii. Supplying sufficient information through the formal communication channel about the concerns that are of importance to employees and staff;
iii. Presenting as much factual information as possible as soon as it is obtained.
iv. Keeping information coming on a regular basis especially during times of change when the employees are stressed and wondering what's going on. Daily communication with them will reduce the pressure of uncertainty through proper and essential clarifications.
v. Being prudent, accountable and transparent in the management of available resources and notify the relevant authorities as and when due.

Conclusion
The identification of formal communication as a tool for avoiding conflicts and crisis does not necessarily mean that it cannot generate same. Formal communication occasionally generates conflicts and crisis, but the chances are more minimal compared to informal communication processes. Formal communication is a preferable alternative to avoid conflicts and crisis in school management because the channels or routes are subject to controls and scrutiny to filter out some pieces of information capable destabilizing the education system. Hence, there is need to follow the proper channels of formal communication to have the desired relative peace.

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