

Effective Communication as a Change Management Tool in Creating Awareness on Leadership Vision and Strategy: A Focus on Management of Student Academic Records at Institutions of Higher Learning

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Abstract

Successful change in organizations must take care of the leadership, the members, the organizational culture; and any planned change should not take for granted the readiness of the change recipients. One of the Key components in organizational change management is proper communication since information is the bloodline of an organization in today's dynamic world. As leaders and managers make strategic decisions to stay at the competitive edge, change is inevitable and if not properly handled, it may lead to failure of the organization. This paper is an insight into the importance of communication in change management in institutions of higher learning based on a study conducted in 2011/2012 academic year in a private university in Nairobi Kenya. Staff members in charge of management of course registration and grades information in the university were the key respondents. Mixed methods of study involving qualitative data, collected through pre-study interviews and quantitative data in the actual study were used. Data collection was done in three phases, first were face-to-face semi-structured interviews in a preliminary study with 2 members of the University's Management Committee, secondly, a pre-study with 6 representatives of two universities in Kenya regarded as local best practices in records management and thirdly, descriptive data was collected using a questionnaire which mainly collected quantitative data but also had room for open-ended questions. Evaluative Research design was adopted for the research, where the descriptive data were placed in comparison with the pre-set criteria from the best practice institutions.

Keywords: Change Management, Communication, Leadership Vision and Strategy, Higher Learning Institutions, ICT.

Introduction

Organizations have been at the center of change ranging from minor internal changes to major transformations that have resulted to new identities. But does the leadership of institutions of higher learning do enough to communicate to the staff about introduction of new strategies? This is a question the author seeks to answer. Change is influenced by many factors such as internal strategies, external environment, industry standards and regulations, technology and competitors. Organizations must be ready for continuous change if they have to survive regardless of the risks involved in this (Bartell 2003, p.43, Palestini, 2005, p. 224, Turner *et al.*, 2009, pp.25-26). Since technology has over the years, been a key influence to change in organizations including the educational sector this paper focuses on communication in the context of change in an institution moving from a manual management of student academic records to an automated management system.

Change implementers in an institution are very crucial to ensure a successful change. Institutional leaders and managers therefore need to consider the central role that good communication plays in change management and implement it among its key stakeholders. However, with the growing conveniences of modern technology, fewer managers are taking the time to talk with staff face-to-face on proposed change, and when they do; it is done in mass audience forums which are inherently designed to only pass along information one-way. How can we expect our employees to execute our strategies, meet our expectations and achieve organizational goals if we aren't diligent in communicating these very things and in a way that provides for feedback from the change implementers?

Understanding the need for change is the first step towards owning up the change process and creating new behaviors within the institution, behaviors that will represent Institutional values in the future state. To drive behavioral change, leaders must communicate the need for change as it relates first to the organization and second to the staff. Communication is paramount when trying to raise the level of understanding and buy-in within organizations.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted evaluative design in the descriptive mode. The design has three parts, descriptive data, criteria of readiness and evaluative judgment of collected data based on determined criteria (Cole, 2001, p.308). A pre-study which was done with the university leadership revealed that the proposed change initiative was preceded by failed attempts to automate the management of student academic records and the leadership was

keen on making the change successful. Some of the issues identified to have caused previous failure were the lack of technical support especially since the previously proposed Student Information System (SIS) called ASPEN was a gift of custom design and not open source. Selection of the software was also not preceded with a needs assessment or a system study. The Integrated Management Information Systems (IMIS) committee of the university was planning in the present change effort to do a needs assessment and information gathering, to prioritize and set criteria for what the system would need to do to be successful that would guide system selection and to conduct a system pilot study for the whole system outcome which would inform the way forward.

Data were gathered from teaching and non-teaching staff whose work involved management of course registration through a questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to establish whether the staff members at the university were aware that there was a plan to implement a Student Information System in 2012/2013 academic year and how much had been communicated to teaching and non-teaching staff on the planned change. This descriptive data from the staff was judged on the set criteria from the best practices to determine the level of awareness for the electronic management of student records.

The actual study was of a single population whose participants comprised staff members in the university; teaching and non-teaching, whose work involved management of students' course registration and grades. The teaching staff involved were all fulltime and part-time staff that had taught at least one course in 2011/2012 academic year. The non-teaching staff included members in the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs (DVCAA's) office, Registrar's office, Extension Studies, Finance and Information Technologies departments who were involved in the management of registration and/or examination information.

Results and Discussion

Findings of the study indicated that the institutional leadership had communicated the envisioned change to the staff members who were the expected users of the proposed Student Information System. This was important to establish because the feedback from the pre-study with best practices affirmed that adequate change communication is a key indicator of change readiness. In this paper, effective communication is defined by high level of communication, which was determined by a score of at least 67% for each Likert item whose level of communication is under assessment. The quantitative data was summarized in percentages, which was used to determine the scale of measurement. The scores of 0% to 33% indicate low level of readiness based on the indicator under evaluation, 34% to 66% show medium level of readiness and 67% to 100% is regarded as high level of readiness. The three levels were adapted from Paul Hersey's Situational Leadership model, which categorized readiness into four levels that the researcher collapsed into three (Hersey et al., 1996, p. 207).

To establish if there had been adequate communication, the staff were asked to indicate from whom they heard the planned change, if at all, when they heard it and how it was communicated to them.

General awareness of the planned change

Responses are summarized in table 1 and table 2, showing the level of change awareness among the staff members. Concerning the teaching and non-teaching staff categories, table 1 shows that 16, (89%) of the non-teaching staff, were aware of the proposed change compared to only 11, (25%) of the teaching staff who confirmed knowledge of the plan to implement the new record management system. This shows perceived low communication levels among the teaching staff and high level of communication among the non-teaching staff, about the change.

Table 1: General awareness for change among teaching and non-teaching staff

Cross tabulation of General Change Awareness among staff based on Job Category

Category of Job appointment	Are you aware that this university is planning to implement a Student Information System in 2012/2013 Academic year?						Total
	Yes		No		Not sure		
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	
Teaching	11	25%	32	73%	1	2%	44
Non-teaching	16	89%	0	0%	2	11%	18
Total	27	43%	32	52%	3	5%	62

$N = 62$ $df = 2$ $confidence\ level = .05$ $p = 0.00$ $reject\ H_0\ if\ p \leq 0.05$

To test if the observed differences in the level of communication among teaching and non-teaching staff were statistically significant, a Chi square test of significance was done on a Null hypothesis which stated that "There is no significant difference in staff perception of how well the leadership vision and strategy have been communicated to teaching and non-teaching staff". The test was performed at alpha level 0.05 allowing a 5% risk of making type 1 error. The p-value obtained from the test at 2 degrees of freedom is 0.000 which is less than 0.05 alpha level. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. This thus confirms existence of statistically significant difference in communication levels between the two groups of staff, teaching and non-teaching.

When the level of change communication is analyzed based on whether staff were fulltime or part-time employees of the organization, data on table 2 shows high level of change communication among the fulltime staff and low level of communication among the part-time staff.

Table 2: General awareness for the change among fulltime and part-time staff

			Are you aware that this university is planning to implement a SIS in 2012/2013 Academic year?			Total
			Yes	No	Not sure	
Status of Employment	Full-time	Count	23	3	2	28
		%	82%	11%	7%	100%
	Part-time	Count	4	29	1	34
		%	12%	85%	3%	100%
Total		Count	27	32	3	62
		%	43%	52%	5%	100%

$N = 62$ $df = 2$ $confidence\ level = .05$ $p = 0.00$ $reject\ H_0\ if\ p \leq 0.05$

Though there was no hypothesis posed for the fulltime and part-time staff categories, the author also tested if the difference in communication levels between these categories of staff was statistically significant. From the Chi-Squares tests done, the p-value obtained was also 0.000 which is less than the 0.05 alpha level indicating statistically significant difference in awareness levels between the part-time staff and the full-time staff on the plans to implement a Student Information system. Of the full-time staff interviewed approximately 82% confirmed to be aware of the plans to implement the new system (SIS), while only 12% of the part-time staff were aware of the plans.

The feedback summarized on tables 1 and 2 shows significantly low change awareness levels among the teaching staff and the part-time staff categories at the university, while high change awareness is noted among the fulltime staff and the non-teaching staff categories. The significant difference in communication for the part-time staff, who were the majority teaching staff needed to be noted by the change leadership team and addressed. The means of communication adopted needed to cater for the staff categories shown to be less informed.

Staff awareness of the change vision and strategy

During the pre-study done with the institutional leadership, some specific items were identified to represent the proposed change vision and strategy. Table 3 summarizes the feedback from staff respondents on how often communication was done, with the last column indicating the level of communication for the 16 items. Data reflected under the column labeled *Often* on table 3 represents the percentage of adequate communication for each of the 16 items.

Table 3: Level of change readiness based on communication of the change vision and strategy

Change vision and Strategy Item	How often changes in the university had been heard by the staff						Level of communication of the change items
	Often		Not sure		Never		
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	
Increasing student enrolment	41	69%	11	19%	7	12%	High level of change awareness <i>(High level of readiness based on level of communication)</i>
Introduction of new Academic programmes	47	81%	6	10%	5	9%	
Financial constraint	43	72%	8	13%	9	15%	
Diversification of students	22	38%	19	33%	17	29%	Medium Level of communication <i>(Medium level of readiness based on level of communication)</i>
New off-campus sites	35	59%	14	24%	10	17%	
Improving university IT capacity	25	43%	23	40%	10	17%	
Introduction of Distance & E-learning	26	44%	23	39%	10	17%	
On-line registration project plan	21	36%	9	16%	28	48%	
Student Work Study Programme	32	53%	14	23%	14	23%	
Training teaching staff for IT capacity building	14	24%	17	29%	28	47%	Low level of communication <i>(Low level of readiness based on level of communication)</i>
Developing non-teaching staff IT capability	8	14%	20	34%	31	52%	
ASPEN	19	33%	12	21%	27	47%	
Needs assessment for a Student Information System	13	22%	12	20%	34	58%	
Integrated Management Information Systems (IMIS) Committee	17	28%	7	12%	36	60%	
Integration of management systems	15	26%	13	22%	30	52%	
Employment of New IT staff	19	32%	22	37%	19	32%	

The data reflected on table 3 is also used to validate information on the general level of change awareness. The information displayed shows that only three out of 16 change items had been adequately communicated to staff, confirming the general low communication levels observed. The 3 items reported to have adequate communication among the staff in total, were all confirmed to be adequately communicated to the non-teaching staff. However, only one of these items was reportedly adequately communicated to the teaching staff; *introduction of new academic programmes*.

In general, the non-teaching staff were more frequently informed than the teaching staff, with the non-teaching staff attaining the required threshold for adequate communication in 9 out of the 16 items as follows:

1. Increasing student enrolment
2. Introduction of Distance & E-learning
3. Introduction of new Academic programmes
4. New off-campus sites
5. ASPEN
6. On-line registration project plan
7. Integrated Management Information Systems (IMIS) Committee
8. Financial constraint
9. Student Work Study Programme

On the other hand, the teaching staff were reportedly frequently less informed than their non-teaching counterparts, attaining the required threshold for adequate communication in only one change item, which is *introduction of new academic programmes*. As already mentioned, most of the teaching staff were part-time. Apart from this change item, the teaching staff reported lack of adequate awareness of the other 15 change items concerned with introduction of a SIS.

To test the first null hypothesis and determine if the differences in communication levels observed between the teaching and the non-teaching staff were statistically significant, Chi Square tests on each of the 16 items was

used. However, some cells had less than 5 expected counts. Fisher's exact test was therefore used instead of the Chi Square test (McDonald 2008, 64). The null hypothesis stated that "There is no significant difference in staff perception of how well the leadership vision and strategy have been communicated to teaching and non-teaching staff". It would be rejected if the p-value obtained at the appropriate degrees of freedom was less than the 0.05 margin of error.

The tests done led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This is an indication that differences in change communication between the teaching and non-teaching staff were statistically significant in 14 items and not statistically significant in only 2 items. The level of communication on the 14 items can therefore be associated with whether the staff were teaching or non-teaching and it is evident that the teaching staff reported less awareness on the 14 items listed below:

1. Increasing student enrolment
2. Financial constraint
3. Diversification of students
4. New off-campus sites
5. Introduction of Distance & E-learning
6. On-line registration project plan
7. Student Work Study Programme
8. Training teaching staff for IT capacity building
9. Developing non-teaching staff IT capability
10. ASPEN
11. Needs assessment for a Student Information System
12. Integrated Management Information Systems (IMIS) Committee
13. Integration of management systems
14. Employment of New IT staff

The only two items where the null hypothesis was not rejected were on communication of *introduction of new academic programmes* and *improving university IT capacity*. Communication levels on these two items were therefore not statistically significant among the teaching and non-teaching staff. It is important to note that *introduction of new academic programmes* was the only change item that was reportedly adequately communicated to both teaching and non-teaching staff. Even though the change awareness level for the non-teaching staff was at 94.1% and the teaching staff at 75.6% on this item. This difference was not statistically significant between non-teaching and teaching staff. The change item, *improving university IT capacity* was reportedly not adequately communicated to both the teaching and non-teaching staff, and the Fisher's exact test confirmed that the difference in the perceived communication levels was also not statistically significant. On this change item, the data did not meet the required threshold for high communication, with the non-teaching staff attaining communication at 64.7% and the teaching staff at 34.1%, both attaining medium communication on the change item.

It was also established in the study that *needs assessment for a Student Information System* was adequately communicated to only 4.8% of teaching staff and 64.7% of non-teaching staff. The fact that this data was collected one month to the planned launch of a SIS implementation shows grave inadequacy of a key factor in the change process, namely communication. The leadership may be seen to either take staff for granted, especially the teaching staff, by not involving them in needs assessment, or the information is not clear for the staff to associate it with the proposed change. It is clear that the views of the part-time teachers dominated the information gathered from the teaching staff category since they were thrice the number of their full-time counterparts. If the part-time teachers were regarded as important as the full-time ones, and if the expectations for the management of course and grades information was the same for them as for their full-time counterparts, then channels and modes of communication would need to be sensitive to all the staff, including those that were part-time.

From the afore discussions, the perceived level of change communication can be associated with whether one is a teaching or a non-teaching staff with the teaching staff being significantly less informed compared to their non-teaching counterparts. This suggests that the change leadership team would need to ensure that all concerned staff, whether teaching or non-teaching are adequately informed on change initiatives that would affect their work in managing student records. Communication ahead of the proposed change would ensure that staff are empowered with information that would allow them identify with, or to contribute to the proposed strategies for change implementation and be highly ready for the change which in a great extent might determine its successful implementation.

Source of Change Information

Data is summarized on table 4, showing the source of this information and table 5 showing a summary of when communication for the planned change was heard. Table 6 on the other hand shows a summary of the mode of

communication used.

Table 4: Source of change information

Person/Office/Section	No. of respondents		
	Teaching	Non-teaching	Total
IMIS Sub-committee	0	6 (37.5%)	6 (22.2%)
Internal Communication/ colleagues/admin staff/ department	3 (27.2%)	3 (18.8%)	6 (22.2%)
Senate/Management Committee/Meeting/IT Director	6 (54.5%)	3 (18.8%)	9 (33.3%)
VC & DVCAA	2 (18.2%)	1 (6.3%)	3 (11.1%)
Registrar	0	3 (18.8%)	3 (11.1%)
Total	11	16	27

Based on the data summarized on table 1 and 2 earlier, 43% of respondents (27 people) were aware of the planned change and they all responded to an open-ended question inquiring from whom the staff heard of the plan to implement a SIS. Data received on the source of information about the planned change were categorized into five main sets as shown on table 4. These categories reflect close association with management of the planned change. The Integrated Management Information Systems (IMIS) subcommittee for instance was the team mandated with implementation and integration of Management Information Systems in the university, where the SIS was one of the projects. The Senate and Management Committee are the leading internal decision making organs in the university, with the IT Director reporting on behalf of the IMIS Committee on the change progress. The Vice Chancellor (VC) & the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic affairs (DVCAA) were the two leaders guiding Academic affairs in the institution where this change was to be entrenched, while the Registrar's office was the intended main user of the SIS. The change leadership team was therefore reflected as the main source of change information. Most of the teaching staff respondents (54.5%) got the change information from the Management Committee and the Senate while more non-teaching staff (37.5%) received the information from the IMIS committee. No teaching staff reported to have heard this information from the IMIS committee or the Registrar, which is an indication of the formal relationships between the 2 categories of staff, teaching and non-teaching. This indicates a need for coordination so that the source of information is definite for the different kinds of staff, with responsibility to have information reach all the targeted audience.

The change leadership team also needed to know that the scope of communication was very limited. This is because, only 43% of respondents had heard of the planned change according to tables 1 and 2 and it is this group comprised of minority of the respondents that responded to the source of information on table 4. Where information intended for the entire staff population was only received by less than half of the staff, there would be a definite need for improvement. There should not be any discrimination; information should reach all those concerned, not just those who are closely associated with the source.

Timings for the Change Information

Out of the 27 respondents who were aware of the planned change, 21 of them indicated the year they heard of the change, all within the past three years before the study was conducted as shown on table 5. Most of the respondents (12), heard of the plan to implement a SIS within the year (2012), followed by 8 respondents who heard of it the year before (2011) and only one heard of the plan two years earlier, in 2010. This shows that the plan to implement a SIS had been there, but only known to very few staff who were in this case associated with its implementation.

Table 5: Timings for the communication

Year when staff heard of the plan for a SIS	No. of respondents
2010	1 (4.8%)
2011/one year ago	8 (38.1%)
2012/ this year	12 (57.1%)
Total	21 (100%)

Mode of Communication

There were two modes of communication identified by the respondents: email and verbal communication, as shown on table 6. Out of the 24 staff members who responded to the question "how was it communicated to you?", 21 reportedly heard of the plan verbally in meetings, while 3 reportedly got the information through email.

Table 6: Mode of Communication

How change information was communicated	No. of respondents
verbally in a meeting	21 (87.5%)
Email	3 (12.5%)
Total	24 (100%)

Since verbal communication in meetings was reportedly the popular mode of communication, it may imply

that the staff who were available for such meetings would be at an advantage compared to those who were not. No wonder that most part-time staff (85%) had never heard of the planned changes, as indicated on table 1 and 2, since they may not have been available on-campus for meetings where this information would likely be communicated. The fact that most meetings in a university setting are administrative in nature, and are in form of committees, only selected staff may attend such meetings, for example Heads of Departments or Heads of Sections, unless they report back to their colleagues not in attendance. This may account for the low levels of change awareness among the staff, considering that verbal communication was reportedly the main mode of communication.

The second mode of communication identified by fewer respondents was email. Additional information indicated that email messages sent from the university official address were only accessed by very few part-time teachers, who formed the bulk of respondents in this research. The use of this mode of communication would therefore need to be evaluated, either by linking the university official email addresses to the popular personal ones used by the part-time teachers or by training all staff to regularly access and use the university email accounts. In addition, alternative modes of communication would need to be considered beyond the two reported by staff members since change communication to most staff was very low.

To identify the source of information for the planned change, the following data of 12 sources of information thought to be the most common were provided.

1. Registry/Student Recruitment/Admissions Office
2. IT Director/Office
3. DVCAA
4. College Staff/workers/colleagues
5. VC
6. Finance Director
7. IMIS/E-learning Committee
8. Academic Deans/Coordinator Extension
9. Internet/University website/Newsletter
10. HR Office
11. Students
12. University Librarian

It is noteworthy that most information on the 16 change items on table 3 was perceived to be from Registry or Students Recruitment or Admissions office, who were to be the primary users of the proposed system. It is however surprising how little information was reported through the university website or internet, which has so much potential to reach many people if well utilized.

Conclusion

Most studies on change management do not miss to emphasize on the centrality of communication in the change process. Though change awareness is not equivalent to change readiness, communication is a major bridge between superb change visions and employees who are ready to implement the change to attain the vision. Employees need to buy into the need for change, based on relevant information provided, to sell the change to the other end users or stakeholders such as the students. Well informed workers are expected to easily join in the change vision, providing important contribution on how to best implement the change and bring the desired results. They also bring very important contributions that keep the leadership accountable and reminded of the need to stay relevant to the needs of staff. This research assumes that informing staff prior to change implementation likely results in a potentially ready team for change, a proposition supported by the pre-study with the best practices.

Inadequate communication was especially evident among the teaching and part-time categories of staff. The major mode of communication reported was verbal, in meetings, which may have alienated some staff. This translated to a considerably uninformed team of staff yet they were the expected key users of the SIS, considering that the institution heavily relied on part-time teachers.

Recommendations

1. Different categories of staff need to be considered when sending out communication to ensure that all those intended to benefit from such information do.
2. Based on the lower levels of communication among the part-time teachers, email communication should be boosted so that all staff are equally informed. However, noting that most part-time teachers do not use the university email allocated to them, the change implementation process should ensure that all the staff use the university designated email accounts or a deliberate integration of these official email accounts and part-time teachers' personal emails be done.
3. Communication of assurance to staff is needed on the implication of the SIS for their jobs. This should

include a proper plan to guide any job reorganization.

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