

EFFECTIVE USAGE OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM FOR AN ENHANCED PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract

Information is an indispensable tool while communication is the life wire of any organization. This paper examines the communication channels in a university system. It stipulates the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of the communication act for staff and students. The full compliance with these 'dos' and 'don'ts' will enable the university system to achieve enhanced productivity in education.

Different scholars have defined communication in various ways depending on the perspective from which they view it. Peter (1980) views it as “the process whereby information is passed between individuals and/or organizations by means of previously agreed symbols” as Uhumwangho (2000) notes. Ndubuisi (1999) further points out that Hybels and Weaver (1989) define communication as ‘a process in which people share information, ideas and feelings’. According to Ndubuisi, (1999), the authorities in question further stipulate that ‘all communications depend on ‘understanding others and having them understood us.’

Channel, a compulsory element of the communication process is the means through which a message is conveyed. According to Arhagba (1996), the Channel could be defined psychologically as “the senses through which a decoder-receiver can perceive the message which has been sent by a source-encoder”.

Balogun, Ikupa and Onyechere (2002) also opined that “Channel refers to the route of the communication”. Communication Channels vary according to the type of establishment concerned. However, for academic institutions, ‘there is hardly any difference among the University, the polytechnic and the College of Education, except in the designation of offices and officials as Nzerem (2001) suggests.

Purposes of Communication

According to Umeh, (1988), "Communication is very essential to the corporate existence of the people on earth." Communication has numerous purposes which include the following.

Through communication, information is transmitted, stored and preserved for the benefit of the present and future generations.

Contact is established through communication

People communicate in order to protest, persuade or convince (others), and clarify issues as the need may arise.

Most importantly, communication boosts the establishment and maintenance of organizational goals and efficiency.

Sources of Information

There are formal and informal sources of information in an organization such as a university.

The Formal Sources of Information

This is the official source. This source carefully prepares the information which is assessed and endorsed by the appropriate officers of the organization before it is released.

The Informal Source of Information

This source is not official. It is further classified into rumour and grapevine information.

Rumour This information is not official and it is unconfirmed. It is difficult to get at its origin. Rumour thrives in an organization if interpersonal relationships among some officers are strained. In such a situation, there would be no free flow of information rather, there will be malicious talks.

Grapevine This spreads information concerning the policies of an organization. The difference between information from the grapevine and rumour is that while the origin of grapevine information can be traced, the origin of rumour cannot be traced easily. Grapevine information is closer to the truth than rumour. Secretaries and other staff whose nature of duty or personal relationships expose official information to them before it is released are sources of grapevine information. Informal relationships which occasion conversation between top Management staff and their subordinates could bring about grapevine communication.

You are strongly advised not to rely on rumour and grapevine information even if research has shown that they often contain more truths than lies. You should rely on official information.

Patterns of Communication in a University System

Two broad patterns of communication exist in a university. A university communicates externally with suppliers, government departments, target groups, contractors etc.

It also communicates internally with staff and students. Attention will be given to internal communication.

Formal Internal Communication

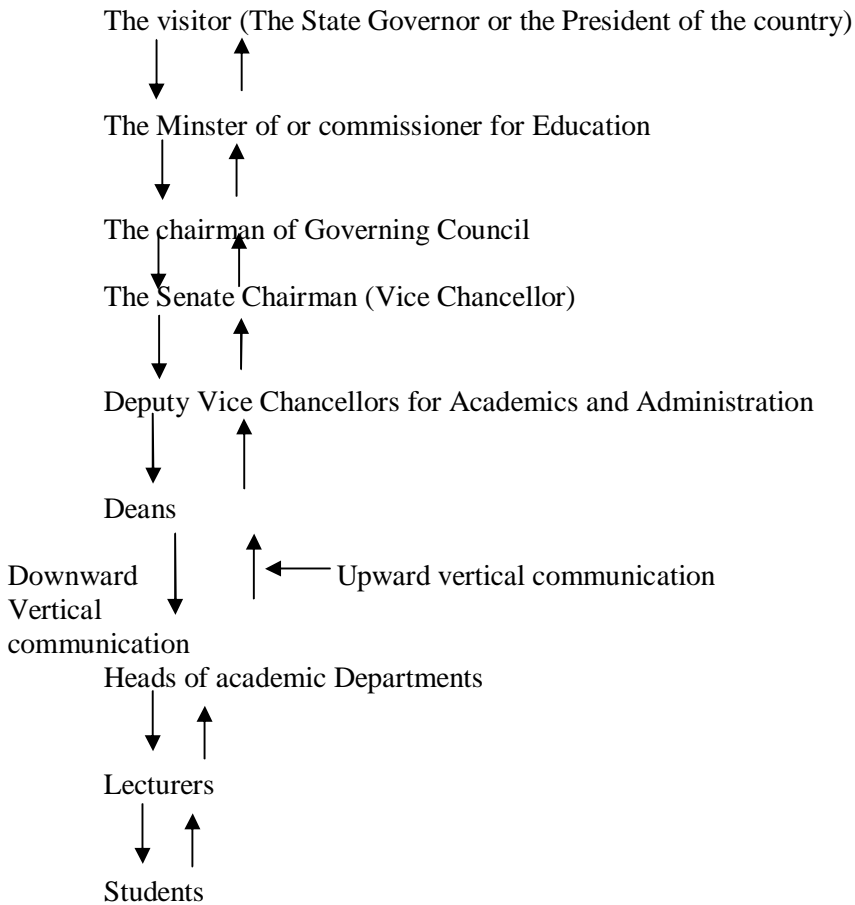
This type of communication is 'the life wire' of an organization' and the 'oil' that smoothens its functions as Goldhaber (1979) suggests. Barelas and Barrets note that 'Formal internal communication is the essence of organized activity and the basic process out of which other functions derive.

Here, communication might be vertical, horizontal or semi vertical.

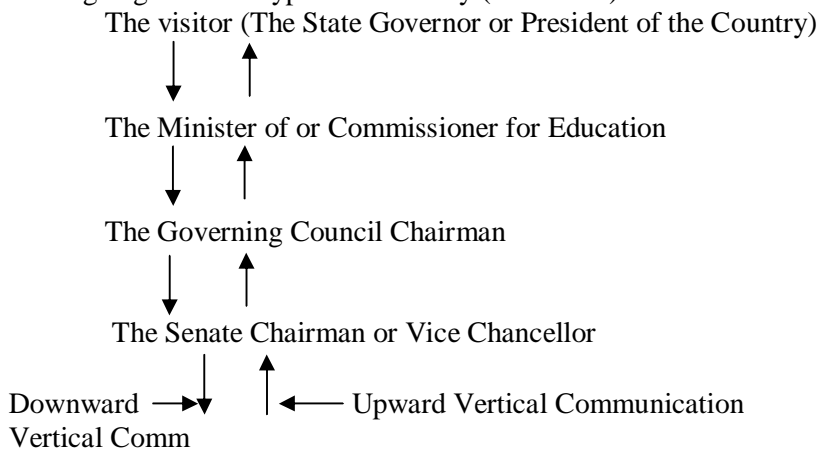
Vertical Communication Under this, information moves either from the top to the bottom or from the bottom to the top. E.g. information can move from the system for which the information is meant. (See the organigram of a university as presented ahead). Vertical communication is between superior officers and subordinate officers. Policy makers at the top take decisions and pass them down to those who will implement them. However, those at the various levels have the opportunity of making input before such decisions are taken. Information flow also moves from the lower rung of the ladder to the top. This manifests in the form of a report on an action taken on the implementation of a policy, contributions or suggestion of ideas on a particular issue or a request by a subordinate officer.

In a university, an instance of vertical communication is a policy decision from either the Governing Council or the Senate via the vice-chancellor down the hierarchy to the deans, the Heads of departments, lecturers, other staff and students.

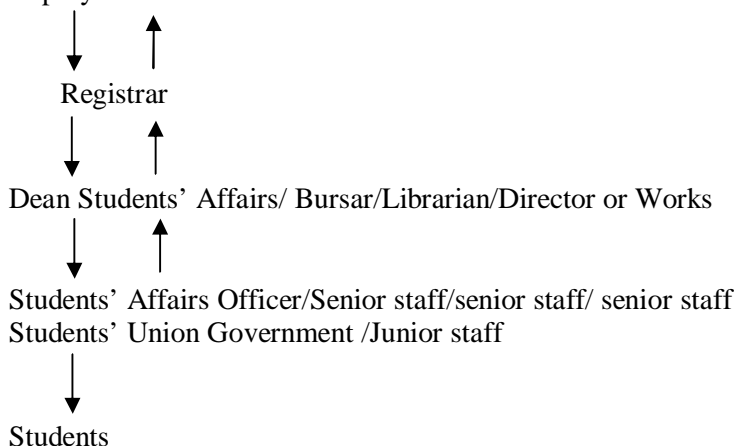
Pristine



An Organigram of a Typical University (Academic)



Deputy Vice Chancellors for academics and Administration



An Organigram of a typical University (Administration)

Semi Vertical Communication This is also called quasi vertical communication. It occurs when the proper channels established to guide the flow of information are not completely maintained. For example, in a normal vertical communication, students channel their grievances through their Head of Department, through their Dean to the vice chancellor or Senate. Nevertheless, if the students' grievances concern students' unionism, the Exco members of the students' Union can communicate directly with the Vice Chancellor or do so through the Dean of Students' Affairs.

The same convention or procedure is applicable to all staff unions in the university the advantages of semi vertical communication are that it encourages immediate action from the Management and further enables the Management to receive the most correct information from the bottom.

Horizontal Communication This involves officers of equal status in the university, under this pattern of communication; information is passed from one Head of Department to another. It is done through direct conversations, telephone conversations as well as internal memoranda. According to Nzerem (2001), 'Horizontal communication in any organization is essential because if rivalry thrives, the co-operation that is essential to the attainment of the organization's goal will be lost.'

Communication Between Staff and Students

A good number of students in higher institutions of learning are not aware of the channels of communication to be maintained if they want to forward their grievances and opinions to Management. This often causes problems in schools because it is not good to break the channels of communication in any organization. For academic matters, the Senate which has the Vice Chancellor as the Chairman is the end point. Information from students should be routed through the course adviser (where there is one), through the students' Head of Department, through the Dean to the Vice chancellor. On issues concerning students' welfare, information from students can be channeled through the Dean of students' Affairs to the Vice chancellor. Matters directly concerning students' union pass through semi or quasi vertical communication which is already explained. Students are advised not to break the channels of communication or take the direct contacts they maintain with individual lecturers and other staff for granted in official situations.

It is true that it is not everything that will be put into writing but every sensitive matter and any issue that may generate controversy must be committed to writing. Every information from the Management to a student is communicated in writing through the student's Head of Department but general information to all students or a set of students is usually passed through circulars. Students are therefore advised to always read circulars.

Communication among Students

A great deal of the communication here is informal in the sense that it is based on unofficial issues. Communication among students is mainly oral except when formal invitations for people to attend activities are issued by Students' Union Associations. The few instances of vertical communication among students involve students' union officials writing to students and receiving feed-back; or complaints from them. Written communication is important because it is a permanent record of transaction and could be tendered in a court as a concrete evidence if the need arises.

While communicating with one another, what you should note is your choice of words for the communication act. Often, people are offended not by *WHAT* was said but by *HOW* it was said. Consequently, the encoder in a communication situation should choose words carefully so as to achieve effective communication and avoid misrepresentation.

Conclusion

In the university system, external communication is important because it is part of what will enable it to achieve its set goals. No matter the pattern of communication adopted, encoders and decoders should be considerate of other people's feelings, use appropriate words, avoid rumour mongering, rely on only official information, accept the limitations of their positions and not envy those in higher positions because they could be in such high positions in future. Students should adhere strictly to the formal channels of communication throughout their period of studentship. Once they are in doubt of the line of action to take in any situation, they should seek advice from appropriate officers. They should not go to those who may advise them wrongly.

Recommendation

To achieve effective communication and enhanced productivity in a university system, staff and students should be given effective orientations on organizational communication before assuming duties or beginning studies as the case may be since effective communication is the undisputed SOUL of any organization.

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