



Communication strategies for municipal success: Insights from KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract: This scientific article explores the impact of effective communication on employee performance within a municipal context. The study investigates whether improved communication with employees can enhance their performance and productivity. It assesses the role of idea sharing in fostering openness among municipal employees and examines the effects of regular feedback on their performance. The research employs a mixed-method approach, utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods. Data was collected in Ubuhlebezwe Municipality, with a sample of 80 respondents selected through simple random sampling. Qualitative data were gathered from ten employees in Ray Nkonyeni Municipality via a convenience sampling method. The study findings indicate that effective communication plays a pivotal role in positively influencing employee performance within municipal settings, acting as a catalyst for improvement. However, the success of such communication hinges on the effectiveness and accessibility of communication channels. The study offers several recommendations for municipal managers and department heads, including the strategic use of effective communication, valuing employee opinions regardless of their positions, and involving employees in decision-making processes, particularly during policy formulation. Additionally, ensuring municipal employees have adequate



resources to fulfil their daily duties is crucial, as inadequate resources can lead to poor performance and a communication breakdown. Providing regular and honest feedback to employees about their strengths and weaknesses is also recommended to enhance performance and productivity, as a lack of communication can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation of information.

Keywords: communication, communication strategies, productivity, South Africa

1. Introduction

The general view of communication is that it is the giving, receiving or exchanging of information, opinions or ideas so that the message is completely understood by everybody involved. This exchange can be achieved using one or more of the five types of communication, which are verbal, non-verbal, written, and listening, as well as visual (Willkomm, 2018).

While many studies have examined communication between municipalities and the communities they serve, these seem to be focused on policy communication to citizens, with other research focused on employees and enhanced job satisfaction or service delivery. Recent South African research in this regard includes Jarvis (2016), who investigated whether service delivery could be improved at a local municipality through enhancing policy communication. Furthermore, communication was determined as a significant factor in a municipal case study by Khoza (2019), who investigated factors influencing job satisfaction. Another example is Worku (2020), with a critical examination of municipal service quality, where communication was found to be critical in clearly described job descriptions that were significantly associated with employee performance. However, this study investigates whether effective communication acts as a catalyst for employee performance within selected municipalities.

The importance for an organisation to improve employee skills and abilities is highlighted by Obiageli, Uzochukwu and Ngozi (2015: 66) because it can potentially change employee performance and contribute to organisational productivity. However, organisational objectives can only be accomplished when employees and managers practice effective communication, as it gives managers and employees a sense of direction on action to be implemented (Lewis & Reicher, 2016: 1603).

Therefore, managers are responsible for conveying accurate information, designing proper job descriptions for all employees, and creating a clear set of instructions that leaves no room for distortion. This also holds for government organisations and institutions, with the Government Communications Policy Document (SA Government 2018: 7) outlining this in detail.

This study is premised on the primary communication methods that enable management, corporate and municipal, to effectively communicate with their subordinates to perform at their full potential. It examines how effective communication is in selected municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) South Africa (SA) and whether employee performance is improved.

Flaherty *et al.* (2012: 127) stated that in today's unpredictable and changing economy, worldwide management in the business sector has been forced to rethink strategies that can sustain their organisations. Nonetheless, Odine (2015: 67) asserted that in order for the communication process to be completed successfully, the information exchanged between both parties must be understood, otherwise, the process is not practical.

Transmission of the message to employees might look uncomplicated, yet it is a procedure constantly filled with communication mistakes. Failure of smooth communication can be found where communication is supposed to be a pillar of performance, and as a result, organisations may not do well in achieving objectives. This matter seems to be a significant problem behind managers conveying perfect messages and correct information to employees regarding day-to-day duties. For response and result to be achieved once communication is undertaken, the information transmitted between managers and employees must be clearly understood.

2. Problem statement

Extant literature has shown that communication is the mainstream and a critical enabling factor in organisational success. Any organisational decision, whether strategic or operational,

cannot be made without communication of the necessary information. Most importantly, Sadia, Salleh, Kadir and Sanif (2016: 1) observed a relationship between organisational communication and employee productivity.

Despite this well-known fact, weak communication processes have been blamed globally and nationally for several productivity and employee performance shortcomings and failures. At a global level, Lovari and Valentini (2019: ch.4.4, p. 2) also added social media to the communication mix in their study of how public organisations' services and processes have been modified with technological advances and electronic media. The authors highlighted that this 'trending' communications method "is also changing relationships between PSOs, citizens, and mass media. The impact is evident in administrative procedures, data storage and management, delivery of public services, and communication with strategic publics". However, social media as a communications tool is not under study and will not be pursued.

Continuous and clear communication is a prerequisite to a successful outcome in a municipal or corporate organisational setting. In this regard, Levenson (2017) and De Kadt and Lieberman (2017) determined that although service delivery protests at the level of local municipalities are due to the inability to maintain service quality standards and expectations, communication plays a significant role in both prevention and maintenance.

South African Municipalities are mandated to achieve specific goals, as with any other organisation, in addition to Government objectives. As scholars have observed, they should use effective communication as a strategic tool to attain these. Judging by the general outcry of the country's citizens against the lack of or poor municipal service delivery, there seems to be a problem with employee performance, which ignited a desire to investigate the situation in the selected municipalities.

3. Research objectives

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- i To establish the extent to which the sharing of ideas creates openness among municipal employees within the identified municipalities in KZN.
- ii To examine whether regular feedback improves employee performance in selected KZN municipalities.
- iii To determine whether open communication channels mitigate misunderstandings between municipal management and employees at selected municipalities in KZN.
- iv To determine whether the recognition of employee opinions increases municipal employee performance at selected municipalities in KZN.

4. Literature review

This section reviews scholarly work on effective communication and employee performance and argues that effective communication acts as a catalyst in enhancing employee performance and organisational success.

Theoretical framework

Several models have been expounded to explain organisational communication, but none did so with the utmost satisfaction as the Convergence model. The Convergence communication model applies to this study because it emphasises two-way communication in an organisation to guarantee effective communication. It suits the object of this study, highlighting the need for effective communication.

The convergence models

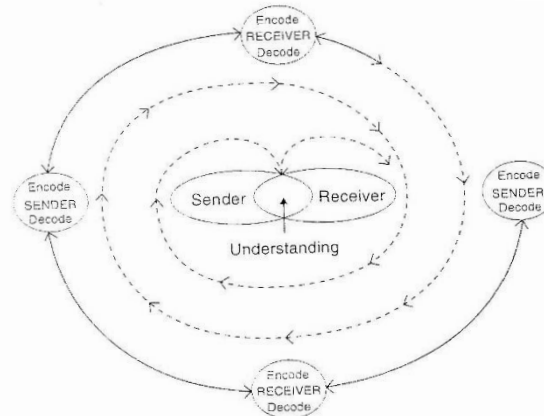
The Convergence communication model is Bormann's brainchild (1972: 396). It describes communication as a two-way process in which participants substitute positions as sender and receiver of communication, thus producing the same meaning when sending and receiving feedback. In the convergence model, the sender repeats the message to the receiver, and the receiver responds appropriately to the sender.

Fielding (2014: 4) subscribes to the notion that the model is relevant in organisational settings. The manager must send an information message to the employee that is clear and accurate through a proper communication channel. Noise can interrupt the message before the employee receives the original message. The receiver returns the feedback to the communicator to establish

whether the employee understood the message correctly. During this communication process, the employee must ensure that the results match the original idea of the message.

The diagram below depicts Fielding's convergence model of communication, illustrating exactly how the information between manager and employee in an organisation is communicated to reach an understanding of the information by both parties.

Figure 1: The convergence model of communication



Source: Fielding (2014)

The Convergence communication model applies to this study because it stresses communication as a transaction in which the sender and the receiver work together to design the meaning. There are times when people need to share the same meaning of words in order to communicate effectively. It emphasises two-way communication in an organisation to guarantee effective communication. As the manager in this case, the message communicator needs to send an accurate message and repeat the message to the receiver until the message receiver, the employee, understands the message correctly. In return, the message receiver needs to understand the message to respond effectively so that the outcomes match the original idea of the message sender. Subsequently, what needs to be done in the organisation has been well-communicated and can thus be successfully implemented.

Effective communication

According to Kreitner and Kinicki (2013: 440), communication is a human activity that binds people together, irrespective of their backgrounds. It is a method of transferring information from sender to receiver, such that the receiver understands the information to produce feedback to the sender and act according to the received message. Through communication, people can interact with culturally diverse people and communicate in different languages. Therefore, it is a cooperative activity among two or more people exchanging thoughts, ideas, facts, emotions and opinions, in which all participants in the shared task construct the meaning.

Elements of effective communication

The main elements of effective communication that emanate from the above discussion are: the sharing of ideas, regular feedback, open channels of communication and recognition of employee opinions (Brown, 2013: 17; Cacciattolo, 2015: 80; Greenberg, 2011: 323; Wuim-Pam, 2014: 49; Agarwal, 2010: 32; Hellriegel et al., 2012: 224; Hellriegel et al., 2012: 224; Salie & Schlechter, 2012:3).

i. To share ideas and information

Brown (2013: 17) stated that sharing ideas and information in the workplace occurs between two people or in a team, working together to accomplish a common goal. It is the most essential tool managers use to involve employees in decision-making. However, managers need to involve employees at the beginning of projects when sharing information about projects, as sharing information with individuals and between teams, on the one hand, unites them, forms a dialogue, and encourages collaboration. It is done through meetings and brainstorming sessions where employees exchange information and offer their perspectives and expertise to solve everyday problems. On the other hand, sharing ideas and information assists new employees with knowledge and helps them

understand how the organisation operates at a high level. This requires proper communication channels in the workplace to be in place to ensure effective communication.

Cacciattolo (2015: 80) described proper listening as a process that requires concentration and good listening skills so that employees correctly and accurately capture messages and on-the-job information their managers communicate. Managers need to listen to employees to facilitate a bi-directional flow of information, as managers with poor listening skills are more likely to threaten their working relationship with employees. Uncertainty builds aversion that may result in demotivated employees and high employee turnover. When managers listen to employees and respond positively to their inputs as part of an open-door policy, employees are more inclined to believe and trust their managers. Furthermore, trust between managers and employees increases performance. Moreover, listening helps employees accomplish their duties effectively, while clarity assists employees to maintain concentration when performing tasks (Soeker et al., 2016: 569).

ii. To provide regular feedback to employees

Greenberg (2011: 323) affirmed that feedback is a two-way communication because the sender sends a message, and the receiver responds. In an organisational context, managers provide feedback through two-way communication to their employees. With two-way communication, everyone is in the position of giving and receiving feedback, but in one-way communication, feedback on performance is delayed; employees become defensive and bored. Feedback is a crucial factor affecting employee performance, not only because of the motivational aspect embedded therein but because it increases job performance and satisfaction.

Wuim-Pam (2014: 49) mentioned that providing employees with regular feedback has two positive effects: firstly, being a way of improving performance and possibly adjusting problems emanating in an organisation and releasing a tense atmosphere. For this reason, managers need to provide feedback to assist employees in improving their performance since different employees respond differently to different approaches. Managers should thus provide information in the form of formal or informal feedback for each task accomplished.

iii. To establish channels of communication

Agarwal (2010: 32) stated that a channel of communication is a systemic approach through which people in the organisation communicate. In an organisation, the assumption of conveying a message or system of interaction from one person to another must be clearly defined, mainly where job descriptions, task performance and other operational activities are concerned.

According to Hellriegel et al. (2012: 224), communication flows in different directions in an organisation, such as an upward channel of communication, downward channel, sideways, and horizontal. All these channels form the organisation's structure and link their communication. The different styles use diverse contexts when communicating within their organisations, depending on the situation and the issues at the time or moment, such as meetings in boardrooms and staffrooms. The results depend on the message the sender sends to the receiver, whether he or she interprets or understands the message correctly, so that the outcomes and the decoding of the original message are the same as the original message.

vi. To recognise employee opinions

According to Salie and Schlechter (2012: 3), recognition of employee opinions refers to a system of acknowledging employee opinions as an individual employee or that of a team on formal and informal participation in decision-making, performance, and accomplishment of tasks that support the organisational goals, values and its objectives. Employee opinions are recognised by managers, particularly on suggestions made by employees regarding job satisfaction and performance. Salie and Schlechter (2012) suggested that recognition of employee opinions motivates workers to put in their absolute best.

Employee performance

Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011: 256) posit that employee performance is the degree to which an employee contributes towards achieving organisational goals (Hilman, 2015: 385) or the extent to which an employee participates in attaining organisational goals. Saleem and Amin (2013: 194) added that employee performance in an organisational context is the duties and tasks performed by employees efficiently and effectively to achieve organisational goals.

Thomas (2015: 8) contributed to the discourse by stating that employee performance refers to responsibilities or roles, which entails that employees have a willing attitude, the skills and the required knowledge to perform the necessary duties. In addition, Waiyaki (2017: 17) stated that employee performance is a continuous process for improving the performance of individuals by

aligning the actual performance with the desired strategic organisational goals through various means such as standard-setting, appraisal and evaluation.

Monitoring of employee performance

Activities and projects in an effective organisation are monitored continually. Achieving this requires consistent performance measurement and ongoing feedback to employees and work groups on their progress toward reaching their goals. Nzimakwe and Ntshakala (2016: 114) added that “the regulatory requirements for monitoring performance include conducting progress reviews with employees where their performance is compared against their elements and set standards.”

Monitoring is, therefore, a continuous process by which managers obtain regular feedback on the improvement made towards accomplishing organisational objectives. Employee performance monitoring is the most essential function of human resource management (HRM) because it contributes to individuals' and teams' operative decision-making to attain organisational goals. Monitoring is a primary aspect and measure of organisational growth and development (Ramukumba, 2014: 20).

Ko (2015: 66) pointed out that employee performance can be measured quarterly or annually to ensure employees are in line with organisational objectives and are constantly improving their performance. After the quarterly performance, review processes take place, and managers can provide proper feedback on areas that need improvement and identify several factors that affect employee performance, such as organisational support for career development, supervisor support, monetary benefits and training programmes. Current managers know that employee performance is the most important factor behind any organisational success (Makki *et al.*, 2015: 1008).

5. Methods

A descriptive research design was deemed the most suitable for this study as it identifies the characteristics of variables and provides facts on what has been revealed about the event or the organisation. This study employed a positivist survey strategy using a structured questionnaire. The target population comprised employees under the MM of uBuhlebezwe and Ray Nkonyeni Municipalities. A sample size of 250 was taken for the study. To minimise bias in employee selection, a systematic random sampling method was adopted. From the electronic employee list, every 10th employee was selected. The quantitative data was captured and analysed on IBM SPSS version 25. The study employed Cronbach's alpha to measure the internal consistency of the measuring items. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was pretested and reviewed with the assistance of two academics. Convergent was assessed by examining factor loadings. Factor loadings above 0.5 but preferably above 0.7 provide evidence that the indicators converge on the same latent factor (Maholtra, 2010:734)

6. Results and discussion

Sharing of ideas and openness

The following results pertain to responses to the first research objective.

Table 1: Statements on sharing of ideas and openness

Statements	Valid percent
I am involved in sharing ideas during policy formulation	84%
Openness creates a good relationship among employees	83%
Openness of management about tasks creates new ideas about the accomplishment of tasks	83%
My manager must discuss work issues openly with subordinates	79%
My involvement in decision-making allows me to open up	76%

These results (Table 1) indicate a consensus among the respondents that sharing ideas and openness are good for accelerating the information-sharing level between managers and employees. The agreement indicated that 84 percent of respondents were involved in sharing ideas during policy formulation, with 83 percent agreeing that management's openness about tasks creates new ideas regarding the accomplishment of tasks. A further 76 percent of respondents agreed that their involvement in decision-making allows them to open up,

This aligns with Brown (2013: 17), who explained that sharing ideas and openness in an organisation is the best way. Managers should involve employees in decision-making and in policy formulation to ensure organisational goals are attained effectively in the workplace. By sharing ideas and information in the workplace, employees can discuss performance matters with their managers.

Relationship between feedback provision and performance

The following results relate to how the provision of feedback by managers can improve employee performance.

Table 2: Statements on the provision of feedback and performance

Statements	Valid percent
When managers excel in providing feedback to employees about their jobs that satisfies employees	80%
Managers should organise adequate training programs to change employee performance	80%
Skilled employees can achieve employee performance effectively	79%
Providing feedback helps towards the attainment of organisational goals	77%
When employees are satisfied, their level of commitment increases	72%
Feedback improves job performance	71%

As illustrated (Table 2), regular feedback on how employees have performed resulted in an increased level of commitment (72 percent), improved employee performance (79 percent) and the accomplishment of organisational goals (77 percent).

Brian (2016: 2) also alludes to this in stating that feedback is a powerful tool in the workplace that guides employees on what they are doing to reach their goals. It is a crucial source of communication managers use to encourage employees, a tool that shapes employee's job performance and helps achieve organisational success. The provision of feedback to employees by managers is imperative as it assists them in correcting small mistakes before they escalate. Feedback prevents tension between managers and employees (Ajjawi *et al.* 2017: 136).

Open channels of communication and employee performance

The following results pertain to the third research objective the study aimed to establish.

Table 3: Statements on open channels of communication and performance

Statements	Valid percent
Clear channels of communication regarding information from managers about tasks can reduce misunderstanding	84%
The excellent relationship I have with my manager eliminates misunderstanding	74%
I can approach my supervisor on any issues that concern me	72%
Open channels of communication change employee attitudes towards managers	72%
Open channels of communication increase job performance	66%
Open channels of communication improve commitment	65%

The results (Table 3) show agreement among the respondents that open channels of communication reduce misunderstandings (84 percent), improve job performance (66 percent agreement) and commitment (65 percent) and change employee attitudes towards managers (72 percent).

This echoes the findings by Agarwal (2010: 32), who posited that open communication channels is a systemic method through which people in an organisation communicate. They convey messages from one person to another, a system of interaction that clearly defines task performance, other operational activities and information. Channels of communication channel the information either downwards, upwards, horizontally or sideways to reduce incorrect interpretations and misunderstandings between the managers and the employees.

Recognition of employee opinions

The results below pertain to the fourth research objective of this study.

Table 4: Statements on recognition of employee opinions

Statements	Valid percent
My opinion is valued by my manager	84%
Recognition of employees can change perceptions	81%
The recognition of employees by managers promotes job involvement and commitment	79%
Excellent and creative opinions can create new job designs for employees	79%
Being recognised by managers improves my commitment to the organisation	78%
When the managers recognise an employee's opinions, their level of trust and honesty increases	78%
Employee's good opinions can play an essential role in decision-making in an organisation	78%

The results (Table 4) indicate that the respondents were overwhelmingly unanimous (78 percent) that recognition of employee opinions by managers in an organisation plays a crucial role during decision-making. Recognition of employee opinions promotes trust and honesty (78 percent), builds employee self-esteem and instils confidence towards their duties (79 percent).

Salie and Schlechter (2012: 3) confirmed that recognition of employee opinions is a system of acknowledging employee opinions, whether as individual employees or in teams. This is done through formal or informal ways to inspire employees to participate in decision-making. Managers in the municipality recognised and valued employee opinions (84 percent), especially on suggestions made on job satisfaction, job performance and other work-related matters within an organisation.

Testing the reliability of the scales

The reliability test was conducted on IBM SPSS version 25, to ascertain the possible limitation in the structure of the constructs. To ensure the considerable scale for reliability that guarantees consistency in measurement, the Cronbach's Alpha should be above 0.7, according to Pallant (2010: 97).

Table 5: Reliability

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha
Sharing of ideas and openness	0.848
Recognition of employee opinions	0.839
Provision of regular feedback and performance	0.829
Open channels of communication	0.766

All the constructs measured have a Cronbach's alpha above 0.7, showing the high reliability of the questionnaire.

Testing the validity of the scale

The results of the questionnaire pretest indicated that it had the potential to measure the determinants of effective communication. Items on all of the constructs had factor loadings above 0.5, indicating they converged on the same factor.

7. Conclusions

The study revealed that sharing ideas creates an open platform for employees to share knowledge and experiences. This encourages employees to own their work and fosters harmony and trust. They can then produce quality outputs and perform beyond the call of duty. According to Brown (2013: 17), knowledge sharing in an organisation fosters working relationships. This is because employees share different experiences for different jobs, enabling new employees to grow in knowledge, especially during brainstorming sessions. Subsequently, the pressure of completing work and meeting deadlines or delivery times is reduced, as engaging with knowledgeable workers in the communication process saves time.

It was established that employees value feedback, be it formal or informal, because it creates awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. Improving on weaknesses helps them improve their performance. These findings align with Král and Králová (2016: 169), who postulated that constructive feedback is vital to employees as it provides progress and performance analyses in detail, allowing employees to learn from their mistakes and build self-confidence. Furthermore, the

ability of a manager to relate well with employees promotes friendliness, giving employees the courage to be open with their manager, especially when they lack complete comprehension of how to tackle a difficult task. Hence, the manager should always ensure a two-way flow of information to avoid doubt or tentativeness (Krylova, Jolly & Philips, 2017: 196).

Communication channels create an environment where misunderstandings can be mitigated and errors timeously corrected. In the process, performance expectations are clarified, and employees come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses. It is the view of Yukl, Mahsud, Hassan and Prussia (2013: 39) that organisations adopt different styles to maintain information flow to the various organs that form work systems. The style of the communication network must be the type that is completely understandable by the entire workforce and public members in order for work productivity to yield corporate goals (Zheng, Shen & Wang, 2014: 198). A plain and transparent change management or communication strategy is needed amongst workers to function with honesty and strength (Tregidga, Milne & Kearins, 2018: 293). However, poor channels of communication affect the implementation of organisational goals and the attainment of task efficiency (Walumbwa, Hartnell & Misati, 2017: 16).

The study concludes that recognition of employee opinions provides acceptance, equality, respect and a sense of belonging. This degree of comfort results in devotion to tasks given and the desire to go the extra mile. Islam (2013: 235) believes an approach to applaud workers in an organisation is through recognition or appreciation of the effort they contribute towards the predetermined goal achievement plan. This action aims to inspire employees to be more committed to their work by exerting their talent, skills, knowledge and experience, especially where transformation requires restructuring the monumental shift in the area of administration. Therefore, organisations should accept as accurate that recognising employee opinions has positive effects on their work engagement. The study concurs with Tessema et al.'s (2013: 3) findings that recognition and reward encourage staff to be loyal and hardworking and to either work towards achieving a collective or an individual goal.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to managers of organisations, specifically Municipal Managers.

Sharing of ideas and openness

Managers should involve employees in decision-making, regardless of their positions in an organisation. They should also consider and appreciate employee opinions during the policy formulation process. Therefore, management should consider all employee opinions, irrespective of the position held in an organisation.

Provision of feedback

Managers should provide formal and informal feedback to employees regarding attaining organisational goals. This will motivate employees to improve their performance, advance their strengths and reduce their weaknesses.

Management should also provide employees with sufficient resources to perform their duties daily, as inadequate resources lead to poor performance.

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

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