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COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE OF ADMINISTRATORS: ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT FOR CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

This study looked at communication competence of administrators as in implementing change initiatives in Nigerian institutions of higher education. The study was carried out at three higher educational institutions in Ogun State. Two research hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance. Data were collected using a questionnaire tagged Communication Competence and Change Management Questionnaire. A total of 180 employees were selected from three higher educational institutions from three political zones in Ogun State. Purposive Sampling was employed as 60 subjects were selected from academic departments/sections and non-academic department/sections in each institution to form the sample. Simple random sampling was however adopted in the selection of the subjects from the strata. Data collected were analyzed using frequency counts, simple percentage and t-test. Results revealed that communication competence of school administrators have significant effect on change initiatives and outcomes in most spheres of higher educational institutions, hence departmental/unit heads with high communication competence exhibit high effectiveness in communicating change initiatives and management change process in higher educational institutions. The result recommends, among others, that school administrators should have keen appreciation of the efficacy of communication competence in managing change in their respective departments/units and where necessary, communication competence training should be instituted with a view to initiating change and managing same within an educational institution.

Keywords: *Communication Competence, Change Management, Change Outcome, Higher Education*

Introduction

Change is both necessary and inevitable for organizations and institutions to remain viable and relevant in the global economy. Academic organizations of higher education comprises and serve a great number of individuals from diverse backgrounds and roles and are constantly faced with the various demands for change to either acknowledge and embrace new learning and knowledge diffusion approaches, take advantage of technological development or re-orient members of the institution on service practices.

As educational institutions change in the way they are structured, the way they function, they constantly evaluate their practices to maintain and improve their effective functioning and building effective relationships with individuals and other institutions or organisations. The pressures for change come from all sides: globalisation, changes to the funding and

regulatory practices, doing more with less, improving the quality of student learning and the learning experience.

In many instances, tertiary institutions have no other alternative but to move with the tide regardless of their level of preparedness. Changes in tertiary institutions, according to Wong & Cheung (2009), emerge and are shaped by external (macro- level) and internal (micro-level) factors. However, Robert (2006) submits that polytechnics like colleges and universities exist in a culture of competition among institutions, among programs and among faculty. As a result, cooperation in times of change is often difficult to achieve as individuals are often more committed to their unit or, in the case of faculty to their discipline or department, then they are to their institution. Any shift of resources away from their own area is viewed as a loss to be avoided at all costs. According to Scott (2003), taking what looks like a potentially relevant, desirable, and feasible change idea and making it work in practice is by far the hardest part of the quality-improvement and innovation process for most organisations. This points to the fact that initiating, implementing and more importantly, sustaining change has become one of the most critical factors for efficient means for effective management of business and organisation.

According to Lane (2007), educational institutions (polytechnics inclusive) are characterized by conservatism in practice, goals and culture and the strength of higher education is in its effort to preserve traditional culture and value. Fullan (2001) as cited in Lane (2007) submits that any press for change in the educational institutions implies that the current situation is somehow flawed, which can trigger defensive reactions as change is a complex, unpredictable, dynamic and non-linear process. Despite the different change management models, more often, the change process cannot be precisely planned and guided and thus involves too much uncertainty for many individuals to risk.

Despite the effort involved by educational institutions in implementing change, an estimated 50-70% of change projects do not succeed in producing the intended results (Hammer and Champy, 1993) Consensus prevails that focus on issues like communication, employee empowerment and satisfaction and committed leadership are ways to enhance performance of organisational change implementation (Skordoulis, 2007).

Abudi (2012) posits that change initiatives, even the ones that seemed so simple at the start, are often complex. In the challenge of trying to manage change initiatives, we forget about the importance of communicating with those around us about the initiative, right from the very beginning all the way through implementation. Wikoff (2017) observes that with the growing conveniences of modern technology, fewer people are taking the time to talk with people face-to-face, and when they do, it's in mass audience forums which are inherently designed to only pass along information, which is a one-way communication. The question then is how can we expect our employees to execute our strategies, meet our expectations and achieve the company goals of successfully implementing change if we are not diligent and competent in communicating these change initiatives? With this in mind, the researchers took interest in the changes that occur in Nigerian higher education, and investigated the efficacy of communication competence of school administrators in achieving change initiative objectives.

Change Management and Communication Competence

Seijts and O'Farrell (2003) state that change involves risk and requires the creation of new systems. Massive change is impacting on all facets of society, creating new dimensions and great uncertainty and, the issues facing us today is how to manage such change (Bowin, 2001). The momentum of change has an impact on structures and operations within tertiary educational institutions. This requires effective managerial leadership and governance of tertiary institutions (Govender, Moodley & Parumasur, 2005).

Organizational change introduces variation of tasks given to individual employees within the organisation and as a result, the transmission of information to the employees on change initiative should be seen as an essential and integral part of the change strategies itself (Husain, 2013). Change management according to Govender, Moodley and Parumasur (2005), comprises efforts to alter the behaviour of individuals (to reduce fears or stereotypes), to increase their confidence in themselves and to make them more open, co-operative and trusting. Weick and Quinn (1999) describe organisational change as either episodic or continuous. According to them, episodic change is infrequent and sometimes radical, while continuous change may be incremental, emergent, and without end.

Gilley, Gilley and McMillan (2009) viewed change from an evolutionary viewpoint and described as transitional, transformational, or developmental. Transitional change improves the current state through minor, gradual changes in people, structure, procedures, or technology. Transformational change is often the most common form of change and it represent a fundamental, radical shift that rejects current paradigms or questions underlying assumptions and mind-sets (Kuhn, 1970 in Gilley, Gilley & McMillan, 2009). Transformational change also represents leadership-driven modifications of culture, formulation of drastically different strategy, or demands for conformity due to a merger or acquisition by a dominant company. Although transformational change is disruptive in nature, its successful execution has been identified as leading to increased competitiveness, to the extent that an organization can clearly differentiate itself (Denning, 2005). Organizations remain competitive when they support and implement continuous and transformational change (Cohen, 1999). As a result, organizational change has been the subject of much research. Many have sought to explain the fundamentals of change, how to manage change, and why change is so difficult to achieve (Gilley, Gilley. and McMillan, 2009).

Acceptance of change occurs in stages, which Rogers (2003) describes as awareness of the change, interest in the change, trial, the decision to continue or quit, and adoption of the change into one's life. Gilley, Gilley & McMillan (2009) identified five types of individuals and classified them on the basis of their general acceptance of change. These are innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Innovators thrive on change; early adopters seek challenges and generally like change; the early majority prefer to observe the impact of change on innovators and early adopters prior to making a deliberate decision to change; the late majority are skeptical, sometimes suspicious, and occasionally change only as a last resort; and laggards are traditional, steadfast resisters who often reject change completely.

Denning (2005) posits that the processes of initiating and implementing change require the use of a diverse set of communication techniques to deliver appropriate messages, solicit feedback, create readiness for change along with a sense of urgency, and motivate recipients to act. Leaders are responsible for “communicating to the organization the risks in clinging to the status quo and the potential rewards of embracing a radically different future.

With relevant role competencies, drive, motivation, enthusiasm and people management skills amongst other salient competencies, tertiary change managers should exhibit communication competence to really re-energise the system, promotes growth and creates commitment of staff to change. Goris (2007) explained that unlike mechanical systems that operate on electrical impulse, organizations are social-systems filled with different people and hence operate and function through communication. The paths for communication, according to Rowicki (1999), are as diverse as they are numerous, yet this is also the source of many problems that arise within schools. One critical area of interest is the communications that take place between educational administrators and the faculties within their institutions. Since these are the key players involved in the normal day-to-day operations of a school, their ability to effectively communicate cannot be overstated.

Leaders within an organisation serve as change agents and are expected to provide employees with abundant, relevant information with regard to impending changes, justify the appropriateness and rationale for change, address employees’ questions and concerns, and explore ways in which change might affect recipients in order to increase acceptance and participation (Green, 2004; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999).

According to (Barrett, 2002), meaningful communication informs and educates employees at all levels and motivates them to support the strategy. This is important as positive attitudes to change are vital in successful change programs (Kotter, 1996), as resistance to change is one of the biggest barriers to overcome (Husain, 2013).

An understanding of the importance of communication is significant to the success of the of any change initiative within a school system. administrators heads need to be aware that the message they convey non-verbally and in their tone or actions is just as important as the words they speak.

Communication competence is the ability to choose a communication behavior that is both appropriate and effective for a given situation (Lane, 2001). Interpersonal competency allows one to achieve their communication goals without causing the other party to lose face. Rubin (1994) categorized communication competence as competent skills for self-disclosure, empathy, social relaxation, assertiveness, interaction management, altercentrism, expressiveness, supportiveness, immediacy and environmental control. Üstüner & Kış (2014) reviewed Wiemann (1977) definition of communication competence as the ability to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he (she) may successfully accomplish his (her) own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his (her) fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation. Wiemann states that communication competence is a combination of five basic skills including affiliation/support, social relaxation, empathy, behavioral flexibility and interaction management.. Hoy and Miskel (2010) consider communication competence as a set of skills

and researches one interactant possesses. In this regard, people with communication competence are expected to be able to send messages, listen to feedback, and provide feedback well. Friedrich (1994) according to Lane (2000) suggests a more complete operationalization of communication competence as situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximize their achievement by using knowledge of self, other, context, and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances. Parks (1985) also submits that communication competence relates to the degree to which individuals perceive they have satisfied their goals in a given social situation without jeopardizing their ability or opportunity to pursue their other subjectively more important goals. They assert that communication competence must emphasize a combination of cognitive and behavioral perspectives.

The model most often used to describe competence is the component model (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984 in Lane, 2000) which includes three components: 1) knowledge, 2) skill, and 3) motivation. Knowledge simply means knowing what behavior is best suited for a given situation. Skill is having the ability to apply that behavior in the given context. Motivation is having the desire to communicate in a competent manner (Lane, 2001).

According to Lane, communication competence requires that a communicator be able to 1) recognize what communication practice is (appropriate knowledge), 2) have the ability to perform that practice (skill), and 3) want to communicate in an effective and appropriate manner (motivation).

The requirement of communication competence is not a theory about communication, but rather a model that sets the framework for what makes someone a competent communicator.

In order to be a competent communicator, one must be able to recognize which skills are necessary in a particular situation, have those skills, and be properly motivated to use those skills.

Natalya, Yuri and Natalia (2015) suggest that communication competence is a characteristic of human abilities which determine the quality of communication. It includes two more components in communication along with competence: communicative qualities of personality which characterize the development of the need for communication, relation to the method of communication and communicative competences, that is the ability to own the initiative in communication, the ability to be active, emotionally respond to the state of dialogue partners, formulate and realize their own individual program of communication, the ability to self-stimulation and mutual stimulation in communication

Statement of the Problem

Competition, technological drive, drift in operational procedure and societal demands have made organisational change to become an increasing salient issue. Changes in organisation are common and they appear at faster pace that employees are expected to be readily adaptable. In the Nigerian education sector, administrators play important roles in ensuring that institutional values, behaviours and considerations are capable of achieving the goals and objectives for facilitating effective learning and research. As a result, individuals saddled

with various responsibilities struggle seriously to activate, use and connect their knowledge in the complex, diverse and unpredictable situations in attempts to engender behavioural shift necessary for desired change. During most change processes, apparent resistance from workers usually leap in and slow down the initiative, and in worst situations, lead to death of the change initiative on the account of ineffective communication.

Higher educational institutions adopt different models for effecting change and communication is usually seen merely as one of many parts of the change process, but not as primary consideration of the process in managing change. Individuals who are in the position to persistently connect with other employees of the system only announce what the change will be and expect everybody to comply. When changes are imposed by management, heads of department and units are expected to adequately communicate for change process to any stakeholders to dispel confusion about the change, and what the objectives are and how their job will be impacted. Hence, the communication competence of the administrators saddled with the responsibility of introducing, enforcing and managing change becomes an essential ingredient in the overall change processes.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how communication competence of school administrators facilitates institutional change and serves as a mechanism in achieving change goals, communicate change to improve outcomes and consulting the indulgence of all members that change affect.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to examine the relationship between communication competence of administrators and employees attitude to change initiative and change outcome:

1. There is no significant relationship between the communication competence of school administrator and staff attitude to change initiative in higher educational institutions.
2. Communication competence of school administrators has no significant contribution to change management outcome in Nigerian higher educational institutions.

Methodology

This study examined change management efforts in higher educational institutions and the effectiveness or failure of such efforts based on the communication competence of school administrators. The study is an exploratory survey and the main instrument for data collection was questionnaire. The questionnaire was a Communication Competence and Change Management Scale which was used as an assessment survey of administrators' effectiveness in communicating and implementing change initiative in their departments/sections/units.

Communication competence of heads of department and units and change management effectiveness were assessed from the perspective of their subordinates. A total of 180 employees were selected from higher educational institutions in the three geo-political zones in Ogun State – the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State, Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta, and Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijebu-ode. Purposive Sampling was employed as 25 subjects selected from academic departments/sections and 35 from non-academic department/sections from each institution were decided upon for sample selection. Simple random sampling was however adopted in the selection of the subjects from the strata. 172 of the administered survey scale were completed and returned by the respondents. This was 95.5% of the questionnaire administered.

Results

Table 1: Perception of staff towards communication style of unit heads about change initiative

Perception of communication	Freq.	Percentage
Favourable	80	46.5
Unfavourable	92	53.5
Total	172	100

Table 1 reveals the perception of the staff in the different sections on the communication style of the superiors on change initiatives. An aggregate of 46.5% were not disposed favourably to the communication methods, style, attitude, approach to information management and superior-subordinate relationship of their unit or departmental heads. 53.5% perceived the methods, style and approach of their boss as good to generate required attitude from other staff.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant relationship between the communication competence of school administrator and staff attitude to change initiative in higher educational institutions.

Table 2

Variables	Count	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Communication competence	172	2.880	0.3755	1.9375	3.5000
Staff Attitude	172	2.4657	0.5198	1.4286	3.5714

For the above, the variance, we have

Table 3

Source	DF	SS	MS	F-value	P-value
	3	12.3683	6.1826	66.99	0.006
Res. Error	169	16.6120	0.0923		
Total	172	29.9772			

Test Statistics: F-ratio @ $\alpha = 0.05$

Decision Criterion: Reject the hypothesis if P-value is less than 0.05

The result above shows that F-ratio = 66.99, P-value < 0.05, then the test is strongly significant as P-value = 0.000. Therefore, we reject the hypothesis and uphold that there is significant relationship between communication competence of unit and departmental heads and the attitude of their staff towards change initiatives.

Hypothesis 2

Communication competence of school administrators has no significant contribution to change management outcome in Nigerian higher educational institutions

Table 4

Predictor	Coefficient	SE coeff.	T-value	P-value
Constant	0.4154	0.3190	1.30	0.196
Communication	0.7908	0.0811	9.75	0.000
Relationship	0.1228	0.0718	1.71	0.000

For the above, the variance shows:

Table 5

Source	DF	SS	MS	F-value	P-value
	2	9.3504	4.6752	48.08	0.002
Res. Error	170	10.8904	0.0972		
Total	172	20.2408			

Test Statistics: F-ratio @ $\alpha = 0.05$

Decision Criterion: Reject the hypothesis if P-value is less than 0.05

Table 5 shows that F-ratio = 48.08, P-value < 0.05, then the test is strongly significant as P-value of 0.002. is less than 0.05. Hence, we reject the hypothesis and uphold that

communication competence of school administrators has contribution to change management outcome in higher educational institutions.

Discussion

The survey measured the staff perception of the communication competence of their superiors, their communication style, interpersonal relationships, approach to change information and the relationship with staff attitude towards change initiative and change outcome.

The result revealed a significant relationship between communication competence of unit heads and attitudinal disposition of subordinates towards change initiatives and their purpose. The result indicated that the competence of supervisors goes a long way in igniting the commitment of their subordinate towards the purpose of the change initiative.

The result revealed that the communication competence of school administrators have significant contribution to the achievement of change purpose. It revealed that effective communication and relationship approaches of the superiors contribute to positive or negative change outcome. This affirms that the communication competence of the heads of department affect their staff awareness of change initiative, create readiness in them and engender their commitment towards the change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Competency in communication is a gap in change management of administrators, and this creates some problems within the system, especially when change process is being undergone. Good communication competence of the heads of departments and unit heads play significant role in generating positive attitudes of their subordinates towards change. It was found to be significantly important in achieving the desired result from change management exercise.

It is recommended that organizations in general and higher educational institutions in particular should have keen appreciation of the importance of communication in change management. Heads of departments in academic institutions should look inward to their leadership influence on their subordinates, create a free atmosphere where participatory management could be used to earn the commitment of their subordinate to change agenda and to facilitate adequate achievement of the desired change objective and outcome.

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