

Internal Communication and Morale in a Natural Resources Public Organization

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Abstract

This research examined perceptions of employees of a natural resources public organization. The employees had positive perceptions of the organization and the importance of internal communications, but evaluations were not high for morale, awareness of issues in the organization, and internal communications effectiveness and consistency. There were positive correlations between the constructs related to internal communications and the constructs related to morale. It was recommended that an organizational structure that fosters positive internal communications be promoted. It was also recommended that promoting informal relationships between organizational units to improve communications. For research, it was recommended that the link between internal communications and organizational climate continue to be studied to unravel the relationship between the constructs. Interventions to improve internal communications of intact groups and organizations should occur. Research should also address how being a public organization affects the ability to foster positive internal communications and organizational climate.

Keywords

Internal communication, morale, public organizations, employees

Introduction & Literature Review

Effects of Internal Communications in Organizations

Internal communications are important to organizations. Schein (2010) considered a “commitment to full and open task-relevant communication” (p. 369) a central component of learning organizations. Organization members have to be able to communicate with each other effectively in order for the organization to operate effectively and efficiently (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2010).

This ability to communicate and share information is considered a key component of organizational success (Clifton et al., 2004; Smith, 2008). Kraut, Fish, Root, and Chalfonte (1990) stated that informal communications are necessary for coordination in organizations. Members of an organization need to use a common language in order to communicate effectively and reduce uncertainty and anxiety within the organization, which helps the organization work toward its goals (Schein, 2010).

In the case of internal communications, it is perception of communication effectiveness that matters. Taylor (1984) suggested that employee perceptions of internal communications were more important than objective measures of communication quality. If there is not an environment of open communications, individuals might resist sharing critical information, adversely affecting the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Along with these broader impacts on the organization, internal communications can be particu-

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larly important for the effective leadership of organizations. Pichault (1993; as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2008) stated understanding of an organization's internal communication structure is necessary to understand the internal politics of the organization. Bolman and Deal (2008) consider it necessary for leaders to be effective politically within organizations.

Another aspect of internal communications that is important to organizational leaders is the effects of what they are communicating to other employees. Leaders' own actions within an organization communicate their expectations for employees (Moore, 1995). Communication behaviors are a significant component of how leaders embed and transmit organizational culture (Schein, 2010). Internal communications also offer an avenue for organizations' leaders to "communicate their strong belief in people" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 362) to improve morale.

Affecting Internal Communications of Organizations

Internal communications are, of course, not static within organizations. Boyle and Kochinda (2004) found that an intervention targeted toward collaborative communication was able to improve the communication skills of leaders, with the leaders also reporting that their leadership skills improved at the same time. The intervention lasted 23.5 hours, spread out over an 8-month time period in 2- to 4-hour sessions.

Wood (1999) made suggestions to improve internal communications of organizations: ensure that communications are two-way, use face-to-face communication when practical, address the clarity of communications, "understand how your employees listen" (p. 148), and create a climate of trust so information can be shared freely.

Beyond recommendations for specific actions, such as those made by Wood (1999), organizational structure can affect internal communications (McPhee, 1985). It is important to understand the effects of organizational structure on internal communications because the advent of written communications has allowed the effects of structure to last longer and reach further (McPhee, 1985). How focused organizations are on structure versus achievement can affect the impact of internal communications. Garnett, Marlowe, and Pandey (2008) found that increasing communications in organizations focused on achievement increased performance. On the other hand, increasing communications in organizations focused on structure did not improve performance.

The structure that is in place can improve or hurt communications through the implicit and explicit limitations made on what individuals do and how they interact with each other (McPhee, 1985). Tourish and Robson (2006) stated that formal and informal mechanisms were in place to limit critical upward communications (CUC) within organizations. Leadership in organizations create reasons why CUC is not occurring, such as justification that things are going well or deferring blame to non-leaders (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Non-leaders, in turn, justify not providing CUC by stating leaders do not really want the feedback and not want to be punished for CUC (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Non-leaders may also not engage in CUC because they want to please leaders (McPhee, 1985). Tourish and Robson recommended increasing informal communications between members of different levels of the organization to improve CUC.

This recommendation to increase informal communications within organizations is supported by other research. Krackhardt and Stern (1988) stated friendships, a type of informal communication, do not naturally occur between organizational units, but these between-unit friendships can have a positive benefit in the event of organizational crises. For organizations that depend on different units to work together, friendships that cross between the units benefit the organization. Similarly, Hinds

and Mortenson (2005) found that spontaneous communications, another type of informal and unplanned communication between organizational members, mediated the conflicts caused because of geographically distributed units in an organization. Spontaneous communications reduced conflict because it improved shared identity and shared context of organizational members in the different units. If the organization's members have a shared identity, the organization can be more confident in its actions (de Chernatony, 2001).

Creating shared vision and identity are important components of transformational leadership (Bass, 1990). Bass reported that the outcomes of transformational leadership lead to higher outcomes from the leaders themselves and the employees they oversee. An important consideration in the development of transformational leaders is that the employees will emulate leaders: if the leader exhibits transformational qualities, the employees will be more likely to exhibit transformational qualities, leading to more transformational leadership within the organization (Bass, 1990).

Along with these examples of the benefits of informal communications between different organizational units, there is work showing that organizational members perceive benefits of informal communications. Johnson, Donohue, Atkin, and Johnson (1994) reported differences between employee perceptions of formal and informal communications. Compared to formal communication, informal communications were reported as more salient and more useful, but formal communications were evaluated more highly in terms of comprehension and credibility. Organizational members are adopting technology to reduce communication formality. Cameron and Webster (2005) found that instant messaging was being adopted because organizational members viewed other communication channels, such as the telephone, as too formal. Instant messaging was also viewed as more private when compared to conversations that could be heard by others nearby.

Internal Communications & Morale

Morale affects organizational success. Parker et al. (2003) showed that overall work climate, which morale is a component of (Churchill, Ford, & Walker, 1976), is related to individual attitudes and performance. The importance of employee morale is also evident in the fact that employees are often the face of organizations because they are the ones interacting with members of the public (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). The public can perceive when employees are not satisfied (Schneider & Bowen, 1985). The organization benefits from satisfied employees through the positive interactions the employees have with members of the public (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009).

Organizational climate and internal communications are related. Hinds and Mortenson's (2005) work showing that spontaneous communication mediated conflict through increasing shared identity and context is an example of this. Carrière and Bourque (2009) showed the communication satisfaction mediated the relationship between communication practices and organizational satisfaction. Similarly, Gould-Williams (2007) showed negative communication exchanges increased stress, reduced motivation, and increased employee attrition, whereas positive exchanges were linked to improved attitudes and improved the likelihood that employees were engaged in work-related activities that benefited the organization without providing immediate benefits to the employees.

Quality of information being shared has been shown to be a predictor for an employee's trust in coworkers and leaders (Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, 2009). The researchers stated that the relationship between trust and communications was complex because trust is necessary for open communications to be possible, and if employees do not perceive open communications within the organization, it could hurt their trust in the organization. This effect of the organizational environment on internal

communications is evident in work by Smith (2008), who showed that defensive environments hindered internal communications, while supportive environments improved internal communications.

Public Organizations

Public organizations are funded by the public and mandated through government and political processes (Moore, 1995). Public organizations are legitimized by providing public value, which occurs when the public is satisfied with the product or service provided by the organization (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995). Because of accountability through the political process, public organizations need to be successful in creating public value to ensure they continue to be supported (Butler & Collins, 1995).

Public organizations can face more difficulties than private organizations because public organizations are generally considered more complicated. Because public organizations depend on political support, the first of these complications is that public organizations must have approval from everyone, not only those who are immediately served by the organization (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995). Second, public organizations often have multiple roles and identities (Hoggett, 2006; Wæraas, 2008). Public organizations risk the losing credibility if they do not represent the multiplicity of their roles (Wæraas, 2010). Given that organizations are more effective when members have a shared identity (de Chernatony, 2001; Hinds & Mortenson, 2005; Schein, 2010), having multiple roles could hinder public organizations' ability to create this shared identity.

Purpose & Hypotheses

Internal communications are important for organizational success because they help organizations operate more effectively and efficiently, help organizations avoid and deal with difficulties, and are a central component of how expectations and organizational culture are shared (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Clifton et al., 2004; Schein, 2010). Internal communications, though, can vary between organizations based on the structure of the organization and organizational climate (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988; McPhee, 1985; Tourish & Robson, 2006). It is important to understand how perceptions of communication interact with perceptions of the organization and morale within the organization. This study seeks to help understand the implications of internal communications in the broader environment of the organization.

The organization in this study was a state public organization with geographically distributed units. The purpose of this study was to address employee perceptions of the organization, internal communications, awareness of issues within the organization, and employee morale. Based on the literature, four hypotheses were tested:

- H1: A positive relationship exists between perceptions of internal communications and perceptions of the organization.
- H2: A positive relationship exists between perceptions of internal communications and perceptions of morale.
- H3: A positive relationship exists between perceptions of awareness of issues within the organization and perceptions of the organization.
- H4: A positive relationship exists between perceptions of awareness of issues within the organization and perceptions of morale.

Methods

Survey methodology was used for this study. The target population for the study was all full-time employees of the organization ($N = 1175$). The director of the organization sent the employees an e-mail soliciting their participation in the study. A reminder e-mail was also sent. The final sample size was 593 (50.4%), which does not include incomplete responses. Because the e-mails soliciting participation were sent from the director of the organization, it was not possible to ensure contacts completely adhered to the recommendations of Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009) to send successive e-mail waves until the number of new responses was no longer great enough to warrant further contacts.

To address the potential for non-response error, early respondents were compared to late respondents (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001). Early respondents were operationally defined as participants who completed the questionnaire before the reminder e-mail was sent, and late respondents were participants who completed the questionnaire after the reminder e-mail was sent. There was not a statistically significant difference between responses of early and late respondents, indicating the results can be generalized beyond the sample to the entire sampling frame, which included all full-time employees of the organization.

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used to address the purpose and hypotheses of this study. The questionnaire addressed employee perceptions of the organization, employee morale within the organization, the internal communications of the organization, and awareness of issues within the organization. Five-point scales were used for all four sections. The instrument was evaluated by researchers familiar with survey methodology and individuals within the organization for face and content validity. Reliability was assessed post hoc using Cronbach's alpha. Reliability scores were as follows: employee perceptions of the organization was .90, perceptions of morale was .83, perceptions of internal communications was .68, and perceptions of awareness of issues within the organization was .77. A .80 reliability score is more ideal (Norcini, 1999), but .70 is considered acceptable (Kline, 1998).

Grand means were calculated for each construct. Pearson product-moment correlations were used to analyze the relationships between constructs. These correlations were used to test the hypotheses with statistical significance set at .05, a priori. Davis's (1971) conventions were used to describe the correlations (as cited in Miller, 1998): negligible was .01-.09, low was .10-.29, moderate was .30-.49, substantial was .50-.69, .70-.99 was very high, and 1.0 was perfect.

Findings

The employees had favorable perceptions of the organization (Table 1). In particular, the employees believed the organization was important ($M = 4.56$) and beneficial ($M = 4.51$). Though still favorable, the employees' evaluation of the organization was lower in regards to the organization being ethical ($M = 3.97$), positive ($M = 4.09$), and good ($M = 4.19$). The employees' self-reported morale was relatively neutral ($M = 2.89$), but their perceptions of overall morale in the organization were slightly low ($M = 2.21$; Table 2). The employees perceived that internal communications were important for the organization ($M = 4.78$), but they had neutral evaluations of the effectiveness ($M = 3.30$) and consistency ($M = 3.33$) of the organization's internal communications (Table 3). The employees believed they were aware of issues within their own organizational units ($M = 3.58$) and that their supervisors were aware of state-level organizational issues ($M = 3.70$), but they did not believe they were aware of issues outside of their organizational units ($M = 2.61$) or that state-level employees were aware of issues within the organizational units ($M = 2.56$; Table 4).

Table 1
Employee perceptions of the organization.

	Scale					<i>M</i>
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	
Bad-Good ^a	3.0	4.7	12.7	30.0	49.7	4.19
Unethical-Ethical ^b	4.2	6.9	18.2	29.1	41.6	3.97
Unimportant-Important ^c	1.2	1.9	6.6	19.7	70.5	4.56
Not Beneficial-Beneficial ^d	1.1	2.5	8.1	20.9	67.5	4.51
Negative-Positive ^e	3.1	5.6	16.7	28.6	46.0	4.09
Grand Mean						4.26

Note. Due to rounding, totals may be slightly above or below 100%.

^aScale ranged from 1 = Bad to 5 = Good.

^bScale ranged from 1 = Unethical to 5 = Ethical.

^cScale ranged from 1 = Unimportant to 5 = Important.

^dScale ranged from 1 = Not Beneficial to 5 = Beneficial.

^eScale ranged from 1 = Negative to 5 = Positive.

Table 2
Self-reported employee morale and perceptions of overall morale.

	Scale					<i>M</i>
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	
Your morale	22.0	20.0	20.3	21.9	15.8	2.89
Overall morale	32.4	32.6	18.8	13.9	2.2	2.21
Grand Mean						2.55

Note. Morale coded as 1 = Low, 2 = Slightly Low, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Slightly High, 5 = High. Due to rounding, totals may be slightly above or below 100%.

Table 3
Employee perceptions of the organization's internal communications.

	Scale					<i>M</i>
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	
Effectiveness ^a	13.1	17.9	12.2	39.1	17.7	3.30
Consistency ^b	11.1	18.6	15.7	35.5	19.1	3.33
Importance ^c	0.7	1.5	2.6	9.5	85.7	4.78
Grand Mean						3.80

Note. Due to rounding, totals may be slightly above or below 100%.

^aCoded as 1 = Ineffective, 2 = Slightly Ineffective, 3 = Neither Ineffective nor Effective, 4 = Slightly Effective, and 5 = Effective.

^bCoded as 1 = Inconsistent, 2 = Slightly Inconsistent, 3 = Neither Inconsistent nor Consistent, 4 = Slightly Consistent, and 5 = Consistent.

^cCoded as 1 = Unimportant, 2 = Slightly Unimportant, 3 = Neither Unimportant nor Important, 4 = Slightly Important, and 5 = Important.

Table 4
Employee perceptions of awareness of issues within the organization.

	Scale					M
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	
How aware are you of organization issues in your unit?	8.7	17.3	9.5	35.9	28.6	3.58
How aware are you of organization issues outside your unit?	27.1	22.7	18.9	25.2	6.1	2.61
How aware do you believe your supervisor is of state-level organization issues?	8.5	13.7	12.5	30.1	35.2	3.70
How aware do you believe state-level employees are of unit issues?	29.4	26.0	13.1	21.6	9.9	2.56
Grand Mean						3.11

Note. Awareness coded as 1 = Unaware, 2 = Slightly Unaware, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Slightly Aware, and 5 = Aware. Due to rounding, totals may be slightly above or below 100%.

Table 5 shows the correlations between the perceptions of internal communications and perceptions of the organization and morale, and between perceptions of awareness of issues within the organization and perceptions of the organization and morale. There were substantial correlations between perceptions of internal communications and perceptions of the organization ($r = .55$) and between perceptions of awareness of issues within the organization and perceptions of morale ($r = .51$). There were moderate correlations between perceptions of internal communications and perceptions of morale ($r = .48$) and perceptions of awareness of issues within the organization and perceptions of the organization ($r = .48$). All of the correlations were statistically significant, therefore all null hypotheses were rejected. This indicates there are positive relationships between perceptions of internal communications and perceptions of the organization and morale, and it indicates there are positive relationships between perceptions of awareness within the organization and perceptions of the organization and morale.

Table 5
The relationship between perceptions of internal communications and morale and overall organizational perceptions.

	Perceptions of the Organization	Perceptions of Morale
Perceptions of Internal Communications	.55*	.48*
Perceptions of Awareness of Issues	.48*	.51*

Note. Correlations are based on the grand means calculated in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4.

* $p < .05$

Conclusions

The employees had positive perceptions of the organization, particularly for the organization being important and beneficial. Despite these positive perceptions of the organization, the participants had slightly below neutral levels of self-reported morale. Of particular interest was the difference between the employees' perceptions of their own morale and their perceptions of overall morale. The employees perceived overall morale to be lower than it actually was when looking at self-reported

morale. This lack of positive morale could be hurting the organization's ability to be successful (Parker et al., 2003). In particular, the lack of positive morale could spill over into employees' interactions with members of the public, harming the organization through poor interactions (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Schneider & Bowen, 1985).

The employees believed internal communications were important, but they did not view the current internal communications of the organization as effective or consistent. These poor evaluations of internal communication could be detrimental to the organization because perceptions of internal communication could be more important than objective evaluations of internal communication (Taylor, 1984). Given internal communication's importance to organizational success, the lack of positive perceptions could be hurting the organization and its effectiveness (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Clifton et al., 2004; Kraut et al., 1990; Schein, 2010).

Awareness of organizational issues also led to discrepancies. While the employees believed they were aware of issues within their organizational units, they did not believe they were aware of issues outside of their organizational unit. They also did not believe that state-level employees were aware of unit-level issues, but they did believe that their supervisors were aware of state-level issues. This lack of between-unit awareness of issues could be caused by a lack of informal communications between units. If this is the case, it could harm the organization, given the positive benefits between-unit informal communications have on mitigating problems of shared identity and context for geographically distributed organizations, as well as aiding during organizational crises (Hinds & Mortenson, 2005; Krackhardt & Stern, 1988).

The results of the study also indicated there were positive relationships between perceptions of internal communications and perceptions of the organization and morale, as well as positive relationships between perceptions of awareness of issues and perceptions of the organization and morale. These results are in line with past research linking internal communications to overall organizational climate and leadership skills (Bass, 1990; Boyle & Kochinda, 2004; Carrière & Bourque, 2009; Hinds & Mortenson, 2005; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Smith, 2008; Thomas et al., 2009).

There are limitations to the study. The first is the correlational nature of the study. While the correlations indicate there is a relationship between the constructs, the direction of the relationships cannot be determined in this study. The second limitation is that this study looked at employees of one state public organization. Because of this results may not be applicable to other organizations.

Recommendations

An environment promoting quality internal communications should be promoted. Internal communications are an important component of organizational success, and the results of this study and prior research indicate that internal communications are linked to organizational climate, which is also an important component of organizational success, and leadership skills (Boyle & Kochinda, 2004; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Clifton et al., 2004; Kraut et al., 1990; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Schein, 2010; Smith, 2008).

As for specific actions for organizations to take, Wood's (1999) recommendations would be a good starting point: ensuring two-way communication, use face-to-face communications when feasible, address clarity of communications, "understand how your employees listen" (p. 148), and create a climate of trust so information can be shared freely. More broadly, the following should be assessed: organizational structure, organizational climate, and informal communications. The example set by Boyle and Kochinda (2004) of utilizing an intervention to improve the leadership skills of organiza-

tional leaders could be advantageous for organizations to implement to help improve internal communications and morale in organizations.

Organizational structure affects internal communications by impacting how employees interact with each other, and organizational structure can have lasting effects due to the ability of current communication means to be stored (McPhee, 1985). In particular, organizational structure has the possibility to explicitly or implicitly limit the ability of employees to share critical information with organizational leaders (McPhee, 1985; Tourish & Robson, 2006). For public organizations, it is important to remember the results of Garnett et al. (2008) that showed increasing internal communications could be positive or detrimental depending on whether or not the organization focused on achievement or maintaining structure. Though internal communications were considered important, they were not positively evaluated by employees in the current study. Increasing internal communications may be a solution, but it might not be if the organization is more focused on maintaining structure than it is on achievement. Considering the importance of open communications for organizational success (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2010), a structure that fosters task-relevant communications should be promoted.

This study specifically addressed morale, but morale is a component of organizational climate (Churchill et al., 1976). Awareness should be present for the organizational climate's effects on organizational success (Hinds & Mortenson, 2005; Parker et al., 2003). Awareness should also be present for the effects organizational climate and internal communications have on each other (Carrière & Bourque, 2009; Gould-Williams, 2007; Hinds & Mortenson, 2005; Smith, 2008; Thomas et al., 2009). More specifically, it is necessary to be mindful that there could be a reciprocal relationship between internal communications and organizational climate. While positive internal communications could aid organizational climate (Gould-Williams, 2007; Thomas et al., 2009), a poor organizational climate can limit open internal communications (Smith, 2008). For organizations that have employees who interact directly with the public, organizational climate becomes especially important. If the employees are not satisfied, employees' dissatisfaction could spill over to interactions with the public, adversely affecting the organization (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Schneider, 1985)

Informal communications is another area that should be considered to aid organizations. For the current organization, it is geographically distributed, which can hurt in developing shared identity and context for employees (Hinds & Mortenson, 2005). Increasing informal communications could mitigate the detrimental effects of being a geographically distributed organization (Hinds & Mortenson, 2005). An issue indicated by this study was a lack of awareness of issues between organizational units. If the success of the organization is dependent on between-unit cooperation, increases in the informal communications between units could be advantageous (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988).

For researchers, the links between internal communications and organizational climate should continue to be studied. While it is clear that internal communications and organizational climate are related, that relationship is complex (Carrière & Borque, 2009; Gould-Williams, 2007; Hinds & Mortenson, 2005; Smith, 2008; Thomas et al., 2009). It is also clear that both constructs are related to organizational success (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Clifton et al., 2004; Kraut et al., 1990; Parker et al., 2003; Schein, 2010). Given the complexity of the relationship between the two constructs and the importance of the constructs to organizational success, research should continue to be conducted to unravel how the constructs can be improved within organizations. With the ability of leaders to affect organizations through internal communications, research should address how organizational leaders can foster both positive internal communications and organizational climate (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Moore, 1995; Schein, 2010).

A specific line of research that should be pursued relates to the positive outcomes in the Boyle and Kochinda (2004) study. Research should be conducted in other organizational contexts to better understand and improve internal communications of intact groups and organizations considering the implications an intervention could have on organizational success and the improvement of leaders' skills.

Research should also continue in this area to address implications for public organizations, given that public organizations can be considered more complex than private organizations (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995; Wæraas, 2008). The complication from the multiplicity of roles could be hurting the ability to foster shared identities among employees in public organizations (de Chernatony, 2001; Hinds & Mortenson, 2005; Schein, 2010). Another added complexity is that public organizations are often geographically distributed, which can lead to more conflicts than organizations with members in the same location (Hinds & Mortenson, 2005). It needs to be understood how these complexities affect the ability to foster positive internal communications and organizational climates in public organizations.

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