Perceptions of internal communication, as experienced by employees within the healthcare sector Organizational Communication; Internal Communication

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The project group has been a collaboration of the group internally, as well as external collaboration with local individuals on Aruba and lecturers from the Netherlands, all with the same purpose in mind; contribute to Aruba's knowledge database and hopefully contributing to the greater good of the Island. I am grateful for being part of the UA-UCU exchange research collaboration project. It has been an unforgettable and enriching experience, especially resulting from the different disciplinary backgrounds of the project members. Additionally, the project has complimented my thesis development trajectory by keeping me motivated and it has also given me extra deadlines to keep me on track.

It was heart-warming to receive support for research from the local organizations and all individuals who were involved in one way or another. In the same trend, I found it pleasant to see sincere interest to conduct research on our little paradise called Aruba, from students who have previously never lived here before. The feeling I got was as follows: we put our differences aside, respected each other's cultures, gave each other the respect and time to voice our thoughts and opinions and magic happened. Even if our research may seem insignificant to some, each research is important and means a tremendous amount to us.

This experience has taught me the importance of investing time in the preparations for conducting research, in this case, research for a bachelor thesis. I have also learned so many things from each individual who has been involved in this project – from planning, networking, sharing our personal values and openly discussing our challenges in conducting research. We have bonded as a group and I for one have developed as an individual, academically and personally. I have become more hopeful that Aruba is on the verge of positive change. There are so many individual initiatives to improve our waste management, energy consumption, restore our ecosystems, preserve our culture, improve communication in organizations, implement environmental policies and be conscious of the role language plays in our every day lives, especially so relating to youngsters.

An important, personal lesson that I will take from this collaboration is that theory does not always translate well into reality. Before commencing on this research collaboration, I wrote my research proposal and started making a general planning of what needed to be done by when. Unfortunately, the writing process got delayed a bit, as did the scheduling of interviews. As a result of this, the research will be concluded after the initial set date. However, this should not be experienced as a major set back, rather as a minor challenge and moment to show patience, perseverance and determination. This lesson may also serve as a lesson for others – preparation, research and analysis take dedication and time.

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1. Introduction

Communication is a central concept in all human relations and also in organizations as human beings operate them. Employees in organizations often communicate using specific work-related terms and communication styles and methods in order to communicate as efficiently as possible. This paper focuses on internal communication, specifically vertical- and horizontal communication. The aim of the research is to uncover how employees of all levels in an Aruban healthcare organization perceive the vertical and horizontal communication. In this paper I describe the theoretical backgrounds, the research design and the expected results for this project.

The motive for researching vertical and horizontal communication within a healthcare center is the importance of the good functioning of a healthcare center in any society. An analysis will be made to compare the perception of managers with the perceptions of the employees in the operational core. The perceptions are defined as attitudes or opinions about a subject or occurrence (Burleson, 2014). The aim is to find out if their perceptions of internal communication are similar or differing between the hierarchical positions and the possible reasons for this. The results of this research will be valuable to the health care center, because communication is an essential part of service and care. Internal communication enables the health care center to share important information with internal members of the organization and serves as a factor contributing to sustainability of the organization,

providing a high level of care, service and internal functioning and accessibility.

Vertical communication refers to predominantly formal communication between top-management (strategic-apex) and other employees (operational core), meaning top-down and bottom-up directions of communication. The strategic apex of the health care center can be divided into the managers and the operational core. The operational core of the health care center can be divided into several functions, both supportive and core staff such as doctors and caregivers. In contrast, horizontal communication refers to informal communication between employees on the same level of the organizational structure. Additionally, there are many different aspects, which influence (organizational) communication such as: culture, language, social and organizational structures (Gaur, 2006).

The following central research question has been formulated in order to unveil the general perception of internal communication within the health care center, as experienced by managers and employees of the operational core. The central research question is: "***How is the internal communication (vertical and horizontal) of the researched health care center perceived by managers and employees of the operational core?"***

The relevance of this research paper is its added knowledge regarding the perception of vertical and horizontal communication within a health care center situated in the Aruban context, in consideration with the influence the cultural background of employees may have on individual perceptions of internal communication within the health care center. Furthermore, this research will contribute to the further development of knowledge, specifically relating to the Aruban context and with regard to local (healthcare) organizations that may benefit from the research results. This paper also highlights the ambiguity of internal communication and the importance of having an overview on the perception of employees on different organizational positions, regarding internal communication. Ambiguity refers to the existence of differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations of an issue or topic (Miller, 2012).

Culture is especially relevant for this research due to the diverse population of Aruba. Aruba has a population of 106,795, which is made up of several nationalities and cultures (CBS Aruba, 2014). There are many different cultures, ethnicities, men and women in various organizational positions and employees with different levels of education working together. Effective and clear communication between the employees is critical in order to correctly fulfill their functions but also to be sensitive to different cultures, avoid conflict and gender related issues such as harassment or discrimination (Miller, 2012).

2. Theoretical Perspective

A broad scope of research has previously been conducted on many aspects of organizational communication. There are many different perspectives to analyze organizational communication and factors, which are interlinked with and influence communication (Gaur, 2006). Such aspects are: culture, type of communication, direction of communication, and communication instruments (Cote, 2013; Miller, 2012; Postmes et al., 2001). The scope of this research will limit itself to the vertical and horizontal directions of communication, which are linked to numerous concepts that influence and shape organizational communication. Besides the main topic of vertical and horizontal communication other aspects related to (internal) communication are important to mention such as gender-stereotypes. However, gender-stereotypes will not specifically be discussed due to the time constraint of the research, complexity and depth needed for such a research with a broad research scope. The research does acknowledge that many aspects, other than those covered by this research, may also contribute to the perception of communication within the healthcare center. This chapter elaborates on theories regarding four important concepts for this research, namely, organizational communication, internal communication, communication instruments and culture.

2.1. *Organizational Communication*

The theoretical model for this research is based on previous researches conducted on internal communication within organizations, namely related to vertical and horizontal communication. According to Unger, Macq, Bredo & Boelear (2000), the structural configuration originating from Mintzberg's typology theory that is most suitable for a hospital, ministry of health or a health care center is the divisionalized adhocracy. The explanation for this is that the divisionalized adhocracy enables the organization to be effective, efficient, holistic, accessible, acceptable and continuous. However, after contextualizing the literature, the chosen health care organization can be identified as being a mix of two structural configurations, namely, the professional bureaucracy and the operational adhocracy. The reason for this is that the operational core is pivotal in both structures. As this healthcare organization has a somewhat complex organizational structure and thus hierarchy, it might be helpful to do a simple network analysis to see how accessible it is for employees to communicate with each other, regardless of the position in the hierarchy.

Network analysis knows three types of network measures: relationships, position of individuals and the characteristics of an entire communication network such as density and centralization (Zwijze-Koning & de Jong, 2014). These links are believed to relate to strengths and weaknesses of communication, however they have received minimal attention in past researches. The network results may uncover communication problems that employees do not individually see as a problem on their individual level. Self reported evaluations enable the research to reach greater depths and uncover underlying issues or causes for communication problems such as low density in a communication network.

2.2. Internal Communication

Communication and culture are key elements of every organization even though they are not always recognized as such (Bisel, Missersmit & Keyton, 2010). Bisel et. al.(2010) argue that discourse possesses culturing properties and that, as a result, culture is always in a state of becoming and is never fixed. This is termed as 'culturing'. The gyroscope metaphor presented by Bisel et. al. (2010) views organizational culture as having different relationships and perspectives relating to different people, positions or organizations, the influence of culture over discourse, vice versa or simultaneously. The culture, created by the sum of organizational procedures and policies, enables and constrains the communicative action of organizational members.

Internal communication within an organization can manifest in either upward or downward directions of communication. Downward communication (also known as top-down) is understood as information that goes from superior to subordinate, whereas upward communication flows the other way around, from subordinate to superior (Hitt et. al., 2011). There are numerous communication channels for both top-down and bottom-up communication, namely, meetings, attitude surveys, participation in decision making et cetera (Hitt et. al., 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that vertical communication is more strongly related to organizational and professional identification, as opposed to horizontal communication within organizations (Bartels et al., 2006; Postmes, Tanis, & de Wit, 2001).

2.3. Communication Instruments

Communication instruments can be understood as communication technologies and / or communication strategies used in organizations to improve communication, conflict solving and decision-making processes (Hitt et. al., 2011). New technologies such as email, Powerpoint and online conference calls have become central means of communication in organizations, impacting on key organizational processes and communication structures (Tietze, Cohen, Musson, 2003, Miller, 2012). These communication technologies supplements and enhance face-to-face communication, however it does not substitute it or is superior to personal communication. Rather, Internet, organizational websites, email and mobile phones enable spatial and temporal flexibility in organizations,

information can be sent now, and read later. However, organizations still widely use formal written texts such as reports, documents, notices and also personal texts such as memos, notes and letters (Hitt et. al., 2011). Electronic communication facilitates the building of new communicative practices, new rules of interaction, as a result of easy, fast and globally accessible communication. Emails can be used both for formal and informal communication, depending on the purpose and receiver of the information in the email and the use of language and titles in the content of the email.

2.4. Culture

Aspects of an organization's culture will gradually become evident through observation as patterns of interaction between individuals, the use of language, topics of conversation and daily routines become visible to the researcher (Morgan, 2006).

Culture is believed to consist of several aspects such as: social roles (gender roles and sexual division of labor), behavior, values, norms, religious beliefs, traditions, communication and language (Hitt, Miller & Colella, 2011). Furthermore, culture can be interpreted as something an organization has and also as something an organization is. Behavior and communication in organizations is part of the organizational culture (Miller, 2012). Culture can thus influence behavior and communication of employees.

3. Research Design

Research Designs explicitly present what the research objective is and what research steps need to be taken in order to realize the objective (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2007). This chapter presents the operationalization of the theoretical framework. After choosing the research topic, perceptions of internal communication in an organization, a literature review was conducted in order to gather relevant literature and theories regarding internal communication in an organization. Relevant topics that emerged were; organizational communication, communication instruments and culture, along with other elements relevant to internal communication, but less relevant to the research at hand. After writing a research proposal and making a topic list that would assist as a guideline for **semi-structured interviews, two pilot interviews** were conducted in order to test the average length an interview would take, comprehension of the topics and experience of the interview.

3.1. Respondents

The respondents that will be interviewed are employees on management level and also employees of the operational core of the chosen health care center. This research will focus on certain departments, rather than the whole organization, because of their key role in (internal) communication of the health care center, but also on request from the health care center itself. A total of thirty-two (32) respondents will be interviewed for this research. This number will be evenly distributed between the strategic apex, also known as the heads of department or managers as well as the employees of the operational core, also known as the line staff of an organization. All the respondents of this research will be fully informed regarding the educational purpose and methodology of this research. The interviews will take place during work hours and are expected to take between 30 to maximum 45 minutes. The respondents are encouraged to ask questions concerning the research before and after every interview. The information and consent of respondents will both be stated verbally. The identity of each participant will be kept anonymous in the research results. However, a personal record of the identities will be archived by the researcher in order to keep a concise record of the interviews.

3.2. Instruments

The research discussed in this paper is of qualitative nature. Qualitative research gives insightful and rich data, which enables the research to find meaning or analyze perceptions (Silverman, 2010). The research instruments that will be

applied during this research are semi-structured interviews, observation and a case study of the health care center; analysis will be conducted on the perceptions of internal communication and modes of communication between staff within the health care center in order to analyze both formal and informal communication.
This thesis applies two methods for studying communication in organizational systems, namely, a simplistic approach to the network analysis (Miller, 2012,p 73) & a case study (Miller, 2012, p. 77) of an organization in the healthcare sector in Aruba. This research mainly applies the case study method to the healthcare center in question. A case study approach suggests that the richest understanding of organizational systems can be obtained by closely observing specific organizations dealing with specific issues. By collecting a variety of data through observation, interviews, questionnaires and archives, the analyst can come to a more finely grained understanding of how and why organizational systems develops and behaves as it does (Miller, 2012). This research will conduct semi-structured interviews and conduct a basic network analysis and observe while interviewing. In doing so, the variety of data will hopefully contribute to more abundant and explanatory research results.

The semi-structured interviews will be conducted with staff of the strategic apex and with staff in the operating core of the health care center in order to get a more representative general perception of how the internal communication is experienced by its employees. By interviewing employees on all level of the organization, from management to operational level workers, I will be able to compare different perceptions and safeguard that the perceptions of both upper and lower level employees are fairly represented in the results of this research.

3.3. Procedure

The interview results will be compared with each other and with the literature review in order to draw similarities and differences between perspectives in order to conclude how vertical and horizontal communication can be described within the health care center. The data will be collected through thirtytwo (32) semi-structured interviews, which will be held during work hours as has been permitted by the health care center. The interviews will be recorded if the respondents grant permission. This is to ensure that no valuable data will be lost. The respondents will be interviewed individually, in order to diminish the possibility of censorship and to create a pleasant environment for the interview. Respondents voluntarily accepted to participate in the research. No material compensation was provided. All interviews and respondents will be kept anonymous in the thesis.

3.4. Analysis

The analysis of the research results will be conducted with the use of three instruments; thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 20016), observational analysis and a simple network analysis (Leavitt & Bahrami, 1989).

4. Expected Results

The main findings of the research are expected to be that perceptions of internal communication within the chosen health care center will differ between the managers and employees of the operational core. Furthermore, perceptions regarding vertical communication are also expected to differ from perceptions of horizontal communication. These expectations are based on different aspects which influence perception such as used communication instruments, formal versus informal communication and working relationships between different cultures. According to the two pilot interviews, it is also expected that communication instruments have positive and negative aspects to it, due to aspects such as lack of personal contact, busy schedules and room for personal interpretation. Perceptions regarding internal communication seem to be linked to the relationship with your colleague and the use of language and appropriate communication instruments.
It is advisable that further research to be conducted on (internal) communication in the health care sector in order to build data and create a general overview of the current situation; strengths and weaknesses of communication within the health care sector.

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