

DOWNWARD COMMUNICATION; A CHALLENGE TO EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE (A STUDY OF SELECTED ORGANIZATIONS IN IMO AND ABIA STATES)

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Abstract

Downward communication; a challenge to employee performance, is a research aimed at examining how downward communication can adversely affect the performance of employees. The basic variables of the study are job instruction, disciplinary action, employee productivity, commitment and work qualities which the specific objectives are derived from. The methodology of the study involves a stratified sampling of two hundred and eighty (280) subjects from ten conveniently selected organizations in Owerri, Imo State and Aba, Abia State. Analysis of the data is by Pearson multiple correlation and the result shows a negative relationship between job instruction and employee productivity ($r=-0.608$), employee commitment ($r=-0.597$) and work quality has a positive relationship with job instruction ($r=0.692$); similarly, disciplinary action is found to have a negative relationship with productivity ($r=-0.773$); work quality (-0.675) and commitment ($r=-0.682$). Based on these findings; it is recommended that, In handling instructions down to subordinates, managers should avoid the use of harsh language in order not to demoralize (and hence de-motivate) the employees among other recommendations

Keywords: downward communication, Job instruction, Disciplinary action, productivity, commitment and work quality.

Introduction

Communication in a business organization can be downward, upward, lateral or diagonal. It is downward when information flows from a superior to a subordinate and upward when a superior or upper management received from the subordinates. On the other hand, it is lateral (or horizontal) when the message is shared among colleagues at the same hierarchical level; and diagonal when the message is transmitted among managers.

For many decades, the role of downward communication in the transmission of organizational objectives, job-related instructions and general rules and regulations that govern the proper conduct of employees, has been underscored by some researchers (Newman and Scott 2014; Eastom, Jeanette & Michel 2018). However, the effect of downward communication on performance variables such as productivity,

commitment, work quality, cooperation, work quantity etc; has not been well substantiated, particularly in Nigerian background.

Many writers argue strongly that downward communication has a tendency to retard employee job performance. (Barnlund 2008, & Daniel 2014). Such claims are based on the fact that job instructions, disciplinary actions, and queries and harsh orders from managers to employees actually impair their performance. In many organizational backgrounds, employee's feel comfortable working without managerial instructions or supervisory scolding and their performance actually improves when left to take decisions that pertain to their job functions. Thus downward communication has a dual effect on employee performance. By definition, business communication is a bilateral information exchange which involves one party sending a message that is easily

understood and responded to by the recipient. Thus, the process involves a sender, the message, a channel, a receiver and the feedback. The feedback is the response that returns to the sender from the receiver; and many scholars argue that communication is never effective without a feedback. Without delving deep into communication typologies at this point, it is important to note that business communication can be formal or informal, which is a classification based on the specificity, duration and tone of the transmitted message. In that regard, formal communication is specific, definite and official, e.g. instruction from a manager to an employee, questions asked by employees for job clarity, etc; while informal communication has no laid down rules or principles that must be adhered to, e.g. chat among colleagues about a job experience (Kora, Fred & Luke, 2011).

Employee performance can be indexed by productivity, commitment, cooperation, work quality, among other indices. By productivity, we mean the rate at which resources (such as time, energy and input materials) are transformed to the desired product. In quantitative parlance, it is the ratio of output to input. Through productivity assessment, the efficiency of an employee at using available resources to achieve a defined target is measured. Commitment, in a similar vein, is a measure of how bonded an employee is to the job. (Easton, Jeanette & Michel, 2018). Work quality refers to the ability of the work to conform to pre-set standards.

As managers seek strategic means of improving employee performances and gain competitive advantage over their rivals in recent times, coupled with the emergence of sophisticated communication technologies

for workplace improvement, it is pertinent to examine the effects of downward communication on employee performance. This paper provides empirical perspective to such examination as a focus and ten different organizations in the South-East of Nigerian as reference points.

Statement of the Problem

For many decades, the role of downward communication in the transmission of organizational objectives, job related instructions as well as in the enforcement of rules and regulations that govern the proper conduct of organizational employees has been underscored by some researchers. Common in the list of writers who share closely related views on the subject of downward communication are Newman and Scott (2014). Eastern, Jeanette & Michel (2018). However, the effects of downward communication on performance variables such as productivity, commitment and work quality have not been clearly established. This makes it necessary to carry out an empirical study of this kind to help evaluate the adverse effects of downward communication on employee performance.

Also, as business managers continue to seek strategic means of improving employee performances and gain competitive advantage over their rivals, in addition to the emergence of new communication technologies and techniques in the workplace, it is important to identify downward communication practices that pose challenges to employee performance. Against these backdrops, this study was carried out to examine the effects of downward communication on employee performance in Owerri and Aba-Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The study is aimed at examining how downward communication poses challenges to employee performance. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the effects of job instruction on employee productivity.
2. Examine the effects of job instruction on employee commitment
3. Determine the effects of job instruction on work quality
4. Ascertain the effects of disciplinary action on employee productivity
5. Evaluate the effects of disciplinary action on employee commitment
6. Examine the effect of disciplinary action on work quality

Research Question

In consideration of the research objectives, the following are the research questions.

1. How does job instruction affect employee productivity?
2. In what ways does job instruction affect employee commitment?
3. What are the effects of job instruction on work quality?
4. What effects does disciplinary action have on employee productivity?
5. What are the effects of disciplinary action on employee commitment?
6. How does disciplinary action affect work quality?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested in the study to guide the attainment of the objectives.

- H₀₁: Job instruction has no significant relationship with employee productivity
- H₀₂: Job instruction has no significant relationship with employee commitment
- H₀₃: Job instruction has no significant relationship with work quality.
- H₀₄: Disciplinary action has no significant relationship with employee productivity.

H₀₅: Disciplinary action has no significant relationship with employee commitment.

H₀₆: Disciplinary action has no significant relationship with work quality.

Scope of the Study

The content scope is coverage of job instruction and disciplinary action (downward communication.), as the independent variables and employee productivity, commitment and work quality as the dependent variables. The geographic scope consists of Owerri and Aba. Owerri is the capital of Imo State, Aba is a major town in Abia State and both are located in the South-Eastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Four organizations were covered in Owerri while six were covered in Aba. The unit scope consists of the staff of the 10 different organizations.

Significance of the Study

The study is of benefit to managers of business organizations, their employees, as well as to research institutions. To managers, the study provides recommendations which could be implemented by the managers to enhance employee performance. The study will enable employees understand that communication approaches used by managers at workplaces are expected to be in the best interest of the organization's strategic objectives and should not be taken personal or found offensive.

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Downward Communication

Kora, Fred & Lukk (2011) define downward communication as the flow of information from upper organizational hierarchy to lower levels, pertaining to employee jobs. Downward communication flows from managers to their employees and the

message being communicated concerns the job.

Downward communication is a type of vertical communication which involves giving orders or instructions either through oral channel or via the use of routine office media like circulars, memos, queries, etc. The tone of downward communication is often that of strictness and most times, managers use harsh tones in the process (Dodd, 2012).

The use of unfriendly tone by managers to buttress their points to employees discourages feedback from such employees and the communication is more or less an order. In this sense, scholars like Dodd (2012) and Kora, Fred & Likk (2011) argue that downward communication is counterproductive since the fundamental model of communication and its conceptualization entails that communication cannot be effective without the desired feedback.

Kora et al (2011) assert that many employees have had to walk away on their managers or supervisors due to the harsh tone of downward communication. Psychologists Phil & Ross (2016) have also expatiated the anti-social effects of unfriendly job instructions to the job performer. As Phil & Ross put it, "downward flow without an agreeable upward flow is a gross de-motivator".

The message of downward communication often pertains to job instructions, guidelines, directions, disciplinary actions, suspension, orders, notice of demotion etc, being communicated through a medium that the instructor deems fit.

Job Instruction

A job instruction is any note or message handed down to an employee by a superior

about how a particular task should be performed (Phil & Ross, 2016). It is any form of guidelines (written or oral), directives, corrections etc, which is communicated to the worker regarding his job. It is reactive in nature, due to its repetitive tendency.

Instructions are often given to employees when a particular circumstance arises on the job. Instructions may cut across job functions. For example, a receiving teller employee in a bank can be instructed to go over to paying section and start to pay customers in order to de-congest the paying section. A production staff in a manufacturing company can be instructed to join a delivery truck for a specific purpose etc. Thus, job instructions are actually used to advance organization strategic goals. However, due to the language of the instruction and the manner in which it is being communicated, employees often find it unpleasant.

Disciplinary Action

A disciplinary action is a measure taken to correct an under-performance or employee's misconduct. Disciplinary action is based on the principle that when an anomaly is appropriately addressed, its tendency to repeat itself is deterred. Secondly, by addressing such issues, loyal employees are motivated as the disciplinary action restores equity. There are many ways in which an erring employee can be disciplined, which depends on the organization's laid down rules for handling such issues. Commonly used remedies are salary decrease, demotion, extension of work hours of the employee; and, in severe cases, dismissal. Offences being committed in this regard include lateness, tardiness, violence in the workplace, dishonesty, disloyalty etc. Communicating disciplinary action to employees often elicits negative feelings in

them and can actually impair performance on the short run.

Theories of Communication

Many theories of business communication abound, such as cognitive dissonance theory, Communication accommodation theory, coordinated management of meaning cultivation proposition, symbolic interaction theory, expectancy Violation theory, face negotiation theory, theory of group think, relational dialectics theory, uncertainty reduction theory, social exchange theory, organizational information theory etc.

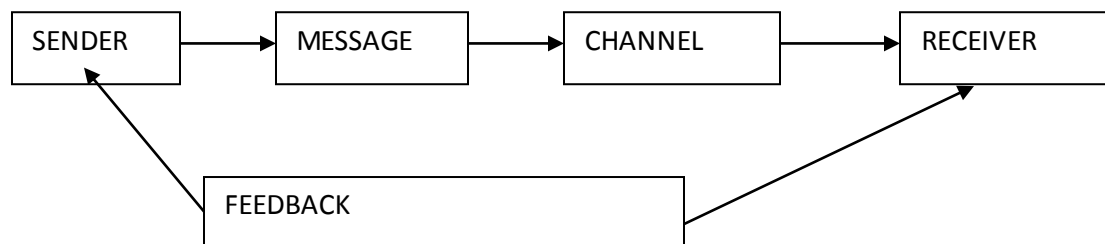
This study hinges on organizational information theory, proposed by Karl Weick in 1946, which aims at eliminating ambiguity and complexity from workplace messaging. The core principle of the theory is the belief that organizations are process driven rather than structurally-driven. The theory attempts to deduce messaging equivocality or uncertainty which normally exists in dynamic information rich organizations. To underscore how interactions could unfold to

granular magnitude in the organization, Weick proposes a “Double Interact Loop” which he considers the building block of every growing organization. The loop is made up of ‘Act’ ‘Interact’ and ‘Double Act’.

According to Weick, Act occurs when one says something, interact occurs when one says something to another and there is a response in the negative (i.e. ‘No’); while Double Interact occurs when one says something and there is a positive response.

Communication Model

Many conceptual models have been developed to explain the human communication process. This study adopted the Shannon & Weaver Model, which conceptualizes communication as being made of four parts - sender (one sending the message), the message (Information being sent), channel (medium through which the message is sent) and Receiver (the one to whom the message is sent, (Shannon & Weaver, 1949, cited by Barnlund 2008).



Linear Model of Communication

(Source: Shannon & Weaver, 1949; cited by Barnlund, 2008)

Empirical Review

Easton, Anna, Hedewald, Jeanette & Michel (2018) carried out a study in the University of Wisconsin to determine the effects of communication between superiors and subordinates on organizational effectiveness.

The methodology of the study involved a sampling of 382 respondents in the university by convenience technique, using structured questionnaire. The communication variables of the study are Top-Down and Bottom-up flows. The primary data of the study were analyzed using statistical packages for analysis of

variance, correlation and regression. The results showed that both Top-Down and Bottom-up communication are significant in realizing organizational objectives. However, a striking discovery by these researchers was that Bottom-up communication contributes more to organizational effectiveness (62.4%) than downward instructions (37.6%).

Daniel (2014) also conducted a study to ascertain the role of lateral communication on realizing group goals. The study involved a sample in 420 subjects from twelve organizations in New Delhi. The sample was analyzed using statistical software's that employed a combination of analytical tools. The results of the analysis showed that lateral communication is significant in achieving individual tasks in the organization and fundamental in achieving group goals. As Daniel puts it: "The achievement of synergy and group coherence actually relies on information sharing among group members. "Apart from enabling groups to realize their goals, lateral or horizontal communication also helps individual employees (particularly, new ones) to clarify ambiguities and achieve higher efficiencies on the job. Daniel concluded that lateral communication plays a significant positive role in realizing individual and group goals in business.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where N = Population size = 934
 e = Allowance error = 5%
 n = Sample size
 n = 934

$$n = \frac{1+934 (0.05)^2}{280}$$

The sample ni of each of the ten organizations was determined using the proportion formula. Yamene 1996, cited by Gupta, 2013

Methodology

Population of the Study

All workers in the ten organizations of the study constitute the population; Six organizations in Aba with a total population of 562 and four organizations in Owerri with a total population of 372. The population size therefore is 934.

Sampling Procedure

Stratified random sampling was adopted for the administration of research instruments (questionnaire and checklist) to the ten organizations of the study. In selecting the ten organizations, purposive sampling technique was used (Anyanwu 2000), based on the attribute sought, for example, long experience of the organization up to twelve years and possession of a well-defined communication system for internal and external interactions. The use of stratify sampling method was to enable the proper capturing of important characteristics of the population of each organization, such as gender, job experience etc.

Sample Size Determination

As it was not necessary to study the entire population of the ten organizations, the researcher made use of a sample size, which was pre-determined with a statistical formula as follows:

$$N_i = \left(\frac{N_i}{N} \right)$$

Where $i = 1, 2, 3, \dots, 10$

$N_i =$ population size of organization

Method of Data Analysis

The Pearson product moment correlation coefficient^(r) was used to analyze the data. The data. The Pearson r is given by:

$$r = \frac{n \sum X_i Y_i - \sum X_i \sum Y_i}{\sqrt{(n \sum X_i^2 - (\sum X_i)^2) (n \sum Y_i^2 - (\sum Y_i)^2)}}$$

Person r was used to establish the relationship between the dependent variables Y_i , the independent variables X_i , $i=1,2$.

Thus:

- $Y_1 =$ Productivity
- $Y_2 =$ Commitment
- $Y_3 =$ Work quality
- $X_1 =$ Job instruction
- $X_2 =$ Disciplinary action

The coefficient of determination (r^2) was also determined in each case, with the standard error of estimate.

Pearson r ranges from zero to 1. the strength of the relationship is as follows.

- $r = 0.00$ No relationship
- $r = 0.10-0.49$ weak relationship
- $r = 0.50-0.64$ significant relationship
- $r = 0.65-0.74$ strong relationship
- $r = 0.75-0.84$ very strong relationship
- $r = 0.85-1.00$ perfect relationship

Decision Rule

Reject H_0 if $r < 0.50$

Accept H_0 if $r > 0.50$

Analysis

Table 4.1 (a) to (d) presents the computation results of the Pearson r, standard error of estimate and coefficient of determination. Table 4.2 summarizes the procedure for the decisions derived from the test results.

Testing the effects of downward communication on employee performance

A Table 4.1 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variables	Sums	Cross products	Squares	Pearson
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Y_1	$\sum X_i \sum Y_1$	$\sum X_i Y_1$	$\sum X_i^2 \sum Y_1^2$	r
X_1	158 122	20148	39741 29605	-0.608
X_2	142 122	32281	64329 30048	-0.773

B

Variable	Sums	Cross Products	Squares	Pearson
Y_1	$\sum X_i \sum Y_2$	$\sum X_i Y_2$	$\sum X_i^2 \sum Y_1^2$	r
X_1	163 177	19071	42841 25331	-0.597
X_2	142 177	15093	56104 36418	-0.682

C

Variable	Sums	Cross Products	Squares	Pearson
Y_3	$\sum X_i \sum Y_3$	$\sum X_i Y_3$	$\sum X_i^2 \sum Y_1^2$	r
X_1	153 127	19431	39628 33634	0.692
X_2	149 131	19519	47210 45618	-0.675

D

Variable	Y_1	Y_2	Y_3	X_1	X_2
Std. Error(α)	0.0743	0.0291	0.1048	0.0068	0.0553
r^2	0.370	0.597	0.356	0.465	0.456

- Y_1 = Productivity
 Y_2 = Commitment
 Y_3 = Work Quality
 X_1 = Job Instruction
 X_2 = Disciplinary Action

Table 4.1 (a) shows that job instruction relates to productivity by ($r^1 = -0.608$) and disciplinary action relates with productivity by ($r^2 = -0.773$).

Table 4.1(b) shows that job instruction relates to employee commitment by ($r^3 = -0.597$) and that commitment relates to disciplinary action by ($r^4 = -0.682$)

Table 4.1 (c) shows that job instruction relates to work quality by ($r^5 = 0.692$) and disciplinary action relate to work quality by ($r^6 = -0.675$)

Table 4.1(d) shows standard errors of estimates of the dependent (Y_1, Y_2, Y_3) variable and the independent (X_1, X_2) variables.

Test of Hypotheses

	Test criterion	Value of r	Decision
H ₀₁ : $r_1 < 0.5$, i.e Job instruction has no significant relationship with employee productivity	Person r	-0.608	Reject H ₀₁
H ₀₂ : $r^2 < 0.5$, i.e. Disciplinary action has no sig relationship with employee productive.	Person r	-0.773	Reject H ₀₂
H ₀₃ : $r^3 < 0.5$, i.e job instruction has no sig. rel with employee commitment	Person r	-0.597	Reject H ₀₃
H ₀₄ : $r^4 < 0.5$, i.e. disciplinary action has no sig. rel with employee commitment	Person r	-0.682	Reject H ₀₂
H ₀₅ : $r^5 < 0.5$, i.e. Job instruction has no sig. rel. with work quality	Person r	0.692	Reject H ₀₄
H ₀₆ : $r^6 < 0.5$, i.e. Disciplinary action has no sig. rel with work quality	Person r	-0.675	Reject H ₀₅

Therefore the null hypotheses (H₀) were all rejected

Discussion

First, job instruction was found to have negative effects on employee productivity. The hypothesis tested in this regard yield a Pearson correlation coefficient (Pearson r) of -0.608, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis of no effect. The coefficient of determination (r^2) was 0.370 (or 37%), implying that about 37% variations in productivity is accounted for by downward communication between superiors and their subordinates. Easton, Anna, Hedewald Jeanette & Michel (2018) and Daniel (2014) had obtained determination coefficients of 21.2% and 13.6% respectively as pertains to formal communication and performance.

Second, it was found out that disciplinary action has a negative relationship with productivity. The Pearson r calculated for this was -0.773, which yielded an r^2 of 0.597 (or 59.7%). The implication is disciplinary action has a strong negative relationship

with productivity and can influence productivity up to 59.7%.

Third, job instruction was found to have a positive relationship with work quality; Pearson r = -0.692 was obtained in the analysis, showing a significant positive relationship. The determination coefficient was 0.356 (47.9%) with a standard error of estimate of 0.1. These results lead to the rejection of the null hypothesis that claimed no effect.

Moreover, it was found out that job instruction also influence employee commitment negatively. The results yielded a Person r -0692. Similarly, disciplinary action yielded $r = -0682$. Similar results has been obtained by Dodd (2012), who discovered that the productivity of manufacturing company in Denuer decreased commensurately with increase in disciplinary actions on employees by the management.

Conclusion

Downward communication in the workplace has some negative effects on the performance of employees.

The general concept of business communication maintains that communication is never effective unless there is a feedback. This feedback is always lacking in a downward communication, which is more or less an order, instruction or directive flowing from a superior to a subordinate. This work shows that the flow of downward communication reflects in two broad areas – job instructions and disciplinary actions. Job instructions have a significant negative effect on employee productivity and can cause productivity to reduce up to 37% as frequency of the instructions increases ($r^2 = 0.370$, $r = -0.608$). In the same way, job instructions adversely affect employee commitment. The negative correlation between job instruction and commitment ($r = -0.597$) can reduce commitment up to 35.6% ($r^2 = 0.356$). However, job instructions have a positive relationship with work quality ($r = 0.692$; $r^2 = 47.9\%$). Similarly, disciplinary actions have negative effect on employee productivity and can influence productivity by 59.8% ($r^2 = 0.598$). Disciplinary actions can also retard employee commitment by 45.6% ($r^2 = 0.456$) and employee work quality by 46.5%. Disciplinary actions found in the study to have these adverse effects were demotions, salary decrement, extension of work hours and suspension. The approach used by managers to communicate these issues to their subordinates does not always make room for feedbacks, thereby rendering the downward communication ineffective. We therefore conclude that downward communication has adverse effects on employee performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it was recommended that;

1. In handling instructions down to subordinates, managers should avoid the use of harsh language in order not to demoralize (and hence de-motivate) the employees.
2. Disciplinary measures should not be constantly used on employees as these have been shown to have negative impact on performance.
3. Employees should always be allowed to take decisions that pertain to their jobs, especially when such employees have gained adequate experience to handle the exigencies of the job.
4. Employee productivity, commitment and work quality should be enhanced by reducing downward flow of harsh disciplinary actions since these have been proven to have a negative impact on performance.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study has shown that employee performance (productivity, commitment and work quality) can be adversely affected by downward communication. The study has determined the strength of relationship between downward communication and factors, like employee productivity, commitment and work quality. This gradation of relationship provides us an ordinal scale that helps to classify the variables in order of magnitude. Although this classification may not be universal, it provides an empirical framework that would guide managers towards determining performance enhancement factors in their organization.

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