

**INTERNAL COMMUNICATION, INFORMATION SATISFACTION
AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY:
THE EFFECT OF PERSONAL INFLUENCE**

Candace White, Ph. D.

University of Tennessee

white@utk.edu

Antoaneta Vanc

University of Tennessee

avanc@utk.edu

Gina Stafford

University of Tennessee

stafford@tennessee.edu

**Key words: employee communication, internal communication, personal influence,
public relations**

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION, INFORMATION SATISFACTION AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY: THE EFFECT OF PERSONAL INFLUENCE

ABSTRACT

This study examined how employees of a large, diverse organization view the flow of information from top managers in positions of personal influence, employees' communication preferences (amount, channels, types of information), their sense of community within the organization, and the relationship between those perceptions and their willingness to advocate for the organization. Previous studies that have explored the personal influence model of public relations have considered it from a boundary-spanning perspective, focusing on an individual practitioner's relationship with other strategic individuals in the external environment. Personal influence can be equally important for internal communication, where employees are the strategically targeted public. Open-ended interviews with 147 employees at all levels permitted respondents to answer in depth, and allowed the researchers to probe for useful insights.

Findings indicate that the personal influence of the CEO and top managers has an effect on information satisfaction, and consequently how employees speak about the organization to external stakeholders. Employees at all levels who have a relationship with the CEO are more satisfied with the information they receive and feel a greater responsibility to advocate for the organization. Even the perception of a relationship with the CEO leads to communication satisfaction.

The direction dimension of internal communication, as well as the channel dimension is important. While email is efficient for *information* exchange, the preference for *communication* among all groups of employees is still face-to-face interaction. Interpersonal, dialogic communication remains important to employees at every level of the organization. Meetings, despite being acknowledged as time-consuming, were surprisingly valued as a channel for feedback and providing face time with top managers. Electronic channels, if used thoughtfully, can flattened the traditional, hierarchical structure of internal communication and can give employees at all levels of the organization the sense of hearing things first-hand, from the top.

INTRODUCTION

Internal communication has been recognized as a strategic focus for business communication, second only to leadership concerns (Barnfield, 2003). Jo and Shim (2005) note that “given the emerging paradigm of public relations by relationship management, the terms of internal communication need to be redefined as part of building favorable relationships between management and employees” (p. 278). Managers within organizations are in a role of personal influence in their relationships with employees.

Numerous studies have linked internal communication and the degree to which employees are informed to job satisfaction and performance (Gray & Laidlaw, 2002; Bartoo & Sias, 2004; Rosenfeld, Richman & May, 2004; Zucker, 2002). The competitive advantage of strategic internal communication comes not only from the obvious benefits of employee satisfaction and productivity, but also from the positive contributions that well-informed employees can make to a company’s external public relations efforts. Employees can be an organization’s best ambassadors or loudest critics, depending whether and how they get information (Howard, 1998). Effective internal communication can enhance corporate reputation and credibility, since employees are viewed as particularly credible sources by external stakeholders (Dawkins, 2004; Hannegan, 2004). Put simply, employees are the face of an organization and have a powerful influence on organizational success.

The purpose of this study was to explore employees’ perception of the flow of information from top managers in positions of personal influence, employees’ communication preferences (amount, channels, types of information), their sense of community within the organization, and the relationship between those perceptions and their willingness to advocate for the organization.

Qualitative approaches are preferable when the goal of the research is to understand a process or phenomenon, since surveys give respondents fixed choices, which forces them to respond to questions that otherwise might not be relevant to them. Inductive qualitative methods allow themes to emerge from the data that may not have been considered *a priori* by the researchers. Therefore, in-depth telephone interviews

that allowed open-ended responses were conducted with employees in a large university with locations across the state.

While universities are unique organizations, they have commonalities with other large and diverse organizations. The president or chancellor is the CEO, and other administrators (vice presidents, provosts, deans) represent the dominant coalition or top management team. Faculty are the professional staff and mid-level managers (directors, department heads) found at the center of organizations. Other employees are workers that range from administrative assistants to computer experts to custodians. The similarities to other complex organizations are greater than the differences, making the findings applicable to a variety of types of large organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An important role of strategic internal communication is to generate “buy-in” for an organization’s goals and strategies. No matter how brilliant the business strategy, it must reach and win employees to achieve optimum effectiveness. Employees want to know where their organization is headed and how they contribute to achieving the vision (Moorcroft, 2003). Employees need a “core story” that consistently puts strategy into the context of the mission and values of the organization (Sanchez, 2004).

Personal influence inside organizations

It is widely acknowledged that the CEO sets the tone for internal communication (Schein, 2000; Tourish and Robson, 2003). The leader of an organization is automatically the designated chief communication officer, and successful internal communication is impossible without CEO support, because “successful companies lead through effective top-down communication” (Van Nostran, 2004, p. 10). Haas (2006) found the greatest desire from employees in a variety of types of organizations was for more information from top management, and most employees believe face-to-face communication with supervisors is the most desirable channel. Jo and Shim (2005) found a strong relationship between management’s interpersonal communication and employees forming trusting attitudes. Cameron and McCollum (1993) also found that employees preferred interpersonal communication with management over mediated communication. In short, employees want to see and talk to their leaders.

Top managers in an organization are in a role to exert strong personal influence in their relationships with other employees and to affect attitudes, job satisfaction, and consequently how employees speak about the organization to external stakeholders. Personal influence is an important component of relational communication. Toth (2000) believes that interpersonal communication is at the core of the personal influence model of public relations, and suggests that the public influence model could be more aptly called the “individual influence model” since the power of personal influence lies in the status, trustworthiness, and credibility of the individual. Most studies that have explored the personal influence model of public relations have considered it from a boundary-spanning perspective, focusing on practitioners’ relationships with external stakeholders such as journalists and government officials. Personal influence can be equally important for internal communication, where employees are the strategically targeted public.

As background, the personal influence model of model of public relations, first identified by Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, and Lyra (1995), referred to public relations practitioners’ personal relationships with key individuals in media, government, politics, or activist groups who could affect the success of public relations efforts. Further evidence of the model was found by Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki (1999). In their study, personal influence was used by practitioners as a *quid pro quo* favor-granting and favor-gaining role. In the Asian cultures in their study, personal influence sometimes relied on social class and power. Jo and Shim (2002) also found that personal relationships played a critical role in media relations in South Korea where personal influence was often used to mitigate negative media stories.

While not always labeled as “personal influence,” evidence of the phenomenon has been found in the practice of public relations in Western societies. Grunig, et al. (1995) provide examples of personal influence, which include former government officials working in firms in which their influence is a commodity, as well as other examples of practitioners providing favors and contacts. Toth (1988) found that “chemistry” and personal relationships between clients and practitioners was important in the decision to hire external public relations agencies, even when the decision was more expensive or inconvenient.

Many of the studies that found evidence of the personal influence model of public relations have been conducted in Asian cultures where power distance and collectivism are stronger than in Western cultures, suggesting that the personal influence model may have more currency in more rigid cultures in which power and social class have more bearing on decision making. However, in all cultures, the concepts of power distance and collectivism are important in large, hierarchical organizations. The CEO and other members of the dominant coalition are a different “class” of employee with more influence and power in decision making, as well influencing communication and acceptance of the organization’s goals.

Employees as public relations advocates

Morgan, Reynolds, Nelson, Johanningmeier, Griffin & Andrade (2004) found the relationship between employee identification with a company and organizational image is both symbiotic and self-perpetuating: working for a company with a positive reputation can enhance the self-concepts of organizational members, and in turn, positive employee identification helps preserve a company’s good public standing as workers share their positive workplace stories with outsiders. By the same token, employees whose self-concept suffers from association with a poor organizational image are more likely to convey negative stories. Employee communication and employees’ perceptions of the organization codetermine each other (Cameron and McCollum, 1993). An organization that succeeds in communicating desirable values and goals also may succeed at making employees identify with the organization (Morgan, et al., 2004), which predisposes employees to speak positively about the organization and thus influence other key stakeholders (Dawkins, 2004; Tucker, Meyer & Westerman, 1996).

The absence of strategic and effective internal communication makes an organization vulnerable to “the disgruntled within” (Grossman, 2005, p. 3) since employees pose a significant threat to organizations that fail to ensure the consistency between external and internal messages (Hannegan, 2004; Dawkins, 2004). Employees with sufficient information about their organization are less likely to spread rumors and more likely to defend the organization (Cubbage, 2005).

Information sufficiency and communication paths

Ideally, internal communication strikes a balance between extremes. Communicating too little creates a vacuum that causes distrust and speculation. However, too much information can result in information overload or the paradox of plenty in which an overabundance of information is ignored. Bartoo and Sias (2004) note that receiving a large amount of information is not necessarily the same as getting the right amount of information. Furthermore, employees can receive the right amount of information that does not contain the *right* information for them. The right amount, however, is hard to determine. Haas (2006) found that even when the amount of internal communication in organizations was increased, employees still desired more. Effective internal communication strives for “information adequacy,” which is a measure of the relationship between information needed and information received (Rosenfeld, Richman & May, 2004).

The direction of internal communication is also a variable. Downward communication may be evaluated on its consistency with recipients’ beliefs about an organization. As a result, gaps in management and employee beliefs can cause negative responses to organization-sanctioned communication (Cameron & McCollum, 1993). On the other hand, supportive communication creates trust in management, and managers’ efforts to enhance interpersonal relationships contribute significantly to organizational trust (Jo & Shim, 2005).

The medium is the message

Selecting the optimal internal communication approach rests as much on expectations and beliefs of employees as on potential efficiency of message delivery. Employees tend to evaluate communication channels based on their expectations for those channels (Cameron & McCollum, 1993). Many employees purport to prefer email as an information source, even while noting the overload of messages they receive each day (Cubbage, 2005). While email is highly convenient for both sender and receiver, it is an impersonal medium and lacks the richness of other information sources (Markus, 1994). Since email is asynchronous in that there are delays in sending, receiving, and responding, it is not the optimal medium for conveying delicate or complicated information or to influence, persuade, or sell an idea. It is most useful for announcements to communicate the same thing to many people, to keep employees informed about an

issue they already know about, and to reach geographically dispersed employees (Markus, 1994). Face-to face communication which allows for nonverbal communication as well as for immediate feedback is a richer communication vehicle (Daft and Lengel, 1986).

Stein (2006) looked at the relationship between types of communication channels and the perceived sense of community in a large, complex organization. She found a high correlation between communication and the community-building process. There is a symbiotic relationship between communication and organizational culture: communication influences culture and culture influences communication. The perception of a positive sense of community inside an organization contributes to a positive organizational culture.

Organization culture refers to how employees feel about an organization, the authority system, and the sense of involvement and commitment (Schein, 2000). Sriramesh, Grunig, and Dozier (1996) argue that changing the communication systems of an organization can affect change in the culture of an organization. However, this is often easier said than done, exacerbated by the fact that internal communication is difficult in workplaces comprised of different and/or competing cultures (Cameron and McCollum, 1993). Varying education levels among employees affect expectations about and satisfaction with communication quality as well as the need for information (Gray & Laidlaw, 2002). A diverse and dispersed workforce means that a one-size-fits-all approach is highly ineffective (Davis, 2005; Suzuki, 1997).

Research questions

This literature review provides context that informs the structure of the long interviews used in this study. The overarching questions are: How do employees perceive the flow of information from top managers? How do employees prefer to receive information? Does the communication channel (interpersonal, electronic, etc.) and relationships with top management affect the perception of a sense of community? Is there a relationship information satisfaction and willingness to advocate for the organization?

METHOD

Data for the study were collected using long interviews, conducted by telephone, using a structured interview guide that allowed for open-ended responses. Probes were used to elicit information pertaining to the research questions. For example, it would not be possible to ask a direct question about personal influence since the term would be meaningless to most employees. Therefore, when evidence of the phenomenon emerged in response to questions about relationships with managers, probes were used to elude information. Probes also were used to further explore concepts that came up during the interviews that were not anticipated by the researchers. The interview guide, modified appropriately for different employee classifications, is found in Appendix 1.

Sample

A purposive sample was drawn from all employment classifications in a large, multi-campus, geographically dispersed university. Employment classifications were top management, professional employees, exempt, and non-exempt staff. Exempt staff included administrative assistants and others in functions ranging from internet technology to personnel to campus security. Functions of non-exempt staff ranged from data-entry specialists to security staff to custodians. Initially, 20 employees from each category were randomly chosen (every fiftieth name). Selected employees were sent an email telling them the nature of the study and asking them to participate. If they agreed, appointments for telephone interviews were set. Interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one hour. Each interview was audio-taped, then transcribed for analysis.

Method of analysis

The researchers began analysis after twenty interviews were conducted in each employment category, then continued to draw names until the findings in each category became redundant. Data collection was considered complete when iteration and redundancy were found in the answers of each category of employee, consistent with the literature about qualitative research which notes that sample size is less important than repetition of among respondents (McCracken, 1993). As shown in Exhibit 1, this resulted in different numbers of employees in different categories. A total of 147 interviews were conducted.

Exhibit 1. Employment categories

Employment categories	Number of participants
Administrators (top managers/dominant coalition)	38
Faculty (professional employees; mid-level managers)	29
Exempt staff (salaried)	30
Non-Exempt staff (hourly)	50
Total	147

Using inductive analysis that prescribes linking and relating sub-categories by denoting conditions, context, and consequences, categorical groups of responses (based on the structure of the interview guide) were examined using a process described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). This process allows researchers to analyze the data without making assumptions. Themes of responses were derived through a method of constant comparison and evaluation of the transcripts, looking at causal conditions, context, and interactions. Finally, the researchers examined the central ideas that merged from the aggregate of concepts and made inferences and recommendations based upon them.

FINDINGS

The interview guide was developed to answer the research questions, but since many of the questions were open-ended allowing respondents to stray from the questions, the analysis considered all of the themes that emerged from the data. In the discussion of the findings below, direct quotes, in italics, are used to illustrate findings that emerged across interviews.

It should be noted that in this study, the Chancellor is the CEO of the organization. In American universities, either “president” or “chancellor” is used as the title of the Chief Executive Officer, depending on the tradition at each university. Vice chancellors and deans are part of the dominant coalition of top-management decision makers, and are also in positions of personal influence.

How do employees perceive the flow of information from top managers?

The bureaucratic structure of organizations was acknowledged as an inevitable fact of life by respondents. They acknowledged that information flowed in a hierarchical, top-down pattern from the CEO and top managers to other levels of the organization. However, at all levels of the organization, there was evidence that employees want to

receive information as directly as possible from the Chancellor. More importantly, direct dissemination from the CEO was perceived to reduce uneven distribution of information and increase credibility of information, since employees at all levels recognize that the top-down flow of information creates bottlenecks at different levels of supervision and makes getting consistent information to all levels of the organization difficult. In addition to the problem of uneven distribution, the study found concern that information from top managers is often filtered, and sometimes distorted, as it is relayed through the layers of bureaucracy.

The problem I've found is that the information gets changed at each level as it comes down to us. By the time it gets to the employees, we don't have all the information, or the whole truth, so people are confused about what's been said. [Exempt staff]

It's like playing a game of telephone. I only hear what makes it to the bottom of the food chain. Whether it's been distorted on the way down, I couldn't say because I didn't hear what the chancellor said originally. [Exempt staff]

The communication line from the chancellor to the blue collar staff is so long that by the time it gets to us, it's almost obsolete. [Non-exempt staff]

Again, I'd much rather hear things directly from the chancellor rather than worrying about it being lost in translation. [Faculty]

Top managers, not surprisingly, believe they receive sufficient information and were satisfied with the information flow. Of course, they have constant access to the CEO (chancellor) as well as access to privileged sources of information. However, while they acknowledge their position at the top of the information system, they are aware that others in the organization may not be as well-informed, as in shown in the following interview excerpts.

This is a top-down university (laughter)...But I'm part of the top. [Dean]

I think there are things I'm aware of because of some of the meetings I am in. If I were a faculty member, I wouldn't be getting some of it and I might feel there are things I wish I did know. [Director]

I do get sufficient information, but again, I'm close to that level. [Dean]

In large, decentralized organizations, information does not flow evenly and consistently throughout all units because individual managers vary in their propensity to share information, and even in their ability to communicate well. In some cases information does not flow, it trickles. Responses from managers indicate that the decision whether or not to share information is often based on personal judgment.

I guess it's my call. If I think it's really important, or the chancellor or vice chancellor has said something to me, that's how I decide to pass information on.
[Dean]

Furthermore, administrators admitted they often do not have a clear sense of what is common knowledge among employees and what pieces of information need to be conveyed. They also admit they do not always know what happens to information after it reaches the next level below them. Information voids are created when supervisors assume that employees have already been informed through other channels.

I know when my faculty complain that I don't communicate with them, it's often because I think it's common knowledge. You're working with it day to day and you don't realize you may be the only one that holds this information. I find myself so involved in things and I think everybody knows about it, but they don't. [Dean]

The study found that employees at the mid- and lower levels relied on lateral communication channels as well as downward channels. A number of employees said information from the lateral sources was more reliable than information received through bureaucratic channels, probably because it is perceived as being more direct.

Unexpected finding: information insufficiency at the middle level

Employees in positions at both the top and at the bottom of the organization believed they received sufficient information about the organization; employees in the middle believed they received too little. Lower level employees, for the most part, believe they receive sufficient information as long as they have the information necessary to perform their job, and therefore need less information. However, employees in the middle of the organizational chart (faculty and professional staff) want more information than they currently receive.

How do employees prefer to receive information?

Employees who were most satisfied with internal communication were those who received information from a variety of sources, including interpersonal channels. Despite

the convenience of emails, a high value was placed on face-to-face communication, even though many employees noted that meetings are time-consuming. Face-to-face channels also included chance meetings and encounters with colleagues and administrators. In this study, the most satisfaction with communication was found in a unit in which the top administrator scheduled “walk-about” on his calendar each week.

I don't think there is a particular kind of information channel. It's the variety that is important. When you are face-to-face, there is a potential for team-building, where with email it's very, very difficult to do. [Exempt staff]

I think email gets to be too impersonal, and that's why our department has gone to a weekly meeting. The idea is just so everybody can come and have our little discussion about what's going on. When I first came here, the only way we communicated was by email and I think there's something missing there. [Faculty]

I am a firm believer in the policy of departmental staff meetings for a communication tool – the wheel runs smoother when the spokes are in unison. Over my years of employment, I have seen the negative effects of not having and the positive effects when regular staff meetings are held. [Exempt staff]

Unexpected finding: The email and website paradox

An interesting finding of the study was that of the email paradox. When asked how they preferred to receive information almost every employee immediately responded: “email.” However, a paradox revealed itself when after the initial, almost knee-jerk response, many interviewees went on to indicate that their true preference for receiving information was meetings and face-to-face interactions. In some cases they contradicted their own initial answer without being probed, as can be seen in the following quote:

I get almost all my information from email. I also get a lot of information from our chairs council meetings that we have each month- that's where the dean of college gets all the chairs and departmental chairs together and goes over what the vice chancellor of academic affairs has explained to him. So, there are a lot of different ways, but the main one is meetings. [Department head]

A readily identified shortcoming of email is the sheer volume that is received each day. Because of the large number of emails received each day, email messages are scanned, rather than read carefully. Almost everyone interviewed had developed a

personal filtering system that included looking at senders' names and subject lines, deleting emails without opening them, and holding emails to read later.

I give it a quick scan. I look at sender name and subject line, and I can tell whether it is important or not. I usually read the first few lines.... I personally think emails should be relatively short communication. [Director]

Another somewhat paradoxical finding was how the organization's website was used by employees at all levels. Managers interviewed believed that since so much information was available on the website, all employees must feel abundantly informed. They assumed that all employees regularly looked at the website. However, the study found that while employees appreciate information on the website and like its broad access (from home, office, wireless), they have little time for surfing and browsing. The website was used primarily as a portal entry point to access specific, job-related information, and was seen as an archive of information, not as a communication channel. It is an information-pull technology, not a push-through technology. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that if information is put on the website, employees will see it or know it is there.

Most faculty don't surf the webpage. They are usually going in to get something specifically needed at the moment. There is information there, but you aren't made aware of it. [Faculty]

Does the communication channel and relationships with top management affect the perception of sense of community?

There was a definite relationship between feeling well informed and perceiving a sense of community within the organization. Employees at the top of the organizational chart felt a university-wide sense of community. The perception of a sense of community among administrators appeared to be based on ample opportunity for face-to-face, interpersonal interaction, particularly with the chancellor. Administrators acknowledged that their unique opportunities for interaction contributed to their sense of community, and while they were aware it was not felt campus-wide, they accepted this as a fact of life and did not indicate that it was necessary to change it. It was apparent that face-to-face interaction was important to community-building as noted in these quotes from deans:

I've gotten to know those deans pretty well, and that helps create a sense of community among that group. But again, that's somewhat atypical, and every faculty member wouldn't have that. [Dean]

I feel a sense of community among the people I'm around, in the college and the upper administration. [Dean]

Perceptions of a sense of community at the department level varied among individual units of the organization. At lower levels, employees felt a sense of community in the department or unit, but often did not believe it existed in the university as a whole. The exception was found among mid- and lower-level employees who were serving on advisory and/or campus-wide committees that had access to the chancellor or other top managers. Employees who felt well-informed as a result of believing that their dean and department head moved information freely and equitably, also reported having a strong sense of community in the unit. It is noteworthy that these interviewees used the terms “we,” “us,” and “our” in their responses. In units in which employees felt they did not have sufficient access supervisors and who felt that information was incomplete and/or filtered when it reached them, did not feel a strong sense of community.

It was clear throughout the interviews in this study that the chancellor was viewed as the most credible and trustworthy source of information. At all levels of the organization, having direct access and face time with the chancellor (CEO) contributed to “community spirit.” In addition, hearing things directly from the chancellor in committees or at town hall or meetings contributed to a sense of community and made employees feel important.

...when we were in the Faculty Senate, we did have much more sense of community spirit, but it was limited to the people in the room. We had access to the chancellor. Maybe every now and then he could hold an open forum, a general meeting of interest to people. [Faculty]

A personal appearance [from the chancellor], certainly would be helpful, maybe not on a routine basis, but those issues that have an impact on the faculty...that would provide more of a sense of community. If I don't have any input, how am I supposed to feel a part of a community? [Faculty]

Is there a relationship between feeling well informed and willingness to advocate for the organization?

Access to information affects morale and makes people feel important and respected. Even when respondents said they had sufficient information to perform their job and sufficient information about policies and goals of the organization, they still want information about administrative decisions, budgets, personnel decisions, pending changes, goals and future directions, etc. Employees want to be “in the loop” and informed of things “coming down the pike,” whether or not the information directly affects them. Employees in the middle stratum of the organization who happened to have more access to information through university-wide committees or even personal relationships with administrators had greater job satisfaction and more campus pride.

I guess when you work at a place, you want to feel like you're in the loop. So when you hear things, you think, 'Why didn't I hear about this ahead of time?'
[Exempt staff]

Too much information I would rather have than not enough. [Faculty]

The study asked respondents if they were satisfied with the amount they received, and if they talked to others about the university. Probes were used to explore their conversations with persons outside the organization. Top managers believed they were very well informed about the university, and indicated they were also willing to answer questions from journalists in a positive way. Other employees who felt satisfied indicated they often talked to friends and family about the good things going on in the organization.

I think there are so many good programs in this university and I am always happy to talk about them. I am sometimes asked to speak to community groups.
[Faculty]

A number of employees noted they could do a better job of advocating for the university if they had more information.

If I knew what the other agencies were about and their goals, maybe I could help promote them rather than just being in my little cocoon. I say that because I'm out in the community meeting people...so if I was more aware, maybe I could help promote...[Faculty]

The study also found that employees at all levels resent finding out things about their own organization through the mass media, and believed that “members of the family” should be the first to know. Employees noted they are often asked about things

that appear in the news about the university, and expressed a willingness to advocate for the university when they had sufficient information to do so.

I think your in-house staff ought to know about it before the world knows about it. You get a lot of questions from parents or students, and all you can say is, 'Yeah, I read that in the paper, too.' [Non-exempt staff]

When we find out first through the paper instead of through campus, I find that, well, a little embarrassing. [Faculty]

We aren't really able to tell other people how good we are a lot of times, because we don't know. [Exempt staff]

Summary of the findings

The most important source of communication is direct from the top of the organization. Employees are suspicious of trickle-down information. Hearing directly from top management, particularly the CEO, gives employees the sense they are receiving full information and makes them feel important. Employees at different levels of the university who happen to have a relationship with the chancellor (through an advisory committee, for instance) are more satisfied with the information they receive and feel a greater responsibility to advocate for the organization. Even the perception of a relationship with the chancellor, perhaps from contact with him at a town hall meeting, leads to communication satisfaction, a sense of community, and willingness to speak positively about the organization.

Information is not the same as communication. The study found that while email is efficient for *information* exchange, the preference for *communication* among all groups of employees is still face-to-face interaction. The direction dimension of internal communication, the extent to which it is two-way and symmetrical, as well as the channel dimension is important. Face-to-face contacts may be time well spent in increasing information satisfaction and sense of community because they provide interaction and immediate feedback, and contribute to perceptions of information sufficiency and sense of community.

The data indicated that the medium is the message. Emails are appropriate for quick notices and updates, printed paper signifies importance, and websites are archives for retrieval-as-needed information. However, interpersonal, dialogic communication

remains important to employees at every level of the organization, and personal contact with the chancellor and other members of the dominant coalition carries the most influence over attitudes and behaviors.

DISCUSSION

The study found, as have studies before it, that organizational culture is a trickle-down phenomenon, and the CEO sets the tone through communication (Haas, 2006; Schein, 2000; Tourish and Robson, 2003; Van Nostran, 2004). In this study, when there was more access to the chancellor (CEO), there was more trust in the administration, employees assumed the best and felt a sense of community, and were more satisfied with the amount of information they received. More distance from the CEO and dominant coalition resulted in skepticism and the belief that information was filtered, and therefore inaccurate, as it trickled down through the hierarchical structure. Top administrators with abundant access to the chancellor had the greatest sense of campus-wide community, followed by employees who had access through advisory committees or other personal contacts.

Interpersonal communication and the importance of personal influence

Interpersonal communication is at the core of the personal influence model of public relations (Toth, 2000), and was found in this study to be at the core of effective internal communication. Interpersonal communication was found to be perceived as more trustworthy. The desire for face-to-face communication is consistent with the findings of Stein (2006). Both her study and the current study found that communication-rich channels effectively foster a sense of community and that employees seek sense of community at some level in the organization. Hearing information first-hand gives employees a sense of importance. Even email messages received directly from the chancellor's computer are valued more than the same email forwarded through the organizational hierarchy.

The study found that the CEO can use personal influence through face-to-face communication to accomplish goals of the organization. Relationship building and interpersonal relationships are appreciated and deemed more important to employees than are mediated channels, consistent with the findings of Jo and Shim (2005). It is

important for the CEO to have relationships at all levels of the organization, and even employees' perception of a relationship, achieved through perhaps hearing the CEO speak at a meeting, is important. This does not mean that the CEO must have a relationship with each and every employee, since communication also moves laterally at the mid and lower levels of the organization, and positive attitudes of a critical number of employees will diffuse through the organization to some extent. Personal influence could be especially important in times of organizational change or when new or complex information needs to be conveyed.

Information sufficiency

The study revealed the need for more co-orientation analysis between managers and employees. Managers with access to numerous communication channels may erroneously believe that employees already have received information through other channels, and may not recognize the need to convey some pieces of information. Managers sometimes neglect to move information down because they are so familiar with it they assume everyone knows as well. Redundancy of communication channels leads to good internal communication. The decision to share information is often based on an individual manager's personal judgment as to sensitivity and relevance, which means some information is shared in some units and not in others. Access to information in organizations should not be based on luck-of-the-draw. Furthermore, when managers rely on others below them to move information down, the result is often uneven flow as well as filtering of information, which can cause employees to seek alternative information sources including the grapevine. Employees in units headed by an effective communicator with a propensity to share information are better informed than other employees at the same level who happen to be in units with less effective communication.

An important finding of the study is that it is important to employees to receive information, even if the piece of information is not essential to their job performance. There is a difference between knowing what you need to know, and being in the know. Employees want to feel they are "in the loop," which fosters a sense of community. They believe receiving information is a sign that they are respected, which in turn creates a propensity to advocate for the organization. Providing information is a manifestation of

the regard in which employees are held, which helps explain the findings of previous studies (Haas, 2006; Moorcroft, 2003) that indicate the constant need for more information. Additionally, complete, timely information prevents rumors, since rumors occur when there is insufficient and incomplete information, which causes people to speculate.

Finally, the study found that employees at all levels mentioned wanting more information so they could advocate for the university, which gives an organization the competitive advantage suggested by previous studies (Dawkins, 2004; Hannegan, 2004; Tucker, et al., 1996). Managers should trust that most employees often have the best interest of the organization in mind, and understand that more information makes for more informed assessments and comments about the organization. Media advisories and news releases should be emailed to employees at the same time they are sent to journalists since employees resent finding something out in the media about their own organization. Additionally, it puts them in a position of being uninformed and therefore unable to defend or promote the organization's position as portrayed in the media.

Communicating from the top in an electronic environment

Electronic communication, if thoughtfully used, can flatten the traditional, hierarchical structure of internal communication and give employees at all levels the sense of receiving information first-hand, from the top. Despite the widespread use of electronic communication, the study found old habits of hierarchical information distribution remain. Emails are still often sent from top management to department heads, who forward them down through the organization, resulting in the perception that information has been filtered or censored before it reaches all levels. If the message is *intended* for all employees, it can be sent from the top to all levels simultaneously. The practice of moving information (memos) down through bureaucratic layers is based on a paper environment that pre-dates electronic communication.

When considering communication channels, managers also need to examine assumptions about email and website use. The medium is sometimes the message, and as noted earlier, employees associate a sense of importance with meetings that provide access to the dominant coalition, even when the information presented in the meeting could be posted on the web or sent in an email. Likewise, there is often false consensus

and erroneous assumptions about website use among employees. Managers too-often adhere to a “post it and they will come” belief, and think that information posted on a website constitutes communication, and that a website provides all the information employees could possibly need. This study found that the organization’s website is an archive from which to “pull” information (forms, policies,) or to access complex, follow-up information from meetings. Most employees do not have time to browse the website just to see what is there. Therefore, managers need to direct employees to information on the company’s website through some other form of communication.

Directions for future research

This study would indicate that both the attributes of the individual and the position (role) that the individual fills are components of personal influence. The interesting questions about the difference between individual influence and personal influence raised by Toth (2000) are worthy of further exploration. At what point does individual influence become personal influence? Does the influence reside in the individual, or in the position the individual holds? Does the model rely on covert or overt power? Sriramesh et al. (1999) suggest that personal influence exists when the right person (one with social class or power) is in the right position. More research is needed to determine the role of individual attributes of such things as charisma, trustworthiness, and good communication skills in the personal influence model.

There is no doubt personal influence exists as a phenomenon, but is it a public relations model? In this study, there was abundant evidence of the personal influence phenomenon, but it was undoubtedly used in an asymmetrical way. Grunig et al. (1995) believe that a personal influence model does not have to be asymmetrical, and that symmetrical personal relationships can be as important for individual public relations practitioners as are symmetrical organizational relationships with publics (p. 184). Many argue that truly symmetrical organizational relationships are an ideal rather than a reality, although it might be possible for a practitioner in a position of personal influence to have a symmetrical relationship with a person of influence in another organization. However, would this not simply be a good working relationship that benefits public relations efforts, rather than a model of public relations? Further research should explore this concept.

Limitations of the study

The obvious limitation of this study is that the interviews were conducted in one type of organization. While a university is somewhat unique, it has commonalities with other complex organizations. However, the findings would be enriched by comparisons to other types of organizations.

REFERENCES

- Barnfield, E. (2003), "A Year of Internal Communication?" *Strategic Communication Management*, Vol. 7 n. 1, pp. 3.
- Bartoo, H. & Sias, P.M. (2004), "When Enough is Too Much: Communication Apprehension and Employee Information Experiences", *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 52 n. 1, pp. 15-26.
- Cameron, G.T. & McCollum, T. (1993), "Competing Corporate Cultures: A Multi-method, Cultural Analysis of the Role of Internal Communication", *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 5 n. 4, pp. 217-250.
- Cubbage, A.K. (2005), "Inside Voices", *Currents*, Vol. 31, pp. 14-19.
- Daft, R. L. and Lengel, R. H (1986), "Organizational Information Requirements, Media Richness and Structural Design", *Management Science*, Vol. 32 n. 5, pp. 554-571.
- Davis, A. (2005), "To Engage Employees, Get to Know Them", *The Business Communicator*, Vol. 6 n. 5, pp. 3.
- Dawkins, J. (2004), "Corporate Responsibility: The Communication Challenge", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 9 n. 2, pp. 108-119.
- Gray, J., Laidlaw, H. (2002) "Insider Perspectives on Communication Satisfaction", *Australian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 29 n. 3, pp. 111-124.
- Grossman, R. (2005) "Sometimes It Pays to Play the Fool", *The Business Communicator*, Vol. 6 n. 4, pp. 3.
- Grunig, J. E., Grunig, L. A., Sriramesh, K., Huang, Y. H., & Lyra, A. (1995). "Models of Public Relations in an International Setting." *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 7 n.3, pp.163-186.
- Hannegan, C. (2004) "Employees as Reputation Makers", *Strategic Communication Management*, Vol. 8 n. 6, pp. 5.
- Haas, J. W. (2007), "A Communication Meta-myth Revisited: Is More Communication in the Workplace Better?" Presented to the International Communication Association, San Francisco.
- Howard, C. M. (1998), "How Your Employee Communications Programs Can Boost Productivity and Pride", *Public Relations Quarterly*, Vol. 43 n. 3, pp. 15-23.

- Jo, S. and Shim, Y. (2004), Media or Personal Relations? Exploring Media Relations Dimensions in South Korea, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 81 n. 2, pp. 292-306.
- Markus, M. L. (1994), "Electronic Mail as the Medium of Managerial Choice", *Organization Science*, Vol. 5 n. 4, pp. 502-524.
- McCracken, G. (1993), *The Long Interview*, Newbury Park, Ca: Sage Publications.
- Moorcroft, D. (2003), "Linking Communication Strategy with Organizational Goals", *Strategic Communication Management*, Vol. 7 n. 6, pp. 24-27.
- Morgan, J.M., Reynolds, C.M., Nelson, T.J., Johanningmeier, A.R., Griffin, M., & Andrade, P. (2004), "Tales from the Fields: Sources of Employee Identification in Agribusiness", *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 17 n. 3, pp. 360-395.
- Rosenfeld, L.B., Richman, J.M. & May, S.K. (2004), "Information Adequacy, Job Satisfaction and Organizational Culture in a Dispersed-network Organization", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 32 n. 1, pp. 28-54.
- Sanchez, P. (2004), "A 10-point Guide to Communicating Business Strategy to Employees", *The Business Communicator*, Vol 5 n. 5, pp. 10-12
- Schein, E. H. (2000), "Sense and Nonsense about Culture and Climate", in N. M. Ashkanasy, C. Wilderom, and M. F. Peterson, (Eds.), *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, pp. xxiii-xxx.
- Sriramesh, K., Grunig, J.E., & Dozier, D.M. (1996), "Observation and Measurement of Two Dimensions of Organizational Culture and their Relationship to Public Relations", *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol 8 n. 4, pp. 229-261.
- Sriramesh, K., Kim, Y. & Takasaki, M. (1999), "Public Relations in Three Asian Cultures: An Analysis," *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 11 n. 4-pp. 271-292.
- Stein, A. (2006) "Employee Communications and Community: An Exploratory Study", *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol 18 n. 3, pp. 249-464.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory, Procedures, and Techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.

- Suzuki, S. (1997), "Cultural Transmission in International Organizations: Impact of Internal Communication in Intergroup Contexts", *Human Communication Research*, Vol 24 n. 1, pp. 147-180.
- Toth, E. L. (2000), "From Personal Influence to Interpersonal Influence: A Model for Relationship Management", in *Public Relations as Relationship Management*, J. A. Ledingham & S. D. Bruning, Eds., Mahwah, NHJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc. pp. 205-219.
- Toth, E.L. (1988), "How Corporations Choose External Public Relations – An Interpretive Perspective." Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, New Orleans.
- Tourish, D., & Robson, P. (2003), "Critical Upward Feedback in Organizations: Processes, Problems and Implications for Communication Management. *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol 8 n. 2, pp. 150-167.
- Tucker, M. L., Meyer, G. D., & Westerman, J. W. (1996), "Organization Communication: Development of Internal Strategic Competitive Advantage", *Journal of Business Communication*, Vol 33 n. 1, pp. 51-69.
- Van Nostran, K. (2004), "Top-down: Building a Better Organization through Effective Communication", *Communication World*, Vol 21 n. 2, pp. 10.
- Zucker, R. (2002), "More Than a Name Change – Internal Branding at Pearl", *Strategic Communication Management*, Vol 6 n. 4, pp. 24-27.

APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. In general, do you believe you're well informed about what's going on campus? Do you feel "in the loop" about what's going campus?
2. Where do you get your information about what's going on campus?
3. Do you think you're well informed about campus policies? Where do you get your information about campus policies? How do you *prefer* to get the information about the things you mentioned?
4. Do you think you are well informed about administrative issues and decisions made by administrators on campus?
5. Where do you get your information about administrative issues? How do you *prefer* to get the information about the things you mentioned?
6. Is there information you would like to receive that you believe is not reaching you?
7. Do you think that you receive sufficient information from your dean? From your department head?
8. How well do you think information flows from the chancellor's office through your dean and department head to you?
9. Do you think you receive sufficient information about things going on in the chancellor's office? From the vice chancellors and provost's offices?
10. Do you know the chancellor's goals and priorities for our campus?
11. What could improve the flow of information from the chancellor's office?
12. Are you satisfied with the amount of information you receive?
13. Do you feel a sense of community on campus? How about in your college? In your department?
14. Do other people (friends, family, neighbors) ask you about what is going on in the university?