

INFORMATION FLOW AND DISSEMINATION IN THE
MANAGEMENT OF TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

BY

E.J. OKEREKE¹; C.D. OKEREKE²

¹ Faculty of Management Sciences
University of Port-Harcourt

² Federal University of Technology, Owerri.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian tertiary Institutions have, in the recent decade, been beclouded with problems at various levels of its management. These problems can be traced to inadequate planning or sometimes lack of it. This has, no doubt, distorted the institutions' success strategies and derailed their broad and specific objectives. Sequel, declining academic standards, students crises, rapid deteriorating physical structures, etc have continued to assume a perennial ugly dimension. Sometimes, institutions strive to ensure that it comes up with an articulated and comprehensive physical, academic and human resource plans. But most often, such efforts will either not see the light of the day at the initial planning process stage or when properly articulated, it will not be realised at the implementation stage. This has been attributed to forces internal and external to the management of the Institutions among which is information ambiguity which makes its flow and dissemination not only difficult, but also impossible. Thus, creating a missing link in the institutions' structural and operational settings.

Essentially, every tertiary institution or organisation depends for its daily functioning on an intricate information flow and dissemination network which has grown over time and has proved indispensable. Generally, the bigger the Institution, the more elaborate the network must be and the more complex it is in the management of the institution. This implies that the network of information flow and dissemination varies from one institution to the other depending on the size but what is important and most common is that they are geared at achieving the same result of maintaining a conducive academic environment, producing quality graduates, etc. The place of information flow and dissemination in the management of our tertiary institutions cannot, therefore, be over emphasized. Fundamentally, uncertainty and unclear direction that educational managers face arise from the inaccuracy of available information or lack of it. Taking a hypothetical case of drawing a ball from a basket that contains a number of balls, each with one of three possible colours: White, red and black. If one is allowed to see the ball, information about its colour is deterministic and a rational decision is possible; if one is not allowed to see the ball but is given the ratios of the three colours, then the chance that each colour will be chosen is known and information about the colour of the drawn ball is probabilistic and decision is near-possible. If one is neither allowed to see the ball nor given the exact ratios of the three colours, the exact chance for each possible colour cannot be pinned down, information about the colour of the ball to be selected is ambiguous and no decision is possible under this condition. This clearly depicts that the role of information in particular and communication in general in any institution or organisation is analogous to the nervous system of an animal. Yet its neglect has continued to mar the progress of our tertiary Institutions. This chapter has focused on unveiling this problem and ensuring that its proper place is taken for effective management of our tertiary Institutions. This chapter has also attempted to pragmatise the subject matter.

AN OVERVIEW OF COMMUNICATION

Communication can be defined as the transmission of meaning, passing of ideas and exchange of information from one party (sender) to another (receiver). The information so exchanged is the only working tool with which organisational goals can be achieved. So the sender must ensure that the information that gets to the

receiver is as intended. This is effective communication which must be distinguished from mere communication. Therefore, the importance of effective communication cannot be over emphasized. It is the means by which the institutions' work-force are linked together for the purpose of achieving corporate goals). Institutions working as a group will remain stagnant without effective communication because co-ordination and change cannot be effected. (Okereke, 1993).

Principally, the purpose of effective communication is to effect change. The internal and external functioning of any Institution depends on communication. Thus communication is internally needed to:

- Establish and disseminate goals of the institution.
- Develop plans for their achievement.
- Organise human and other resources in the most effective and efficient way. Select, develop and appraise members of the Institution. Lead, direct, motivate and create a climate in which people want to contribute; control performance.

Externally, institutions reach their environment and create open system through effective communication.

Communication is a process involving a number of specific steps and components as follows:

SOURCE (SENDER OF THE MESSAGE OR ENCODER)

This is the beginning in the communication process. Here, the sender has the thought or idea or need or message he wants his receiver to receive. The thought must be encoded by the sender for proper understanding.

MESSAGE

This represents the meaning the source intends to convey and it determines the meaning the receiver will obtain.

TRANSMISSION OF THE MESSAGE (CHANNEL)

This is the media to be used or the dissemination network. Generally, it may be oral or written. Examples of oral communication include spoken.

instructions/statements, interviews, committee meetings and their procedures telephone, telegraph or television. Instances of written communication include letters, memoranda, manuals, reports, minutes, circulars on notice board.

Peter (1986) identified other important methods of communication as facial expression, posture, and other forms of "body language". It is important to note here that when a message is repeated through several media it is more accurately received, comprehended and recalled. Also when selecting the media, the communicator, the audience and the situation must be considered.

RECEIVER (DECODER)

A receiver is the person that the message is meant for. On receipt of the message he decodes it and attaches meaning to it. It is effective if the message is understood by him.

CHANGE

This is the end result of effective communication.

FEEDBACK

This indicates whether the Institutional intended change has taken place. According to Herbert and Raygullet (1981) feedback enables the source (sender) to know whether or not the message has been received and interpreted correctly. Figure 1. explains the process.

Feedback systems measures output of a communication process and feed to the system or the input of the system corrective action to obtain desired result (Fig. 2).

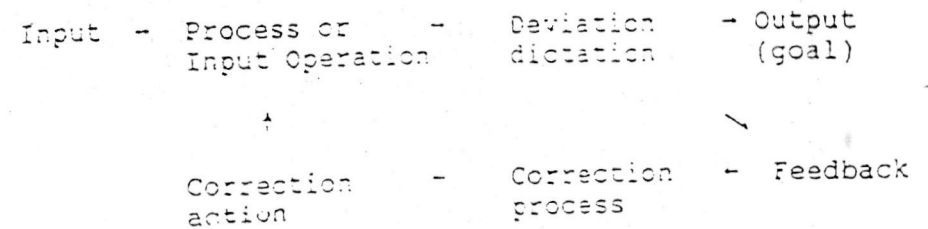


Fig. 1 Feedback Model

NOISE

This is the message interference in the communication process and it is present in every stage of the communication Process.

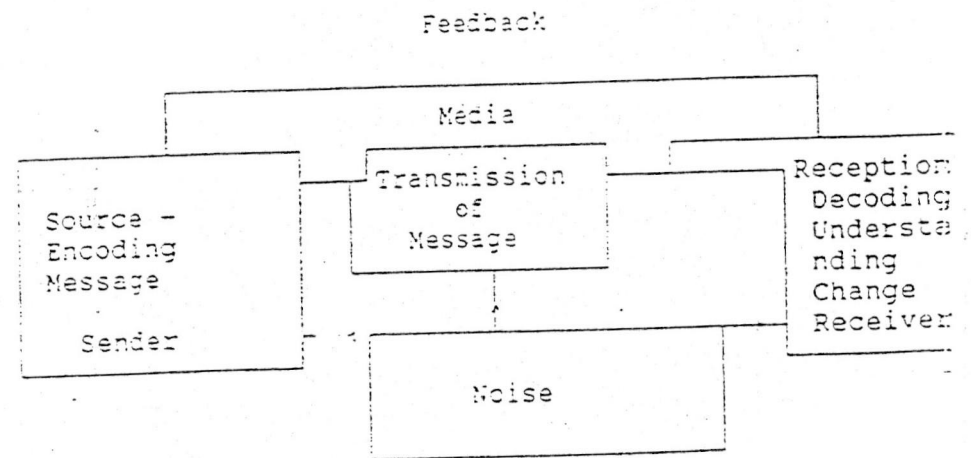


Fig. 2. Communication model.

INFORMATION FLOW IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Patterns of Information Flow

Generally, patterns of information flow in organisation could be vertical, horizontal or complex. Nigerian tertiary institutions follow these patterns. This is because, its structure is bureaucratically organised. Essentially, bureaucracy, originated by Max Webber, was the most efficient form of Organisation and has been identified and accepted today as a useful tool for the operation of a complex organisation like our tertiary institutions.

Basically, the key concept of bureaucracy is hierarchy, the ranking of individuals in terms of power. Within the ranking, we may have individuals of the same powers but there must always be the highest ranking at the top and the lowest ranking at the bottom. For example, a typical university is bureaucratically organised with the Vice Chancellor at the top, followed by the Deputy, Heads of Departments etc.

The three patterns of information flow in our tertiary institutions will be appreciated when we look at the organisational structure of a typical tertiary institution.

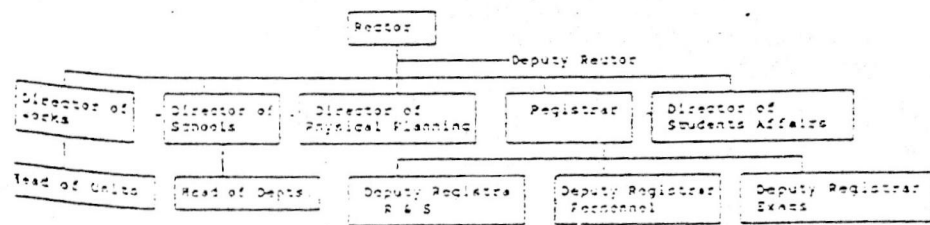


Figure 3. Three patterns of information in a typical polytechnic

From the figure above we observe three patterns of information flow in an Institution as:

(1) Vertical pattern: The vertical line shows how instruction or policy statements of the institution's Management flowed from the Rector vertically throughout the Institution. Thus, the instructions of management

moving downwards throughout the firm and reports passing upwards management will both follow the authority line of the firm (Little, 1977 p.5).

- (2) Horizontal Pattern: Here information flows across the Institution, most among equal ranks, otherwise each section would be operating in isolation. The horizontal line shows how policy on students flowed horizontally from the Director of student Affairs to other directors.
- (3) Complex Pattern: The short-comings of the vertical and horizontal patterns of information flow led to the development of complex pattern information flow. Moreover, the complex posture of the society with attendant shifts in scope and changes in government policies demands flexible means of meeting the test of time. From our figure, line "___" shows how the Registrar issued a statement in reaction to, say government's new policy on employment without waiting to follow the hierarchy and the information showed complexity throughout the institution.

DISTORTIONS OF INFORMATION FLOW

Information required for effective operations of the Institution is, most often distorted which makes its flow very difficult and the end result of change is effected. This distortion arises from a number of factors among which include

- (a) Preconceived Notions: These can distort information flow between individuals. If a Director of Works or the Chief Executive of the Institution has a wrong preconceived notion about a particular head unit, automatically information flow between them will be difficult. This is because there will always be misunderstanding and misinterpretation of material facts. However, if the preconceived notion is positive, information flow between them will be very easy.
- (b) Semantics: By semantics, we mean the same word may have different meaning to different people and if they are not understood by the receiver.

the way it was intended by the sender, information flow are distorted. For example, a Director who instructs his secretary to finish a particular job as soon as possible may be misunderstood by her believing that her boss wants her to complete the task after all other jobs are finished.

- (c) Threat to status or position: The relative status and power of senders and receivers may prove to be a barrier to effective information flow. Subordinates may prefer a happy but ignorant boss to an informed but upset one (McFarland, 1979). This is also applicable on the part of the superior who may not communicate accurately to the subordinates if the information stands as a threat to his position.
- (d) Attributes of the receiver: The attribute of the receiver affects the manner he accepts an information. If a receiver is psychologically indisposed or that the environment is very unfavourable, flow of information will be distorted and vice versa.
- (e) Structural constraints: The architectural plan and sitting of the building or plants, the organisation of the physical facilities within each building and the geographical location of each department in relation to the main reporting unit are factors that can distort the flow of information in an Institution.
- (f) Information Overload: This occurs to individuals who have access to more information than they can cope or who are overwhelmed by the amount of work they are called upon to do within a given time. This often leads to inefficiency as workers tend to be forgetful, disorganised and ineffective over loading a channel that brings a lot of distortion in the information flow. Gate keeping: In our tertiary Institutions just like any other organisation, we have gatekeepers. They are those who occupy position that gives them access to all information as it enters in and goes out of the Institution. They can easily impound and suppress information to which they are unsympathetic or hostile while they can allow the ones that can benefit them to flow.

Time Pressure: This also pose some difficulties to information flow. Sometimes, adjustment period to change is insufficient.

The case of Autonomy: Sometimes, when a department becomes autonomous it often times finds it difficult to get favour from their former immediate reporting units. This, no doubt generate information flow problem which hamper management's planning strategy.

Other difficulties include poor retention or loss of transmission, social distance, communication filtering, hostility between communicators, and personal distraction or problem.

TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING INFORMATION FLOW DISTORTIONS

Information flow distortion can be remedied or sometimes prevented by applying a number of techniques among which include:

- (a) Follow-up and Feedback: This technique states that for information flow to be effective, it requires follow-up, and feedback in order to set up an informal mechanism by which the sender can check on how the message was actually interpreted, and carried out. This process makes information flow two-way process.
- (b) Develop two-way communication techniques: For efficient management of information flow to an institution, this technique, suggest that educational manager should always allow and encourage subordinates to ask questions and seek advice.
- (c) Clarity: This technique requires responsible officers to always clarify ideas before attempting to communicate them.
- (d) Conciseness: This technique requires educational manager to always give brief and short messages to subordinates.
- (e) Efficient use of the informal organisation: This technique requires the recognition of the importance of informal group in the Institution and their

place in the efficient management of information flow. It is a known fact that a manager might reinforce and clarify a formal written order within an informal chat session among employees.

INFORMATION DISSEMINATION IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Information flow and dissemination should not be misunderstood to mean the same thing. They are different in both meaning and application. However, they happen simultaneously in the communication process. Essentially, information dissemination is effective to the extent the Institution's management is able to avail themselves of some information technology which according to Oliver (1990) is the technology which supports activities involving the creation, storage, manipulation and communication of information, together with their related methods, management and application. In every Institution, different types of information flow across the entire Institution and different types of technology (electronic and mechanical) are available for effective dissemination of information. Institution's policies or programmes could flow through memos which could be disseminated through the network of courier system, mail runner, etc. Information concerning students could be recorded and disseminated with the use of notice boards, Public Address System (PAS), electronic Data processing system (EEDPS), radio communication example motorial etc. Information concerning the successful planning of an Institution's yearly academic programme or the like could be disseminated verbally with the help of a telephone system, intercommunication system etc.

Information has remained a veritable, indispensable and working tool with which the Institution working together as a team, can plan and achieve result. The effective management of our tertiary Institution depends on its availability and non-availability. Unfortunately, an information may be readily available but the network necessary to disseminate it may not have been properly put in place. Consequently, efforts geared at ensuring effective management of the Institution is marred. Lack of information can stagnate a plan or action for as long as it remains unavailable.

Information dissemination can be patterned to achieve the desired result.

Although there is no generalised pattern as obtained in information flow, however, most tertiary institution in Nigeria adopt the horizontal pattern of information dissemination. Under this arrangement, a central mail sorting center is created and each unit of department gets and sends information therefrom. Figure 4 illustrates this. Sometimes, messengers are used to disseminate information meant for specific units or departments. This is the complex pattern and it is very common among our Tertiary Institutions and a reflection of their bureaucratic structure.

Dissemination of information has some inherent difficulties which makes information utilization impossible. It ranges from high cost of acquiring the necessary information technology or inappropriate medium to lack of co-ordination between the central body and the units. Some difficulties associated with information flow are applicable to information dissemination.

These difficulties hamper information utilisation and by extension the effective management of our tertiary institutions.

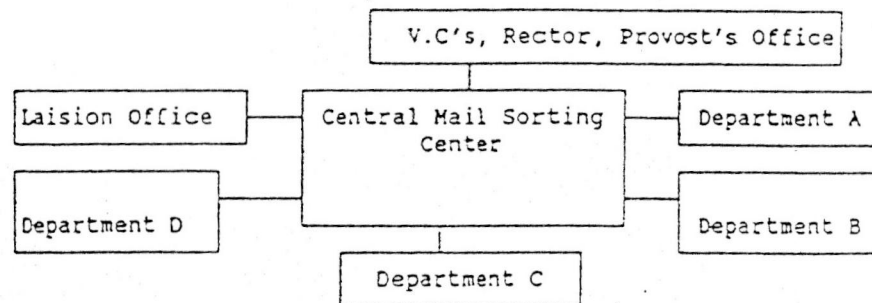


Fig. 4. Horizontal pattern of information Dissemination.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Information flow and dissemination is not considered for its own sake, but rather as a means to achieving organisational goal(s). Attaining organisational goals and foundation objective of an Institution requires free information flow and efficient dissemination network.

Organisations like tertiary Institutions are often exposed to information flow and dissemination difficulties, sometimes, due to bureaucratic and structural bottlenecks. The consequences of such difficulties are quite obvious especially in the management efforts. Therefore, it is necessary for educational managers to always ensure that their entire communication process is barrier free. This will go a long way in enhancing performance at all levels. The following recommendation in addition to the earlier proposals in the text is proffered.

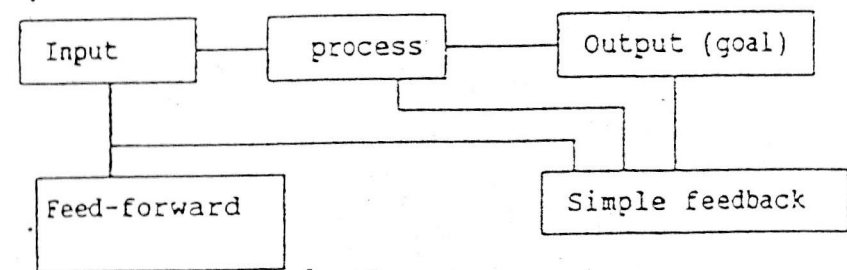
The preventive approach of constantly carrying out a communication audit should be adopted. It can take any form like observations, questionnaires, interviews, and analyses of written documents. Periodic reports is essential here. Essentially, communication audit should concentrate on the following:

- The regulative and task related network pertaining to policies, procedures, rules and superior sub-ordinate relationship.
- The innovative network which include problem solving meetings and suggestions for change.
- The integrative network which consists of praise, rewards, promotions and those items that link institutional goals with personal needs.
- The informative oriented network which includes publications, bulletin board, and the grapevine.
Real-time information should be vigorously pursued and encouraged. This can be achieved by using information technology such as intercoms, telephone, walking-talking, etc.

Information sources should always be identified and utilized effectively. Participants should identify their public relations weaknesses and as much as possible strengthen them.

Participants as communicators should ensure effective listening habit. To achieve this, Keith (1911) proposed ten guides: stop talking, put the talker at ease, show the talker that you want to listen, remove distraction, emphasise with the talker, be patient, hold your temper, go easy on arguments and criticisms, ask questions, stop talking! and statistics should be kept simple.

In addition to feedback, feed forward should be encouraged.



Training and development of staff in the acquisition of communication skills should be encouraged and vigorously pursued.

Information and reporting systems should involve no more data and reporting than is really needed to give a reliable picture of what is going on. The information gathered should emphasize strategically meaningful variables and symptoms of potentially significant development. Temptations to supplement "what officers need to know" with other "interesting" but marginally useful information should be avoided.

REFERENCES

Herber G. Hicks and Raygullet C., Management, Auckland: McGraw-Hill Inco. 1981, p.16

Little P., Communication in business, 3rd ed., Longman, 1978, p. 202.

Oliver Chapman F, Data Processing and information Technology, 8th ed., London: EIBS, 1990, p. 23.

Okereke E.J. "Communication in security Management services", Workshop paper presented at Adapalm Nig. Ltd, Ohaji, March, 1993. p. 3

Peter J., Business Studies: An integrated Approach, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986, p. 174