

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE: THE CASE OF THE UASU AT EGERTON UNIVERSITY, KENYA**Lagat, A. C.**

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CITATION: Lagat, A. C., Mutai, B. K. & Kosgey, I. S. (2014). Effective communication and employee performance: The case of the UASU at Egerton University, Kenya. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Entrepreneurship*, 1 (10), 179-188.

ABSTRACT

The objectives of the Universities' Academic Staff Union (UASU) in Kenya is to ensure better welfare and terms of service for its members, provision of a favourable working environment, and protection of its members from harassment and firing by their employers. The Union experiences some challenges in the process of its operations, including enhancing effective communication and, consequently, employee performance. Through a cross-sectional survey, this study assessed the contribution of the UASU to effective communication and its influence on employee performance at Egerton University in Kenya. Results indicate that the UASU significantly affected employee communication. Reliability of existing communication channels was ranked high followed by employees being informed promptly on organizational expectations. Feedback from the employer on employee related issues was not very timely. Prompt and effective communication contributed positively to employee performance. Similarly, timely delivery of information to employees positively and significantly affected organizational layout and working conditions. There is, therefore, need to actively engage, maintain and strengthen the UASU in University activities.

Key Words: *Effective communication, Employee performance, UASU, Kenya*

Introduction

A trade (labour) union is an organization of workers that have banded together to achieve common goals in key areas like working conditions. Through its leadership, a trade union bargains with the employer on behalf of the union's members and negotiates labour contracts (i.e., collective bargaining) with employers. These may include the negotiation of wages, work rules, complaint procedures, rules governing hiring, firing and promotion of workers, benefits,

workplace safety and policies. The agreements negotiated by the union leaders are binding on the entire membership and the employer and, in some cases, on other non-member workers. A survey of 73 independent studies on American manufacturing and education sector unions revealed that a positive and statistically significant association of, respectively, about 10 and 7%, existed between unions and productivity (Doucouliagos & Laroche, 2003). In a number of West African countries (e.g., Cameroon and Nigeria), academic staff trade unions in universities have succeeded in preserving a considerable degree of autonomy, enabling them to play a significant role in the defence of interests of their members (Anungwom, 2002; Iyayi, 2002; Konings, 2003).

In Kenya, the Universities' Academic Staff Union (UASU) was formed in 1993 as a trade union for academic staff in all the public universities in the country, with a Chapter in every university (UASU Constitution, 1993). The UASU was formed against a background of lack of representation of academic staff and declining academic standards, owing to poor terms and conditions of service for the academic staff. The Union has, among its objects, ensuring better welfare and terms of service for its members, provision of a favourable working environment, and protection of its members from harassment and firing by their employers (UASU Constitution, 2006). These are imperative to quality assurance in the provision of higher education because motivation and incentives in a supportive working environment lead to responsibility, ownership, creativity and innovation. To achieve its objectives, the UASU has to effectively communicate with its general membership and University Management (Lagat, 2012).

Employee communication is essentially about involving people in the organization. Employees will only be able to perform their best if they knew their duties, obligations and rights, and have opportunity of making their views known to management on issues that affect them (Perrin, 2003). Good communication is, therefore, essential to the management process and management of organizational change. Generally, employee satisfaction with communication in their organizations is linked to organizational commitment, productivity, job performance and satisfaction, and other significant outcomes (Gray & Laidlaw, 2004). This study assessed the contribution of the UASU to effective communication and its influence on employee performance at Egerton University in Kenya.

Research Methodology

A cross-sectional survey was undertaken at Egerton University, Njoro, Kenya in which primary data was collected from a sample frame of the 435 general UASU members using sets of pre-tested structured and unstructured questionnaires. Systematic random sampling was used to secure a representative group using the formula of Israel (1992) as shown in the equation below:

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

Where; n is the optimum sample size, N the number of registered UASU members and e the probability of error (i.e., the desired precision, e.g., 0.1 for 90% confidence level).

Secondary data was obtained from records and documents (e.g., collective bargaining agreements, the UASU Constitutions, publications and reports) at the Union's Offices. The data collected were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The respondents provided information regarding the extent of effective communication and its influence on employee performance. General statistics were used to describe the data. Non-parametric analyses were done using Friedman ranking test to test whether there were significant differences on the impact of the activities of the UASU on various aspects explaining effective communication. Besides, correlation analyses were done to establish the effect of improved communication on employee performance. The results were then presented in tabular summaries.

Research Results

General Characteristics of the UASU Members

Findings relating to the general characteristics of the respondents indicated that males dominated (72%) the UASU membership. Married employees were the majority (89%) of the UASU members followed by the singles (7.3%) and least were the widowed (1.2%). The age category of 46-55 years was the majority (50%) of the membership to the UASU followed by the age bracket 36-45 (29.3%) and 56-65 (15.9%). Most of the respondents (80.5%) had more than six years of work experience in the University. Findings relating to the medians, modes and standard deviations for general characteristics of the members of the UASU at Egerton University indicated that the gender of the respondents had a median of 1, marriage status 2, age, length of service and length of membership 4.

Contribution of the UASU to Effective Communication

Findings relating to the extent the respondents agreed that the UASU contributed to effective communication within Egerton University indicated that 30% and 38% of the respondents moderately agreed or agreed that employees were promptly informed due to negotiations by the UASU. Only, correspondingly, 12% and 4% disagreed and strongly disagreed.

Concerning timely feedback from the employer due to negotiations by the UASU, correspondingly, 38% and 35% of the respondents moderately agreed and agreed while 20% and 2% disagreed and strongly disagreed that this was so. Majority of the respondents also agreed that information was accurately delivered within the University to the UASU members as a consequence of the negotiations by the UASU. This was confirmed by 38% and 40% of the respondents who moderately agreed and agreed, respectively, compared to 11% and 1% of the respondents who disagreed and strongly disagreed. The response on the reliability of existing communication channels due to the contribution of the UASU was also positive.

Correspondingly, 22% and 54% of the respondents moderately agreed and agreed that it was so. Only 15% of the respondents disagreed.

Findings relating to the standard errors and standard deviations of the means pertaining to the extent to which the UASU contributed to effective communication and employee performance indicated that the median and mode of the response variables were between 3 and 4 when rounded off. This implies that the respondents agreed that the activities of the UASU moderately improved communication among its members at the University.

Table 1: Medians, modes and standard deviations for aspects explaining effective communication

Parameter	Employee informed promptly	Timely feedback from employer	Reliable communication channels	Information accurately delivery to employees
N	82	82	82	82
Median	4.00	3.00	4.00	3.50
Mode	4.00	3.00	4.00	4.00
SD	1.07	0.96	0.91	0.95
Minimum	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00
Maximum	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00

SD = standard deviation.

Table 2 indicates the means and ranks of the negotiated mode of communication from the employer to employees by the UASU. Reliability of existing communication channels was ranked high at a mean of 2.76. This was followed by employees being informed promptly on the organization's expectations (2.60), information being accurately delivered (2.52) and, finally, feedback from the employer being timely. As indicated earlier, all the variables explaining effective communication in the University were positively affected by the activities of the UASU, which also positively influenced employee performance. However, the extent to which the factors affected employee performance differed as shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Means and ranks for aspects explaining the negotiated mode of communication from employer to employees by the UASU at Egerton University

The negotiated mode of communication from employer to employee	Mean	Rank
Timely feedback from employer on employer related issues	2.12	4
Reliable existing communication channels	2.76	1
Information accurately delivered to employees through acceptable communication channels	2.52	3
Employee informed promptly on organizational expectations	2.60	2

Table 3: Friedman test for the negotiated mode of communication from employer to employee by the UASU at Egerton University

N	82
Chi-square	22.38
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	0.00

Level of significance – 5%

Correlation analysis was performed to test whether there was any significant impact of effective communication on employee performance as contributed by the activities of the UASU. Employees being informed promptly on organizational expectations positively and significantly affected effective mix of wages and personnel policies ($r=0.27$, $P<0.05$) and better organizational layout and improved working practices ($r=0.24$, $P<0.05$). Timely feedback from employer to employee related issues positively and significantly affected effective mix of wages and personnel policies ($r= 0.26$, $P<0.05$).

Accurate information delivery to employees positively and significantly affected effective mix of wages and personnel policies ($r= 0.23$, $P<0.05$). It also improved employees' contract terms and conditions of service ($r=0.28$, $P<0.05$).

Discussions

It was evident that males were predominant members of the UASU. Traditionally, trade union services have been directed to the needs of male members in organizations. Women were, therefore, less likely to be union members. On the other hand, married respondents were more than singles. This implies that married members were responsible not only for themselves but also for their families, a situation that would increase their propensity to be union members, especially when one had dependants or when being the only bread earner for the family. The findings in the current study concur with those of Tadić (2005), who found that in Croatia, a large number of employees that possessed postgraduate qualifications were more within the male

population. This could be due to many employees on managerial positions being male. Studies on gender and career commitment have also shown that professional women were more committed to their careers than their male counterparts (Jack, 2004). Conversely, other studies have found no significant relationship between gender and career commitment (e.g., Akinyemi, 2001; Popoola & Oluwole, 2007). The findings in the current study are in agreement with those of Popoola & Oluwole (2007) that majority of the personnel in records management in the registries of Osun State Civil Service in Nigeria were married. That study showed that married workers had a lower mean career commitment than the unmarried ones, implying that the married workers were more committed to their family matters than the career.

It was apparent that the majority of the UASU members were relatively older. Perhaps this was because many organizations had reduced investment in younger employees due to lack of funds and the longer time the existing employees took to retire from the service. Previous studies have found that younger employees were more willing and eager to learn and develop themselves and had more opportunities for career development than older employees (Meyer et al., 1993). However, older workers in any organization were more likely to be committed to their careers than younger employees (e.g., Adeleke, 2003; Robert 2005; Popoola & Oluwole, 2007).

Overall, the responses in the present study indicated that the UASU positively contributed to prompt and effective communication in the University. Burton (2006) reported that more than 80% of employees polled in America and the United Kingdom indicated that employee communication influenced their desire to stay with or leave an organization. Nearly a third said communication was a “big influence” on their decision. Generally, unions provide information to workers about benefit expectations, rules and procedures, and dispel stigmas that might be attached to receiving a social benefit. This in turn directly leads to better plant layout and improved working practices, which affect gain in performance efficiency (Budd & McHall, 1997). Through increased employees being informed promptly on the organization's expectations, awareness was created on wages and personnel policies among members, which enabled them to take action when necessary. It has been observed that workers with collective bargaining rights earned 5-8% more than those without such rights (Kearney & Carnevale, 2001) and a premium wage of up to 17.4% (Pierce, 1999). It is important to note that although unions can bargain for wage increases for their members, public sector wages were often limited by budgets and, mainly, by public opinion (Shapiro, 1978; Mitchell, 1988). The role of the UASU in this issue in light of the establishment of the Salaries and Remuneration Commission in line with Kenya's Constitution (Constitution of Kenya, 2010; The Salaries and Remuneration Commission Act, 2012) remains to be seen.

As found in the current study, existing communication channels were reliable, prompt and effective (Table 2). Generally, good communication between the employees and their supervisors ensures that they do their job well and reaps many benefits for an organization. For example, organizations may benefit from good internal communication in terms of greater productivity, less absenteeism, improved quality of goods and services, fewer strikes, reduced

costs and increased levels of innovation (Winterton, 2004). It has also been observed that by improving the quality, adequacy and timeliness of information that employees received about the organization or their own work, their individual performance can improve by as much as 20-50% (Boyett & Boyett, 1998). Many employees who feel unrecognized or unappreciated by their employers for their hard work in turn develop decreased motivation. Besides, a positive work atmosphere and effective employee communication strengthen employees' identification with their organizations, which contributes to an organization's financial performance and sustained success.

The more a trade union addresses job security issues, the more trust is built up between an organization and employees, and the more likely employees are willing to adopt new ways of working (Ashton & Sung, 2002). It is generally acknowledged that whenever there is job insecurity, career commitment among employees declines (Meyer & Irving, 1994; Popoola & Oluwole, 2007). Principally, if the employees do not trust an organization over job security, then they are likely not to commit themselves to achieving organizational goals (Stuart & Lucio, 2001). In the absence of job security, workers fear they may be removed out of their jobs (ILO, 2004). It is important to note, therefore, that effective communication facilitates engagement and builds trust, which are critical ingredients in strong, viable organizations (Berger, 2008). Engaged employees enhance business performance because they influence customer behaviour, which directly affects revenue growth and profitability (Perrin, 2003). To be effective, the process of employee communication must be clear, easily understood and concise. It should be presented objectively in a manageable form to avoid rejection by the recipient. Good employee communication could improve the performance of management and decision-making by allowing employees to express their views and, thereby, help managers to arrive at sound decisions. This often improves employee performance and commitment as employees would perform better if they were given regular and accurate information about their jobs (Perrin, 2003; Gray & Laidlaw, 2004).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The contribution of the UASU to the factors affecting employee communication significantly differed. Reliability of existing communication channels was ranked high followed by employees being informed promptly on organizational expectations. Feedback from the employer on employee related issues was not very timely. The perception of the respondents on the frequency of employee training in the University, as attributed to the activities of the UASU, was moderately high. The prompt and effective communication contributed positively to employee performance in the University. Similarly, timely delivery of information to employees positively and significantly affected organizational layout and working conditions. There is, therefore, need to actively engage, maintain and strengthen the UASU in University activities.

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