



(Re-)Positioning and recognising the influence of internal communication on employee engagement for maximum organisational performance

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Abstract

Research on how communication contributes directly to high levels of employee engagement within the workplace is still relatively under-prioritised in public relations and corporate communication literature. Although some evidence exists on the relationship between internal communication strategies and employee engagement outcomes, the accentuated value that can be derived from internal communication practice is yet to be fully explored. The purpose of this study is to reposition and recognise the strategic nature of internal communication in maximising and cultivating high levels of employee engagement for organisational performance and success. The study explores the strategic importance of internal communication in accordance with a management philosophy anchored on collaborative, open and transparent communication. By using semi-structured interviews with managers and focus group discussions with employees, the study found that organisational engagement emanating from a strong management philosophy as part of the internal communication strategy empowered employees to perform beyond prescriptive expectations. Also, employees viewed the management philosophy as an avenue for the attainment of organisational goals, enabled through 'one-on-one caring' interviews with managers, which centered on the sensitivity of collaborative internal communication efforts. The efficacy level of internal communication was a key determinant of the organisation's engagement efforts. More so, internal communication was also used to facilitate the dialogic exchange of information and often cultivated diverse opinions to improve operational efficiency through the attainment of strategic communal relationships.

Keywords

Internal communication; employee engagement; engagement; organisational performance; management philosophy; social exchange theory

INTRODUCTION

Although employees have begun to realise their value and significant contribution to organisational performance and success, the extent to which internal communication is used as a strategic means in advancing employee engagement is yet to be fully explored. This realisation, however, necessitates an organisational environment where employees can productively contribute not only to the bottom line, but also safeguard their interests and welfare in the workplace. Consequently, scholars continue to point out that relatively little research exists on the extent to which communication directly contributes to high levels of employee engagement (Gruman & Saks, 2014; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson & Lings, 2015; Ruck, Welch & Menara, 2017). Arguably, a revolutionary approach to how organisations manage internal

interests and communicate with employees is increasingly needed to maintain high organisational performance and success. Mazzei (2018) confirms that employee disengagement may often lead to poorer organisational performance and can constitute a threat to an organisation's survival. The added value that can be attributed to employee engagement as a fundamental function of organisational success can never go unappreciated (Shamila, 2013). Notably, the appreciation of employee engagement is dependent on several other organisational functions, such as an effective internal communication system of values and a shared organisational culture, instituted to avert low engagement levels. Essentially, Pillay and Singh (2018) suggest that low engagement affects the commitment and motivation levels of staff. In this sense, low employee engagement levels are often the result of job design, ineffective communication, dissonance in management approach and style, and a lack of inclusive participation in organisational processes and decisions.

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategic importance of internal communication in maximising and cultivating high levels of employee engagement to enhance organisational performance through a unique management philosophy from the perspectives of managers and ordinary employees. In exploring this philosophy's strategic importance, the current study concurs with Welch (2011:329), who states that internal communication is an important factor in the development and understanding of employment engagement. The concerns and lack of clarity in understanding the concept of employee engagement emanates from confusion often attributed to a lack of agreed-upon definitions and concerns about overlaps with other similar constructs (Dhanesh, 2017). Accordingly, Sarkar (2011) opines that employee engagement is a barometer that determines the association of a person with the organisation. However, such association must be rewarding, and the benefits should far exceed short-term incentivisation mechanisms. Likewise, Welch (2012) proposes that, given global leadership concerns regarding employee engagement, communication professionals involved in internal communication management need an in-depth understanding of the concept, so that they can craft strategies and tactics that contribute towards building engagement (Baik, 2016; Khadilkar, 2017).

Considering the foregoing, Mazzei, Butera and Quarantino (2019:24) maintain that employee engagement is also critical for gaining a competitive advantage; however, the engagement levels are relatively low. A study by Aon Hewitt (2018) indicates that in 2017, the level of employee engagement worldwide was 65%, and about 35% of employees were viewed as passively or actively disengaged, which constitutes what is termed the 'engagement-gap' (Albrecht, Gruman, Macey & Saks, 2015; Saks, 2006; Sievert & Scholz, 2017). This is an issue that organisations must face with some urgency, as it is likely to become a major concern if disengagement spreads throughout an organisation. To this end organisations need to adopt managerial approaches that contribute to engaging workplaces, conducive to pro-social employee communication behaviours (Mazzei et al. 2019).

Conversely, organisational problems are often fundamentally problems involving human interactions and processes. No matter what technical, financial, or other matters may be involved, there will always be humans involved in the design and implementation of such processes. A thorough understanding of the human processes (the way individuals behave, act and take decisions in organisational settings) and the ability to improve such processes is therefore fundamental to any organisational improvement and the attainment of organisational success. Hence, the issue of effective communication is critical as a human and a strategic concern, which also extends beyond the normal organisational mechanisms. However, it requires a planned and integrated internal communication approach to organisational engagement (Men, Neil & Yue, 2020; Ruck et al., 2017). Surprisingly, the contribution of employees to the broader organisational direction and strategy that can lead to organisational engagement, higher performance and success is often overlooked and at times unappreciated. Similarly, the added value of communication to the successful functioning and continuous improvement of organisational processes is often unrecognised. For these reasons, the study of internal communication in cultivating high levels of employee engagement for maximum organisational performance and success becomes more relevant, timely and a significant contribution to the paucity of research in this area.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study uses the social exchange theory in positioning the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, which the sociologist, George Homans, introduced in the mid-20th century. The main presupposition of the theory is that employees experience a series of interactions with organisational leaders (Oparaocha, 2016; Reader, Mearns, Lopes, & Kuha, 2017). When employees and leaders have a positive relationship, they typically experience a sense of mutual respect and trust. Contextually, this study broadens the understanding of the social theory through the Jeong-do management philosophy and the LG-way method as part of key internal communication strategies used at LG Electronics, South Korea, as the research context. Central to the social exchange theory is the concept of reciprocity, which means that two or more individuals who have a positive relationship want to return the benefits they receive from each other (Karanges, Beatson, Johnston & Lings, 2014). For example, when organisational leaders foster a positive relationship with employees, employees often want to respond by demonstrating increased work motivation and performance (Ko & Hur, 2014). In this respect, social exchange theory is applicable to this study, because organisational leaders who have a positive relationship with employees and use appropriate, timely and impactful internal communication efforts, may help employees feel more engaged at work and perform more effectively (Jha & Kumar, 2016; Karanges et al., 2014). Moreover, organisational leaders can develop and use strategies to foster and attain communal relationships with employees rather than exchange relationships – exchange relationships often do not proffer reciprocity and only one party stands to benefit at a given moment. Consequently, exchange relationships are more one-sided and asymmetrical because the benefits are not enjoined equally, which could be one of the contributing reasons to disengagement in the workplace. On the other hand, communal relationships are based on two-way symmetrical communication where both parties provide benefits as they are more concerned for the welfare of the other. The key advantage of striving for a communal relationship is that employees may respond by demonstrating higher engagement and performance at work, which can make an organisation more productive – in the main, organisational leaders can use effective internal communication strategies to engage employees and discuss their expectations on a regular basis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Welch (2008) remarks that literature points to a relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, listing effective internal communication strategies as one of the key drivers of employee engagement (Eaglebarger, 2017; Goncalves, 2017; Kang & Sung, 2017). Moreover, internal communication has evolved into an element that is crucial for organisational success, in that it underpins organisational effectiveness and, at times, often becomes a method of accomplishing organisational goals (Men et al., 2020; Ruck et al. 2017). The growing importance of recognising internal communication as such has led to it turning into a pressing issue for organisations, as they continue striving to achieve higher levels of engaged employees. In validating the links between internal communication and employee engagement, this study explores the strategic role played by internal communication in accelerating employee engagement to enhance organisational performance. In this regard, Ruck and Welch (2012:294) assert that internal communication is a prerequisite for organisational success. It is imperative, therefore, to consider organisational performance as a precursor of success birthed from highly engaged and satisfied employees, who are often determined to deliver organisational value beyond normative expectations.

The concept of engagement

Lemon and Palenchar (2018) indicate that engagement research in public relations began over two decades ago, with scholars examining it in relation to concepts such as internal communication,

corporate social responsibility and reputation and social capital, among others. Johnston (2014) suggests that engagement is regarded as an important component of organisational life, used to deconstruct and provide insight into the meanings and values that result from communicative interactions among diverse publics. Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma and Bakker (2002:74), define engagement "as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption." Additionally, the authors further described vigour as being "characterised by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties." Dedication refers to a sense of "significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge," and absorption describes an employee who is "fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in the work performed" (Schaufeli et al., 2002:74-75).

Further, Verčič and Vokić (2017) argue that engagement is becoming one of the more popular paradigms in describing the way organisations try to collaborate with their stakeholders. Engagement is influenced by internal communication – it is an organisational practice with the potential to effectively convey the values of the organisation to all employees and involve them in the goals of the organisation. Surprisingly, research shows that today there are more passively or actively disengaged employees than previously (Aon Hewitt, 2018). In this respect, Taylor and Kent (2014) posit that engagement is an ideograph or a word that is both unclear and ephemeral. Engagement seems to be easily understood, but as the term is unpacked in research, the complexities associated with it are uncovered. One area of particular interest for engagement scholars in public relations is employee engagement (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Karanges et al., 2015; Verčič & Vokić, 2017).

Understanding employee engagement (EE)

Although employee engagement has become a popular term in organisations, there has been concern that it may simply be the repackaging of an old construct such as organisational commitment (Welch, 2011:336). Notably, the concept of employee engagement has become a substance of concern for leaders and managers in organisations globally, and has been recognised as a critical element influencing and affecting the organisation's effectiveness, innovation, and competitiveness (Welch, 2011). Pertinently, Anitha (2014:310) also advances that employee engagement gained the attention of managers, consultants and policy makers during the period 1990 to 2005 whereas, on the other hand, academics appear to have started expressing interest in the concept only from 2006. Similarly, Gruman and Saks (2014) state that employee engagement has received great attention in management and human resource management publications in recent years. What distinguishes employee engagement from other related concepts is its emphasis on the two-way relationship between employer and employee (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Karanges et al. (2015) describe employee engagement as a form of reciprocation when employees are satisfied with the quality and quantity of internal communication. Employee engagement refers to employees' passion about work, commitment to their organisation's goals, and motivation to work hard to ensure success (Kahn, 1990; Karumuri, 2016). Essentially, high levels of employee engagement as often as not lead to high work performance (Mackay, Allen, & Landis, 2017; Neha & Narwal, 2017). Although some leaders have developed effective approaches for engaging employees and improving their work performance, others still struggle to determine the best way to engage their workforce (Howard, 2017; Pandita & Singhal, 2017; Plaskoff, 2017). Without a doubt, employees who feel committed to their organisation, have the right skill sets, perform well, and tend to be productive, help their organisation remaining competitive (Anand, 2017; Shirin & Kleyn, 2017).

It is important for researchers to explore how organisational leaders can use communication strategies more effectively to engage employees and improve their performance so that their organisations can be successful. The issue of employee disengagement within organisations represents an applied business problem that deserves renewed attention from the research community. Researchers such as Farndale and Murrer (2015), and Izard-Carroll (2016) identified factors that help employees feel engaged at work, including financial rewards and professional development opportunities. Kerns (2014) has also identified the benefits of having engaged employees, such as better customer service and financial performance.

New research may lead to new information regarding the strategies that organisations can use to increase employee engagement and work performance; the objective of this study is thus to reposition and recognise the accentuated value of internal communication in promoting and fostering high levels of employee engagement for maximum organisational performance.

Another perspective on employee engagement is advanced by Biloch and Löfstedt (2013). The authors created a model that promotes employee engagement, partially based on established concepts within performance management and motivation and partially based on a pioneer concept within business, referred to as gamification. The aim of their study was to adapt this model to an organisational setting characterised as potentially unengaging, to be able to identify possible benefits and concerns by means of the model developed. The model created was thereafter configured to the work of a truck driver, to illustrate how employee engagement could be promoted within the field of haulage firms (Otieno, Waiganjo & Njeru, 2015). The findings of their study indicated that components of the performance management cycle can, to various degrees, be supported by game elements (gamification) to drive employee engagement within the performance management process.

Bakar (2013) examined the factors that influence and shape employee engagement in the context of the financial sector in Malaysia. The author studied multilevel factors at three levels, namely the individual-, organisational- and societal level. The focus was placed specifically on three increasingly prominent concepts: empowering leaders' behaviour, high performance work practices (HPWP) and the possible role of religiosity. Drawing on institutional theory, an important argument in Bakar's study is the limitation of the mainstream single-level conceptualisation of employee engagement, which fails to capture the relational interplay of the contextual factors and the multilevel nature of engagement. The study demonstrated that empowering leadership behaviour has the largest effect on engagement. In essence, employees experience a significant level of engagement when their leaders show concern for their wellbeing too.

Internal communication (IC) perspectives

Karanges et al. (2015) postulate that internal communication has become a critical and independent field of study and a function within public relations and corporate communication. In congruence, Verčič, Verčič and Sriramesh (2012:223) assert that internal communication is listed among the fastest growing specialisations in public relations and communication management. Welch and Jackson (2007) view internal communication from a stakeholder approach and define it as the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels, and the exchange of information and ideas within an organisation. Moreover, internal communication within an organisation is dependent on several factors, including the type of industry, the structure of the organisation, organisational culture, and managerial style (Kitchen, 1997; Quirke, 2000). Additionally, De Araujo, Simanski and De Quevedo (2012:47) maintain that communication should therefore produce integration and a true spirit of teamwork within organisations. Karanges et al. (2014), state that the internal communication function therefore serves to strengthen the connection between an organisation and its internal stakeholders – that is, its employees.

Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter (2011) suggest that internal communication is part of the organisational context in which engagement, or disengagement, occurs. Likewise, internal communication underpins organisational effectiveness, since it contributes to positive internal relationships by enabling communication between senior managers and employees (Welch, 2012). Notably, organisations that communicate information, goals and processes, can also help employees feel a stronger sense of ownership of their duties (DeAscentis, 2016). Clearly communicating the reasons behind organisational decisions can similarly engage workers by increasing their understanding and support of the decisions (Lavigna, 2015). In addition, leaders who frequently provide feedback to employees regarding their performance can strengthen workers' sense of commitment to organisational goals (Heller, 2017). Therefore, organisations should also foster ongoing dialogue among team members (Seymour & Geldenhuys, 2018) and emphasise to employees that their work is important to the organisation's success

(Carton, Murphy, & Clark, 2014).

To contribute to organisational engagement, the practice of internal communication requires practical and theoretical considerations for communication to be perceived as appropriate by employees. Pertinently, Grunig (2001) believes excellent internal communication could eventually result in quality employee relationships and supportive behaviours toward the organisation. This connection is now confirmed by public relations scholars (see Men et al., 2020). On the other hand, Kang and Sung (2017) found a positive link between symmetrical internal communication, employee engagement, and supportive behaviour and commitment. Similarly, Men and Stacks (2014) found a positive association between symmetrical and transparent communication with favourable relationship outcomes such as employee trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality. In congruence, Yates (2006:71) links effective internal communication with business performance, stating that effective internal communication enhances bottom line results. Scholars have long recognised that effective internal communication can foster engagement, but poor communication can result in disengagement (Welch, 2011). In fact, it is said that in driving employee engagement, internal communication “plays a central role, if not the most important one” (Men & Bowen, 2017:121). Although limited, empirical studies have consistently shown that effective internal communication, such as transparent communication, symmetrical communication and supervisory communication, is positively related to employee engagement (compare Ewing, Men & O’Neil, 2019; Jiang & Men, 2017; Kang & Sung, 2017; Karanges et al., 2015; Men et al., 2020; Verčič & Vokić, 2017).

Relationship between IC and EE in the workplace

Public relations literature dealing with internal communication and employee engagement has been rather scarce (Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012). Additionally, very little attention has been given to employee preference regarding communication by their organisations (Ruck & Welch, 2012). However, many authors agree that communication plays an important role in increasing employee engagement (Gill, 2015; Karanges et al., 2015; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Men et al., 2020; Sievert & Scholz, 2017; Welch, 2011). Studies have consistently shown that various internal communication elements, such as innovative organisational communication initiatives, the opening of channels of communication, constant feedback and information sharing, are positively associated with work engagement (refer to Caesens, Stinglhamber & Luypaert, 2014; Fearon, McLaughlin & Morris, 2013). Welch (2011) gives a thorough overview of the link between engagement and internal communication and specifies that engagement is influenced by internal communication. The author further states that internal communication has the potential to effectively transfer the values of the organisation onto all employees and involve them in organisational goals.

Verčič and Vokić (2017) point out that, notwithstanding the importance of the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, the association has not been widely empirically tested. Internal communication should accordingly be recognised as an underlying influence of employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2015), for internal communication strategies, when effectively applied, help organisations to create and sustain high levels of employee engagement, which leads to higher levels of performance (Verčič & Vokić, 2017).

Carton et al. (2014), further emphasise the need for effective communication after conducting an archival study of 151 hospitals and an experiment with 62 groups of full-time employees. They unearthed two common, ineffective communication practices. The first practice was the tendency of business leaders to be unclear or inconsistent in communicating the organisation’s vision. The second is the tendency of leaders to communicate an overwhelming number of organisational values rather than a small number of explicitly stated values. The authors noted that leaders who avoid both practices could engage employees, create unity among workers and increase organisational performance. Karanges et al. (2014), studied the communication and employee engagement connection by collecting online survey data from 200 non-executive employees and concluded that managers should communicate in a way that employees feel supported and appreciated, with face-to-face communication serving as an effective

approach (O'Neill, Hodgson, & Al Mazrouei, 2015).

O'Neill et al. (2015), conducted interviews with 16 Emirati employees in the United Arab Emirates and discovered that participants felt most engaged when leaders and peers used face-to-face communication. Their findings further indicated that participants felt most engaged at work when face-to-face communication was used. When the participants wanted to engage colleagues, they also employed face-to-face communication channels. Cultural influences were pivotal in the participants' communication channel selection. Based on a web survey of 407 workers in medium-sized and large corporations in China, Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) confirmed the notion that face-to-face interaction and social media were effective channels for building organisational transparency and engaging employees. In addition, Parks (2015) surveyed 50 years of organisational communication research and suggested that leaders who listened to their employees with compassion and respect could increase employees' commitment at work. Schramm (2017) likewise recommended that leaders genuinely listen to employees to engage their workforce and enhance the quality of the work environment.

Internal communication creates and maintains the internal environment of an organisation – it can be viewed as the oil that keeps the engine of an organisation running, and contributes much to the welfare of the organisation as well as that of employees. In realising the accentuated value of internal communication, organisational managers should be educated on the importance of using effective and timely internal communication strategies for enhancing employee engagement. However, they must be aware that the set of drivers of engagement is broad (Kahn, 1990; Ruck & Trainor, 2012), as there are many organisational and situational factors, as well as individual differences, that influence employee engagement or disengagement. To determine the added value of internal communication in promoting and fostering inclusive employee engagement, it was necessary for the current study, when interrogating the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, to pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the significance of internal communication in facilitating employee engagement that leads to organisational performance and success?

RQ2: How can a management philosophy advance employee engagement and create value within the workplace?

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

This study was conducted at LG Electronics headquarters, Seoul, capital city of South Korea, providing the research context. The choice of subject was motivated by the unique corporate culture and organisational commitment that the Korean people often pride themselves on in their thriving economy, in particular the business sector. LG Electronics is said to be part of the five major South Korean brands that continue to strive for excellence and organisational performance. The researcher primarily focused on two organisational driving factors maintained by the organisation, namely the LG-way method and the Jeong-do management philosophy anchoring the leadership style. Importantly, LG Electronics is also known for its various viable activities in the area of electronics, due to its technological advancements and continued digitalisation efforts. The organisation, as a business sector, was accessible and therefore regarded as receptive to the researcher's exploring the extent to which internal communication influences employee engagement in order to attain maximum organisational performance and ultimate success. A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the thoughts, experiences and perceptions of managers and employees, in order to better understand the contribution of the Jeong-do management philosophy as an integral part of the internal communication strategy, with the view of considering the complex nature of employee engagement in depth. Mmutle and Shonhe (2017) posit that people's perceptions mostly spring from opinions held on a particular subject of interest; their experiences, behaviour, and often observations therefore become key aspects of a qualitative inquiry. Veal (cited in Mmutle, 2017) is of the view that a qualitative approach is generally concerned with information in the form of words, conveyed orally or in writing, thus making it possible to gather a relatively large amount of

information about the research subject.

Profile of the research participants

In the researcher's quest to contribute to academic debate and the body of knowledge, qualitative data or information was gathered from participants. The research population for this study comprised ordinary employees and managers of LG Electronics, thus a group of individuals that share one or more characteristic of interest. Regarding this aspect, Pandey and Pandey (2015:40) define a population as "the entire mass of observations, which is the parent group from which a sample is to be formed". In this study, a convenient non-probability sampling method was adopted on a spontaneous basis to take advantage of available participants, and without the statistical complexity of a probability sample. This approach was ideal for both ordinary employees and their managers at LG Electronics, as the objective of the study was exploratory in nature. Research participants consisted of males (55%) and females (45%). Most of the participants (70%) were South Korean born nationals, while others (15%) were from areas such as the USA and UK. Additionally, 10% of the participants were Indians and only 5% were from African countries, such as South Africa, Nigeria and Senegal. Of significance is the fact that a large proportion of the participants (96%) had tertiary level qualifications, with a minority of only 4% having no-post secondary level qualifications. The age group varied between 18 and 64, with a significant majority (67%) between 20 to 55 years.

Data collection instruments and analysis method

The study sampled 33% of the staff component as participants across various departments (for example, Information and Communication; HR; Marketing; Manufacturing, Robotics, etc.), who were readily available to engage with the researcher on the topic of internal communication and its influence on employee engagement in order to enhance organisational performance. Data collection was done through semi-structured individual interviews consisting of open-ended questions, involving 7 managers, while focus group interviews were facilitated with 36 ordinary employees (4 sets of FGIs with 9 employees per group). After four sets of focus group interviews, data saturation point was achieved as no new information emerged from the participants. In transcribing the data collected, the study considered the process of coding and classification of topics, developing categories and seeking patterns for theme development in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis prescripts. Notably, Percy, Kostere and Kostere (2015) argue that thematic analysis is a process that is used to conduct an analysis of qualitative data. Although it does not represent a complete research design, it does offer a process of data analysis that is flexible and compatible with many approaches to qualitative research. Thematic analysis in this study was deemed necessary and compatible with the use of Atlas.ti for data management and analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The presentation of the research results herein solely reflects the perspectives, viewpoints and experiences of LG Electronics' managers and ordinary employees on how internal communication influences high levels of employee engagement for the enhancement of organisational performance. The results are informed and center around two key approaches of the organisation, namely, the LG-way and the Jeong-do management philosophy. Firstly, the LG-way method is an action plan of the organisation founded on principles of trust, respect, and open and transparent communication. The method forms part of the philosophy of strong leadership and open communication as a basis for enabling employees to form part of the shared organisational culture. The LG-way method is further emphasised through effective communication strategies as adopted by the organisation to improve staff engagement, boost staff morale and attain organisational objectives. Moreover, the LG-way highlights that communication mechanisms adopted by the organisation should be inclusive, proactive and fulfilling for employees to gain a sense of belonging to the organisation.

The second approach refers to the deeply entrenched Jeong-do management philosophy. It is a management philosophy founded on principles of respecting human dignity, customer value creation and people-oriented management, constituting the action guidelines for all LG Electronics employees as enabled via open communication. Furthermore, the philosophy simply deals with how the leadership style of management encourages diverse views from the employees, which has a positive impact on the performance of the organisation. The Jeong-do management philosophy and the LG-way method are used as part of the internal communication strategy with strong indicators and variables that can lead to employee engagement in the organisation.

Theme 1: Internal communication through the LG-Way method

Literature revealed that internal communication involves organisational practices designed to promote employee understanding of the goals of the organisation, enabling them to identify with the values of the organisation. Such practices are recognised as key influences on employee engagement (Lavigna, 2015), since they enable the internalisation of organisational values and involvement with organisational goals, resulting in more engaged employees. Research participants in this study revealed numerous aspects about their involvement as employees in the internal communication process in the organisation. They argued that the organisation valued and recognised all efforts and contributions of employees regardless of their standing, race, or cultural background.

"We have a deeper understanding of each other, we are more than a family as we engage everyday".

Interestingly, many of the participants advanced that employee communication and other factors that contribute to the broader management philosophy defined their internal environment most. Moreover, research participants articulated that a higher level of consciousness and awareness of their environment – proper knowledge of efficient strategies of employee communication – impacted positively on the organisational culture.

"One of the participants acclaimed that.... the Korean culture teaches unity, sharing and openness – as such, we are more dedicated to our duties as a team rather than individually".

Some of the participants held the viewpoint that open and transparent communication, as the hallmark of the LG-way method, is integral to organisational understanding in the building of long-term mutual relationships, as envisaged by the Jeong-do management philosophy. It emerged that knowledge and awareness of the environment by employees contributed immensely to the identity and image of the organisation. Research participants further postulated that they ordinarily demonstrated high levels of understanding because of the shared organisational culture and identity. The shared organisational culture enabled them to easily associate with the brand of the organisation, as championed by the LG-way method.

"Being a united front in all we do as the organisation produces better results, our revenue is growing – we are more recognised in most countries because of the discipline we have as employees.... because we do things the LG-way".

Research participants also intimated that effective communication among employees and with senior executives of the organisation is an integral component of LG's success. Purposeful communication was cited as a leading engagement indicator, as employees were empowered to directly form a part of decision-making processes. Likewise, participants further argued that their level of commitment, loyalty to the brand and understanding of organisational goals affirmed their awareness of internal communication

as a strategic function – the LG-way method as the action plan of the organisation is intended to enhance engagement and promote collectivism rather than individualist achievements, because of two-way synchronised communication. The research participants further posited that direct and face-to-face communication was preferred to a greater extent by employees, because the organisation encouraged contact and two-way communication with high possibilities of personalised feedback.

"We start face-to-face communication with formal and informal one-to-one meeting(s) which includes eye contact, facial expression, body movement and the tone that show the importance of the message. The way we interpret the message will also change, based on the differences of the expressions".

However, few of the participants indicated that although collectivism is encouraged, individual brilliance and excellence is not overlooked by organisational leaders – this is because certain employees tend to exert more effort in achieving organisational goals. The views of these participants somehow contradict earlier assertions that the organisation encouraged collectivism over individualism. Notably, the notion of open and transparent methods of communication intensified a two-way system of communication based on principles of trust, commitment and, above all, respecting human dignity, as heralded by the management philosophy. The respondents also highlighted the importance of the role played by management in ensuring that internal communication formed part of the dominant coalition of various organisational units as a proactive measure to enhance strategic relationships within the organisation.

Participants also suggested that LG Electronics maintained an internal network of diverse communication channels through which various work units can freely communicate with one another. Attention was drawn to interactive videos posted throughout the organisation to disseminate information to all employees on a regular basis. Important internal messages on what actions to take and what the crucial weekly expectations were, were communicated through such interactive videos. New ideas across the organisational units were also gathered by the same means. In addition, some of the participants stated that the usage of electronic communication mechanisms enabled them to instantly receive important messages about their work performance, expected roles and management vision; these included video conferencing and social media communication via Kakao, a platform mostly used in Asia for instant communication and interactions.

Fundamental to understanding the internal environment, research participants advanced that employees' input and suggestions were incorporated into the dominant coalition of communication and key decision-making processes. It emerged that employees experienced a sense of value and freedom to take decisions based on their work and to influence the organisation's goals and values through open communication. One of the participants contended that:

"Through corporate culture, accountability and open communication, employees' commitment is viewed as more central to the developmental growth and success of the organisation, as well as our own growth and development in the workplace".

It also emerged that employees enjoyed a harmonious platform for being change agents. The main role of the change agent (CA) was to gather the Voice of Employees (VoE) and relay them to senior management, as well as to ensure that employee feedback was incorporated into team management. The fact that that employees' feedback remained central to both information sharing and imparting knowledge was emphasised. Participants further maintained that open communication between management and ordinary employees remained integral in championing the voices of employees. Some of the research participants intimated that the ability to integrate the input and voices of the employees was an opportunity to influence the operations of the organisation. Employees were innovative because of the mutual relationship that exists across the organisation and had a sense of ownership because their ideas contributed to the success of organisation.

Organisational engagement through Jeong-do management style

Several research participants held that open communication played a crucial role in encouraging employees to better understand their organisational goals and values at LG Electronics. It was also revealed that inclusive organisational engagement is a manifestation of deliberate communication with a strategic intent. Strategic communication programmes were advanced to promote high levels of organisational engagement, based on the shared organisational culture. Moreover, the research participants postulated that the impact of a harmonious and inclusive culture unified employees to achieve the broader goals and objectives, as well as contributing to personalised engagement. The Jeong-do management philosophy accounts for all the communication activities in the organisation, thus becoming the direct determinant of organisational engagement and performance.

"We are direct when it comes to dialogue, mostly we prefer to talk things through before any major decision is made. This way, we are able to internalise all that is said and develop a clear approach onwards".

Research participants also affirmed that organisational culture, as anchored by the Jeong-do management philosophy, plays a pivotal role in ensuring that employees understand the vision and mission of the organisation. They further remarked that the Jeong-do management approach, as a strategic function, embeds meaningful collaborative mechanisms aimed at facilitating inclusivity. Inclusivity in this regard can also be summarised as a means of working together to make a difference in the organisation and developing the combination of skills, knowledge, values, and motivation to make that difference. So, research participants pertinently articulated that the Jeong-do management tenets facilitated informed and participatory engagement in the workplace, where everyone is empowered to demonstrate their true potential and to empower others to perform optimally.

"Jeong-do management philosophy means promoting quality of life inside and outside our organisation, through both organisational and non-organisational processes. We are coached beyond the borders of the organisation – this is beyond caring for employees".

Most of the research participants concurred that the philosophy as a catalyst requires that employees should be regarded more as a priority that contributes immensely to communication and the organisational well-being. In addition, several other participants voiced that efforts such as the hosting of the 'Global Innovation Competition' annually was part of inviting employees to participate by sharing their ideas on LG Electronics' innovation culture. Such a programme was meant to integrate and promote innovation in the organisation by allowing employees to contribute to the organisational culture as part of the collective engagement process.

Surprisingly, two of the participants stated that communication was one form of employees' psychological needs that LG Electronics had to meet as a way of developing and sustaining satisfied employees in the workplace. From this perspective it emerged that elements of internal communication should be positioned as mediating antecedent engagement variables on the one hand (promoting commitment and a sense of belonging), and as communication engagement outcomes on the other hand (awareness and understanding). Essentially, innovation, competitiveness, and organisational effectiveness were conceptualised as organisational outcomes for employee engagement, promoted through effective internal communication efforts.

Research participants further suggested that the top management of the organisation was always optimistic about championing a positive people-centred culture, developed to turn employees into change agents, inside and outside the organisation. Various programmes were implemented to monitor individual growth and collective or team efforts – employees were offered training opportunities to empower them and encourage them to further perform adequately in their duties. Some of the participants further

recorded that the organisation focused on recruiting quality talent to serve in various departments. They recruited graduates from various universities and maintained a variety of networks across South Korea and globally.

"We have a strong relationship with most universities here, we identify deserving students and fund them to study. This investment has worked for our organisation, as they come back ready for the workplace with much needed ideas and creativity".

Many of the research participants also revealed that employees were required to establish their own Career development Program (CdP) along with their annual performance targets to ensure that the organisation contributes and supports their development. Based on the CdP, employees have 'One-on-One Caring' interviews with their managers to receive any form of support they need to follow through with the plan. It is imperative to note that the fundamental purpose of communication in the workplace is to enable and energise employees to carry out its strategic intent, as participants alluded. Likewise, several participants suggested that it was essential for the organisation to have the capacity to quickly identify, send, receive, and understand strategically relevant information supported through the Jeong-do management philosophy and the operational LG-way method.

A significant number of the participants also pointed out that the CEO of the organisation was optimistic about sharing ideas with the ordinary employees of the organisation in all levels. A channel of communication named "Mr. CEO email account" was created to afford employees the opportunity to engage the CEO on a continuous basis. The main purpose of such a channel was to encourage communication, build a network of trust and give a sense of value to employees. The 'Mr. CEO email account' was also used to better understand the strength of each employee and determine what form of support individual employees needed to make the organisation succeed in its mission.

DISCUSSION

Participants advanced several issues that contributed to their internal communication environment. Much emphasis was placed on the Jeong-do management philosophy, which encouraged open communication and employee empowerment through various programmes and in-house initiatives with either the CEO or other executives. It is evident that the LG-way method and the Jeong-do management philosophy remain central to the organisation's success and performance as part of the strategies used to encourage organisational engagement. The two approaches are used for collaborative decision-making processes on strategy and policy for efficient and open communication to thrive in the organisation. However, they are yet to be empirically tested in other organisational contexts, as they have been found viable and applied only in South Korea, LG Electronics headquarters, up to now.

The majority of the research participants considered the Jeong-do management philosophy instrumental in providing a fulfilling and empowering working environment. The empowerment of employees at LG Electronics goes beyond organisational boundaries – the Career development Program (CdP) was established to ensure that employees are equipped with social skills as well as organisational experience to better perform their respective duties. On the other hand, the LG-way method is utilised to encourage more sustainable dialogue among employees and management. Through the method, practical communication opportunities are operationalised to facilitate inclusive organisational engagement that cuts across every department.

The results further revealed that organisational managers employed the philosophy of servant-leadership, whereby a manager's primary role is based on supporting and serving those around him/her to enable a highly engaged environment. The results clearly indicated that if managers were not engaged, it was unlikely employees would respond to any effort to engage them (Men et al. 2020; Ewing et al. 2019; Karanges et al. 2015). Notably, employee engagement tends to be based on factors such as the relationship employees have with their managers and the extent to which communication is effective

in yielding communal benefits. In addition, the two approaches espoused at LG Electronics are simply to ensure that employees are determined to strive for excellence in their respective duties and to obtain value from various interactions, as pioneered through two-way symmetrical engagement.

RQ1: What is the significance of internal communication in facilitating employee engagement that leads to organisational performance and success?

The ability to use communication not only as an operational tool, but a strategic function with a deliberate purpose, produces several rewards for an organisation. In this sense, the strategic function of internal communication holistically enhances employees' confidence and increases socialisation at LG Electronics, serving to promote organisational performance and success (Schramm, 2017). Moreover, the study revealed various variables that contribute to employee engagement, such as coaching, career development, recognition, rewards, accountability, satisfaction, meaningful work, perceived safety, adequate resources, collective and individual attention, alignment with the organisation's values, opinion surveys, effective communication, management's interest in the welfare of staff, challenging work, input in decision-making and a clear vision of attaining the organisation's goal (Carton et al., 2014; Sievert & Scholz, 2017). These variables are the result of highly empowered, engaged and committed employees beyond their line of work and scope (Kahn, 1990; Ruck et al. 2017). Employees at LG Electronics also stated that employee relations and communication were strategic in the realisation of the Jeong-do management philosophy and the operational LG-way method of governance. It is further observed that the two approaches serve as aspects of internal communication and were positioned as mediating antecedent engagement variables, promoting commitment and a sense of belonging (Kang & Sung, 2017; Men & Bowen, 2017) while also serving as communication engagement outcomes – offering awareness, understanding and appreciation of organisational values (Yates, 2006).

In recognising the accentuated value of the Jeong-do management philosophy, effective communication is used to ascertain that innovation, competitiveness, and organisational effectiveness were conceptualised as organisational outcomes of employee engagement, promoted by an inclusive internal environment. As Caesens et al. (2014), and Anand (2017) contend, and without a doubt, satisfactory engagement is ordinarily influenced by how relevant and strategic an organisation is when communicating. From this perspective, internal communication is an organisational practice with the potential to effectively convey the values of the organisation to all employees and involve them in the goals of the organisation, which is vital to achieving an engaged workforce.

RQ2: How can a management philosophy advance employee engagement and create value within the workplace?

It is borne in mind that the Jeong-do management philosophy was established to champion an inclusive and a reciprocal organisational culture, shared by a united workforce. The Jeong-do management philosophy and the LG-way method as instruments of effective communication offer positive opportunities for value creation. These approaches serve as novel performance and inherent satisfaction catalyst to adequately enhance internal relationships beyond the boundaries of the organisation. It can be advanced that the management philosophy was created to promote an open and transparent communication environment, whilst in pursuit of an impactful workforce determined to serve beyond the expected norms. Strategic elements such as the coaching of employees, taking a keen interest in employees' social welfare and providing sufficient organisational support contribute immensely to the realisation of organisational goals. The management philosophy also has a significant impact on staff engagement. The philosophy and method account for all decisions to engage or disengage, which, on its own, is one of the mechanisms to evaluate the influence of effective communication in the organisation, supported by the servant-philosophy as a strategic approach to organisational communication.

Effective internal communication strategies as advocated through the LG-way method enhance productivity and employees' performance; employees indicated that the role of the method was to equip them for the realisation of collaborative activities, sustainable objectives, and the attainment of

the organisation's vision and mission. Moreover, the aforementioned statement is because employees' understanding of the organisation and the utilisation of direct methods of communication are enhanced by the Jeong-do management philosophy. The philosophy as the strategic blueprint is more concerned with capacitating employees with relevant knowledge of the organisational culture through numerous engagements and open and transparent communication platforms. Sathe (2017:2) indicates that employee disengagement is affected by appointing employees in mismatched positions, and a lack of development and participation in decision-making. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the contribution of strategic internal communication on employee engagement (for example, Karanges et al., 2015; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Sievert & Scholz, 2017; Men, 2015; Welch, 2011). The more specific roles of symmetrical internal communication in engaging employees have also been evidenced (refer to Kang & Sung, 2017; Men, 2015).

This study contributes to the literature by showing the positive contribution of symmetrical communication in boosting employee engagement through the Jeong-do management philosophy as part of the organisational communication practice. The Jeong-do management philosophy is simply about a shared organisational culture where employees are encouraged to become change agents and contribute their voice toward organisational productivity and success. However, for this realisation to occur, internal communication strategies must be effective and aligned to the organisational goals. Through the Voice of Employees (VoE) programme, symmetrical communication is used as a critical determining factor for organisational engagement. Notably, responsibility (content and context), conciseness, professionalism and sincerity in internal communication result in improved interaction, greater trust, greater understanding, enhanced efficiency, better performance and enhanced gratification, as envisioned in the Jeong-do management philosophy and the LG-way method.

CONCLUSION

Deficient or lacking communication can create a disparity between what employees hear from their managers and what they see or observe in the organisation. Inconsistency in respect of the internal communication strategy leads to distracted and demotivated employees who feel a dearth of trust caused by lack of transparency, whether real or perceived. Fundamentally, organisations can be most effective by developing internal communication strategies and tactics that focus on creating sustainable engagement opportunities. In this way, the deliberate purpose of internal communication as a facilitator for advancing employees' interactions and engagement can be frequently realised. This study advocates that internal communication be considered as a strategic revolutionary approach to employees' welfare, coaching, mentoring and engagement to promote an impactful internal environment that is inclusive and strategically determined. Internal communication should be credited for its contribution to corporate affairs, as it has the potential to leverage interests and offer more sustainable equity in relationship management. The efficacy level of internal communication is a key determinant of an organisation's engagement efforts and overall performance. This is because it has the potential to facilitate the dialogic exchange of information and harness opinions within the organisation. Also, communication helps in improving operational efficiency, thus improving an organisations' performance towards the attainment of strategic communal relationships.

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