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Towards more effective leadership communication

ABSTRACT

Contemporary organisations and their leaders are continually tasked with finding new ways of creating value for their stakeholders. Leadership effectiveness is critical within large organisations, and leadership communication ranks as the top critical driver of organisational results. This underlines the importance of leaders being capable communicators responsible for adding value to organisations. However, discussions on the topic of leadership communication are rare. This highlights the fact that the field of organisational communication has had limited engagement with the world of leadership. This study aimed to address this knowledge gap and focused on the role of communication in the leadership process, and attempted to identify ways in which leadership communication could be improved. Leadership communication was explored from two different perspectives to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. Rogers' revolutionary conceptual analysis was employed to investigate the foundation of the concept. Thereafter, a phenomenological study was undertaken among communication professionals exposed to leadership communication to explore their lived experiences of the phenomenon. The data from the phenomenological study were used to enhance the conceptual analysis. Effective leadership communication was described as a socially constructed and relational concept that should endorse meaning-making in particular contexts. Guidelines are presented to enhance the effectiveness of leadership communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Leaders of contemporary organisations are continually tasked with finding new ways of creating better value for their stakeholders and improving leadership behaviour (Stigall 2005). Research undertaken in 2013 by the Ketchum leadership communications monitor (KLCM) indicated that a company's leadership behaviour has a direct impact on the organisation's bottom line, and poor leadership communication hits the bottom-line far harder than good leadership communication helps with enhancing it. It is, therefore, essential that organisational leadership comprises capable communicators that can play a role in the value creation process of the organisation. Leadership effectiveness is critical within these organisations, with leadership communication ranking as top critical driver of organisational results (Madden 2011). However, research on the topic of leadership communication in business literature are rare, which highlights the fact that the field of organisational communication has had limited engagement with the world of leadership (Tourish & Jackson 2008). Against this background, this study attempts to explore what effective leadership communication entails, and how it could be employed to enhance organisational operations. Research has documented a link between leaders and organisational effectiveness (Madden 2011). It is, therefore, argued that communication be viewed as an inherent part, and the face of leadership, and not as a technique or tool that leaders use to convey a message. In other words, leadership is communication; therefore, leadership communication impacts an organisation's performance. In the next section, the theoretical framework of the study is provided in order to position this article in the general body of knowledge regarding leadership communication. Thereafter, the research methodology is explained; the results of the study provided and discussed; and finally the guidelines derived from the results of the study presented to conclude the study. The value of this study within the broader body of knowledge on leadership communication, as well as suggestions with regard to further research, is also provided.

1. LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION

Globalisation, volatile organisational environments and the effect of the economic downturn, together with technological advances, are forcing scholars and practitioners to reconsider the "rational organisation" and its views of leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton 2014:8), and replace it with a more relational, communicative and people-centred approach (Fairhurst 2008). Kaiser (2005) defines leadership as fundamentally concerning influencing individuals to transcend their selfish short-term interests and contribute to the long-term performance of the group. The essence of leadership is, therefore, building a team and guiding it to outperform its rivals (Kaiser 2005:3). The human capital element is essential in both these instances.

In 1998, Anderson already predicted that knowledge and human capital would become core commodities in complex and competitive landscapes driven by globalisation and technological revolution. Employees as human capital make significant contributions to the overall success of an organisation. Research indicates that organisational performance markedly improves when communication is permitted to flow uninterrupted and employees are empowered, provided with incentives, and given the necessary resources to perform at optimal level (Ahmed et al. 2009).

Communication is essential to building trust and confidence between leaders and employees. Leaders can develop good relations with employees by creating an atmosphere or environment of free, fair, and informal communication networks. These networks encourage and motivate employees to speak out and adopt a participative approach, which helps to develop a profitable organisation (Ahmed et al. 2009). Although many well-documented examples of research indicating the correlation between leadership and organisational effectiveness exist, it is still unclear exactly how leaders make a difference to the organisation's bottom line (Joyce, Nohria & Roberson 2003). Communication is key to relationships and coexistence in environments where results are expected. Communication is also critical for accelerating change and improving organisational performance, particularly when it comes to aligning and motivating employees. It is therefore disconcerting that the role of communication in the leadership process does not receive the prominence it deserves.

Communication-based leadership research has significantly challenged some of the managerially focused, universal presumptions of traditional leadership research (Fairhurst 2001). Hall (2007:197) emphasises leader talk in organisations and its role in constructing collaborative, context-driven meaning for organisational members. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) constructed the leadership role as creating and managing meaning in the organisation that influences the reality experienced in that specific organisation. These authors have placed communication at the core of leadership. Knowledge of the essence of leadership communication is therefore essential, as a deeper understanding of the concept could allow for a more effective application thereof.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study is approached from a qualitative paradigm and is exploratory and descriptive in nature as it attempts to explore and describe the essence of leadership communication and describe how it should be employed to enhance organisational performance. The research was conducted in three phases: Phase I of the research entailed an evolutionary concept analysis (Rogers 2000) of leadership communication to discover the essence of this phenomenon. During this phase, the development and history of leadership communication were explored; similar and surrogate terms of the concept identified; and attributes, antecedents and consequences of leadership communication stipulated.

Phase II comprised a hermeneutic phenomenological study. During this phase, in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with respondents who are regularly exposed to leadership communication. Groenewald's (2004:12) phenomenological research questions were put to participants during phase IV to explore:

- Experiences (How do you experience the leadership communication in your organisation?)
- Feelings (How does your leader's communication make you feel?)
- Beliefs (How should an effective leader communicate?)
- Convictions (What is the contribution that leadership communication can make in your organisation?)

In phenomenology, bracketing is used to explicate the data. Bracketing is a process of suspending one's judgement or bracketing particular beliefs about the phenomenon in order to see it clearly. Groenewald's (2004) five-step explication process was used in Phase II. The steps applied included bracketing and phenomenological reduction, delineating units of general meaning, extracting units of relevant meaning, clustering units of relevant meaning to form themes, and integrating and summarising interview data to extract/identify general and unique themes to compile a composite summary.

The unit of analysis comprised employees (communication practitioners) exposed to leadership communication. The population of the sampling design of phase II comprised members of the Free State chapter of PRISA who were employees of organisations in the services industry in Bloemfontein; more specifically, individuals on the receiving end of communication from leadership. The sample was drawn by means of non-probability and purposive sampling (Welman & Kruger 1999). The inclusion criteria were first of all that the participants were selected on grounds of their membership of the PRISA Free State chapter; in other words, communication specialists who would be able to provide valuable input regarding communication-related matters. Secondly, only members of the PRISA Free State chapter that were employed in organisations in the services industry were considered for the sample. Finally, only individuals exposed to leadership communication from top or middle management were included. A theoretical sample was drawn based on "saturation of categories". Charmaz (2006:189) refers to this as theoretical saturation. The sample size for phase II was 12 (participants).

During phase III, the results of the first two phases were combined and compared to develop a comprehensive overview of the theoretical foundation of leadership communication, and to provide guidelines to enhance organisational performance through more effective leadership communication.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following section, the results that emanated from phase I are presented.

Phase I: A conceptual analysis of leadership communication

From the evolutionary concept analysis of leadership communication, it was established that leadership today should be approached from a *socially constructed* and *relational* point of view (Fairhurst & Connaughton 2014), where *meaning is co-created* by the leader and those that he/she is communicating with. Leadership communication was found to be a *unique and complex* form of communication that directly impacted the organisational bottom-line (Fairhurst & Connaughton 2014) and is not easily applied in practice. The very *close* relationship and inseparable nature of leadership and leadership communication were also established (Hall 2007).

According to Rodgers (2000), **surrogate terms** are synonyms of the concept being analysed. In the leadership literature, a growing attention to leadership discourse, communication, and

relational stances to leadership by a select group of scholars, many from the communications field (Cooren 2007; Collinson 2005; Barge 2004; Fairhurst 2001; 2008), can clearly be recognised. This focus on communication and the relational aspects of leadership can be ascribed to the linguistic turn in social theory that led to language being regarded as constitutive, rather than reflective, of social reality (Aritz & Walker 2012). As such, authors referring to leadership communication in literature often use terms such as communicative leadership, discursive leadership, relational leadership, dialogical leadership and rhetorical leadership as synonyms for leadership communication. Concepts that are similar to, yet also somewhat different from the concept leadership communication are known as **related terms** (Rodgers 2000). Similar terms or terms related to leadership communication identified through the conceptual analysis are leader, leadership, manager, management and managerial communication.

From the **historical evolution** of the concept, it was concluded that, contrary to the past, leadership communication's focus is not merely on the influence of the individual leader, but also on the leader's interaction with the individual, the group and team, and the organisation in its totality. According to management theories, the focus is no longer primarily on the leader as individual, but rather on the leader's interaction with his/her followers (Aritz & Walker 2012). This emphasises the importance of considering the human element when communicating. In contemporary literature, a communicative approach to leadership communication, to establish relationships with all stakeholders, is essential.

The lack of **definitions** of leadership communication underlined the fact that this important phenomenon does not receive the attention it deserved. Despite the realisation that no one management or leadership approach will be sufficient to meet existing challenges, it was concluded that a fundamental principle agreed on is the need for communication. The most comprehensive definition of leadership communication found was proposed by Barrett (2008:5), who define leadership communication as "a highly complex, socially co-constructed and interactive phenomenon that takes place on different organisational levels between a leader and an individual, group/team, and/or organisation". DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty and Salas (2010) added the much needed communication focus when they postulate that it has as its purpose the controlled transfer of meaning.

In order to condense the findings or this research and avoid repetition, the **attributes, antecedents** and **consequences** of leadership communication uncovered in the concept analysis will be presented in combination with the results form phase II.

Phase II: Employee perspectives on leadership communication

During this phase, the sample of respondents previously described were interviewed to capture their perceptions of leadership communication. The respondents indicated that many problems were experienced with the communication received from leadership in their different organisations. It became evident that the majority of the leaders (referred to in this study) were not proficient communicators. The conclusions related to each interview question will now be discussed.

Question 1: How do you experience the leadership communication of your organisation?

In order to determine the essence of effective leadership communication, it was important to establish how employees experienced their leaders' communication as this would give an indication of aspects that were perceived as positive or negative regarding the experience. These aspects could be useful in enlightening the nature of effective leadership communication.

Respondents perceived the leadership communication as problematic and stated that basic communication principles were found absent. A general lack of communication existed and an absence of communication was also detected. In one case the respondent mentioned:

> In our department the communication is exceptionally pathetic. No communication takes place. (Respondent F, age 45)

A respondent that captured the sentiment of most of the participants stated the following:

> …but the communication does not come from management. We as communication practitioners are there to help leaders to communicate, not to communicate on their behalf, but we communicate on their behalf. (Respondent I, age 33)

Although the literature describes all forms of effective communication as two-way communication (Gittell & Douglas 2012), it seemed as if communication experienced by the respondents was mostly one-way and no provision was made for feedback from respondents

> We can never give feedback, and when we are allowed to, it is just to make us keep quiet. They don't listen, and you never hear anything about it again. (Respondent H, age 55)

Top-down communication appeared to be the norm. Communication received was also of poor quality and often insufficient and unclear. A lack of interpersonal communication skills compounded the problem, as leaders exhibited insensitivity to non-verbal cues and were also unable to establish meaningful relationships with employees. Furthermore, communication was perceived as unsupportive, condescending, cold, detached and strained. As one respondent described this:

> A relationship of trust is absolutely essential. When those leaders interact with the staff personally however, the staff members often perceive them as indifferent, as clinical, cold and distant. (Respondent A, age 32)

Respondents also complained that they do not always receive information necessary for the proper execution of their jobs, and indicated a total disregard for communication from some leaders. As respondents explained:

> I don't think everything that we need to know gets communicated to us. I think it is left to the discretion of the leader to decide what gets communicated to whom and if the leader

does not have good discernment skills, then the necessary information does not get communicated.", and "There is no relationship, only instructions and they don't take any time or make any effort to try and understand what your situation or circumstances are. (Respondent H, age 55)

A silo approach to communication was reported by some respondents, with interdepartmental communication described to be inadequate. This resulted in little integration of work activities, which was very demotivating to respondents as certain tasks had to be repeated. This had a serious effect on the work teams as an absence of team spirit was reported:

they hardly ever share information and when things change you are not aware of it. You function by trial and error. (Respondent K, age 42)

A very important point that surfaced was the fact that communication was experienced as unethical, disrespectful and dishonest. This has serious implications for the establishment of relationships of trust between leaders and their followers. Where trust is absent, communication cannot be successful as leaders will be perceived as inaccessible, and employees will not have the confidence to approach them about important organisational issues (Gray & Laidlaw 2004).

Finally, an overall lack of or under-utilisation of communication structures had a serious impact on the communication. Without a proper communication structure and integration of messages, there will be no message consistency to internal and external stakeholders alike (Mulder 2016). Different departments did not know what was expected of them, and messages to external stakeholders were also not effective. It was concluded that organisational structures did not always provide the necessary support. A lack of communication strategy also led to respondents not knowing where to report and what channels to follow when communicating.

The experience of leadership communication among the respondents differed radically from what was discovered as being effective through the conceptual analysis of leadership communication.

Question 2: How does your leader's communication make you feel?

It seemed as if the leadership communication employed by most respondents' leaders had a very negative effect on the respondents' wellness. One respondent reported the following:

I feel that I don't want to go to work because it is so unpleasant there. My job is not a bad job, I like what I do, but the communication issues make it unbearable there. (Respondent C, age 36)

Interpersonal interactions, involving the exchange of information and affect between co-workers and employees and their supervisors, can have significant consequences for the employees' psychological job outcomes, including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and burnout (Postmes, Tanis & De Wit 2001). The feelings reported by the respondents led to the conclusion that the quality of the leadership communication influenced employees negatively and that

frustration, distrust and unhappiness prevailed. The way in which some leaders communicated caused respondents to feel inferior and powerless, which in turn led to disheartenment and respondents feeling demoralised:

> Sometimes I feel nervous and not able to perform the way I can and should. (Respondent G, age 39)

> It has an influence on your attitude towards your work. It makes you negative. You don't want to support work initiatives. (Respondent E, age 45)

Increasing contact between leadership and subordinates allows employees to identify with the company's goals, improving morale and increasing productivity (Madlock 2008).

Respondents also indicated that they regularly felt stressed and unsafe in the workplace, which affected their functioning. It seemed as if this led respondents to feel emotionally abused, not good enough and disrespected, as well as unhappy in their work environment. This had a serious effect on the respondents' job satisfaction. The following statement reflects the feelings of the majority of respondents:

> It also hampers one's ability to function optimally, so you feel frustrated. You feel inferior, as if you are not good enough to be communicated with. This influences your value addition to the company and the image that you project. (Respondent E, age 45)

Day (2000) indicates that mutual respect between leaders and followers serves as an emotional connection that heightens each party's attentiveness to the needs and insights of the other and in turn triggers cognitive connections in the form of shared goals and shared knowledge.

From the data it could be concluded that the communication employed evoked negative emotions that were demoralising. It is thus imperative that leaders understand and acknowledge the impact that their communication could have on employees as this would contribute to their effectiveness as communicators, and ultimately as leaders.

Question 3: How should an effective leader communicate?

Despite the fact that the communication that respondents were exposed to was not always experienced positively, most respondents have had prior satisfactory communication experiences. This question was focused on exploring the aspects that could contribute to a positive experience with leadership communication. Four main themes emerged from the data. Firstly, it was found that leadership communication should be communicative in the sense that communication is the central aspect of leadership and constitutive of leadership. It was stated that leaders should pay attention to important aspects such as dialogue, effective listening and understanding when communicating with subordinates:

> I also feel leaders should use participative management and I connect communication with this because people get the opportunity to participate and give input. (Respondent D, age 61)

> I think that an effective leader must welcome input and should also encourage input. So, you have to encourage bottom-up communication, you must listen, and you must understand. (Respondent E, age 45)

The importance of supplying feedback on communication received from employees, as well as receiving feedback with an open mind and without a preconceived agenda, was stressed. Furthermore, the respondents expected communication to be an inclusive process that is meaning-centred and interactional, and where interpersonal exchanges between the different parties are of the essence. As suggested by a respondent:

> A leader on the other hand, will make you part of the process. He will keep you informed, whether formally or informally. (Respondent G, age 39)

The necessity of frequent and adequate communication was also indicated. One respondent said:

> I would say that communication should take place on a regular basis and it must be transparent. (Respondent B, age 54)

A communicative leader is described by Johansson, Miller and Hamrin (2012) as one who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision-making, and is perceived as open and involved. Eriksen (2001) describes it as different ways of coordinating actions in a cooperative and reciprocal manner.

The second theme emphasised the importance of taking a relational approach to communication. The importance of interpersonal communication skills, being able to communicate in a professional manner, as well as being diplomatic and tactful, was indicated. Emotional intelligence was seen as one of the prerequisites for being an effective communicator, as this would allow the leader to show insight and understanding when communicating, and enables the leader to adapt the communication to a specific context, and be audience and recipient sensitive.

> A leader will, because he has shared values with his followers take them along or with, because of this deeper relationship that he has with his people. It will almost be a natural process. (Respondent G, age 39)

According to Gittell and Douglass (2012), relational leadership can be seen as a pattern of reciprocal interrelating between employees and leaders in an attempt to make sense of a situation and determine what is to be done, and how to do it.

Thirdly, the importance of authentic and ethical communication were viewed as very important as this would allow for transparent, honest and unambiguous communication that would lead to the establishment of trusting relationships.

> A leader must communicate honestly and must communicate in a diplomatic way. He must not use attacking and degrading communication and must listen to people. (Respondent L, age 49)

The interpersonal communication process enables individuals to negotiate definitions for their relationships as they share the roles of the sender and receiver and become connected through the mutual activity of creating meaning (Trenholm & Jensen 1992:33).

A final theme highlighted was the need for communication to be used strategically. The need for a communication structure and the inclusion of communication in the overall organisational strategy, as well as the need for a communication strategy, was mentioned repeatedly. It was also suggested that communication be integrated with all the organisational functions to encourage the establishment of a culture of collaboration to enhance teamwork and team spirit, and counter silo functioning.

> Leadership should not randomly just say stuff that they know is not going to happen. Or at least they should plan before they just communicate stuff. (Respondent J, age 51)

> I believe that there should be a structure or strategy and that communication should be integrated. Different departments should receive the same message. (Respondent A, age 32)

When leadership communication is strategic, it communicates strategic decisions; creates and communicates a vision of the future; develops key competencies and capabilities; develops organisational structures, processes, and controls; manages multiple constituencies; selects and develops the next generation of leaders; sustains and effective organisational culture; and infuses ethical value systems to the organisations' culture (Boal & Hooiberg 2000).

The responses received during the phenomenological research phase correlate with existing literature on the matter and assist in defining what more effective leadership communication entails. As stated previously, the data from the conceptual analysis was confirmed by the data gathered during the empirical research phase. Only two aspects that did not evolve during the concept analysis, but which surfaced during the interviews, were added. These aspects will be highlighted in the discussion. The remainder of the discussion is a representation of information obtained during the concept analysis and confirmed by data from the phenomenological research results.

Question 4: What is the contribution that effective leadership communication can make to an organisation?

The aim of this study was to describe the essence of effective leadership communication. It was important to explore this field as the literature clearly indicates the value that effective leadership communication could add to organisational success (Ketchum Leadership Communications Monitor (KLCM) 2013). With the final question, the potential impact of effective leadership communication was explored. The responses to this question were categorised into two sections. The first section pertains to the impact of the leadership communication on the organisation, while the second section concerns the influence that effective leadership communication could have on the individual.

- *Impact on the organisation*

Relating to the organisation, respondents stated that when communication from leadership was effective, it was expected that higher productivity and efficiency in the organisation would prevail and that organisational effectiveness would improve.

> If I feel that my leaders care about me and show it in the way in which they communicate with me, I'm going to want to do my best. (Respondent K, age 42)

> The productivity and service delivery can be improved. (Respondent C, age 36)

> Good communication can also improve overall organisational functioning. (Respondent H, age 55)

Furthermore, respondents concurred that, if leadership communication is effective, the establishment of relationships of trust and respect will be possible, and that this will influence the organisational culture and climate in a positive way. Ultimately, this will positively impact the organisational reputation.

The two aspects that were not identified during the conceptual analysis process, but surfaced during the phenomenological enquiry both relate to the impact that effective leadership communication could have on the organisation. Firstly, almost all the respondents indicated that effective leadership communication provided direction. It assisted them in knowing what was expected of them, feeling more in control of the situations they had to manage, and feeling safe in their environment. The following responses serve as examples to emphasise this issue.

> Everybody is in the same boat and going in the same direction so organisational goals can be obtained and that means more success or productivity for the organisation. (Respondent F, age 45)

> You are not in the dark you actually know what is expected of you. (Respondent H, age 55)

Staff will know what is expected of them and will feel more in control of the situation. (Respondent H, age 55)

Secondly, respondents felt that when they are not communicated to on a regular basis and important information is not given through to them, they are often unable to perform their responsibilities as required. It is, therefore, imperative that the workforce be well informed. A number of respondents raised this issue.

If staff members know what the goals of the organisation are, and are told how to obtain them it will have a positive influence on the whole organisation. (Respondent B, age 54)

Ground-level staff that is uninformed cannot deliver the best service possible. (Respondent C, age 36)

There is a better working climate in the department because people know what to do and what is expected of them. (Respondent I, age 33)

From the data it seemed as if the respondents felt uncertain of themselves and were unable to deliver good service, which ultimately impacted organisational performance. This issue also impacted the individual.

Informed staff does not feel as if they are in a stream and just taken with the tide. You feel informed and more competent and can deliver better service. (Respondent L, age 49)

In the next section, the impact of effective leadership communication on the individual will be elaborated on.

• *Impact on the individual*

Considering the impact on the individual, it was discovered that effective leadership communication would encourage and enhance positive employee identification with the organisation. It could also positively influence employee and job satisfaction, which in turn could lead to organisational commitment. Additionally, improved leader-member relationships could positively impact group and task cohesion, which could enhance collaboration between different parties. Finally, effective leadership communication could also allow employees to feel free to express themselves, which would make them feel empowered. This could encourage a culture of innovativeness in the organisation that could have a positive effect on employee well-being and ultimately affect the organisational bottom-line positively. The following statements pay testimony to this:

If staff members know what the goals of the organisation are and told how to obtain them it will have a positive influence on the whole organisation. (Respondent B, age 54)

You are not in the dark you actually know what is expected of you", and "There is professionalism and a feeling of empowerment. (Respondent D, age 61)

I think if they communicate with us in a proper way, people will know what is expected of them, and when they understand why they have to do certain things they will be much more willing to cooperate. (Respondent L, age 49)

The findings discussed above are presented in Table 1 and provides an overview of the positive outcomes of effective leadership communication.

Table 1: Synopsis of outcomes derived from conceptual analysis and employee responses

Impact on organisation:	Impact on individual:
• Higher productivity and efficiency	• Positive employee identification
• Organisational effectiveness	• Group and task cohesion
• Environment of trust and respect	• Improved leader-member relationships
• Positive organisational culture and climate	• Employee and job satisfaction
• Positive impact on organisational reputation	• Innovativeness
• Increase turnover	• Freedom of expression
• Provides direction	• Collaboration
• Informed workforce	• Organisational commitment
	• Improved susceptibility to change
	• Empowered employees
	• Enhanced emotional well-being
	• Motivated employees
	• Improved employee wellness
	• Improved efficiency
	• Improved service delivery
	• Foster loyalty
	• Improved morale
	• Sense-giving

From the data it was evident that when leadership communication was effective, employees were impacted positively, which in turn could enhance the success of an organisation. This underlines the importance of having knowledge of what effective leadership communication entails. In the next section, guidelines for how leadership communication should be employed to enhance organisational operations are supplied.

4.   GUIDELINES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

The consequences identified during the conceptual analysis of leadership communication could be directly related to the data gathered in phase II. Therefore, the guidelines presented in this section are based on the findings of both research phases. It was established that the results of the two phases corresponded with each other. New information surfaced only in two instances from the phenomenological enquiry. This will be indicated in the discussion.

The results emphasised that organisations are in need of leaders who are effective communicators. It became clear that, although there is a greater awareness of the importance of leadership communication, it is still not receiving the attention that it warrants. The guidelines provided below attempt to address this challenge. The guidelines are provided in two different categories, namely fundamental and structural aspects needed for effective leadership communication.

Fundamental aspects needed for effective leadership communication

Primary aspects of effective leadership communication are described in terms of an overarching term, namely *communicative leadership*. From the conceptual analysis and respondents' feedback, it became evident that communicative leaders are deemed to be more proficient communicators than other leaders and managers. They are more *open and involved*, and will *initiate dialogue* while actively *sharing and seeking feedback*. Communicative leaders are experienced as *authentic*, and use communication that is seen as *open and accurate*. The actions of authentic leaders are based on their values and convictions, while they practice what they preach. This contributes to the fact that the communication of the authentic leader is characterised by high levels of *transparency and integrity*. This provides them with the ability to impact employees' attitudes, well-being and organisational outcomes.

Effective leadership communication is *meaning-centred*, which means that leaders apply words and images, symbolic actions and gestures, and evoke patterns of meaning which give them considerable control over the situation being managed. Therefore, they frame the situation and provide employees with a "map" or direction for action. This type of communication is also *dialogical*, as it encourages the establishment of relationships through high quality, continuous contact between leaders and followers that are open, creative and meaningful, and can lead to ethical organisational learning and change. It allows the leader to consider and listen to all opinions in order to establish the intended meaning through interactive talk. When leadership communication is effective, meaning is created through dialogue among groups of people in a particular context. Communication is a primary factor in understanding the ways in which meaning is negotiated during interactions, and therefore effective leadership communication can be viewed as being *socially constructed*. Humans are symbol-using creatures, predominantly through language, which allow them to make sense of reality, while providing techniques to build connections with other human beings. The function of language is therefore more than to label and define ideas, but it is a way in which humans co-exists. Language asserts how a role like "leader" comes to be, but a rhetorical perspective adds that communication is the substance

that allows humans to act collectively in human interactions. Therefore, effective leadership communication should also be *rhetorical*. Rhetorical tasks that leaders might want to accomplish include communicating empathy or a vision, decision-making, or influencing behaviour or attitude.

Furthermore, leadership is described as a *discursive endeavour* and defined as a process of meaning management that is process focused, rather than leader focused, and as shifting and distributed among several organisational members. Through discursive leadership communication, *sense-making* occurs - which is a process that can assist in generating a point of reference against which a feeling of organisation and direction can emerge. When leadership communication is discursive, it embodies cultural meanings and can be seen as the interaction processes of language in use. Discursive leadership is a language game that allows for the co-construction of meaning through talk and through social interaction processes. This allows leaders and followers to work together in meaningful ways to reach desired outcomes. It emerges through decision-making as decision-talk frames, and defines the issue that a projection of future action sets out to resolve. In this language game, rights to assess, and therefore to define the organisational landscape are negotiated in talk and the person or persons who have most influence in this process emerge as leaders.

Dyadic leadership communication is characterised by the formation of unique one-on-one relationships between a leader and each of his followers through interpersonal exchanges. Each of these dyadic interpersonal relationships is unique and not dependent on other relationships in the group or team. The leader should employ this in a purposeful and systematic way to uncover, and more fully understand each team member's perspective, limitations, and possible contributions to the team's activities. In *interpersonal communication*, human relationships emerge from patterns of behaviour between individuals. Interpersonal communication is a dynamic process of interacting and creating relationships between people who systematically engage in transactions and electively construct and manage meaning in their relationships. The leader who is an effective communicator approaches communication as a *transactional process* that is *interactional* and leads to the creation of meaning. Interactional communication assists in structuring organisational reality and influences leadership perceptions among employees. *Transactional* leadership communication is content bound and has a relationship dimension in which the message defines and redefines the association between the involved individuals. It enhances an ongoing and changing process in which sender and receiver roles are interchangeable and senders and receivers are able to influence each other's interaction. In transactional communication, leaders establish the exchange of something of value, and a transaction between communicators.

Another important aspect needed for effective leadership is *relational leadership communication*. This type of leadership communication is co-constructed in a social interaction process and is neither leader, nor follower-centric. Relational leadership can be seen as a pattern of reciprocal interrelating between employees and leaders in an attempt to make sense of a situation and determine what is to be done, and how to do it. A relational view recognises leadership as a phenomenon generated in the interactions among people acting in context. Here the different parties learn from one another; the employees contribute the more focussed or specialised

in-depth knowledge associated with their roles, while the leaders or managers contribute the broader, less focussed knowledge associated with their roles. Together they create a more integrated, holistic understanding of the situation. This process of reciprocal interrelating involves communicating through relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect.

Leadership communication should also be *strategic* to be effective. A *strategic* approach enhances the shaping of meaning, building of trust, creation of reputation, and management of symbolic relationships with internal and external stakeholders through the communication of strategic decisions and the creation and communication of a vision for the future. Strategic leadership communication also develops key competencies and capabilities; it establishes organisational structures, processes, and controls; manages multiple constituencies; and sustains an effective organisational culture.

A final fundamental aspect needed for effective leadership communication is *communication competence*. Leadership is enacted through communication, therefore communication competence is essential. Leadership communication can only be executed successfully when the necessary knowledge and skills are present. This includes employees receiving accurate, frequent, timely and adequate communication and being informed of changes. Competent communicators also employ communicative resources such as language, gestures, and voice and must share and respond to information in a timely manner. Listening to others' points of view, and communicating clearly and succinctly while supplying adequate feedback are most likely to deliver favourable organisational outcomes.

Contextual aspects needed for effective leadership communication

Concept antecedents are events, conditions, or precursors that are evident prior to the occurrence of a concept; in other words, in this study antecedents refer to those aspects that need to be in place in order for leadership communication to be successful and add value to the organisation. Based on the antecedents of leadership communication, interpreted against the answers obtained from the phenomenological study, a number of guidelines are proposed regarding the context within which leadership communication should be employed to be more effective.

First of all, it is important that leadership communication be implemented where a *culture of ethical and caring behaviour* preside. Leaders can contribute to such a context by treating others with dignity and respect. With such an approach, the negative emotional turmoil expressed by the respondents of this study will be counteracted to a large extent. In such a context, an environment is established that supports *respectful engagement*. Leaders that aspire to practising effective communication should ensure that they convey a sense of value and worth to those that they interact with. Such leaders should also acknowledge the fact that *sustainable engagement* must receive continuous attention. When a leader succeeds in this, a *nurturing organisational culture*, where employees feel safe and protected, is established. Such an organisational culture is supportive of more effective leadership communication, while more effective leadership communication concomitantly enhances this type of organisational culture.

An awareness of and *sensitivity to the context* in which leadership communication is taking place are also imperative. Leadership communication cannot be effective if contextual differences are not taken into consideration. When leaders do not display a sensitivity to the importance of the context in which the communication is taking place, it has a very negative effect on employees. This was repeatedly reflected on by the respondents in phase II. In the same way, a leader should also develop *cultural sensitivity*; in other words, the leader, through his/her communication, should pay attention to cultural barriers and differences. Intercultural communication could be a breeding ground for ineffective communication, but this could be countered if the leader is sensitive to the barriers culture could create.

Furthermore, *enabling conditions* through processes and structure that stimulate social interaction and organisation-wide relationships, are essential. These conditions enable leaders to establish *network relationships*, as leaders are positioned in networks in different ways. Effective leadership communication provides structures that facilitate the work. This contributes to a *positive organisational climate* that creates a shared set of values, goals and priorities that are encouraged through the policies and procedures of the organisation.

Finally, leaders need to establish an *alignment between the goals* of the individual and the higher-level objectives of the organisation. Through effective communication, a leader conveys direction and assists others in achieving their goals. However, while initiating structure the leader should not be primarily task-oriented, but *people-oriented* as well. This type of orientation is important in an effective leader's make-up, and can be associated with *emotional intelligence*. Emotional intelligence is also necessary for the leader to be able to adapt to different organisational contexts. It is seen as a composite of distinct emotional reasoning abilities; perceiving, understanding and regulating emotions. A leader with emotional intelligence is aware of his/her own, as well as others' feelings, and is able to communicate both positive and negative emotions and internal experiences when appropriate.

5.   CONCLUSION

This study attempted to explore what effective leadership communication entails, and how it can be employed to enhance organisational operations. The results of this study indicate a symbiotic relationship between communication and leadership. Everything that a leader does or does not do communicates meaning to subordinates. This substantiated the first part of the argument that directed this study, namely that leadership is communication.

The fact that leadership communication is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, sitting at intersection of the strategic and operational levels of an organisation, was confirmed in this study. In its most simplistic form, leadership communication can be described as the purposeful sharing of meaning by a leader to shape organisational outcomes effectively.

The outcomes of effective leadership communication (at the individual as well as organisational level), indicated that leadership communication impacted employee's attitudes, well-being and

willingness to walk the extra mile for the organisation. The argument that leadership communication impacts an organisation's performance, was therefore upheld. The guidelines provided to embrace the fundamental and contextual aspects needed for effective leadership communication, could therefore add value to an organisation's performance if implemented effectively.

While there is sufficient literature available on the topic of leadership, and many discussions on the traits and attributes that a leader should have, the descriptions of leadership communication are far less. The conceptual analysis of leadership communication done in this study adds to the body of knowledge defining the concept, and provides clarity about the important elements of leadership communication. This information could the used to develop training and measuring instruments to assist HR professionals responsible for the recruitment and training of organisational staff, especially those in leadership positions. The information could direct the development of educational curricula to improve leadership communication.

This study was conducted in the services industry in South Africa. It would be interesting to see if another industry presented the same results on leadership communication as those discussed in this article. Another area that could yield thought-provoking results, is generational expectations of workplace communication. When considering the changing business environment and the perceptions and expectations that different generations have of the workplace as well as the way in which they are communicated to in the workplace, it would be interesting to discover what members of different generations perceive as effective leadership communication, and whether these expectations correlate or differ among generations.

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