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Communicating Effectively in Rapidly Changing Times

Anne Marie Casey

Abstract: This paper investigates communication in academic libraries that experienced rapid changes during the Great Recession and its aftermath. The investigator conducted a multi-case study, in which she interviewed library and university participants in three U.S. academic libraries in 2010. Results show that effective communication existed for the most part in the three libraries, all of which were maintaining strategic priorities while experiencing dramatic changes.

Preface

This paper was written in 2012 and submitted to the Proceedings of the 4th Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries International Conference as a companion to a presentation on this topic for that conference. The paper was not accepted and was not submitted elsewhere.

The author asked the advice of Dr. Donna J. Barbie, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, ERAU, Daytona Beach Campus, about publishing on Scholarly Commons. She agreed to the idea and suggested some edits to improve the paper. Dr. Casey is grateful for her suggestions and continued support.

Introduction

Organizational communication is complicated under the best of circumstances. In an increasingly complex world, it is far more than sending simple messages to one or more receivers. Modern communication encompasses the intricate networks of computers,

understanding of cultures, as well as the issues that unite and divide communities (Miller, 2012). Developing strong communication processes in any organization can contribute substantially to its effectiveness. Maintaining that communication during times of stress or crisis in an organization may make the difference between merely surviving difficult periods and thriving under adverse conditions. This paper explores the role effective communication played in the response of three academic libraries to budget reductions.

The Great Recession of 2007-2009 and its aftermath caused dramatic and recurring budget reductions for many institutions of higher education. Public support for colleges and universities in the United States declined overall by 3.8 percent from fiscal year (FY) 2007 to FY 2012 and more profoundly in some states, such as California, which saw a 12.4 percent decrease, and Michigan, which experienced a 19.3 percent reduction (Illinois State University, 2012). Private institutions of higher education, which often weathered economic downturns in the past, lost substantial endowment funds, forcing them to make deep cuts also (Kniffel & Bailey, 2009).

Tied as they are financially to their parent institutions, many academic libraries faced considerable fiscal challenges. In a 2009 survey, 87.2 percent of library respondents expected either decreased or flat budgets for the next year (Nicholas, Rowlands, Jubb, & Jamali, 2010). During the same time period, 79 percent of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members reported a similar budget situation and 85 percent of them experienced flat or reduced endowment income in 2009-2010 (Lowry, 2011).

These reductions forced rapid change in many academic libraries, including the elimination of positions, cancellation of subscriptions, inability to replace technology, and reduced operating hours. Alterations such as these can affect the morale and productivity of library employees, who may be afraid or feel alienated because they neither understand what is

happening nor believe they have a voice in how it occurs. In these circumstances of rapid, potentially unpopular changes, effective communication is especially important, yet no study has investigated this in academic libraries affected by the Great Recession. This paper draws from a dissertation (Casey, 2011), which focused on the role of strategic priorities in academic libraries. One finding of this research centered on the importance of effective communication in the ability of the libraries to maintain their priorities during periods of rapid change.

Literature Review

Communication is “the exchange or sharing of information and the meeting of minds to achieve shared meanings that bring about mutual understanding” (Conroy & Jones, 1986, p. 7). When people communicate they deal with both the content of the message and the process for delivering it. The former involves the idea, concept, attitude, or emotion a person wishes to convey, and the latter is the means of transmitting the message as well as the response or lack of response to it.

Communication is a constant in most organizational environments and varies according to the purpose of the workplace. Conroy and Jones (1986) write that the principle reasons library employees communicate internally are: to inform, gather information, motivate, persuade, instruct, coach, counsel, mentor, develop staff, and build teams. In addition, they state that the typical purposes for external communication¹ are to communicate, become visible, promote, provide leadership, create connections, and negotiate.

Internal communication includes messages that flow among levels, groups, and individuals within the organization. Strong internal communication in the workplace is

¹ Much of the relevant evidence from the case studies, on which this paper relies, highlights internal communication; therefore, external communication at the cases will not be covered.

important, particularly between managers and employees. Several studies link open managerial communication with job satisfaction and productivity (Clampitt & Downs, 1993; Petit, Goris, & Vaught, 1997).

People need information to do their jobs, so the dissemination of it is perhaps the most central and common function of internal communication. It may appear to be a simple process of talking and telling and writing, but to be useful, new information must be understood by recipients, particularly in the ways in which it relates to them and their work (Conroy & Jones, 1986). Gathering information or upward communication, which is just as important as downward, can provide indispensable input for managerial planning and decision-making (Conroy & Jones, 1986).

Regardless of the process of communication, the most important aspects are the message being conveyed and the transparency of the information exchange. Open communication, where both parties, supervisors and subordinates, perceive they have the right to speak and where they listen to the message of others, supports the free exchange of information. An organization in which information flows freely is transparent and transparency leads to trust (O'Toole & Bennis, 2009). Furthermore, "trust is based on beliefs about the other party, which are shaped through information. Consequently, providing information gives an employee the opportunity to develop trust, and lack of information can reduce trust" (Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, 2009, p. 290).

Research Design and Methodology

This study used a multiple-case design in which different academic libraries were investigated. From the Carnegie Foundation classification database (Carnegie Foundation for

the Advancement of Teaching, 2009) the investigator developed a list of Masters L² institutions in the states of California, Michigan, Nevada, Rhode Island, and South Carolina. The rationale for selecting these states is that the unemployment rates there were the highest in the nation in late 2009 (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009), and economic difficulties were widespread in these states, including budget reductions to public institutions of higher education.

The search of the Carnegie Foundation classification database yielded 50 Masters L institutions in the five states. The investigator searched the web sites for evidence of library strategic priorities, the focus of the dissertation. Three public institutions in the states of California and Michigan, fitting the dissertation criteria, emerged and were designated Cases A, B, and C to protect their anonymity. The investigator visited each of the libraries in 2010.

Data collection relied on interviews and documentation. Two types of interview techniques were employed. The first entailed in-depth personal interviews with the library director, the chief administrative officer (CAO), and a representative of the institutional planning unit. A second method consisted of three focus group interviews. One was with members of the library administration exclusive of the director, another with librarians, and a third with library support staff. In addition, a third source of information was obtained through a review of relevant documents. The investigator audiotaped the interviews with the permission of the participants and transcribed them. She analyzed the transcripts and other relevant documents through content analysis.

The Cases

² The Carnegie Foundation designates as Masters L those institutions which awarded more than 200 degrees and at least 50 masters' degrees but less than 20 doctorates in the 2008-2009 academic year (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2010).

Case A, the largest of the three sites, experienced budget shortfalls over an extended period of time. The recession, however, increased the magnitude of the reductions. By summer 2010, the library had lost 16 positions due to attrition, reduced the amount of time the building was open by eight hours a week, and was experiencing a ten percent reduction in workforce due to mandated furlough days. Its base budget was reduced four out of the five years preceding FY 2009. As a result, the library had to reduce materials' expenditures and streamline operations and was finding it increasingly difficult to initiate new services.

Case B was only beginning to experience effects of the recession by spring 2010. It was insulated somewhat because the university's growth over the previous decade had been strong, resulting in annual increases in tuition revenue. In addition, state appropriations to Case B had remained stagnant over the same decade, resulting in a situation where the university relied far more on tuition and development dollars and was not impacted strongly by reductions in public funding. From 2005-2010, the library received funding increases every year and regularly obtained monies for new initiatives from the CAO, the most important of which was funding for a new state-of-the-art library. At the time of the interviews, planning for the building and attendant new services was spurring rapid change.

The smallest of the three sites, Case C, experienced new budget reductions as a result of the recession, but also saw decreasing allocations over a period of several years. The budget reductions resulted in a number of changes, including the inability to replace personnel who left and the need to reduce the information resources' budget. In addition, the library was planning a temporary reduction in workforce among the librarians for fall 2010, which was causing them to restructure assignments in order to ensure that they maintained priorities.

Communication at the Case Libraries

Communication at Case A takes place primarily in library-wide meetings, department meetings, via email, and a blog. The director considers open communication within the organization a high priority. All of the interview transcripts highlight her habit of informing and gathering information, particularly in regard to the effects of the budget reductions on the library. One librarian states, “She was very communicative. She was sharing information with the staff at all levels.” Another reports, “What was strategically very wise was not only [to] communicate information, but to ask for feedback and input from librarians and staff.” They also speak about the positive tenor of the communication, especially compared to some very negative discussions about the effect of budget reductions they have heard from colleagues in other departments.

Focus group interview participants mention the priority that the director of Case A places on open communication. They say that her skills as a communicator provided a calming influence throughout the planning for the effects of budget reductions. She persuades the library personnel, who experience fear and uncertainty as massive budget reductions are announced, that the library will maintain its mission. One member of the management team says, “I think [the director’s] style is open and transparent. It engenders confidence in her.”

Beyond a reputation as an effective communicator, the director of Case A is acknowledged by her staff as someone who manages well under difficult circumstances, a quality that many of the interview participants discuss. They gave examples of past crises in which the director maintained open channels of communication and made decisions that led quickly to better circumstances. This past experience lends the director credibility with library personnel who trust her to lead them through the aftermath of the recession successfully.

The director herself remarks that librarians and staff do not have as many questions as one might expect, particularly in relation to budgetary changes. She says, “I notice that people

do not have questions about the budget. I make it available. They see it in the minutes. They know what their budgets are ... but I think they have a level of confidence ... that we are honest and fair-dealing and trying to be as square as we can.”

At Case B, the primary channels of communication are the minutes of management team meetings, e-mail announcements, library-wide meetings, and department meetings. The director says that the management team members discuss who among them is most appropriate to take responsibility for the dissemination of particular information. In addition, members of the management team mention that they often discuss the best way to convey certain messages in order to avoid misunderstandings and confusion.

An issue that surfaces in many of the Case B interviews is that of some communication breakdown at the management team level. The director reports concern about whether she and her managerial colleagues attend to the sharing and gathering of important information as well as they should. She says, “At times I think we may move too quickly [and] pay too little attention. We may be missing the odd good idea that floats out there but nobody takes it and brings it forward into our hearing.” In addition, a member of the management team refers to a common response from staff who report that they did not know about a particular initiative or purchase. She acknowledges that she and her peers do not always communicate about major decisions to everyone who might be affected “because it is hard to keep communication going in a place that is doing things that quickly.” A librarian echoes this belief when he speaks about some new initiatives in his area. On the other hand, a librarian from another department, whose manager is considered a good communicator, expresses that he is well-informed and has experienced positive reaction to new initiatives he proposed. Staff members also indicate that communication varies by department and hope that it improves when vacant managerial positions are filled.

The primary method of communication at Case C occurs in the management team minutes, which are posted to a library wiki. The managers have tried other methods of disseminating information about their deliberations in the past, such as a weekly newsletter, but found them ineffective. The director communicates regularly by e-mail. In addition, unit heads inform staff and ask for their input in regular department and committee meetings.

The director of Case C realizes that not everyone perceives a message in the same way or in the way it was intended through the mechanisms of posted minutes and departmental meetings, so she holds library-wide meetings twice a year and attempts to meet one-on-one with all personnel on a regular basis. In addition, members of the management team emphasize the importance of unit meetings as a channel of communication. They also speak about the commitment the director has to informing staff on relevant issues and say that she relies on e-mail for a great deal of this communication and encourages them to do so as well. One member of the management team says, “She has trained me well in communicating a lot.” The librarians also mention that the director is forthcoming with information and strives for transparency. She shares what she learns in administrative meetings to such a degree that one librarian expresses, “Often times we will know a whole lot more about what is going on on-campus than people in other departments.”

Staff members at Case C describe communication in the library as top-down. They mention that they rely on their unit heads and e-mail announcements for information, but they say that the latter can be slow. One says, “Usually when the official announcement of whatever is going on comes out, we already know it.” She goes on to say, “It depends on which manager you have as far as how quickly you get the information.” Staff participants also remark that their ideas, such as engaging in cross-training to ensure service desk coverage due to staff shortages,

are well-received by managers and often implemented. They add that working in other library departments has opened new avenues of communication.

Discussion

The directors all speak about the importance of open communication and transparency, but the communication style of the director of Case A receives the most attention from her subordinates. She emerges from their description as someone who values an open exchange of ideas. She is accessible, shares information quickly, and seeks input wherever it is appropriate. She also communicates in a way that encourages library personnel to perform effectively. They trust her to lead them through the current difficulties and any others they may encounter.

At Case B, there is willingness among managers to communicate openly. However, they acknowledge that do not do so as readily as they should because they make decisions very quickly and sometimes forget to seek feedback or inform others. The librarians and staff also indicate that communication from some managers is lacking and this can affect their work.

Effective communication appears to exist at the management team level of Case B and seems to flow openly from some managers to their departments and within some departments, but communication overall has some flaws. While it is important that the director and managers are aware that they do not communicate as effectively as they should, they give no indication that they have a plan to ameliorate this situation. Some librarians do not seem to know what is going on, and some staff members are optimistic that the next managerial hire will solve their communication gaps. Other librarians and staff claim to be knowledgeable about managerial planning and appear to embrace the changes in the library more enthusiastically than some of their colleagues.

Communication at Case C appears to be open and transparent. This could be due as much to the fact that all librarians are involved in planning and decision-making as to the open communication style of the director. The minutes of meetings reveal that there is a great deal of conversation about issues and that, although the director may sometimes make a decision that does not reflect the majority, she listens to what others have to say. In addition, staff members indicate that they have the information they need and consider themselves part of the solution because ideas they put forward are acknowledged and implemented.

Conclusion

Communication flows between managers and subordinates, as well as among the members of departments in the libraries participating in this study. Directors espouse a communication culture of openness and transparency, and for the most part managers, librarians, and staff members support that culture and participate in it. Librarians and staff members have the opportunity to inform, listen, give feedback, and perceive that their opinions are treated with respect. In spite of the rapid changes occurring in the three organizations at the time of the site visits, staff morale was high, productivity was evident, and the libraries were maintaining their most important priorities. In fact, the only hint of morale and productivity issues was among some librarians at Case B, who did not seem to experience regular communication with their supervisors.

Change forced by budget reductions has affected the majority of libraries in the United States and in many parts of the world since the beginning of the Great Recession. However, even with a stronger economy, academic libraries are repositioning themselves to abandon some traditional roles and taking on new ones, such as leadership of scholarly communications issues. Doing business in a different way can cause fear and alienation among non-managerial staff, if

they perceive they have no voice in the change and little understanding about why it is happening. Such negative feelings may lead to loss of productivity, effectiveness, or quality customer service.

The three libraries investigated for this study point to generally positive outcomes in the face of rapid change. A concerted effort on the part of the managers to foster open communication results in organizations where the librarians and staff understand their circumstances, trust their leaders, and believe they are heard. Personnel pull together to meet the libraries' highest priorities, in spite of multiple challenges.

This study investigated a small number of similar libraries and revealed a possible connection between effective communication and the ability to successfully maintain priorities during a period of rapid, externally-driven change. The results may prove valuable to organizations in general in regard to effective communication. If a culture of open communication helps to sustain an organization through a difficult period, that same culture may contribute to the increased effectiveness of the organization under normal circumstances. Further research may explore whether a culture of open communication exists in different types of organizations that maintain priorities, or in organizations that do not engage in strategic planning or priority-setting to discover more about the effect of communication on successful organizations.

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