ENSURING EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE USE

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined how effective use of language can bring about effective organizational communication. The terms, communication, organizational communication as well as language was examined and barriers to effective organizational communication were also examined. It was posited that when language is used effectively, it would change the organizational climate which will in turn positively affect the total financial gains of organizations. Recommendations were also made to ensure and assure of effective organizational communication through effective language use.

Keywords: Communication, organizational communication, language

INTRODUCTION

Effective is a word that people who are interested in the workability, dependability and efficiency have come to love. Nothing seems to be affective if it is not effective; as such, the adjective means a lot to those for whom quality is king and key.

In organizations as in individual or group life, effectiveness guarantees continuity. The extent to which an organization is adjudged effective is the extent to which it affects its community positively. Many things are responsible for an organization's effectiveness or other wise, but top on the list for ensuring effectiveness is effective communication. Communication, especially organizational communication is many pronged and multi-dimensional as communication involves everything that goes on in an organization. Therefore this work focuses mainly on effective language use as a tool for ensuring effective organizational communication and the language in focus is the English language.

It has been said that to live is to communicate, but I dare add that to use language effectively to communicate effectively is to live well. Living well is a quality of life that all rational thinking people aspire to. Living alone is not worth all the trouble -   the poor who cannot afford one meal a week are living, the sick who groan under the weight of pain are living, the prisoner whose rights have been mortgaged is living. All these people are living but they are not living well. It follows too that in as much as people are using language to communicate, if the language use is not effective, it will not bring about effective organizational communication. Effectiveness is therefore the quality in focus in this work. No organization can truly exist without communication as communication has been described as the life-wire or life-blood of every organization. Life, they say, is in the blood – blood means life. When the blood level in an individual is low, he is said to be unhealthy and nutrition that would likely increase his blood level is prescribed. If communication has been accepted as the life blood then it means that organizations where communication is not taking place in the right quantity or effectively are unhealthy and need communication enhancing prescriptions. But to deepen this discourse, we need to know the answer to the question:

- What is communication?

What is Communication?

The word communication has been described as a chameleon word, changing its meaning to suit each new user of the term. As such, there exists an array of definitions. Enighe (2010), has defined communication as

> A relationship or interaction to make something known by means of understood symbols between people or groups that have something in common with each other. (p.448)

To Umeh (1998), Communication is the process by which "information is passed between individuals and or organizations by means of previously agreed symbols" (p.271). Soola (1998) further describes communication as "the only means by which employee relationships are established, extended, nurtured and sustained" (p.12). Goldlaber in Soola (1998) calls communication "an organizational embalming fluid" whereas Bel-Molokwu (2000) has it that communication is of pedestrian essence: an everyday thing (perhaps an every moment thing) because it pervades our very essence, our very routine of living, Bel-Molokwu goes on to state that "communication goes on in virtually every facet of our being: motherhood, fatherhood, manhood, womanhood, adulthood, "geriahood" and "morihood".(p.1). He concludes by saying

> Communication therefore can be described in simple terms as the process of saying something and getting heard. Effective communication by deduction is saying something, getting heard and getting understood. (p.2)

The term communication has been presented here in its many colours and different uniforms; but suffice it to say that communication is life – to live is to communicative and communicative is to live. Communication includes all the activities of mankind, important, unimportant, boring, interesting, profitable, painful, understandable, etc. Thus mankind is virtually wrapped in a communication cloak of many colours, dimensions and operations.

Organizational communication draws from the over all or general meaning of communication. It has also been defined differently by different authors. Umeh, (1998) looks at the term as the internal or external, vertical or horizontal communication that involves organizations, firms or establishments passing on information to their staff or customers through public relations, advertising techniques or memoranda (p.273). To Bel-Molokwu, (2000), the standard of an organization's corporate image and efficiency, is directly related to the standard of its communication and loss of business to the tune of millions of naira, loss of customers and loss of prestige in the market… all too often result from poor organizational communication (p.44). In other words, organizational communication would mean the process of standardizing an organization's overall corporate image and efficiency in such a way that would prevent any form of loss. To Enighe, Galadima & Surma (2002), organizational communication is the sum total of what actually happens in an organization. These include how staff and management relate, how staff and customers relate, how non-management and management staff relate and the organizational climate in which they relate.

For some time now, many young and even long standing organizations have suffered under the weight of ineffective organizational communication arising or resulting from problematic use of language. In some cases, staff would be offended at how some one in management addressed or talked to them or about them; at other times management would feel that staff are taking them for granted simply because they (staff) used what could be considered inappropriate language yet at other times customers would feel offended by the way they are spoken to – either that impolite or disrespectful and spiteful language was verbally used or

the tone of a letter sounded dictatorial. All these do not augur well for the well being of the organization as many communicators have noted that the health of an organization's communication is the wealth of the organization. When staff are not happy with language used on them, their psyche would be counter balanced and their attitude and output would be counter productive. In the same vein, when customers feel insulted or put down through the language used on them, they would inadvertently gravitate away from the source of pain (insult) towards the source of pleasure (respect and honour). In each case, the organization is negatively affected. As the saying goes, the customer is king and the customer is always right. So if organizations that depend on the patronage of customers drive away the said customers with their words, then sooner than latter, the organization's very existence would be threatened. But the customer is just one angle of the triangle – the workers are the other angle. The workers are the "cow" that produces the milk. But the owner of the cow must know what to do or where to press to bring out the milk in the cow. Management must know how to address staff in order to put them in the psychological and emotional state to bring out and give in their best for the benefit of the organization. The question then is, in what practical way(s) can organizations employ effective communication through the use of language to bring about effective organizational communication? The assumption here is that if organizational communication is effective, it would ultimately translate to better efficiency and optimal profit thereby fulfilling the purpose for which organizations exist.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Human beings are the repositories of the meanings contained in words as words have no meaning on their own. It is only when humans come in contact with words that they assign meaning to the words spoken, written, heard or read. When words are misunderstood or misrepresented, organizational climate becomes tense, hostile and virulent and this leads to other problems. It is because of this that it is often said that organizational problems are symptoms of more deeply rooted communication problems. The picture this paints is that barriers or roadblocks that negatively affect organizational communication revolve around communication.

There exists a long list of perceived or real barriers to effective organizational communication. Some authors have called them blocks others problems, others hindrances, others militating factors, constraints, impediments, etc. But no matter the nomenclature, Ndupuechi (2000), Umeh (1998), Bel-Molokwu (2000), James, Ode & Soola (2004), Enighe, Galadima & Surma (2002) all agree that barriers hinder and are obstacles to effective organizational communication. A few of these barriers will be considered in this write up.

In my consideration, too many intermediaries is a huge barrier for as they say, "too many cooks spoil the broth". When information passes through too many middlemen (people), it creates room for distortion. There is also what is called human barriers which have to do with how people respond to their work and the work environment. Included in this are information over lead, human attitudes and gate-keeping. We also have structural as well as technical constraints. Added to the list is ineffective listening for when listening is ineffective, communication will, inadvertently be ineffective. Again we have barriers of semantics or semantic barriers, selective attention, idiosyncrasies of language, attitude of "allness", authoritative attitude of management, vocabulary deficiencies, by-passing, conflicting and competing messages, stereo-type attitude. Then we have lack of proper planning which has led to the saying, "if you fail to plan, you have planned to fail"; insufficient or no training as well as emotional barriers. The list is endless but suffices it to add that rumour is also a barrier, for rumour embellishes information more than is necessary thereby adding to or

subtracting from the essentials. Also is feedback. Feedback is necessary but when a message goes back to its encoder or sender without being fully internalized or understood, we have a "back to sender" syndrome. Furthermore, when feed back is delayed, a communication gap is created and the gap so created will often be wrongly filled, leading to communication breakdown.

Having mentioned some of communication's negative influences that affect organizational communication, it is therefore needful to examine how organizational communication can be salvaged through language use.

ENSURING EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE USE

Language is strictly and uniquely a human trait and it has been described as "species-specific" for it is the ability to use language for the purpose of communication that has distinguished man from other animals. Indeed, "man alone uses language for communication" (Verghese, 2007:8). Man's ability to use language is invariably what has made modern civilization a reality for without the use of language, other human achievements would have no voice. In the words of Verghese (2007), "No worthwhile thinking leading to sensible and rational conclusions is possible unless one uses language" (p.8).

Language is an important instrument with which members of a given community (organization) express their thoughts, it is uniquely a quality of man from a magnanimous God. In the words of Udom (2011), "language is not being able to talk only, it is about being able to express our thoughts, feelings and emotions" (p.70). To corroborate Udom, Benjamin L. Whorf in Verghese (2007) has it that:

> Words and structures of a person's language control his thinking and ultimately the whole culture to which it belongs. So, the way in which we see the world is determined by language. (p.9)

When or how language began may be the subject of heated debates but certainly why language began or the reasons for language are glaringly obvious – communication, interaction, expression, socialization, encoding thought for the benefit of others who decode it, etc. But language is a weapon, both an offensive and defensive; it is likened to the Biblical "two-edged sword" which cuts in any direction and as Broughton in Verghese (2007) put it,

> Communication can be infinitely varied and infinitely complex just because language is a highly structured system which allows an infinite range of permutations. (p.40)

The idea then is that for organizations to benefit from language they must use language according to prescriptions – right dose and right application or else language use will become a night-mare of organizations instead of an ally. Organizations must strive to use language proficiently and as determined by the occasion, whether formal or informal. Using informal language for formal occasions will be counter-productive. Just an ability to use language would not do, language must be used appropriately.

Language should also be used acceptably and not just intelligibly. Since an organization is not just limited to one single linguistic community, staff must go beyond using intelligible language to using acceptable language to accommodate clients that may come from outside the linguistic sphere of intelligible usage. An example is the Nigerian usage of 'uncle' or 'auntie' to mean anybody older than one; or 'brother' and 'sister' to refer to one who is from the same place as you are. Both are intelligible in Nigeria but not acceptable. So I would get

an American client confused when I refer to my Ghanaian boss as 'Uncle Peter' simply because I want to sound respectful. Intelligibility is good but it should not replace acceptability for as Verghese (2007) says, "corrections based on internationally accepted standards cannot be ignored by us" (p.15).

Members of an organization should also endeavour to use words that build and learn to take control of their speech. Words and sentences like "please", "I'm sorry", "excuse me", etc should be part of organizational vocabulary. Sarcastic, hostile or emotionally loaded language should therefore be avoided as much as possible. According to Enighe (2010), language that puts down, demeans or causes any form of psychological injury should be replaced with polite language (p.455). Enighe, Galadima & Surma (2002) also advise that for language to positively impact on organizations, it must be simple, familiar and everyday language that make the communication process easy to understand for as they say, "simple language is usually more easily understood than complicated grammar" (p.77). Instead of saying, "I was flabbergasted by his pusillanimity and imbecility", one could simply say, " I was greatly surprised by his cowardice and stupidity or weak-mindedness". As far as achieving effective organization communication through effective use of language is concerned, simplicity is the highest sophistication.

Sincere language that does not unnecessarily flatter or inflate the ego should also be employed and caution should be exercised in the use of technical terms or jargons that those outside the organization may not understand. When professional jargons are used, those who do not understand will feel left out and may become suspicious of the organization's intention. This will likely affect business negatively; so inclusive language is the name of the game here. Additionally, the oral communication will be fluent and use acceptable pronunciation in order to be both intelligible and acceptable. Wrong grammar usually sends the wrong message.

In written communication, short sentences should be preferred as they are less confusing than long ones. Also sentences should be positive most of the time as positivity tells a story about the organization and colours the organization brightly. So instead of saying, "your reporter addressed me wrongly", which is negative, one can positively say, "sorry, but my correct titles are Reverend, professor ….". Again, rather than say, "I will not be able to make it to the office by 8:am", which is negative, one could say, "I shall make it to the office a little after 8:am", which is positive. Positive atmospheres create hope and paint a picture of a brighter future rather than negative atmospheres that dampen the mood, stifle happiness and spread impossibility around the organization.

Again, no matter how well-intentioned, complex sentences should be reduced to the barest minimum and rather simple sentences should be used. Here is an example of a complex and overly long sentence:

> You have initiated a persistent, preposterous and obnoxious campaign of vilification, calumny and villainy against my person making me look goofy and diabolical and loathsome; but get this clear, your insidious machinations and criminal manipulation of facts are going to propel and escalate a chain reaction, the end of which no man can tell.

The sentence above contains more that fifty (50) words, both structural and content words. Rather than this long, winding sentence, we could have at least four grammatically correct sentences made from this overly long one. Twisting sentences are not easy to follow or comprehend as such; they are not helpers of organizational communication. Words should also be used mostly in the connotative sense so as to minimize the possibility of confusing the

receiver when words are used denotatively. It should also be ensured that each word used is correctly spelt and that only the appropriate part of speech is used.

Because language is complex, organizations should begin to look into the possibility of hiring language experts (at least one) to ensure that language is used to the advantage of the organization. Language when used correctly in an organization can be a great ally but when used incorrectly can literally set the organization on fire. One can douse organizational tensions with well thought out language but one can also tear down the whole organization with careless and thoughtless words.

CONCLUSION

The contributions of effective communication to the well being and continued existence of individuals, organizations and societies is not in question. This contribution is well captured in the saying, "the whole world is altered through the communication process". But as important as communication is, it is a very complex and multidimensional process whose understanding and right application is the only thing that will guarantee its fruitfulness. Since language is an aspect of communication and communication is the lubricant that keeps the wheels of organizational development rolling, it therefore becomes necessary that organizations that have hitherto played down the importance of effective language use in the realization of effective organizational communication have a re-think. Because organizational communication is carried out only through language, language should therefore be given more than a careless thought; rather it should be treated as the vehicle or conveyor of effective organizational communication which will in turn usher in profit and ensure continued existence for organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are hereby made:

1. Communicators in business organizations must carefully choose and use words that communicate the organization's objectives, vision and mood.

2. Organizations should introduce what the University of Jos calls "Smart Work Ethics", but this time with a focus on language use such that those who default by using language that should not be used would be guilty of unethical practice and be so penalized.

3. Organizations should from time to time organize attitudinal and attitude change seminars and workshops for staff to demonstrate that the success of effective language use for effective organizational communication begins with attitude change.

4. Organizations should also institute language use monitoring systems to find out when the wrong language has been used and call the offender either for correction or reprimand. Where the organization is a very large one, the language use monitoring system should be set up in the different units that make up the organization.

5. Slogans and wise sayings that capture the essence of the organization should be boldly written out and placed in strategic places in the organization so that they serve as reminders and also as warnings against the use of negative language. For example, a company in Nigeria had, "The word impossible does not exist here", placed all over the premises right to the gate. Another had "No fear here" posted every where.

6. Communicative competence should be part of the induction programme for newly employed staff as well as a major criterion for hiring new ones.

7. Attitude change and right use of words should be part of the promotions criteria of organizations and should be handsomely rewarded. This will serve as motivation to those who feel that there is nothing to be gained from effective language use.

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