

## Original Research Article

# Employees' Perception on Internal Communication during Unrest in Public Universities in Western Kenya

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**Abstract:** Public universities in Kenya have experienced recurrent employees' unrest which could be as a result of ineffective internal communication between the university and its employees. During crisis, effective internal communication is vital as it is the only way the organization and employees can dialogue and stop the crisis. Despite vast research on organizational internal communication, literature on employees' perception on internal communication during unrest in Kenyan public universities during unrest is deficient. Data was collected by means of questionnaires and FGDs among 374 employees and 114 union officials respectively. The findings revealed that the employees felt that during unrest there are no sufficient internal communication channels, and opportunities within the organization to give suggestions. Moreover, the study ascertained that the organizations do not support two-way communication between employees and management during unrest. The other finding was that during unrest the information employees got from their organization was unreliable and untimely. Therefore, the employees are largely dissatisfied with the internal communication between them and the organizations they work for during unrest.

**Keywords:** employees, Internal Communication, organization, unrest.

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## INTRODUCTION

Perception is the process by which an employee organizes and interprets his or her impressions in order to give meaning to his or her environment and thus, it influences significantly his or her workplace behavior (Langton & Robbins, 2006). Therefore what employees perceive about their work situations influences their attitudes and behavior during crisis. The development of crisis management over the past decades has been obviously focused on two distinct approaches, which are crisis as unavoidability and as pro-active crisis prevention (Jaques, 2010). Even though many scholars agree that crisis is inevitable, they argue that crisis can be anticipated and mitigated. Research demonstrated that crisis management process begins with the perceptions of leaders toward uncertainties and vulnerabilities, leading to finding out ways to prevent or mitigate those crises (Smits & Ally, 2003). However, crisis cannot be prevented or reduced by leaders' response solely, but it requires the collaboration of all entities in an organization. To ensure that people in an organization are able to handle crisis properly when it occurs, knowledge and ideas about crisis must be provided to responsible employees beforehand. However, this is not the case in the public

universities in Kenya since all of them do not have crisis management plan in place. This implies that internal communication channels to be used during unrest are not defined beforehand to the employees who are the main publics. Therefore, the present study aimed at establishing how these public universities communicate during unrest and their employees' perception on the internal communication during unrest.

The study by Johansen, Aggerholm, and Frandsen (2012) examined perceived organizational crisis management and plan between executives and employees. This study found that employees felt betrayed, ashamed, and panic when they perceived crises. Furthermore, they also discovered that employees needed more information, and had a higher perception of insecurity. Johansen and Frandsen noted that organizational crisis can be evaded if the organizations have crisis prevention and preparation in place (as cited in Johansen, Aggerholm, and Frandsen, 2012). To measure an organizational effectiveness in coping with crisis situation, numerous studies tend to focus on the outcomes, yet crisis outcomes either success or failure are reflected by crisis preparedness. Thus, to assess the employees' perception of crisis communication effective crisis management in an

organization, crisis preparedness in terms of the channels of communication, timeliness and reliability of messages is a vital

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This was a descriptive study to establish the channels of internal communication preferred by the employees of public universities in western Kenya during unrest. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009), define descriptive survey as a method that involves asking a large group of people questions about a particular issue. The study employed descriptive survey to explore opinions, on the employees preferred internal communication channels during unrest in public universities in western Kenya.

### **Study Population**

The population for this study consisted of 5674 employees from six accredited public universities in western Kenya. The sample for this study was made up of 374 employees. Out of 374 employees who were given questionnaires, 302 of them returned the questionnaires which provided the data for analysis, hence  $n=302$  which translates to 81% response rate. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate of 50% is adequate for analysis and reporting, while 60% is good and that of 70% and above is very good. The response rate of 81% achieved in this study was sufficient for analysis

### **Sampling Procedure and Sample Size**

According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2008), a sample should have ability to represent characteristics in population. Unit of analysis for the study were employees, union officials and public relations officers. The target population constituted respondents from six accredited public universities in Western Kenya. Census sampling was used to sample all the 6 accredited public universities in western Kenya.

Mugenda and Mugenda (2008), state that purposive sampling is a technique that allows a researcher to use cases that have the required information with respect to the objectives of his or her study. Six Public Relations Officers from six accredited public universities in western Kenya were sampled purposively since they are the managers in the public relations department which deals with the internal communication of these universities. Similarly, crisis management is part of the public relations function.

According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2008), thirty percent of accessible population is enough sample size for descriptive survey. Thirty percent of 113 union officials from accredited public universities in Western

Kenya under the study were used to get a representative sample of 34 union officials. The union officials were important for this study since they are the mediators between employees and the management during unrest.

Employees sample size was calculated using Glenn Israel's sampling formula (1992) with 95% confidence level and precision of  $\pm 5\%$ , which gave a sample size of 374 employees. This represented all the employees in all six accredited public universities in Western Kenya. The sample size of 374 was distributed proportionately since the universities do not have homogeneous population using multi stage sampling in two stages. First stage was to formulate the clusters based on the three unions in these universities under the study. They are: KUSU, KEDHEIHA, and UASU, then a representative percentage per universities was calculated. The representative percentages per universities were as follows; Maseno University 25.25%, MMUST 13.77%, JOOUST 21.69%, Kisii University 21.48%, Rongo 9.67% and Kibabii University 7.95%. Then second stage of multistage sampling was to conduct a proportionate sampling per union per university since the unions also do not have equal number of staff

### **Data Collection Techniques**

The primary data for the study came from interviews, focused group discussions and questionnaires, while secondary data was gathered through library research and internet search. The data collection commenced in January through to March 2019 with the aid of two research assistants. Questionnaire, FGDs guides and key informant interviews were used to collect data. There was an Interview schedule for the Universities PR Officers, FGDs guide for universities union officials and Questionnaires for employees.

### **Data Analysis**

SPSS version 21 was used to analyze data. Data from questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively while data from focused group discussions were analyzed qualitatively

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Employees Perception on Internal Communication during Unrest**

This objective sought to assess employees' perception internal communication during unrest in public universities in Western Kenya. The survey covered the perception of employees on internal communication during unrest. The statements were rated through a five point scale: SA=5, A=4, 3=U, 2=D, 1=SD and  $n=302$ . The findings are presented on Table 1

**Table 1: Employees perception on Internal Communication during Unrest**

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	U (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
Do you consider the internal communication channel used by management to give feedback on employee concern during employees' unrest effective?	4 (1.3%)	27 (8.9%)	13 (4.3%)	143 (47.49%)	115 (38.1%)
Do you consider communication flow during unrest adequate	21 (7.0%)	84 (27.8%)	12 (4.0%)	130 (43.0%)	55 (18.2%)
During unrest there are sufficient internal communication channels, and opportunities within the organization for employees to give suggestions for improvement in their work	16 (5.3%)	42 (13.9%)	47 (15.6%)	169 (56.0%)	28 (9.3%)
During employees unrest Management of the organization pays attention to our suggestions	1 (0.3%)	23 (7.6%)	85 (28.1%)	121 (40.1%)	72 (23.8%)
My organization support two way communication between employees and management during unrest	4 (1.3%)	29 (9.6%)	65 (21.5%)	130 (43.0%)	74 (24.5%)
During unrest, information I get from my organization is usually reliable and timely.	47 (15.6%)	50 (16.6%)	56 (18.5%)	137 (45.2%)	12 (4.0%)

Source: Study data (2018)

The findings of the study in Table 1 revealed that 143 (47.49%) of the respondents felt that internal communication channels used by management to give feedback on employees concern during unrest was ineffective. One hundred and thirty (43.0%) respondents felt that communication flow across the university was inadequate. The study also bared that most organizations they worked for do not support two-way communications between employees and the management, a majority of employees 130 (43.0%) confirmed that while 137 (45.2%) disagreed that information they got from the organization is usually timely and reliable. The study revealed that 130 (43.0%) of the respondents felt that communication does not flow across the university adequately during unrest. The inadequate flow of information could be because of the use of internal memos placed on the university noticeboards to communicate to employees during unrest when their preferred channel is staff WhatsApp. Putti, Aryess and Phua (2009), state that satisfaction with communication within the organization is pegged on the amount of information available. When employees are given autonomy and freedom to express their opinion and with a good relationship with their senior management, helps create a comfortable working environment which in turn promotes employees efficiency (Vipul & Srivastava, 2011).

The present study revealed that, majority of the respondents 169 (56.0%), felt that during unrest there were no sufficient internal communication channels and opportunities within the organization to give suggestions for improvement in their work while 121 (40.1%) of the respondents confirmed that management of their organizations does not pay attention to employees' suggestions. This could be as a result of lack of a specific communication channel(s) where employees can receive information and send feedback

and, also have dialogue with the management of their organizations during unrest. So they may have good suggestions but no conduit to reach the management for consideration especially on matters pertaining to their duties.

Conversely, Mallet-Hammer (2005), posits that lack of communication within an organization can decrease productivity, lower morale and be the cause of other serious workplace issues. In addition, Harris and Nelson, (2008) noted that relationships grow out of communication and the functioning and survival of an organization is based on effective relationships among individuals and groups. During unrest when the employees are able to and have access to information and give constructive feedback, then that means there is kind of dialogue between the management and employees. This will promote good communication relations between employees and management and employees themselves since the employees are able to present their suggestions to the management.

The findings revealed that the employees felt that during unrest there are no sufficient internal communication channels, and opportunities within the organization to give suggestions. Moreover, the study ascertained that the organizations do not support two-way communication between employees and management during unrest. The other finding was that during unrest the information employees got from their organization was unreliable and untimely. Therefore, the employees are largely dissatisfied with the internal communication between them and the organizations they work for during unrest.

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