

Contributing Factors in Hospital Internal Communication based on Hospital Managers and Healthcare Personnel's Attitudes: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: A variety of clinical and administrative employees form a complicated communication network which makes various conflicts and contradictions possible in hospitals. This highlights the significant impact of internal communication in directing healthcare centers as one of the manager's duties. Although improving hospital management is key to improvement of the healthcare delivery, few studies have been conducted to address internal communication as one of the main management tasks in hospitals. The current study aimed to determine the contributing factors influencing internal communication based on hospital managers and healthcare personnel's points of view.

Methods: A qualitative study utilizing a content analysis approach was performed. A purposive sampling method was recruited and twenty hospital managers and healthcare staff in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis by MAXQDA version 10.

Results: Eight managers and twelve healthcare staff including eleven male and nine female subjects participated in the study. Three main themes were discerned: namely "personal factors", "technical factors", and "organizational and structural factors". The participants placed the most emphasis on leadership and new technologies as the influential subthemes.

Conclusion: Many factors can affect internal communication, some of which depend mostly on managers to be applied effectively in the hospitals and some on healthcare staff. The identified factors help the managers and staff to recognize how their internal communication can be impressed by these factors and how they can create effective internal communications.

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Introduction

Communication, as one of the most important and dominant tasks in organizations, is required for

transmitting information, attitudes, ideas, feelings, planning, and decision making.¹ Internal communications have become one of the most important factors in today's business world. The dissemination of information from

managers to employees is a preliminary factor to advance the organizational goals.² Internal communications are different from communication which means simply exchanging information between a resource and a receiver through a communication channel.^{3, 4} Kalla⁴ defines internal communications as “all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization”. Internal communication mainly focuses on how to convey information, thoughts, and ideas. According to Quirke,⁵ internal communication can help turn strategy into action, gain differentiation, and manage the changes more effectively. Internal communication goals are to create the sense that employees are an important asset for the organization, improve morale, change employee behavior to be more productive, inform employees about internal changes, and increase employees’ understanding of the organization and its goals.⁵ Thus, communication and business success are inseparable.

Internal communication would keep the employees on the right track to achieve the organizational goals, thereby enhancing productivity and performance.⁶ On the other hand, in today’s industrial economy, innovation has emerged as the main source of competitive advantage, but still many organizations fail to create an innovative culture.⁷ Thus, successful innovation depends on effective communication of the business value of innovation.⁸

Healthcare managers have other important responsibilities in addition to the defined responsibilities. Primary functions in healthcare centers include patient care, teaching, research, collaboration with other hospitals, job creation, and social functions.⁹ A variety of clinical and administrative employees form complicated communication networks which make various conflicts and contradictions possible. Internal communication is the main process happening within hospitals and enables the staff to create value for the patients. This highlights the significant impact of internal communication in directing healthcare centers as one of the manager’s duties. Effective internal communication can be beneficial in developing a long-term relationship between the management and employees and improve efficiency as a result.⁶

Internal communications have been described as a means for achieving job satisfaction, job performance, and innovation.¹⁰ Meanwhile, studies have found that job satisfaction is relatively low in hospitals.^{11, 12} Thus, improving internal communications may be helpful. According to the aforementioned points, internal communication can be helpful for improving personnel productivity, job satisfaction, innovative culture, change management, and personnel loyalty, all of which can lead to improving patient care delivery. However, Martini¹³ believes that in most hospitals he visited, communication concepts and

communication strategies were foreign terms for the hospital managers; furthermore, internal and external communications have been a field neglected for a long time. Therefore, we decided to conduct this research in order to understand how satisfied the personnel are with the internal communication in hospitals and what influences the internal communication to leverage its advantages.

Although improving hospital management is key to improvement of healthcare delivery,¹⁴ few studies have been conducted to address internal communication as one of the main management tasks in hospitals. Similar studies have focused mostly on written communication,^{15, 16} the linkage and interaction between internal communication and competitive rivalry,¹⁷ communication processes,¹⁸ and communication audit as a case study.¹⁹ Thus, the current study aims to determine the contributing factors influencing internal communication based on hospital managers and healthcare staff’s points of view.

Methods

Study Design

This is a qualitative study utilizing a content analysis approach to explore the hospital managers and healthcare staff’s attitudes about the most important factors affecting internal communication. The qualitative research design was chosen because it was important to hear the views and experiences of hospital managers and healthcare staff in their own words on what they feel about manager-employee communication that they had experienced in their hospital.

Participants

It is suggested that in the initial stages of a study, researchers should start by interviewing the most knowledgeable people to get a line on relevancy and immerse themselves in a rich supply of data.²⁰ Thus, a purposive sampling method was recruited; twenty hospital managers and healthcare staff in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (SUMS) participated in the study. Inclusion criteria were having master’s or general practitioner degrees at least, having five years of work experience as a manager or healthcare staff who had different levels of communication in hospitals affiliated with Shiraz University of Medical Sciences as well as being willing to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria were managers or personnel in private hospitals, with less than five years of work experience, or working in hospitals not affiliated with SUMS.

Data Collection

After obtaining an institutional review board approval, the researcher explained the study objective

for the participants and sought informed consent from those who agreed to participate and be interviewed. The researchers requested the participants to determine a suitable time and place for the interview session. Sessions were mostly held in their office or a quiet place out of their working time. Procedures like the use of pseudo-names when describing individuals were applied for ensuring the confidentiality of sensitive information.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Experts including the research team and three healthcare services managers checked the research questions and confirmed the validity. An explanation about the study objective was presented to the participants; to prepare them for the main questions, we began each interview with questions including “Are you satisfied with the communications you have with your superiors or your colleagues?”, “Is there any communication challenge between you and your staff/managers”, “If yes, what are the challenges?”; then, the main question was asked: “What is the most important factors affecting the managers and employees’ internal communications” while allowing the participants to determine the direction of the conversation. The responses directed the interview according to the study objectives. Each interview lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. The sessions were audio-recorded and key points were written down. Interviews and analyses were continued until the quantity reached saturation and no new themes emerged.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, we used Lincoln and Guba’s Evaluative Criteria. They determined four criteria to ensure trustworthiness including Credibility (confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings), Transferability (showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts), Dependability (showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated), and Confirmability (a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest).²¹ They described some techniques that can be used to conduct a qualitative study that achieves these criteria. The techniques we applied in this study included variety in participants, abandoning the experience and assumption of the researcher, detailed data recording, good communication with the participants, prolonged engagement with participants, member-checking with study participants, and the supervisor.

Analysis

The contents of the transcribed interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. In general, this method consists of the six following steps: 1- familiarization with data, 2- preliminary coding, 3- finding themes, 4- reviewing themes, 5- defining

and naming themes, and 6- producing report.²² In the first step, the contents of the transcribed interviews were read many times to become familiar with the collected data and gain a general idea of what was contained in the interviews. In the second step, the key semantic units of the content were extracted and arranged in a table of preliminary codes, where each semantic unit was assigned a code. In this step, a total of 102 semantic units with 26 preliminary codes were extracted. Similar semantic codes were given similar codes. The third step was to categorize the obtained codes into potential themes and sort the coded data summaries based on these themes. In this step, the codes were classified into 9 themes. The fourth step consisted of two stages: reviewing the themes including the coded summaries to determine whether they are valid for the original data set, and refining the themes to make them more accurate and a better representative of the data. In this step, the number of themes was reduced from 9 to 6. In the fifth step, the themes were defined based on their nature, what they discuss, and the aspect of the data which they represent. In the final step, the themes were named according to their definition with care to make sure they provide a comprehensive representation of contributing factors in the hospital internal communication. We also analyzed the data using MAXQDA version 10.

Results

Eight managers and twelve healthcare staff including eleven male and nine female participated in the study. Thirteen participants (65%) declared that they had challenges in their working communications. Three main themes were discerned: namely “personal factors”, “technical factors”, and “organizational and structural factors”. Each main theme consisted of some categories, and each category consisted of some sub-categories (Table 1). The first theme, “personal factors” included the following categories: “leadership”, “ethical characteristics”, “personal characteristics”, and “communication skills”. The second theme, “technical factors”, included the following categories: “administrative automation”, “information systems”, and “social networks”. The third theme, “organizational and structural factors”, included one category as “organizational culture”. Table 1 indicates the themes, sub-themes, and supporting quotes extracted from Hospital Managers’ and Healthcare Staff’s attitudes related to contributing factors in the hospital internal communication

Personal Factors

Leadership

Managers stated leadership as the most important characteristic influencing internal communication. Four of eight managers believed that employees should be aware of mission, objectives, and strategic

Table 1: Classification of the main themes and subthemes

Domain	Theme	Subtheme	Representative quote
Personal factors	Leadership	Being a role model	Employees have an upstream look to the managers and do the same things he does.
		Having expertise	I think the first important principle is to have sufficient knowledge in the field we are responsible for, both academic knowledge and experimental knowledge.
		Guiding and directing subordinates	Employees should be guided in their tasks; we cannot expect them to do their best when they are not guided. Managers should notify the employees of any arising or forthcoming issues and provide guidance.
		Supporting employees	When an employee makes a mistake, whether the manager points the accusing fingers at the employee and evade managerial responsibility, or instead he takes the bull by the horns and supports the employee.
		Motivating employees	Employees need to be motivated; valuing and taking care of employees and what they do makes them feel belonging to the hospital and cause work progression.
		Being aware	Employees should be aware of hospital goals and know their role in the hospital; determined goals result in a specified attitude based on which employees can work.
		Delegating the authority	Some tasks should be delegated to subordinate staff; delegation of authority results in creating self-confidence in staff, accelerating tasks, and communicating better.
	Behavioral features	Respecting the employees	Mutual respect is very important and managers should respect the personnel's human dignity.
		Being just	The personnel compare their selves with their peers and if they observe injustice, it would disturb effective internal communication. When two coworkers do the same tasks and one of them receives more reward or more attention than the other one, he/she would gradually decrease his/her communication with the coworker or become motiveless.
		Being honest	When the staff observe the managers' speech and honest behavior, an effective communication can be formed.
		Having empathy and sympathy	Empathy and sympathy can make communications more effective; even if we are not able to do something for the personnel, listening to them can be useful.
		Speech transparency	Managers should speak clearly and simply. Problems mostly occur due to lack of transparency, and not clearly stating our expectations.
	Personal characteristics	Being flexible	Personnel, in hospitals, work in different shifts, and setting these shifts is difficult, but I try to cooperate and adapt myself with their condition; it has resulted in better communication and cooperation.
		Being decisive	Friendship, intimacy, and kindness should not cause the manager to lose his decisiveness; we should be decisive wherever necessary.
		Using criticism	We should not be thin-skinned; otherwise, the work environment would get boring and good communication cannot be developed. I ask my staff to notify my mistakes and, if logical, I will accept and I think I have been able to develop better communication.
		Knowing the appropriate time and place to raise the issue	It is important to know when and where to raise an issue; for example, sometimes personnel raise the issues when I am in the hospital corridors; I think it was not an appropriate place because I was probably thinking about issues associated to where I was going to or where I was coming from.
	Communication skills	Being accessible	We should allocate some hours in the week to communicate with the personnel, a direct relationship is very good; suggestions box is another approach, but it cannot provide mutual communication.
		Giving feedback	Personnel's performance must be known as their own name. The work must be presented to superior managers when the personnel is invited to a meeting. Feedback on the personnel work outcome should be provided. The employee should be aware of the value of his/her work on the healthcare progression.
Having non-verbal skill		It is important how much a manager can be charismatic at the first look. Managing the hearts is very important.	
Having listening skills		Some managers' mistake is that they like to speak more rather than listening to others. Listening to the personnel patiently will solve the problems in most cases.	
Creating a peaceful environment		Some managers are stressful. Even in emergencies, we need to keep calm while keeping stress away from the personnel. We should avoid using words such as run, hurry up, and so on.	

Technical factors	Novel technologies	Having mobile phones	Most of our communications are via mobile phones; for example, when a new patient refers to our department, I call the resident who is shifting if he/she is not in the department at the moment. Old technologies like pagers will prolong the communication, so I prefer to use my mobile phone instead of calling the hospital telephone center.
		Using social networks	Considering the managers' limited time, social networks have been very helpful. However, it should have a specified framework. In a virtual group, it is possible to transmit the message and receive the answer of all subordinates as soon as possible.
		Having administrative automation	In previous years, communications were based on paper; now, with administrative automation, communications have become more systematic, easier, and more traceable.
		Using information systems	Information systems provide good documentation as well as archiving the hospital information.
Organizational factors	Organizational culture	Team work	Teamwork is very important in effective communication and it will impact the patients' care. Team communication is time-sensitive and team members need to receive information as fast as possible.
		Meritocracy	If a manager does not choose the employee for a position based on meritocracy, or if the choice is based on favoritism rather than the pre-specified rules and capabilities, it will damage the communications.
		Establishing performance-based payment	Payments should be based on the real performance of the personnel; they compare their performance with that of their peers, and it will even affect the patients' care, so the payments must be clear and transparent to everyone.
		Having innovative culture	We should encourage the personnel to express ideas and thoughts without fear.
		Informal relationships	In many of our hospital structures, inter-departmental communication is based on informal relationships. It is better to provide a logical boundary between formal and informal relationships because it has both negative and positive aspects.

planning; they should be directed and guided in their task to achieve the determined objectives. Two healthcare staff believed that managers cannot expect the employees to do well when they are not informed about the hospitals' problems. Sharing information and providing awareness make employees committed to achieving the defined objectives and communicate better. Managers believed that information asymmetry disturbs good communication. Supporting employees also have a positive impact on communication. Four managers also expressed delegation of authority as an influential factor for effective communication. Delegation of authority would bring about shared management and provide self-confidence in employees as well as better communication.

“We should ignore the personnel’s minor errors; to err is human. We should support rather than blame them, especially in presence of others. The aim should be to take some actions to prevent errors rather than find and punish the guilty person”

Employees should be motivated; they need to know they are valuable assets of the hospitals, and their task independent of being minor is valuable for the hospital; this makes them feel belonging to the hospital and do their best and consequently communicate better. Managers are perceived as a role model, so they are expected to do the best in practice because employees have a bottom-up look toward managers. If the staff recognize that the manager’s behavior is matched with what he/she tells; then, they trust the manager and effective

communication can be developed. Managers stated that employees should have sufficient expertise in the field they were responsible for; expertise includes both academic and experimental knowledge. Expertise is necessary to recognize incorrect information which can lead to incorrect decision-making and ineffective communication. From the discourse, it can be seen that the healthcare staff spoke about the managers’ role model and emphasized commitment.

Behavioral Features

Five healthcare staff stated that a manager should be a just judge. Injustice can negatively affect the relationships between employees because they compare their performance and the receive reactions with that of their peers. They believed that mutual respect would also affect communication. They expressed that managers should value their employees’ time; when an employee has to wait a long time to visit the superior, it would affect communication.

“Employees compare themselves with their peers, and if they observe injustice, it would result in job dissatisfaction and disturbs effective internal communication. When two coworkers do the same tasks and one of them receives more reward or more attention, the other one would gradually decrease his/her communication with the coworker or become motiveless.”

Six managers stated that sympathy and empathy in hospitals were some of the most important factors contributing to internal communication. Speech

transparency is also reported as important; managers declare that they should make sure the expectations are clear to employees.

Personal Characteristics

Five managers expressed flexibility as a factor influencing internal communication. Hospital managers work with a wide range of staff with different conditions in different shifts, so flexibility sounds a key factor for communicating with each other. Decisiveness is determined by managers; they believe that friendly communication should not hinder the managers' decisiveness and seriousness. Managers should take criticism; they should let good recommendations be raised and, if logical, accept them. The irrationality of managers or employees when encountering a criticism would disturb a good communication.

Communication Skills

According to healthcare staff, applying a framework for sharing information in hospitals is very important. Accessibility of information for decision-making when necessary is an influential factor for internal communication. Employees should be aware of information flow in the hospital and know where and when they can obtain the required information. They believed that managers should determine a specific time and place for communicating with employees. Both managers and staff should recognize where and when to raise an issue. Communication necessitates that people should be good listeners at first;

“Time and place of raising issues are important; for example, encouragement should be in the presence of others, but punishment should be in a private place”.

According to the managers, listening skills as well as non-verbal skills are very important for communication. Providing feedback to employees is also mentioned by the managers. A manager even believed that directing staff without provision of feedback was “meaningless”.

Technical Factors

Novel Technologies

Almost all participants stated that they preferred communicating via their mobile phones. For instance, one nurse mentioned that:

“Most of our communications are via mobile phones; for example, when a new patient refers to our department, I call the resident who is shifting if he/she is not in the department at the moment. Old technologies like pagers will prolong the communication, so I prefer to use my mobile phone instead of calling the hospital telephone center.”

Administrative automation is mentioned by

healthcare staff as an effective tool for communication. Four healthcare staff described administrative automation as a tool making the correspondence faster and more traceable. However, two old healthcare providers believed that administrative automation had made the processes slower. Most of the personnel expressed social networks as the most influential factor affecting internal communication nowadays. Considering the managers' limited time, social networks provide a good communication channel. The managers believed that social networks under determined law could provide both formal and informal communication which could make them more effective. Three managers mentioned information systems as an essential approach for archiving the documentation of communication.

“Social networks like WhatsApp group can provide a good communication if both formal and informal relationships are defined in a structural framework.”

Organizational Factors

Organizational Culture

According to the managers, teamwork should be applied in the hospitals. The culture of engaging people in different activities in a team or group would help to communicate better. Providing an innovative culture in which the staff are free to express their ideas and thoughts would contribute to developing effective communication. The approach determined for recruitment is mentioned as effective in communication. Five managers believed that recruitment that was not based on meritocracy would result in the staffs' disappointment and negatively affect communication.

“As you know, recruitment is not a decision made by managers only, managers obtain the required information about hiring a person from communication, and if this is not based on determined criteria, it will affect communication.”

According to the managers, it is necessary to provide a critical culture in which employees engage in a variety of process improvements, criticize it, and present their suggestions. The managers said if the criticisms were logical, they should be applied. Healthcare staff also stated that it was necessary to create a trustful environment in which employees shared their information, thoughts, and ideas because one barrier for effective internal communication was the lack of trust between the employees. They suggested that developing a mechanism for establishing new ideas by the name of employees was beneficial.

Almost all the managers expressed the informal relationships would heavily affect internal communication. They believed that most of the communications in their hospitals were informal.

“Unfortunately, we see that informal relationships are preferred to formal relationships in most of our administrative structures which is called “lobby”. However, it can be positive and negative, positive when aligning with hospital objectives and negative when aligning with individual objectives.”

Discussion

Three main themes were extracted from the interviews including personal factors, technological factors, and organizational factors. Among all the themes and subthemes gained from the interviews, the participants placed the most emphasis on leadership and new technologies as the influential subthemes. They believed that managers should play their leadership role in a way that provided a constructive environment for all personnel resulting in effective internal communication.

Personal factors of managers are mentioned as a key factor affecting internal communication. Providing awareness, motivating and fostering the subordinates' engagement, being flexible, and providing feedback on the employees' performance are recognized as increasingly important aspects of internal communication. However, a study found that downward communication was poor in the organization under study and did not improve the employees' performance; they also found that superiors did not share information with subordinates adequately.²³ On the other hand, sharing information in hospitals has a crucial role in managing disease as shown in a research who stated that internal communication and sharing information helped them handle the Ebola virus disease.²⁴ Hierarchical level and engagement in the strategic decision process are mentioned as the key factors influencing the quality of internal communication.⁷ One study revealed that even if employees begin engagement effectively into the organization, it can decline the first year or up to five years later.²⁵ Thus, we suggest employing internal communication professionals who orient both managers and healthcare staff, provide feedback and listen to the employees' concerns.²⁶ It is suggested that nowadays the core function of internal communication departments is not just to transmit messages but to improve active communication behaviors at all levels of organizations.²⁷ Thus, all managers and employees need to promote communication behaviors to have effective internal communications.

Technical factors have changed the form of communications through new technologies, such as smartphones and social networks. Communicating through mobile phones is preferred by the healthcare staff. Given the limited time in healthcare facilities for decision making and performing the activities, mobile phones provide instant information, so they are an appropriate tool for supporting clinical communication.

Healthcare staff may share the patients' information through mobile phones. However, it is important to note that it can raise the risk of violating the patients' privacy and confidentiality. To minimize the associated risks, the healthcare staff need to be aware of privacy and confidentiality considerations as well as the strategies to prevent violating the patients' privacy. Social media have emerged as a frontier for promoting the internal communicators. Social media can engage the employees through developing connections and increasing collaborations among the employees. Social networks, as a communication tool, can be used for sharing information, managing knowledge, and solving problems.²⁸ Considering the hospitals' interrupt-driven environments,²⁹ active social networks can be highly useful. Functionality, system leadership, system quality, and information quality are key aspects of social network adoption, which can result in internal communication promotion.³⁰ According to the results, the participants believed that new technologies could have both negative and positive impacts. To create a positive impact, employees should be trained to recognize what is appropriate or not appropriate to post. Moreover, managers need to show active participation in internal social media.³¹ Hospital internal communication needs to be science-based,²⁴ so posted messages should be closely monitored. However, to leverage internal communication and increase efficiency as a result, we should apply both traditional communication and social networks together.

The organizational factor is another key factor affecting internal communication. Creating a critical culture as well as an innovative culture requires management force in the hospitals. Innovation can be fostered through communication activities. Since employees are considered an important source of innovation, it is necessary to encourage their innovation through internal communication.³² A change framework is developed for implementing innovative culture.³³ The developers of the framework have declared if managers are supposed to establish an innovative culture, listening to employees and following each step from philosophy to action is necessary. Employees need to be motivated to devote time and effort to develop innovative ideas.³⁴ Two researchers analyzed the relationship between innovation and performance and consider specificities of the hospitals. They pointed to the current communication gaps within and across healthcare organizations as the main barriers to enhance higher value hospital services through innovation. However, innovation alone will not improve performance; organizational flexibility and external cooperation are two factors mediating this relationship³⁵ and should be kept in managers' mind when developing critical culture as well as an innovative culture.

The confirm the results of the current study, we recommend determining the factors affecting internal communication based on the hospital managers and personnel's point of view, so it can provide appropriate information for managers and personnel to improve their internal communications. However, the limitation of the present study is the lack of generalizability of the findings due to the qualitative feature of the study, sample size, and sampling method. In addition, although the researchers did their best to get an arranged appointment in an appropriate time and quiet place, interview with the managers might be affected by their busy schedule.

Conclusion

There are many factors that can affect internal communication. Some of these factors depend mostly on managers to be applied effectively in the hospitals and some on employees. The identified factors help the managers and healthcare staff to recognize how their internal communication can be impressed by these factors and how they can create effective internal communications.

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

This study is approved by the Ethics Committee of the Vice-chancellor for Research Affairs of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences with the ethical code of IR.SUMS.REC.1399.571.

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