

NIGERIAN PUBLIC SECTOR COMMUNICATION: A DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at administrative communication with a specific focus on the Nigerian Public Sector. It argues that the effectiveness of public organisations in the accomplishment of organisational goals is partly a function of the communication abilities and skills of the operators of the system from the highest to the least ranking officer. The paper begins with introductory remarks and graduates to other sections like conceptual clarifications, features of administrative communications, forms of communication in public organisations, list of a Abbreviations/Acronyms used in administration and other sections.

Keywords: Communication, administration, Nigerian public sector, administrative abbreviations/acronyms

Introduction

Administration is a universal phenomenon that takes place in all forms of organizations, whether private or public. It is the vehicle through which the goals of an organization are realised and accomplished. No doubt, every organization has goals to achieve. For example, while the cardinal goal of private organizations is profit maximisation through the production and sales of goods and services, that of the government or public organizations is the rendition of essential services such as provision of roads, medicare, education amongst others for the members of the public with little or no charges or better still, at affordable rate. However, the realization or accomplishment of organizational goals largely depends on many factors. For instance, the classical organization theorists such as Frederick Winslow Taylor and Max Weber talk about division of labour in an organization on the basis of employees' abilities or competencies, which implies that a worker would be able to maximize productivity or output (get the most out of) if he or she is assigned the job which he or she has been developed or trained to do. On the other hand, administrative theorists like Luther Gulick, Lyndal Uwick and Henry Fayol laid emphasis on the functions of a chief executive (an administrator or manager) which amongst others include: planning, organizing, staffing, directing, reporting, and controlling, budgeting.

Understandably, an administrator has numerous functions to perform. One of the fundamental responsibilities of an administrator therefore is communication, which is the focal point of this paper. Undoubtedly, every organization has a structure of authority or hierarchy which depicts the flow of authority or seniority from the top of the organogram to the bottom. In the same vein, communication flows from top to bottom of the hierarchy and vice versa. In other words, in every organization, especially formal organizations, there is always, an overall head (chief executive) who oversees the entire organization. He communicates to the other members what the overall goal of the organization is and what to do towards the realization of the same goal. Apparently, communication is the life wire of

every vibrant and successful organization because, without communication, workers would not have direction and coordination will be hampered and circumvented.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the only wire that connects one officer from the top of the hierarchy to another is the official communication which directs, instructs or orders an employee or group of employees on what to do per time so as to enable the organization to accomplish its set goals.

The paper is aimed at addressing specific questions which constitute the basic research problem of the study. These questions are:

- 1 Are there standards of communication in administration?
- 2 If there are, to what extent do administrators comprehend and apply them?
- 3 Those who receive messages packaged in administration, how do they interpret them?
- 4 Is there any standard body of knowledge developed around this pattern of administrative communication?
- 5 Do the abbreviations used in administrative communication have universal meaning?

Conceptual Clarification

Communication

There are as many definitions of communication as there are many writers on the subject. However, for the purpose of this study, it is germane to examine some definitions of communication as put forward by some writers. Little, (1977) cited in Hambagda, (2000:2) defines communication as “the process by which information is passed between individuals and/or organizations by means of previously agreed symbols”. Here, communication is perceived as involving the use of symbols to transmit ideas, thought or messages from one person or group of persons to another. It also implies that a receiver of a message should be able to decode or interpret the symbols used in the communication. For example, in administration a superior officer can minute in a file to a subordinate by using abbreviations as “b.u.f next meeting”. Meaning “bring up file in the next meeting”. Similarly, k.i.v. in administrative communication means “keep in view”. However, such abbreviations could mean different things in other professions. Agreeably therefore, in the context of this particular discourse, communication is achievable “... by means of previously agreed symbols” as opined by Little (1977).

In a similar vein, Sharma and Sadana, (2008: 688) define communication as “the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another. It involves an exchange of facts, ideas, opinions or emotions by two or more individuals”. With specific reference to organization, W.G. Scot, cited in Sharma and Sadana, (2008: 688) view communication as a “process which involves the transmission and accurate replication of ideas reinforced by feedback purporting to stimulate actions to attain organizational goals”. Clearly therefore, communication in administration is highly purposeful. Any instruction, directive or order (written or verbal) from a superior to subordinate in administration is aimed at achieving specific objectives. Also, at the end of any directive or order, a subordinate is expected to report back to the superior the extent to which he has done what he was asked to do or if action has completely been taken. Communication is therefore a two-way traffic that serves four specific functions. Robbins, Judge and Vohra (2013:358,359), noted that communication acts to control the behaviours of organisational members; fosters motivation by clarifying to workers what they must do, how well they are doing it, and how performance can be improved upon; provides for the emotional expression of feelings and fulfilment of social needs and finally, communication facilitates decision making by providing the information individuals and groups required to make decisions through the transmission of the requisite data needed to identify and evaluate choices.

Primarily therefore, for public organisations in Nigeria and elsewhere to perform effectively, Robbins, Judge and Vohra(2013:359) echoed that there is need to maintain some form of control over members or workers, stimulate members to perform, allow emotional expression, and make decision choices.

Features of Administrative Communication

From the foregoing, it is obvious that communication has some essential features.

- Communication involves two or more individuals – sender(s) and receiver(s).

- Communication is a process that begins with formation of ideas by the sender. The idea is the subject matter or actual message or content of the message. It may be a fact, a thought, transmitted through signs or symbols.
- Documentation: most administrative communications are hand-written or typed and kept in files for reference purposes. A proper filing system is a fundamental means of retrieving official documents for future use or communication in Nigerian Public Organisations.
- Channel: Communication has a channel which includes; telephone, mail, letter, fax, email etc.
- Receiver: in any communication, the person who receives the message is the receiver. Communication is incomplete without a receiver.
- Understanding/Decoding: this has to do with the receiver's ability to interpret the content of the message transmitted to him or her, without which the desired result or action is impossible.
- Communication is continuous. Day in day out, communication continues to flow from superior to subordinate and vice versa.
- Feedback: in every communication, feedback is necessary. Feedback is the response or reply to the message received by the receiver. Feedback enables the sender of the message to know whether or not the receiver actually understood the content of the message.

Forms of Communication in Administration

Basically, there are two major forms of communication in administration. They are oral and written communications.

Oral communication

Oral communication is the process of verbally transmitting information and ideas from one individual or group to another (Donna, 2014). Oral communication can be either formal or informal. Examples of informal communication include:

- Face –to – face communications
- Telephone conversations
- Discussions that take place at business meetings or meetings in public organisations..

Formal types of oral communication include:

- Presentations at business meetings
- Classroom lectures
- Commencement speech given at a graduation ceremony etc.

Essentially however, with advances in technology, new forms of oral communication continue to develop. For example, video phones and video conferences combine audio and video so that workers in distant locations can both see and speak with each other. Other forms of oral communication include: Podcast (audio clips that you can access on the internet) and voiceover internet protocol (VOIP), which allows callers to communicate over the internet and avoid telephone charges (www.education-portal.com).

Advantages of oral communication

Umorem, (2013:9) has identified the following as advantages of oral communication:

1. Oral communication gives immediate feedback.
2. Enhances interpersonal relationship
3. Enlivens the message as gestures made in face to face contact enforces and clarifies the message.

In addition, oral communication is appropriate or advantageous if time is limited and a business matter requires quick resolution, in such a situation, it may be best to have face to face or telephone talk. Furthermore, there is more flexibility in oral communication in which case, one can discuss different aspects of an issue and make decisions more quickly than one can in writing.

More important is the fact that oral communication is most advantageous in handling conflicts in an organization. Also, oral communication promotes employee morale, energy and enthusiasm within a team (Donna, 2014).

Disadvantages of oral communication

1. Oral communication lacks formal record of transaction.
2. Not all categories of audience could be reached orally.
3. If the verbal message is passed from one level of the hierarchy to the next, then some distortions can occur during the process.
4. Lengthy and distant communications cannot be effectively conveyed verbally (Preserve Articles, 2014).
5. Spontaneous responses may not be carefully thought about.

Written Communication

In administration, written communication is the most essential form of communication. Written communication includes any type of communication or message that makes use of the written word. It refers to oral messages or thoughts translated into alphabetic symbols and include hand-written, type-written and any form of the printed word. Examples or types of written communication often used in organizations include; memos, reports, bulletins, job descriptions, employee manual, email, and instant messages (IM). Others include; letters, proposals, telegrams, faxes postcards, advertisement, brochures and news releases.

Essentially, in written communication, Omachonu, (2003:8) asserts that “the level of attainment in written composition often indicates the level of intellectual maturity as well as mental development of the writer”. He maintains that “ability to write good composition is clear evidence of concrete intellectual achievement...” Clearly therefore, effective written communication is characterised by the following features.

Fundamentals of written communication in administration

In administrative communication, certain ingredients are basic when writing. Hambagda, (2000: 123-139) has pointed out the following as the fundamentals of written communication:

1. **Completeness:** a complete message contains all the facts that the reader needs for the reaction desired.
2. **Conciseness:** has to do with the use of few words as possible to give the necessary information or compressed in order to be brief. As Kell and Corts, (1983) quoted in Hambagda (2000:125) have noted:

Most business situations require the manager to work quickly and efficiently. And because managers have to be extremely active, on-the-go people, they prefer short, precise, almost choppy statements that go directly to the heart of the issue.

Concise therefore means expressing much in few words. To achieve conciseness, the writer should always analyse his message to ensure that he includes only essential ideas, avoid unnecessary and omit trite expressions. Make every word work and count for you.

3. **Clarity:** connotes getting the reader to interpret the words and sentences with the same meaning as intended by the sender. To achieve in writing, the writer should choose words that are short, common and direct to the point. Words and sentences should not be vague. As Hambagda, (2000: 127) has rightly pointed out that “it is important to recognise that the reader is likely to be a busy man and does not have the time to run to the dictionary for meanings. Instead, he will guess what the writer means, often incorrectly, or will disregard some or all the message”. Consequently, lack of clarity in administrative communication hampers desired result. Thus, the choice of word should be determined by the writer’s aim, the situation and the level of understanding of the reader.
4. **Consideration:** as an administrator, it is often expedient to put the receiver of your message into consideration in terms of his or her ability to interpret or understand the written message.

In this case, the qualification, profession and general intellectual competence of the receiver of the message are factors to be considered when writing.

5. **Concreteness:** writing concretely means being specific, definite and vivid rather than vague and general. The ideas expressed when the words are put together in sentences become more and more specific as more specific terms are used and are illustrated by concrete and specific details. For example, whenever the communication is based on popular terms capable of being interpreted in different ways, or professional terms that may be strange to the reader, specific details are required to support it. Also, when you make a claim that your reader might disagree, you will need specific details to support it in order to clear his doubt. Furthermore, any statement of opinion needs to be clearly explained and justified beyond reasonable doubt.
6. **Courtesy:** courtesy has to do with good manners; showing consideration for the needs and feelings of the receiver of the message. It means that as an administrator or manager, you are supposed to be polite in your communication. You don't make expressions that irritate, hurt or belittle your readers or colleagues. Another aspect of courtesy is to be quick in responding to mails so that you don't keep someone in suspense.
7. **Correctness:** correctness has to do with an expression that is without error. Thus, it is expected of an administrator to use the correct language when writing. Accurate facts, words and figures should be maintained and other acceptable good writing principles or technicalities should be observed. As Omachonu, (2003) has rightly noted "the merit of a piece of writing is judged based on the writer's successful handling of the writing task as it relates to the target audience, the purpose and the situation.

Having examined the concept of communication at length, it is expedient at this juncture to delve into the concept of administration given that both communication and administration are interdependent.

The Concept, Administration

Essentially, a careful look at available literature reveals that administration as a concept lacks a universally acceptable definition. The different definitions of administration put forward by different authorities seemingly reflect their individual perceptions of the subject matter. It is therefore expedient to examine some of the definitions of administration, at least, to give one an insight even though one cannot pinpoint any of the definitions to have totally captured the connotation of administration. The Encarta Dictionary, (2009) defines administration as "the management of the affairs of a business, organization or institution". This implies that administration is the act of managing both human and material resources of an organization. From another perspective, the Encarta Dictionary views administration in terms of management staff, meaning, "the staff of a business, organization or institution whose task is to manage its affairs". Similarly, Adebayo, (1989) defines administration as the "organization and direction of persons in order to accomplish a specified end". It means that administration involves people and the people ought to be led or directed by a particular person or group of persons to achieve a given goal.

Furthermore, Simon, (1947) cited in Bagaji, (2002:2) defines administration "activities of group's cooperation to accomplish common goals". In like manner, Drucker, (1967) sees administration as "getting things done through others". Gulick and Urwick understand administration in terms of functions captured in an acronym POSDCORB; interpreted as planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting.

From the foregoing, it is clear that an administrator performs several functions including communication which is identical with all the aforementioned functions as captured in the acronym POSDCORB. Understandably, everything an organization does requires communication including setting goals and objectives, making and implementing decisions, motivating staff and measuring results or performance, recruiting and training staff as well as dealing with the external environment in which the organization exists.

In this work however, special attention is given to specific abbreviations, acronyms or jargons that are often used by administrators, especially public administrators in the bid to economize writing

and to be confidential in official (especially written) communications. However, the question of whether or not such administrative jargons have universal connotations is what makes this study significant; as it will acquaint readers (globally) of the existence of such acronyms, their meanings and the extent to which an organization can adopt them.

Abbreviations/Acronyms used in administration

Hambagda, (2000:127) posits that “when communicating with members of a group that share an understanding of certain technical words and phrases, the use of such jargons may be the most effective and efficient way to get the message across”. Thus, in as much as there are many of such administrative abbreviations or jargons used by administrators, the choice of which abbreviation to use per time should depend on the objective, the situation most essentially, the reader of the written communication. Because the reader is expected to respond to the message and his response largely depends on his ability to interpret the content of the message.

The abbreviations and their meaning are:

A.B.C	-	At Back Cover
A/C	-	Account
A.F.C.	-	At Front Cover
Ag.	-	Acting
A.I.E.	-	Authority to Insure Expenditure
A.S.	-	Assistant Secretary
A.S.A.P	-	As Soon As Possible
A.Y.C.	-	At Your Convenience
B.C.	-	Back Cover
B/F	-	Brought Forward
B.O.F.	-	Back of File
B.U.	-	Bring Up
B.U.F.	-	Bring up File
C.B.	-	Confidential Branch
CC	-	Carbon Copy
CCO	-	Chief Clerical Officer
C/F	-	Carried Forward
Cap.	-	Chapter (usually of law)
C/O	-	Care of
Conf.	-	Confidential
Cont.	-	Continued
CSC	-	Civil Service Commission
D.A.V	-	Departmental Adjustment Voucher
D/D	-	Dated
Dept.	-	Department
DPS	-	Deputy Permanent Secretary
DVEAB	-	Department Vote Expenditure Account Book
E.g	-	For Example
Enc.	-	Enclosure
E.O	-	Executive Officer
E.T.A	-	Estimated Time of Arrival
E.T.D	-	Estimated Time of Departure
F.F.A	-	For Further Action
F.N.A	-	For Necessary Action
F.R	-	Full Rate
F&R	-	File and Return
F.U.A	-	For Usual Action
F.Y.C	-	For Your Consideration
G.E.C	-	General Executive Class
G.O	-	General Order
H.O.D. or H of D	-	Head of Department

H.E	-	His Excellency
H.E.O	-	Higher Executive Officer
Hon	-	Honourable
H/W	-	Herewith
I.A.W	-	In Accordance With
I/C	-	In Charge of
I.D.C	-	In Due Course
I.e	-	That is or In other words
I.F.O	-	In Favour of
I.R.O	-	In Respect of
I.V.O	-	In View of
K.I.V	-	Keep in View
L.P.C	-	Last Pay Certificate
L.P.O	-	Local Purchase Order
L.T	-	Letter Telegram
Misc.	-	Miscellaneous
Mylet	-	My Letter
N.a	-	Not applicable
N.A	-	Native Authority
N.a.t	-	Necessary action taken
n.f.a	-	no further action
O/C	-	Officer in Charge
O.K	-	All correct or agreed
O&M	-	Organization and Methods
P.A	-	Put Away or Personal Assistant
Para.	-	Paragraph
P.E.O	-	Principal Executive Officer
Perm Sec.	-	Permanent Secretary
P.T.O	-	Please turn over
P.U	-	Put up (papers or suggestions to and officer)
P.V	-	Payment Voucher
R.V	-	Receipt Voucher
S.A	-	Special Adviser
S.A.S	-	Senior Assistant Secretary

Source: Nigerian Civil Service handbook (2011)

Other Forms of Administrative Writing

Other forms of writing in administration include: minutes, report, notices, memo and circular and letters.

Minutes

In administration, a minute is a written communication, in a mail or file usually in a brief form, from one officer to another. A minute could be a directive, an order, instruction or mere official information from one officer to another directing or telling the receiver, in clear terms, what to do. In this type of minute, the receiver's rank is written and underlined, followed by the message (usually direct to the point) and it ends with signature, rank of the writer and date.

For example, in a letter of application for employment, addressed to the Vice Chancellor of a university, on receiving the letter, the VC can minute to the Registrar thus:

Reg.

The application of Dr. J.J. John as LI is approved.

Convey approval.

Signature (VC)

Date

Above is an example of a minute in day-to-day administrative writings. Note that “LI” in the VC’s minutes above represents “Lecturer I”. It is expected that the Registrar will write to the applicant and inform the VC that action has been taken as directed or instructed. Where necessary, a copy of the appointment letter sent to the applicant can be attached for VC’s sighting and a carbon copy of the appointment letter would be sent to different officials of the university such as the Bursar, Auditor, and Dean/HOD just to mention a few plus a file copy for future reference.

Minutes of Meeting

Minute of meeting is the brief summary or records of what is said or decided at a formal meeting. It can also be defined as the records of the proceedings of a meeting usually prepared by a secretary to be read at the next meeting. The decisions, resolutions and contributions made are usually reported in the third person (Omachonu, 2003). It is important to note that once the minutes of a meeting has been read by the secretary, adopted by the general house after necessary corrections and amendments, and signed by the chairman and secretary; it becomes a legal document that can be tendered in court.

Fundamentals of Minutes of Meeting

1. A minute of meeting should have a heading containing the parties that are meeting, type of meeting (regular or emergency), venue and date.
2. Followed by attendance/apology for absence or absence without apology.
3. Agenda (list of items for discussion)
4. AOB (Any other business)
5. Closing
6. Name and signature of the secretary and Chairman of the meeting.

Report

A report in the context of this work is a written account of a particular matter after thorough investigation or consideration by an appointed person or body. Usually, in administration, whenever there is an issue that requires critical attention for a lasting solution to be proffered, a committee will be set up to achieve such a specific goal. Thus, it could be a conflict resolution committee, a panel or commission of inquiry, appointment and promotion committee, examination committee and so on. Such a committee is to be headed by a chairman and a secretary who records the proceedings or minutes of their meetings.

In most cases, the chairman and secretary to the committee are appointed by the body that set up the committee. In the light of this, Omachonu (2003:66) opines that “membership of a committee should be an odd number preferably. This is to forestall deadlock that may arise from disagreement in the course of their deliberations on especially sensitive matters”. In the end, a report should be written in chapters. It should begin with a heading followed by introduction which should contain preliminary information such as:

- What occasioned the setting up of the committee?
- Who set up the committee and when?
- Members of the committee as appointed.
- Terms of reference (what the committee is to do)
- Mode of operation and the number of times the committee met.

Other qualities of a good report are:

- It should be factual: every report should be based on facts, verified information and valid proofs.
- A report should be clear and easily understandable.
- It should be free from error and duplication
- Should facilitate the decision makers in making the right decision
- Result focused and result oriented
- Well organised and structured
- Ethical reporting style (www.mnestudies.com).

Notice

A notice is a written or printed announcement often displayed on a board or wall for people to read. Some notices are circulated or sent directly to the individuals concerned, informing them of an event that is to take place in future and the need for them to prepare toward the event. A notice should have an address, date, sender, title or heading and the message which must contain date, time and venue of the event that is going to take place with the signature and name /title or rank of the writer (sender).

Example of a notice

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR

1st December, 2014.

To all Lecturers

NOTICE OF MEETING

This is to inform you that there would be an emergency departmental meeting as scheduled below:

Date: 2nd December, 2014.

Time: 10:00 am prompt

Venue: Faculty Boardroom

Agenda: Honorarium

(Signature)
HOD

Memo

Memo which is the short form of memorandum is a written communication like a letter but without the formal address at the beginning that is circulated to people within the same organization or office. Memo should be clear and brief. Memos are usually used to share information, influence decisions and document actions. In a typical organizational setting, memo provides a useful means of communicating work related information, such as giving instructions, announcing a meeting, announcing policy changes, listing job duties, posting of staff, project timetable and offering feedback. In a nut shell, memos are often used to instruct, remind and highlight.

Format of a memo or memorandum

MEMO
To: write name of receiver(s)
From: write your name as (sender or writer)
Date:
Subject: A memo should deal with a subject per time. The subject should be bold or underlined.

Note that the body of the message goes into the space. The message should be brief but clear and care should be taken to make sure the grammar and spelling are correct. Keep the language appropriate for the recipients. For example, if the memo is to colleagues on equal rank, then jargon language is okay. But if you are writing to your superior make sure you are polite and respectful and if it is to a subordinate then, make it clear. Finally, end the memo with your initials (www.businessstraining.com).

Circular

Circulars or fliers are like a formal letter intended for distribution to a large number of people. Many organizations use circulars to enforce policies, invite employees to meetings and even dress codes. In government, circulars can be issued to different ministries, departments and agencies to forward specific details to the central government. For example, in the bid to know the total population of all government employees in the federation, the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Ministry of Labour and Productivity can issue a circular to all government organizations in the federation to that effect. Thus, the letter that is used to circulate any special message to a large member of audiences at the same time is known as circular (www.thebusinesscommunication.com).

Conclusion

From all indications, administration is instrumental to the accomplishment of organizational goals. In the bid to achieve organizational goals, administrators plan, organise, direct, control and report, usually, in a written or documented form. Equally important is communication as the life wire of all organisations. Communication is the vehicle that conveys the plan of the organization to every worker. Communication can be oral or written. However, written communication is the most dominant form of communication in administration. In written administrative communications, memos, letters, circulars, notices, minutes and report are fundamentals. Also, administrators often use specific abbreviations/acronyms to convey their messages which the receivers of such messages are expected to comprehend if the desired response or result must be achieved. An administrator therefore should be a good communicator.

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