

Exploring the strategic potential of internal communication in INGOs¹

By

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ABSTRACT

The role and importance of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) has increased with globalization and the growth of global institutions. Within this changing role, the performance and management of INGOs is more vital than ever. When managed strategically, internal communication is a management function that has the potential to impact the effective functioning of these organizations and their ability to adapt to an uncertain world. This paper examines the theory on internal communication and non-profit management as well as current practices in INGOs to identify the challenges and potential of this area to improve the effectiveness of INGOs.

Introduction

The role and importance of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) has increased with globalization and the growth of global institutions. Not only do INGOs play a

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major role in aid delivery in developing countries, they also serve as the voice of the people in the growing global governance system. Thus they have an increasing impact on the social and economic welfare of people around the world. Within this changing role, the performance and management of INGOs is more vital than ever.

One area which is often overlooked in NGO research is internal communication. When internal communication is managed to facilitate strategic alignment (align internal stakeholders with the organization's strategic intent), it has a direct impact on organizational performance, such as relationships with key stakeholders, financial performance indicators and overall organizational reputation. As such, strategic internal communication can directly impact the ability of an INGO to fulfill their role.

This paper fits within the Governance and Management sub-theme of the fifth Annual ANSER conference. It looks specifically at the need to review the management of internal communication in INGOs given the challenges posed by their changing role and an uncertain world.

Research question

Can current internal communication practices in INGO's be classified as serving a strategic purpose?

Significance

Within the corporate communication domain as well as the NGO (INGO) sector, internal communication has been neglected. Research into internal communication in INGOs is limited, yet internal communication has been identified as critical to successful strategic management.

In order to change current ideas and practices in INGOs, it is first necessary to explore the current knowledge of decision-makers in these organizations and whether they view internal communication as merely the sharing of information or understand its contribution to the overall strategic management of these organizations.

Literature review

This study started with a comprehensive literature review of communication management, non-profit management and strategic management theory to develop a normative framework for strategic internal communication in INGOs. Based on this review, it was determined that to be strategic, internal communication must have:

- **content** centred on the organisation's strategic intent;
- a **purpose** of strategic alignment;
- a **role** in strategy development and implementation;
- a **position** as part of senior management;
- a communicator with the **knowledge** to be strategic; and
- a **process** founded on leadership commitment, a holistic infrastructure and symmetrical communication and dialogue.

It was determined that to be applicable in an INGO, strategic internal communication needs to take into consideration the challenges posed by the INGO's context, form, structure, culture and workforce as well as the communication challenges they face. These include, but are not limited to, an INGO's complex and changing environment, limited resources, multiple stakeholders, focus on subjective values and often ambiguous missions. To address these

challenges, it was found that a postmodern approach to strategic internal communication incorporating an on-going strategizing process across the organisation has the most to offer INGOs within their complex and uncertain environments.

Method

This study adopted a three-phase approach to explore the strategic functioning of internal communication in INGOs:

1. A comprehensive literature review of communication management, non-profit management and strategic management theory to develop a normative framework for strategic internal communication in INGOs.
2. Exploratory, qualitative case studies combining semi-structured interviews and document analysis in a diverse group of 5 INGOs.
3. Comparison of the results from the case studies with the normative framework for strategic internal communication.

Data source and analysis

This study comprised 5 case studies (INGOs) with offices in Johannesburg, South Africa representing different development sectors including education, social enterprise, humanitarian assistance, poverty alleviation and human rights. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with the most senior communicators and analysis of organizational documents, which, depending on availability, included websites, annual reports, organograms, organizational strategies, communication strategies and internal communication strategies.

The data from the case studies was subject to post-coded thematic analysis to identify themes within the data. These were then compared with the normative framework for strategic internal communication developed through the literature review portion of the study to determine if the evidence supported the theory.

Findings

Of the five case studies conducted two had formal internal communication functions, corresponding to the two largest INGOs studies; one had internal communication responsibilities assigned to the general communication function; and two had no assigned internal communication responsibilities at all. While the senior communicators in the two case studies with formal internal communication functions were found to have strategic knowledge, in all other regards internal communications in all five case studies were not found to function strategically.

The five case studies all exhibited evidence of many of the challenges identified in the literature that INGOs face. These challenges included changing environments, competing demands from multiple stakeholders, limited resources and difficulty remaining true to their values. None of the case studies showed evidence of adopting a post-modern approach to strategic management or strategic internal communication to address these challenges. However, the potential remains for strategic internal communication, particularly with a post-modern approach, to assist an INGO in addressing many of the challenges they face in an uncertain world and improve their overall performance.

Implications

This study contributes to the academic research on internal communication by synthesizing the theory on strategic communication, strategic management, and internal communication and presenting a normative ideal for strategic internal communication. It applies this theory to the INGO context to provide additional support to the internal communication theory and advance the academic field of non-profit management. By establishing that strategic internal communication has potential within INGOs, it sets the stage for further research in this area.

Conclusions

This study found that, overall, internal communication does not function strategically in INGOs. This means that there is a high-potential for poor strategic alignment within the organisation. However, INGOs were found to face a variety of challenges including complex and changing environments, multiple stakeholders and ambiguous missions. The presence of these challenges suggests that the implementation of strategic internal communication, particularly with a post-modern approach, has significant potential to improve the functioning of these organizations.

In an uncertain world where governance and power are taking on increasingly global aspects, INGOs, as the vehicles through which the voices of the poor, the vulnerable and the local can reach the global stage, are ever more important. Therefore, their effective management is of ever more vital importance. As such, this study suggests that strategic internal communication is an area where increased focus can have significant impact on the

organisational performance of INGOs. By exploring this management area in more detail, INGOs can take one more step towards achieving the change they want to see in the world.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Jessica Hume completed her MPhil (Communication Management) dissertation, *cum laude*, at the University of Pretoria, South Africa in 2011. During the completion of her degree, she worked in communications with international non-governmental organization CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. Jessica is currently based in Toronto, Canada and continues to work in communication with non-profit organizations.

Anné Leonard is a lecturer in the Division Communication Management at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. She supervised the completion of Jessica's dissertation.