

# COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL SERVICE

**AFINOTAN, L. A.**

*Department of Political Science and Public Administration*

*Joseph Ayo Babalola University Ikeji-Arakeji.*

E-mail: andyafinotan@yahoo.com

## **ABSTRACT**

*The efficiency and effectiveness as well as the ultimate success of any organization is often dependent on how well established the channels of communications between the units that make-up the organization are, and how well the organization communicates with its environment and target audience. Making use of library research methodology, this work examined the communication strategies within the Nigerian Civil Service and how effective this has been in the striving to attain the goals of the establishment. The paper reveals that in order to be effective, communication must flow in all directions. A well considered modification of the Official Secret Acts 1982, will improve communication between government and people. It was concluded that granting some freedom of communication to civil servants within the system would reduce bureaucratic red-tape, the long pipeline syndrome, and enhance efficiency in the public service.*

**Keywords:** *Organization, message, feedback, communication channels, bureaucratic red-tape.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is a generally accepted belief in administrative circles that executives acquire official authority for a specific grant of power from a higher office, relevant to their area of responsibility. And also that obedience to instructions and directives are assured through the forces of command and discipline (McCurdy, 1977). This may well be so, at least in theory. But in practice, authoritative instructions are always attached to a communication to do this or not to do that. If the communication channels are clogged, snarled or ill-adjusted, and the meaning of the order never received or never understood, then according to Chester Bernard as quoted in McCurdy (1977), authority did not exist. In practice, all authority depends on the willingness of sub-ordinates to accept and implement orders from their superiors. If the communication from superiors to their sub-ordinates was heard, but ignored, then authority did not exist.

Sub-ordinates ignore communiqués Civil Service where the purpose is legitimized through the co-operation of its members, authority depends entirely upon an effective system of communication (McCurdy, 1977).

It must not be assumed that since all human beings communicate in one form or the other, communication is necessarily effective in all cases. Communications in an office are a very vital function which must be provided for by careful analysis of needs and a careful choice of the correct equipments to meet those needs (Mills et al, 1986). Basic qualifications are needed to communicate effectively. They are, among other things an analytical mind, logical thought processes and a command of words and skill in manipulating language structure (Shaw, 1977).

This study therefore is concerned with an analysis of the means and methods of effective communication strategies in the Nigerian Civil Service.

## **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

If the term effective communication is to be rightly understood and situated within its utility context as a relationship between individuals, groups and peoples, it must be broadly defined. It is basically the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another. It is the channel for passing, not only information, but also understanding. Information that has been passed, but not understood and therefore implies not executed that effective communication has not taken place. In this perspective, communication is seen as an interaction between the minds of at least two people, the sender and the receiver.

The process involves the production, perception and understanding of information consisting of ideas, facts and emotions, interchanged between two or more persons. The sender or communicator, conceives of an idea, chooses a suitable channel which may be verbal or non verbal and pushes it out to the desired receiver, through his chosen channel. The receiver, if tuned to the right channel gets the message, gives it his own understanding and makes use of it (Eboh, 1986). Effective communication therefore involves.

- a) Clear articulation of an idea or message.
- b) Accurate conception of the idea
- c) Choice of the right channel
- d) Correct understanding of the information
- e) Correct utilization of the information and a feed back.

Effective communication must therefore be understood as; the meeting of minds between the sender and the receiver, on the particular information being transmitted. Every communication always has a goal, a purpose. It is only when the purpose is achieved that communication can be regarded as effective. Some of the aims of communication in an organization are:

- a) To establish and disseminate the goals of the establishment
- b) To develop plans for their attainment

- c) To organize human and other resources in the most effective and efficient way.
- d) To select, develop and appraise members of the organization
- e) To lead, direct, motivate and create a climate in which people can be free to make their contributions (Eboh, 1986).

No organization can achieve its objectives without effective communication. It is therefore a paramount responsibility for the management of any establishment to ensure that effective communication is the bedrock of interaction between people within the given system. But for there to be effective communication, certain basic qualifications are *sine qua non* to the employee. They are:

- a) An analytical mind.
- b) Logical thought processes or the ability to reason logically
- c) A command of words and skills in manipulating the language.
- d) An appreciably wide vocabulary, which helps one to know what one is talking or writing about (Shaw, 1977).

Since effective communication is about a meeting of minds, it is much better and easier between people who are friendly towards each other. That is why some organizations take deliberate measures to establish personal relationships between members of their staff, their suppliers, customers and other regular contacts. In some organizations, informal relations on first name basis are encouraged among members of staff. In addition, when speaking or writing, it is necessary for the communicator to have some appreciation of what the addressee already knows. When a lawyer writes to another lawyer, he can use legal language and be sure that he will be understood. But when he writes to a client, he will have to use ordinary language if he wishes to be understood (Mills et al, 1986). If the civil servant for instance, in writing to a layman on the street begins his message

with “*I am directed...*”, the layman gets a different impression altogether. Yet another civil servant will readily understand him. The communicator has a duty to make himself understood. It is useless to blame the recipient of a communication if he does not understand it (Mills et al, 1986). In order to communicate and understand what is communicated effectively, one must learn the technical language of the relevant profession.

## **THE COMMUNICATION MODEL**

Our preferred conceptual framework for analysis is of this problematic is the Communication Model. The communication model, as a relatively new approach to the study of government and politics, focuses on communication processes as the central aspect of politics. According to this approach, the essential function of government and politics is to receive and process the messages or information, decide on what actions to be taken, and then steer and coordinate human efforts towards the attainment of selected goals. The major output is then the decision. The main emphasis of this approach is on the mechanism of how decisions are made, rather than on the causes or effects of such decisions.

One of the foremost proponents of this approach is Karl Deutsch, and his contribution was set out in his work titled “the nerves of Government”. For Karl Deutsch, power is neither the essence nor the centre of politics. The essence of politics is the dependable coordination of human efforts for the attainment of the goals of society. Deutsch adapted the structure and terminologies of electrical engineering to an understanding of the political process, which he sees as a network of communication channels. The data in the messages or information are processed in such a way that the decision centre drawing on its memories (example given are, files, or other records of its past decision) and its values (preferences for certain outcomes rather than others), can take a decision which is then communicated to the effectors, which in turn translate the communicated decisions into actions. The processes are again

linked by feedback loops. All organizations, including the State have feed back mechanisms which may allow them to change and adapt in response to information.

The General Communications Model comprises seven basic elements which are as follows:

1. The originator or sender of the communication. For effective communication, this source must be credible, and recognized by the receiver to be so.
2. The message in the communication must be put in a form that is comprehensible to the recipient. This process which is called encoding may take a written or unwritten form.
3. The channel chosen for transmitting the message or information from the sender to the receiver must be appropriate. This could be written, verbal or non-verbal sign language, or a combination of two or more channels, or even all.
4. The decoding process, which involves how the recipient perceives the encoded information and interprets it. What meaning the recipient attaches to the transmitted information, and the basic factors such as status or gender that permits the decoding and encoding process to achieve the desired congruence?
5. The nature and expectations of the receiving individual group or audience. Where a communication's message conflicts with the interest or perception of the recipient, it may be ignored or rejected.
6. The feedback, which helps the sender to assess the effectiveness or otherwise of his communication. It also offers the sender the opportunity for response through the quality and nature of the feedback.
7. Is Noise. This refers to any form of disturbance that can

interfere with the transmission of the message or information. Noise can occur at any point in the communication process (Agagu, 1999)

This approach has been criticized for being essentially an engineering approach modeled on the performance of machines rather than of human beings. It fails to deal adequately with purely human responses such as irrational, fortuitous or random behaviour, as well as the means of human thought processes, the psychological consequences of worldviews and value systems, the subtleties of political leadership and the nebulous quality of many political decisions.

It is also argued that the approach of Karl Deutsch appears to be too deterministic, and fails to allow for the influences of political change in the development process. Furthermore, the indiscriminate borrowing of terminologies from cybernetics and other extra-political science disciplines tends to confuse rather than clarify the approach.

In spite of these criticisms, however, the communications model continues to demonstrate its versatility and relevance as a tool of analysis in political science and general administration, including public administration. It is most germane to our current problematic, and offers us the best tool of analysis of the communication strategies in the Nigerian Civil Service.

#### **PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION FLOW IN AN ORGANIZATION**

According to Eboh (1986), the flow of communication in an organization can be upward, downward or cross-wise. This means that communication could be uni-directional (one way) or bi-directional (two-way). Bi-directional or two-way communication is superior to uni-directional or one-way communication. This is basically because in two-way communication, the receiver has an opportunity to seek clarification for what is not understood, or to improve his understanding of the

message. This opportunity is non-existent in a one-way flow of communication. If for instance, an employee does not understand information passed to him, and cannot ask for clarification, then chances are that he cannot carry out effectively what is required of him.

Upward communication is a communication that emanates from sub-ordinates and then moves upward through the hierarchy of the organization. The advantage of this is that it allows top management to know what is happening low down in the hierarchy. But the practicability of this type of information flow depends on whether or not the top hierarchy provides the enabling environment where the sub-ordinates need have no fear of possible victimization for being too bold or outspoken. This type of communication is a necessary feed back format for the higher executives and helps them to have proper checks and balances.

Downward communication flows from superiors to sub-ordinates. The problem with this management style is that, it is authoritarian, and subordinates may view it as management by intimidation, and simply carryout directives without initiative, especially if they are not given a chance to comment. This management style which tends to treat sub-ordinates as robots is in most cases not good for the organization.

Cross-wise communication is a communication pattern that flows horizontally between people on the same level or diagonally between people at different levels, in different sections or an organization. Crosswise communication speeds-up the flow of information and improves understanding, because it cuts across the chain of command to by-pass the slow process of information from one department to another.

In the civil service in Nigeria, these three patterns of information flow are used in combination because none of them can be successful in isolation. Both upward and downward communication must be employed together in order to achieve a two-way communication flow. When the multi-directional



crosswise communication is added to this, then effective communication is achieved within the organization.

## **COMMUNICATION CHANNELS WITHIN THE CIVIL SERVICE IN NIGERIA**

The Nigerian Civil Service has many channels through which it communicates with not only its members but also members of the public. Some of these are; written, oral, or non-verbal channels. Very often, the channels that are used within the service, depends on:

- 1) What is to be communicated?
- 2) Who is doing the communicating?
- 3) At who is the communication targeted.
- 4) What is the feed back

The wrong channel would naturally result in the target audience missing the message or information altogether (Eboh, 1986).

### **Written Channels**

In the Nigerian Civil Service, this is the most frequently and intensively used communication strategy. Some of the written channels often used in the civil service are:

**Memorandum:** A memorandum is a short statement, report or note, used daily in the civil service within and outside departments. It could be formal or informal, but its main characteristics is that it is relatively short by comparison to reports for instance. Often referred to as memo, it is written on pre-printed memo forms showing who the message is from, and to whom it is being addressed. It is a relatively fast and easy way to communicate in the service. One shortcoming however is that, on account of its shortness, it does not give a full exposition of the matter under consideration (Eboh, 1986).

**Minutes:** Minutes are views, opinions, advice, information or directives expressed in writing during the course of day-to-day work

in the office. They are usually enclosed in paper jackets known as files. Each file bears a reference number by which it is easily identified. A minute is usually much shorter than a memorandum. While a minute in normal circumstances should not exceed five pages, a memorandum can be much longer. A minute is more informal than a memorandum, both in language and in style. Whereas a minute is addressed to a particular person, a memorandum is usually meant to be studied and considered by as many people as are concerned or interested in the subject. For these reason, abbreviations are often used in minutes, and constitute the normal short hand in minutes writing, they are considered improper in memo writing (Adebayo, 1981).

**Reports:** Reports are official written accounts of any matter, which are usually written after analysis or investigations have been concluded on the subject matter. Unlike memoranda reports are usually very long and detailed. They are meant to provide the reader with a complete analysis of the matter under review. Reports could be written on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis depending on the requirement of the department concerned, and the issue at stake. One feature of a report is that which also constitute its main weakness. And that is that; the bigger the report, the better executives think of it. But the bigger it is, the less chance there is of its being read. Civil service departments are almost like waste paper bins – there are masses of files very few people have knowledge of; reports people don't read. The correct information is in there, but it is disguised and people don't have time to dig it out (Shaw, 1977).

**Press Releases:** This is a method used by government departments to inform the public about what it wants the public to know. The information is usually typed or printed and distributed to the public. However, government officials hope that the press would reprint or broadcast the released information to give it wider publicity (Eboh, 1986).

**Press Conference:** In a press conference, public officials face the press and give out written statements read to the press by an official, who also fields questions from the press. The President or Governor and many other high officials, use this method to release information on important topics. It is an effective communication strategy because it provides immediate feedback in the form of questions asked by reporters. Such questions tend to clear away any misunderstanding of the message communicated.

**Executive Orders:** There are directives issued by the President or Governor directly, or by others, in their names. They communicate desired actions to those concerned. Executive orders usually have the force of law, and even after they have been announced orally, they are normally printed and distributed.

**Gazettes:** Gazettes are official government publications aimed at informing the public about government decisions. It includes all kinds of information about various aspects of government activity. Most often, government decisions do not take effect until they are published in a Gazette. The gazette is published weekly, and is widely distributed within and outside the civil service.

**Letters:** Letter writing is a normal feature of bureaucratic activity in the service. It could be to people within or outside the service. If the subject matter concerns many people, it is presented as a “circular” letter written and distributed to all concerned.

**Pamphlets:** Pamphlets are printed publications without covers, concerning any subject or topic, and are usually distributed to everyone who might be interested. They are fast and cheap ways to communicate with interested parties.

**Handbooks:** These are short reference books that contain information on particular subjects. Any government office can publish handbooks explaining any aspect of its activity. Such publications are very useful to people who have to deal with the particular government agency. They help to reduce the volume of direct enquiries by the public.

**Bulletin Boards:** There are boards upon which notices are pasted informing people on various matters. They are always conspicuously displayed. It devolves on the public to read such notices and be informed about government policy and activity.

**Circulars:** There are short written messages intended for wide circulation. They are regularly used within the civil service as a means of communication to civil servants. Circulars always show from who they emanate and to whom they addressed.

**Petition:** This is a special appeal directed formally to an ultimate authority, for special consideration on a matter affecting a civil servant. There is usually a definite laid down procedure for sending petitions. If an officer believes that he has been wronged, he must in following due process, take the matter up with his immediate superior. If he is not satisfied by the solution proffered by his immediate superior, then he could submit a formal petition to the Head of Government. Such a petition must be routed through his immediate superior and Head of his Ministry – the Permanent Secretary. If the petition deals with appointments, promotion, transfer or discipline, it should be addressed to the Secretary to the Federal or State Public Service Commission as the case may be. If it deals with conditions of service; it is address to the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Establishments. Normally a petition should end with a short summary of the redress being sought.

**Newsletters:** Newsletters usually contain information that are of interest only to a particular group. The newsletter of any government agency is meant principally for the information and entertainment of members of the particular agency. They may contain information on transfers, promotion, meetings seminars and so on. Social news is often also included.

On the whole, written channels of communication are often preferred by civil servants because they provide a retrievable record of what has been communicated. This reduces the chances of

someone claiming that a particular message did not exist. The problem with written communication strategy however is that, it creates a lot of paper work. Civil servants often complain of being weighed down by a mass of paper work, leaving them little time to act on them. Written channels can also cause confusion when the message is unclear. Unclear messages lead to more paper work in an attempt to clarify things (Eboh, 1986).

### **Oral Channels**

The most effective communication is the face to face communication between interested persons in which process, speech is accompanied by gesture and facial expressions. It can then be perceived immediately whether or not, what is being communicated has been understood. It also permits further explanations to be given, and the right words chosen to express the desired concept.

Often the quickest and best way to ensure co-operation is to discuss the matter through direct conversation with the persons involved. Most often, oral communication precedes a written communication on the subject previously discussed. This could be formal or informal. Instructions given by a boss to a subordinate orally may be considered formal if it is official. But oral conversations may also be unofficial, which makes it informal. (Mills et al, 1986).

One of the most important problems of oral communication is the absence of a record or evidence of it. It can be easily denied by either party, even when it is tape-recorded. No record of oral communication is normally kept for later reference. In spite of this, it is a very important communication strategy in the Civil Service. In the service, there are various forms of oral communication. They could take the form of meetings, seminars, public lectures or telephone discussions.

**Meeting:** Regular meetings are essential for the smooth running of any organization including the Civil Service. Meetings could be daily, weekly or monthly depending on the requirements of each

department. Meetings allow members of staff to contribute to decision-making, and given them an opportunity to air their views. Heads of sections or department often use the opportunity provided by meetings to inform the staff of new policies and procedures or to get their comments on any issue.

**Seminars:** Seminars are meetings that are organized around a specific topic. It is usually done to explain particular issues, subjects or topics. Experts in the relevant areas are invited to present papers on different aspects of the subject to participants. At the end of each paper, discussions are held to clarify any cloudy points.

**Telephone Discussions:** These are very important means of oral communication in the Civil Service. It is relatively cheap and saves time for traveling and movement for face to face communication. Now with the coming of the GSM in Nigeria, telephone communication has assumed greater importance and utility in the civil service.

### **Non-verbal Communication**

In order to communicate with each other, civil servants do not always need to depend on the written or spoken word. A look, facial expression or gesture often communicate more than words could express. In the civil service, like most organizations, a lot of non-verbal communication goes on daily. This can happen in face to face conversation, or even over the phone. The tone of the voice during verbal communication often tell more than what was spoken. Hesitation before answering questions often indicates much.

Very often, the non-verbal communication employed by the civil servants is what most exasperate and annoy outsiders. The way one is looked at or even ignored when one enters an office tell much about whether such a person is welcome or not. The manner in which one's question or greeting is answered, often tells a story – sometimes more eloquently than words.

## **COMMUNICATION BARRIERS WITHIN THE CIVIL SERVICE**

Before discussing the communication barriers, it is pertinent to talk about the preferred communication strategy in the Nigerian Civil Service. Most civil servants prefer that one puts whatever he wishes to say in writing. Written channels are generally the most preferred in the service. This is because, generally, every employee wishes to have and keep a written record of communication, so that the sender cannot later deny the message. Written records also protects the receiver, because he can produce evidence of the message when disagreements later arise. It is however pertinent to point out that all the methods of communication are in the final analysis used in the civil service because they are mutually reinforcing.

The basic barriers to effective communication in the civil service may be classified into two broad categories. Those barriers that have to do with the person, and those that concern the service itself as an institution. The personal barriers are further classifiable into the psychological, the physical and the semantic.

The psychological barriers concern the emotional and other personality characteristics of the sender or recipient of information being communicated. Emotional disturbances concerning such private feelings of anger, love hatred and such other emotional conditions that may lead to disturbances in the mental state of the individual. All of these could cause a message to be inadequately sent or poorly received.

Physical barriers concern issues relating to physical and social distance between the sender and the recipient. Physical distance could prevent communication if the recipient is at a distance out of the sight and physical reach of the recipient, and this could not be bridged by telephone, telegram, letters, electronic mail or mass media. One cannot communicate with another who cannot be reached.

Social distance has to do with the social class and status of the persons who need to communicate. If the person, owing to his

being in a much lower class, finds it difficult to say what he really thinks or wishes to communicate, then this will hinder a proper interaction. On the other hand, a person in the higher social class will tend to give only commands to the other party. In the final analysis, social distance becomes a barrier to normal relationship between the sender and recipient of communication, as none of the parties understands the premises of the other.

Semantic barriers to effective communication has to do with understanding the meaning of words used in the process of interaction. When people try to communicate orally or in writing, they use words and symbols which may convey different conceptions and meanings to different people. If the intended meaning of a word is not conveyed properly to the recipient, a communication breakdown results. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that most words have more than one meaning. Sometimes it is difficult for the receiver of the message to decipher which meaning ascribable to a word is intended by the sender. It is not always the case that the context within which a word is used, will serve as clarification.

There are official barriers to effective communication created by the civil service itself. These have to do with civil service rules and regulations, the biggest of these being the Oath of Secrecy. It is a basic requirement that every public official subscribes to the Oath of Secrecy, which is signed and carefully preserved. What constitutes a breach of the official secret acts is so widely defined that it cover any kind of information given out without official permission. No civil servant wishes to inadvertently disclose information that may be covered by the official secret acts.

As a result, civil servants have to seek permission before they can communicate any information to a person who needs it. This slows down the communication process and in several instances frustrates it altogether. Civil servants are also prohibited from publishing in the mass media or speaking in public on matters of political or administrative import. They are on tap, not on top; to be seen, not to be heard.



This makes the civil servant circumspect in choosing his words in public or even refuse to hold discussion in public for fear that he might breach the rules. These barriers to communication created by the government has made it very difficult to receive communication on civil service or government affairs. Any person who has attempted to collect data from a government office can attest to this fact. Consequently, only very few people know anything about what government is doing, and thus the mass of valuable information collected by government on various subjects lie unused.

## CONCLUSION

In order to improve communication within the civil service, it is necessary to remove or modify some of the institutional barriers within the civil service. First, the Oath of Secrecy as it stands today is much too restrictive. Although official secret acts are a necessity, the problem here remains the fact that it is too all-embracing. Things that should not be secret have been made so by this act. A well considered modification of the official Secret Acts 1982, will improve communication from government to the people and the people to government.

A list of those kinds of information that should not be revealed should be made available to the public. The Oath should then only be binding on the listed items. Any other matter, not covered by the list should be freely revealed. Such a modification will speed up the flow of information because civil servants will then be free to uncover what is not listed as official secret.

Second, is the need to reduce the severity of the rule prohibiting civil servants from making public statements. When a dedicated civil servant, working within the system to improve it, meets with frustration, he may be justified in going public with his case. Constructive criticisms are fair criticisms which must be allowed in a responsible organization. If the civil service is to operate at a desirable level of efficiency, it is important that communication within the service must be effective, not only in

some ministries like the Presidency, or the governor's office, but throughout the service. And for communication to be effective, it must flow in all directions. When this is facilitated through granting some level of freedom of communication to civil servants within the system, bureaucratic red-tape and the long pipeline syndrome will be reduced, and efficiency enhanced in the civil service.

## REFERENCES

- AAPAM (1986)** *The ecology of public administration and management in Africa*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT. Ltd.
- Adebayo, A. (1981)** *Principles and practice of administration in Nigeria*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Agagu, A. A. (1999)** *Theory and practice of public administration*. Ado-Ekiti: Department of Political Science, University of Ado-Ekiti.
- Eboh, C. K. (1986)** Communication in the public service. In Ola R.F. (ed) *Introduction to Nigeria public administration*. Benin City: Ambik Press.
- Hackett, P. (1979)** *Success in management: Personnel*. London: John Murray Publishers Ltd.
- Mc Curdy, H. (1977)** *Public administration: A synthesis*. Menlo Park, Oslo: Cummings Publishing Company.
- Mills, G. et al (1986)** *Modern office management*. London: Pitman Publishing.
- Ray, S.N. (2006)** *Modern comparative politics: Approaches, methods and issues*. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India Private Limited.
- Shaw, J. (1977)** *Secretarial management: A guide to effective use of staff*. London: Macdonald and Evans Ltd.