

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PATTERN IN TQM MANUFACTURING ORGANIZATIONS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Organizations need to perform; productivity need to be improved and organizations' activities need to be effective. Therefore, the need for quality improvements are crucial in both manufacturing and service sectors. The main purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of internal communication patterns in TQM implementation in Malaysia manufacturing organizations. This study was done using qualitative in-depth interview method. This is because open ended questions in interviews enable informants to describe their own answers. This qualitative methodological approach refers to the "systematic process analysis". The study had been carried out in five manufacturing organizations originating from three different continents; two Malaysian local organizations, two eastern and one western organization, and all of them located in Malaysia. In selecting the informants, the study adopts a judgment type of purposive sampling techniques. Results show that the most preferable and reliable medium of communication between superiors and subordinates is still face-to-face meetings although we are in the era of IR4.0. While telephones are popular among the administration staffs. The most preferable forms of communication is the formal internal-operational communication without denying that informal internal-operational communication is also important.*

Keywords: *Internal communication, Organization, TQM*

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INTRODUCTION

Total quality management is a process and management of interaction and integration among a system and employees of different departments. These processes have effects on the organization performance (Taib, Mohammed, Iteng and Lazim, 2018). Top management developed the overall quality culture, but it's up to all employees to do their part. This paper aims to provide an analysis of internal communication pattern in Malaysia manufacturing organizations in implementing Total Quality Management (TQM).

Productivity improvement activities are no doubt extremely important especially in an environment of intense global competition (Kirkham, 2014). The need for quality improvement continues unabated in both manufacturing and service sectors. In Malaysia, manufacturing sector

remains challenging for industry players with strong competitive pressures especially from other developing industrial countries in terms of product quality, production, and cost and we are of the opinion that they are to remain competitive in the foreseeable future. Malaysia has also taken itself the challenge of integrating with the IR4.0 technologies and attaining the status of a developed nation as soon as possible. Therefore, TQM as a philosophy of management including in manufacturing organizations in Malaysia, provides an interesting and important area for empirical study on the pattern of internal communications so that it can contribute to enhance the success of the initiatives.

TQM is considered to be one of the most important and widely implemented management system used to gain sustainable competitive advantage and a method of achieving quality recognition at the global level (Arslan, 2019). Besides the improvement method on the hard factors of TQM such as benchmarking, quality control tools, cost of quality, documentations, supplier management, customer management, self-assessment and quality processes (Abdullah & Tari, 2018), there are also the soft elements of TQM that are crucial to be enhanced in order to bind together the hard factors so that everything in the process will run smoothly (Georgiev & Ohtaki, 2019; Nofal, Omair and Zairi, 2005). Moreover, Ockland (2000) and Yan (2019) stated that, the soft quality elements are rated as highly important in terms of criticality in TQM implementation phase. The importance of these soft elements also has been stated by Padhi (2005), who suggested that in order to be successful in implementing TQM, an organization must concentrate on the eight soft quality elements such as integrity, ethics, trust, training, teamwork, leadership, recognition and communication.

Based on the situations, it is clear that one of the ways to improve the success of TQM implementation without adding so much cost is by improving their practice of internal communication. The absence of effective internal communication may lead to lack of involvement, commitment and loyalty among staff (Arunachalam & Palanichamy, 2017; Sewestianiuk & Voitovici, 2013; Zulhamri & Antony, 2012). These factors such as commitment, involvement and loyalty are among the critical success factors of TQM implementation that should not be taken for granted. As Mishra, Boynton & Mishra (2014) stated that internal communication will gradually increase employees' trust and commitment, which will lead to employees' engagement, and this is very important in successfully implementing TQM (Faisal Talib Zillur Rahman, 2015; Jamal Abdul Nasir Shaari, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature of organizational strategy, communication is well known as a functional mechanism of coordination (Suzuki et. al, 2019; Srikanth & Puranam, 2011). This means that people communicate with each other in a functional setting, where they practice the communication strategies either it is formal and informal, planned or unplanned. If it is a planned communication, usually there are some guidelines that tell the employees how they are supposed to act and communicate and the constraints that tell them how they are not to act and communicate. Organizations also provide some resources or means for communication through face-to-face and mediated. All these will create a network or chain of communication or what the scholars called as communication pattern and its direction and contents are depends on the hierarchical architecture of an organization, issues of status, power, rank and prerequisite often shadow the form of communication and its flow (Silburyte, 2004; Sommerfeldt et. al, 2019).

Besides, employees also form informal communication networks usually to compensate the weaknesses of formal networks (Mumby, 2011). Since many studies indicate that improvement in communication can mobilize the ambient functioning of an organization and it has become prominence topic to human resource and organizational studies, a careful design of communication pattern should be crafted for a broader usage in organizational management such as TQM.

In discussing the role of internal communication, Zerfass & Volk (2020) pointed out that, internal communication is crucial for both organizational success and for their day-to-day existence. According to them, this is because internal communication can engage employees' intellectuality and creativity to produce value. As Quirke, 2008; Kennan & Hazleton, 2006 mentioned, the role of internal communication is to illuminate the connection between different pieces of information and its job is to provide employees with the information they need to do their job.

Te'eni, (2001), emphasizes three constructs of organizational communication processes: goal-based communication strategies, message form and communication medium. The researchers seek to balance cognitive and social communication strategies and to combine new and old measures of message form (organization, formality and size). The results of the study reveal that, people will prefer different combinations of strategies, media and messages when they are engaged in strategic rather than operational communication. The recommendation made were the theories of organizational communication must be re-evaluated in order to understand the new and complex communication behavior in today's organizations. These findings are similar to Kramer et. al (2018) who mentioned that employees who were concerned about combination of strategies used such as relationships, organizational norms, image and demonstrating technology use and appropriate professional-personal life balance.

Another issue of internal communication was studied by Quinn & Hargie (2004) used a triangulation approach encompassed structured interviews. They adopted the international communication audit questionnaires and a critical incident approach to study the issues of internal communications at Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). The result of the interview provided seven categories in terms of how people felt about communication in their sub-division. Among others are, perceived as open to new ideas, willing to share information, able to clarify expectations and able to co-ordinate work. Formal channels as meetings and briefing were perceived as an administrative tool and the majority indicated problems in communicating. A little difference found by Worley & Doolen, (2006) on the similar internal communication issue. They found that moderate support for communication activities within organization towards lean manufacturing implementation making a positive impact on communication, primarily which involved communication lines and the management. They investigated two specific variables: management support and communication within the organization. Additionally, their findings also showed that the majority practice poor communication (64.6 percent) which involved communications between departments and communication necessary to facilitate material flow through the factory. They also found strong evidence to prove that the dissemination of information to all employees about lean manufacturing did not occur except among the management teams. Meaning, the workers only received work instructions of what to do without knowing the main purpose of doing it. Despite that, Naknoi (2012) in Thailand, studied about the organizational communication pattern at Thaksin University. The study found out that the majority of the respondents agreed that the executives had provided clear information and they

also agreed that executives should improve public relations through media and declare any problems occurring in any changes made to all members of staff. With regard to increased motivation and confidence of workers, supervisors in each department should hold more discussions. This finding was supported by Ewing et. al (2019) who had interviewed 27 senior level internal communication practitioners working in global companies. They claimed that internal social media are able to engage employees, providing fast response especially in explaining policies and training. They believed that social medias as an internal communication medium are becoming a future trend and evolving.

On the other hand, TQM has been so popular across industries until many previous studies mentioned that TQM rank high on the management agenda in the effort of businesses to make more profit, improve product quality, increase customers as well as employees' satisfaction and cost reduction (Sahoo, 2020; Shafiq et. al, 2019; Koilakuntla, 2012). Brun (2011) also asserts that TQM not only promotes the performance of all departments but also joins and integrate them to achieve the objectives of the organization. Long before that, Dawabsheh et. al (2019) have stated the proper implementation of TQM could be a powerful vehicle where companies are able to achieve excellence in business performance. Therefore, many organizations in manufacturing and services have devoted considerable attention to the implementation of TQM. However, they also claimed companies that have not achieved TQM potential benefits have begun abandoning this practice. The key principle mentioned for the failure was the lack of understanding of what TQM means for each unique organization and how to implement it effectively created skepticism on the effectiveness of TQM.

METHODS

This study applies a qualitative in-depth interview method. This approach has been used by many organizational communication researchers such as Applebaum et. al (2019) and Worley & Doolen (2006) and study on internal communication by Way & Tracey (2012) and Quinn & Hargie (2004), as well as scholars in management studies such as Abdullah, et. al (2019) and Jones, et. al (2019). The strength of qualitative research is that the meanings that lies in an identified group of informants or respondents can be expressed as fully and truthfully as possible. This is because open ended questions in interviews enable informants to describe their answers from their point of view. This qualitative methodological approach refers to the "systematic process analysis" which aims to explore the pattern of phenomena under study (Hall, 2003). The dynamic of the interview process is it allows informants to discuss their experiences and opinions on the research area themselves while researcher only have minimal control through the interview questions to cater the research objectives. Thus, the choice of qualitative research design for this study which a part of it is to see the pattern of internal communication is well justified (Alpenberg & Scarbrough, 2016).

The study was carried out in five manufacturing companies from three different continents; two Malaysian local organizations, two eastern and one western organization, all of whom are located in Malaysia. In selecting the informants of the research, this study adopts a judgment type of purposive sampling techniques. Judgment type of sampling involves the choice of subjects who are in the best position to provide information that is required for the research.

Before each of the interview sessions, a brief introduction was made to explain the purpose of the study and a simple definition of internal communication pattern and practice was given. This was done to ensure the uniform understanding of the subject matter. This study used a set of semi-structured interviews which asked the informants to describe the process of sharing of information pertaining to TQM implementations to their subordinates. The pattern of internal communication of their organization for the purpose of TQM implementation were then divided into three forms: formal-internal operational communication, informal-internal operational communication and personal communication. Whereas, mediums of communication were divided into two categories: face-to-face communication and mediated communication. Therefore, the semi structured questions were formed to get information on mediums and practice of communication in six critical success factors of TQM which are leadership, commitment, teamwork, involvement, training and education, and, motivation and reward. The interview data were then coded based on qualitative content analysis procedure by Powell and Renner (2003).

RESULTS

The study reveal that formal-internal operational communication were the most used forms of communication for all six critical success factors of TQM mentioned earlier. However, informal-internal operational communication also had been found as an important element in enhancing commitment, involvement and motivation of their subordinates in the process of TQM implementation. Personal communication only appears twice throughout the analysis for the purpose of building teamwork and training and education in local manufacturing organizations. In terms of medium of communications, most of their daily internal activities regarding TQM were using face-to-face communications such as formal meetings, discussions and morning prayers or assembly. However, mediated communication such as telephones and emails were highly used among the management staffs. Below are the summary descriptions of patterns of communication in all the manufacturing organizations based on continents.

Table 1: Forms and mediums of communications in TQM Manufacturing organizations in Malaysia

Organizations	Form of communications	Activities	Medium of communications
Local	Formal internal-operational communication	Formal meetings	Face-to-face
		Weekly briefings	Phones
Eastern	Formal internal-operational communication	On-job trainings	E-mails
		Morning prayers	Intercom
	Informal internal-operational communication	Discussions	Face-to-face
		Personal communication	Phones
Eastern	Formal internal-operational communication	Formal meetings	Face-to-face
		Monthly assembly	Telephones
		Morning prayers	E-mails
Eastern	Informal internal-operational communication	Discussions	Intercom
			Face-to-face
			Phones

Western	Formal internal- operational communication	Formal meetings Report reviews Morning prayers Conferences	Face-to-face Telephones E-mails Intercom Video conference
	Informal internal- operational communication	Discussions Managers “Teatalk”	Face-to-face Phones

Local

For both local organizations, formal-internal operational communication is the most described form of communication from leaders to subordinate in disseminating TQM messages. Face-to-face channels are the most frequent communication mediums used by leaders in these two local organizations to disseminate TQM related information, mission and vision, and instill awareness of TQM initiatives to all members of the organization. In other words, leaders use formal type of communication such as formal face-to-face meetings to share information to their subordinates.

Eastern

Similar to the local organizations, the eastern organizations used face-to-face formal-internal operational communication. This is the most described form of communication from leaders to subordinates. Face-to-face channels are the most frequent communication mediums used by leaders to disseminate TQM related information, mission and vision, and method of announcing quality achievement to all members of the organization.

Western

In comparison to the local and eastern manufacturing organizations, the western organizations used more informal face-to-face communication besides the major mediums, format-internal operational communication. The managers often spent time for a tea-talk to discuss about their operations and to get prompt feedback during the TQM implementation especially feedbacks from lower management team. However, the face-to-face formal-internal operational communication was still the main forms of communication to all workers.

Across continents, a common form of communication practice used is the formal internal-operational communication practice using face-to-face as a medium of communication either in meetings, briefings or assemblies. This form of communication is further strengthened by informal-internal operational communication and personal communication to tackle certain issues and with the usage depending on certain communication functions. Face-to-face communication is still dominantly used to communicate internally among employees and between the management team and employees. Mediated communication, especially computer mediated communication which should be the backbone of organizational communication especially in the era of IR 4.0 is far from what had been portrayed in the mass media. It has not yet supplanted the formal and informal face-to-face communication although all the organizations studied are among the large manufacturing organizations. Mediated communication is only utilized by the management team to communicate among each other, with the head office and to disseminate documents for references.

Through non-participative observations on the communication artifacts, most of the posters and banners hung on their walls and fences were up-to-date, clear and informative in all of the organizations. The researcher's only issue was with the daily, weekly and monthly achievements notifications that were posted on notice boards were quite small and crowded in most of the organizations. And, one of the eastern organizations have situated within the working areas of the organization's premises, a beautiful "wall photos' album", designed and painted by their staffs which portrayed the organizations family day.

CONCLUSION

Past literatures had revealed to us that mediated communication is on the move to replace face-to-face communication in organizational settings, as earlier mentioned by Te'eni (2001), then Kramer (2018) and Ewing et. al (2019). However, from the findings and discussions, this study reveals that the usage of online mediated communication are quite limited in all manufacturing companies across continents in the process of TQM implementation. These forms and mediums of communication pattern might delay manufacturing sector's future in Malaysia specifically, and especially towards mass production and smart interactive platform and digital technologies. In order words, the manufacturing organizations should embrace and practice of online mediated communication in monitoring their processes, disseminate information, getting feedbacks and in training their employees. Apart from that, the usage of face-to-face communications across TQM organizations were put into action nicely and they were able to attain their goals. The formal internal-operational communication practices are the most common types or form of communication such as formal meetings, briefings and assemblies. The mediated communications mediums are more popular among the administrative staffs. The overall of observations on the communication artifacts is that most of the organizations have displayed a good idea of disseminating TQM implementation messages which is believed to have enhanced the spirit of teamwork and togetherness among all of the employees.

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