

EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS ON STRATEGY EXECUTION IN THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to determine the effects of communication skills in strategy execution in the airline industry in Kenya. The study tested the null hypothesis that communication skills does not have a significant effect on strategy execution in the airline industry in Kenya. The population for this study consisted of the employees of sixteen airlines operating internationally, regionally, and locally in Kenya. The total target population were 4560 employees from 16 airlines in Kenya. A total of 354 respondents from 15 airlines were used as the sample size for the study. Descriptive survey design was used for the purposes of this study. Primary and secondary data was collected for analysis. Self-administered questionnaire were used to collect primary data alongside evaluation reports that were obtain for the secondary data on strategy execution. Communication skills had $\beta=0.411$ and $p\text{ value}< 0.05$, hence a positive and significant relationship between communication skills and strategic execution. The study recommends that the leaders in the airline industry should adopt and enhance their communication skills.

Keywords: *Communication skills, Strategy Execution, Airline Industry.*

INTRODUCTION

Forman and Argenti (2005) rightly noted in their study of how corporate leadership communication skills influences strategy execution that although an entire discipline is devoted to the study of organizational strategy, including strategy execution, little attention has been given to the links between communication and strategy. The study also noted that business

communication researchers have become increasingly interested in the contribution of corporate leadership communication skills to an organization's ability to create and disseminate its strategy. However, very few studies have investigated the link between corporate leadership communication and strategy and by so doing their focus has primarily been on how corporate leadership communication skills affects the organization's relationship with its various stakeholders.

At least, numerous studies have already emphasized the importance of communication skills for the process of strategy execution (Schaap, 2006). The study of Schaap (2006), which was conducted in the casino industry within the state of Nevada, united states of America shows that over 38 percent of the senior-level leaders do not communicate the organization's direction and business strategy to all of their subordinates. This study also reinforces findings that frequent communication up and down in organization enhances strategic consensus through the fostering of shared attitudes and values.

The leadership communication skills are vital elements whose purpose is to facilitate strategy execution through variety of ways (Forman & Argenti, 2005). Communication skills can also serve as the antenna of an organization, receiving reactions from key constituencies to the strategy of the firm. Forman and Argenti (2005) found that the alignment between the leadership communication skills and the strategy execution process was particularly visible in those companies that were going through fundamental strategic change. All of the firms studied were involved in significant efforts in internal communications and felt that the leader was central to the success of the function, particularly in terms of implementing strategy and building reputation (Forman & Argenti, 2005).

In a related study on conceptualizing communicative leadership done by Catrin, *et al.*, (2014), it was found that there are four central communicative skills of leaders which include structuring, facilitating, relating, and representing. They also found that eight principles of communicative leadership which include conversation, listening, body language, anticipating needs, trust, re-confirming, being positive, being prepared, and a tentative definition are equally critical during strategy implementation. A communicative leader is defined as someone who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision making, and is perceived as open and involved.

Apart from being construed through leadership, communication skills are deeply connected with strategic consensus. Everybody in the organisation must know the direction the organisation is going and what are the strategic objectives. As well they must know the vision, thus the ideal state. Communication skills serves as a means to reach this consensus. Leadership task is to ensure that this communication takes place, between themselves and middle management, between different functions and between other important connections in the organisation. Rapert, *et al.*, (2008) see the need for vertical communication through the organisation as well as frequent communication as major method to reach shared perceptions, values and beliefs among the workforce and eventually reach a stage of higher performance of the organization. Also Noble (2009) feels the significance of a common language and understanding. Beer, *et al.*, (2000) see a major challenge in the lack of honest upward conversations from the team about barriers and underlying causes, which is caused by a strict top-down management style. The

study agree with Noble (2009) and Rapert, *et al.*, (2008) that poor vertical communication inhibits effective strategy execution and promote more open dialogue within the organisation.

Mapetere, *et al.*, (2012) also found that strategy implementation in most state-owned enterprises failed due to lack of two-way communication. They therefore recommended that state-owned enterprises should consider adopting two-way communication tools that permit and solicit questions and opinions from employees on issues related to the strategy execution. They further suggested that the communications should tell employees about the new requirements, tasks and activities to be performed by the team that is executing the corporate strategy, and, furthermore, cover the why reason behind changed circumstances.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A study conducted by Schyns, *et al.*, (2012) on the role of implicit leadership theories in the performance appraisals and promotion recommendations of leaders found out that when there is a poor match between a supervisor's implicit leadership theories and his or her perception of a subordinate leader, this leader's performance appraisal and promotion chances are believed to decrease. In a similar manner, the implicit leadership theories of followers may influence their appraisal of a leader's performance. This according to this study will affect the level of strategy execution in a particular industry. The ability of an organization to compete in a flat world is enhanced when all elements of the enterprise are in close alignment. A key role of the leader of the enterprise of the future is to create and maintain this alignment (Kumar, 2013). If this alignment is maintained, the execution of the strategy can be enhanced and performance improved. One study that was conducted in South African strategic leaders by Jooste and Fourie (2009) on the role of strategic leadership in effective strategy implementation concluded that strategic leadership positively contributes to effective strategy implementation in South African organisations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective communication skill is one of the biggest factors in successful leadership in formulating and implementing strategies. Forman and Argenti (2005) rightly noted in their study of how corporate leadership communication skills influences strategy execution. The study of Schaap (2006) which was conducted in the casino industry in Nevada shows that over thirty eight percent of the senior-level leaders did not communicate the organization's direction and business strategy to all of their subordinates. This study also reinforces findings that frequent communication up and down in organization enhances strategic implementation consensus through the fostering of shared attitudes and values. Forman and Argenti (2005) found that the alignment between the leadership communication skills and the strategy execution process was particularly visible in those companies that were going through fundamental strategic change. All of the firms studied were involved in significant efforts in internal communications and felt that the leader was central to the success of the function, particularly in terms of implementing strategy and building reputation (Forman & Argenti, 2005).

In a related study on conceptualizing communicative leadership done by Catrin, *et al.*, (2014), four central communicative skills of leaders were identified and includes structuring, facilitating, relating, and representing. The study also identified eight principles of communicative leadership which include conversation, listening, body language, anticipating needs, trust, re-confirming, being positive, being prepared, and a tentative definition and concluded that such are equally critical during strategy implementation. Rapert, *et al.*, (2008) see the need for vertical communication through the organisation as well as frequent communication as major method to reach shared perceptions, values and beliefs among the workforce and eventually reach a stage of higher performance of the organization. Noble (2009) revealed the significance of a common language and understanding. Beer, *et al.*, (2000) see a major challenge in the lack of honest upward conversations from the team about barriers and underlying causes, which is caused by a strict top-down management style. The study agree with Noble (2009) and Rapert, *et al.*, (2008) that poor vertical communication inhibits effective strategy execution and promote more open dialog within the organisation. Mapetere, *et al.*, (2012) also found that strategy implementation in most state-owned enterprises failed due to lack of two-way communication. They therefore recommended that state-owned enterprises should consider adopting two-way communication tools that permit and solicit questions from employees on issues related to the strategy execution.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative and quantitative approaches. Considering the strength of mixed methods research with respect to understanding and explaining complex organizational and target population, there was clearly a need for this study to conduct a research that employs mixed methods as proposed by Cao, *et al.*, (2006). The target population, therefore, comprised all the airlines domiciled in Kenya. The study used stratified sampling method to select the top and the middle level management from the sampled airlines as it is applicable if a population from which a sample is to be drawn from does not constitute a homogeneous group (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). In this study, the sampling frame is the target population of 4560 employees from 16 airlines from where the sample of respondents were drawn. The research collected data using the questionnaire that was administered to each of the sampled airlines in Kenya with the aim of generating quantitative data. The questionnaires were issued to airline manager of various cadres from managing directors, general managers, and or their assistants to heads of departments. Inferential statistics were used to test variable relationships.

RESULTS

To begin with, respondents were asked to indicate if they agreed or disagreed with the statement those communication skills during execution process was a key ingredient that provided the connective tissue throughout the organisation and helped people understand the big picture. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used to source the opinions from the respondents. The weighted scale comprised of Strongly Agree (SA) -5, Agree (A) -4, Neutral (N) -3, Disagree (D), -2, Strongly Disagree (SD) -1. Majority (49.2%) showed strong agreement, 35.1% demonstrated agreement, 8.9% took a neutral stand whilst 4.6% and 2.3% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. As to whether respondents agreed or disagree with the opinion that tailoring a message to suit a specific strategy execution team during execution process led to achievement of strategic goals. 33.4% showed a strong agreement, 27.5% agreed, 15.4% took a neutral position whereas 17% disagreed and 6.6% disagreed strongly.

Further, the level of agreement to the statement that direct communication between leadership and the strategy execution team enabled smooth strategic change in the company was sought. 40.7% and 37.7% showed a strong agreement and agreement respectively while 4.9% and 3.3% showed their disagreement and strong disagreement respectively even though 13.4% were undecided. The study also sought to establish the level of agreement if the leadership provided strategic directions by communicating to the execution team during execution process on a daily basis. 46.9% strongly agreed, 30.2% agreed, 10.5% were undecided while 8.5% and 3.9% choose to disagree and strongly disagreed respectively. Finally, the level of agreement on that statement on whether strategic leadership communication skills elicited execution team's feedback or checked to see if the message was understood during strategy execution processes was sought. Most respondents (45.9%) showed a strong agreement, 35.1% agreed while 5.2% and 3.3% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively as 10.5% took a neutral position.

In a situation where there are different participants, Peng and Littlejohn (2001) observed that communication and cooperation are crucial characteristics to strategy execution. A finding of this study proves the need to communicate extensively the big picture of the strategy to be implemented in a customized message directed to specific strategic execution team. Thompson (2009) suggest that for any complex or technical terms in the strategy one must be caution and considerate of the stakeholders to whom the strategy concerns. As leader having implementers in the minds will always help to communicate effectively thus increasing chances of succeeding in that strategy.

Still in the current study, most respondents noted that communication skills are key ingredient that connects different individuals in different department of the same organisations. This confirms the finding of Najib and Baroto (2016) who studied effect of strategy implementation for SMEs in a competitive environment. The study found out that in absence of implementation skills which include communication skills, efforts of any strategy execution may nosedive.

Table 1 Descriptive Analysis for Communication Skills

	Percentage of responses (n=305)					Mean	Std. Deviation
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
Communications skills during execution process is a key ingredient that provides the connective tissue throughout our organization and helps people understand the big picture.	2.3	4.6	8.9	35.1	49.2	4.2	1.0
Tailoring a message to suit a specific strategy execution team during execution process has led to achievement of strategic goals.	6.6	17	15.4	27.5	33.4	3.6	1.3
Direct communication between leadership and the strategy execution team enables smooth strategic change in our company	3.3	4.9	13.4	37.7	40.7	4.1	1.0

The leadership provide strategic directions by communicating to the execution team during execution process on a daily basis	3.9	8.5	10.5	30.2	46.9	4.1	1.1
Strategic leadership communication skills elicit execution team's feedback or checks to see if the message was understood during strategy execution processes.	3.3	5.2	10.5	35.1	45.9	4.2	1.0
Overall						4.0	1.1

There was a positive and significant relationship between communication skills and strategic execution in the airline industry ($\beta = 0.568$, $T = 10.371$, $P \text{ value} < 0.05$). This implies that a unit change in communication skills increases strategic execution by 0.568 units.

$$\text{Strategic Execution} = 1.427 + 0.568 (\text{Communication Skills})$$

Mesu, *et al.*, (2013) study of effect of leadership on labour flexibility points that visionary leadership will always direct employees clearly through communication. In line with this statement, the current study found that the respondents were in full support of the leader providing strategic directions by communicating to the execution team during execution process on a daily basis. Further, as Schaap (2006) study in Nevada's casino industry encourages frequent vertical communications so as build consensus via developing shared attitudes and values which the current study finds to be of great value because 99% of the respondents respondent in affirmative and fully supported this preposition. If possible, the strategic directions during execution process should be done on a daily basis.

As spell out in Forman and Argenti (2005) research, companies faced with major strategic changes, they need to make sure communication is efficient since it serves as antennae of the strategy execution process. These scholars goes ahead to expound on who is a communicative leader: he or she is thought to possess skills to engage in dialogue, seek feedback, encourage decision making and open minded. Lack of these necessary characteristics leads to miscarriage of strategy implementation. Poor top-down communication has been found to inhibits effective strategy execution and promote more grapevine within the organization (Noble, 2009; Rapert, *et al.*, 2008).

Table 2 Regression Coefficient on Communication Skills and Strategic Leadership

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Coefficients Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.427	0.164		8.705	0.000
	CS	0.568	0.055	0.512	10.371	0.000

a Dependent Variable: SE

Communication skills were hypothesized to have no significant relationship with strategic execution. Communication skills had $\beta=0.411$ and $p \text{ value} < 0.05$ hence a positive and significant relationship between communication skills and strategic execution. It also implies that a unit increase in communication cause a rise in strategic execution by 0.411 units. Therefore, there is enough evidence to warrant rejection of the null hypothesis, thus we conclude that there is a positive and significant relationship between communication skills and strategic execution.

The results of the regression analysis showed a positive and significant relationship between communication skills and strategic execution ($\beta=0.411$ and $p \text{ value} < 0.05$). Implying that communication skills are necessary factors when executing any strategy as they vary in the same direction. The presumed notion of whether communication skills really matter has been confirmed by the rejection of null hypothesis (H_{01}) meaning that a team leader of the strategy needs to communicate effectively. Donna, *et al.*, (2007) observed that a leader of a strategy execution team ought to possess excellent communication skills and be able to make decisions while on his/her feet. The study suggests that leaders need to be creative in the tools used to communicate any technical terms that must be passed for strategy execution to succeed.

CONCLUSIONS

The study findings indicate that communication skills affected strategic execution positively and significantly and thus the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was adopted. As many of the past studies found out, communication skills still remained a key ingredient in provision that help connect the dots for easy understanding of the big picture. Several communication factors were identified to have great influence during strategic execution. One of them is the leader's ability to be able to tailor messages for a specific strategic execution group. Another one is the art of the leader being able to communicate directly with the subordinates on the strategy to be executed for a smooth management change. Also, the ability of the communicating leader to encourage and receive feedback from the execution team to ensure the right message is being decoded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study show that communication skills influences strategy execution in the industry. This means that airline industry need to incorporate better communication skills which are customized to suit the execution team for successful achievement of the desired strategic goals. The Kenyan airline industry should also embrace direct communication with the member of the execution team for smooth strategic change; this could be done by the use of routine briefings before the start of the day's work. Further the industry leaders ought to provide a forum where they can receive feedback for checks and controls of information being convey from time to time and this could be done by having an interactive session where team members are allowed to express their views.

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