

Full Length Research Paper

Effective communication in academic libraries: An imperative for knowledge delivery

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This paper highlights briefly the position of effective communication in academic libraries vis-à-vis prompt knowledge delivery. Definitions of the concepts of effective communication, academic libraries, and knowledge delivery are also given. The importance of effective communication in academic libraries is discussed. These include decision-making and knowledge delivery enhancement. The paper discusses also the factors militating against effective communication. Such factors are the presence of ill health, use of closed words, information overload, etc. In order to assuage the impact of the militating factors or barriers to communication, several points are raised and explained. They include the use of face-to-face communication, avoidance of credibility gap, being sensitive to the feelings and needs of others while communicating.

Key words: Academic library, effective communication, knowledge delivery, communication in library.

INTRODUCTION

In this present era of knowledge economy and information globalization, employers of labour and the employees require a level of communication competence. Much as this applies to all human interactions, it is most important and relevant to library managers and workers whose basic instrument and stock-in-trade rests on continuous exchange of information with their clientele. Poor communication is a great source of frustration in any organization, let alone academic libraries, and it contributes significantly to reduced services. If libraries are to survive the present global organizational competitiveness and be able to make an indelible impact on their clientele and academic circle, their workers must have good understanding of the indispensable need for communication proficiency and effectiveness. This is because much of what the library workers and their managers do on daily basis to accomplish their tasks and

maintain balance is communicating at all levels. These communication patterns occur between the managers and the library workers, and among the managers, workers, friends of libraries and the clientele. In agreement with this, Ifidon and Ifidon (2007) state thus: Communication is such an important element of management that it deserves a special treatment. People communicate everyday from when they wake up in the morning until they go to bed at night. This process goes on in every unit of society and in every discipline, including librarianship.

Communication is the process whereby one conveys ideas, opinions, attitudes, feelings, sentiments, beliefs, or impressions on others. It is a means by which one sends and receives information. For communication to serve its purpose, it must be effective. Effective communication is therefore a much-needed factor in libraries for utmost and

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precise delivery of their services. It is the life wire of every vibrant organization but more to libraries. It is the highest common factor for all those who congregate in libraries, especially in academic libraries where teaching and learning, querying and answering form the bedrock of their functions. Following this, effective communication is a pre-requisite for working and walking in academic libraries and for the achievement of their goals and objectives.

Effective organizational communication is the utilization of appropriate interpersonal patterns for the exchange of information that enhance the conceptualization of the sender. This results when the receiver understands the sender exactly the way he (sender) wants to be understood. It is a process by which information is appropriately transmitted and understood between two or more persons. This type of communication in any library environment makes for good rapport and quick answers to inquiries and requests, but more to academic libraries for knowledge delivery. In realization of the importance of effective communication in academic libraries, this paper critically discusses it by examining the followings: definition of terms, importance of communication, barriers to effective communication, strategies for reducing the barriers and the conclusion.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In an organizational set-up like academic libraries, management is akin to communication. This is due to the large amount of communication that is regularly carried out in libraries for the enhancement of organizational efficiency, workers' commitment and knowledge delivery. It fosters harmonious relationship among library administrators and their workers, vendors, clientele and other stakeholders. When all the stakeholders in libraries put across their feelings and messages and understand themselves fully, effective communication results. According to Kreitner et al (2002), effective communication occurs when the richness of the medium is matched appropriately with the complexity of the problem or situation. Furthermore, they state that ineffective communication results when the medium is either too rich or insufficiently rich for the comprehension of the problem or situation. Both types of media are found in libraries and only the appropriately rich are required for successful academic services. In their own assessment of effective communication, Tubbs and Moss (2006) stated that it is a situation that occurs when the stimulus as it was initiated and intended by the sender or source corresponds closely to the stimulus as it is perceived and responded to by the receiver. Effective communication is the process by which information is appropriately transmitted and understood between two or more people. While communicating, we rarely reach a level of perfect sharing but

we aim for it when trying to reach library clientele and achieve academic library objectives. According to Ugwuanyi (2004), an academic library is a library that takes care of the people engaged in academic and research work in the institutions of higher learning. Such institutions include the libraries found in universities, colleges of education, colleges of technologies and polytechnics. It is a melting point for different people requiring the services of libraries. They require good service through effective communication and services delivery.

Knowledge delivery has to do with the precise and timely presentation of information and knowledge available to those who desire it. It is the dissemination of knowledge to the library clientele, when needed. This is important because knowledge dissemination demands that right knowledge should be delivered to the users and in the right format that they could be made use of. It shows how information resources generated can be packaged, delivered and retrieved from any source irrespective of time and space from any library (Annunne, 2011). Defining knowledge delivery, the Industrial Service Select (2007) says that it is the giving of the right knowledge/information to the right people at just the right time. Following this definition, Obsasikene (2008) raised pertinent questions, which he answered in the following ways:

It may be said that the right information is the information required by any person(s) or organization for optimal capacity utilization, productive efficiency and goal realization. The right people are knowledge seekers and the right time is the time/period when the knowledge is most needed for operational efficiency.

According to the International Service for National Agricultural Research (2007), knowledge delivery has to do with the collection, dissemination and management of knowledge. Knowledge and information delivery in academic libraries is entirely carried out through different types of communication patterns which include formal and informal, electronic, verbal and non-verbal and written communication. These types are applied in academic libraries so that effective communication and knowledge delivery takes place.

Importance of effective communication

A commendable library worker must be an effective communicator whose communication is not misinterpreted. He is always interested in mastering the meaning of things that listeners take from certain words and symbols. He knows and appreciates what communication medium is most suited for a particular situation. While attending to the library customers, a good library worker ought to endeavour to use different communication media to

achieve personal and inter-personal as well as organizational goals and objectives.

As the cornerstone of any library's survival in today's competitive work environment, effective communication offers the following advantages. In libraries, especially academic libraries, effective communication helps to foster concrete and cordial relationships between workers and their clientele. As they communicate and express their feelings and thoughts, they get to know each other better and become more open to and so acquainted with each other. McShane (2004) asserts that communication is the glue that bonds people together and acts as part of the dynamic social support that eases or reduces work-related stress in libraries.

Effective communication plays a very vital role in knowledge creation and management. When we talk of organizational communication, reference is made to individual workers who operate and communicate within the organization. As they communicate at all levels (verbally and in writing), they share necessary information that results in the development of knowledge which is very important for serving customers.

Communication enhances decision making in libraries. Upward communication that flows from bottom to top enables the management to make decisions at different levels of administration. The top down movement of information makes it possible for the workers to be aware of what decisions the management makes on their behalf, knowledge about them (the workers) and is communicated to them. Hence, communicating different types of information to workers has always resulted in quicker and better decision-making (Kelly and Barasade, 2001).

In addition to decision-making and knowledge creation and management, communication effectiveness coordinates work activities and enhances knowledge delivery in libraries. Information dissemination in libraries would be seriously hampered if communication is distorted. Workers can only carry out their functions effectively and make progress in serving their patrons when the exact meaning and understanding of the messages that are sent to them occur. This means that for progress in knowledge delivery to take place, effective communication must occur. When workers happily deliver their services as a result of proper understanding of the management's communication, then workers and the patrons are satisfied. Clappitt and Down's (1993) observation that employees' satisfaction with organizational communication is positively and significantly correlated with both job satisfaction and performance.

Effective communication is very vital for the successful delivery of services in academic libraries. The services offered by libraries are very dependent upon communication. As social animals, people in organizations interact greatly amongst themselves. Failure to do this will not only engender dissatisfaction, discontentment,

and loss of motor coordination among the workers and their customers, but will also lead to mal-adjustment. This means that communication is the cornerstone upon which efficient academic library services is built. Okon (2005) states that library managers and their workers spend between 85 to 90% of their time communicating during the day. Effective communication gives libraries and library workers a better chance of marketing themselves.

Barriers to effective communication

From what has been discussed so far, one can reasonably state that effective communication is at the heart of library existence and success. Hence, it is necessary to examine some of the barriers to effective communication in academic libraries. Considering the enormity of information exchange in libraries, the important role communication plays in the life of academic library administrators, workers and clientele, and the harm its absence could do to the efficient administration of libraries, the need to recognize possible barriers is indispensable.

How people perceive statements or questions determine their interpretations and understanding of them. One's perceptions are usually determined by one's past experiences, attitudes, present mood, etc. Therefore, the perceptual standard of an individual affects his communication ability. One factor that hinders effective communication process is the inability of the receiver of the message to correctly perceive it. McShane (2004) says that incorrect or different perception is a significant source of noise, especially if the sender and the receiver have different perceptual frames and mental models.

A breakdown of effective communication may also occur when either the sender or the receiver of the message is in a state of ill health. In such a situation, the sender may send incorrect messages, or the receiver may find it hard to effectively decode the message. Corroborating this fact, Iwundu and Aniago (2010) observe that the effectiveness of any communication depends on the state of the health of both the sender and the receiver. In other words, ill health may corrupt communication and render it incomprehensible.

Another barrier to effective communication occurs when closed words or messages are given out.

According to Drafke and Kossen (1998), closed words are all inclusive words that eliminate the possibility that exceptions occur. Such words include none, everyone, all, never, etc. What if a clientele enters a library and describes all library workers as people with low academic qualifications? It is an over generalization that would block effective communication and result in defensiveness on the part of the librarians because many library workers have high academic qualifications. To

avoid ineffective communication through closed words, it is pertinent that communicators do not make sweeping statements that generate bad feelings. Bemoaning the impact of closed words in communication, Sathre-Eldo et al. (1981) stated that their effect is to create defensiveness in the people who are the subject of the generalization.

Effective communication may equally be affected by noise. Here noise is taken to be anything in the sender, the medium of communication, or the receiver that disturbs the efficient flow of communication in libraries. Noise, when speaking of interference, does not mean sound. Kreitner et al (2002) define noise as anything that interferes with the transmission and understanding of a message. They list such things as speech impairment, poor telephone connections, illegible handwriting, inaccurate statistics in a memo or report, poor hearing or eyesight, and physical distance between sender and receiver as noise in that they hinder effective communication.

Another hindrance to effective communication in academic libraries is snap judgments. Snap judgment occurs when a person draws conclusion hastily or without enough evidence. This can occur when a person's character is judged based on a single meeting with the person, or his appearance, his speech, etc. Information obtained in this manner rarely holds true, and deters true understanding of the person in question. Snap judgments distort effective communication and are harmful because they are based on limited information or on hasty first impressions (Dellingre and Danne, 1980).

Information overload is also another factor that distorts communication effectiveness. Every library worker has a certain information processing capacity, or amount of information one can process within a fixed time. Information overload becomes an hindrance to communication when the volume of information received exceeds the person's capacity to process it; the person has more than enough information with which to cope. For instance, when library workers receive too many queries and complaints from their clientele, they take many of them to be noise. They will either overlook some or misinterpret them. According to Koski (2001), every job has its information load, or the amount of information that can be processed per a unit of time. Any load that exceeds that unit of time therefore hinders effective communication.

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Having discussed at length barriers to effective communication in academic libraries, it becomes necessary to strategize on how best to overcome some of these barriers. Without overcoming many of the communication barriers that usually confront academic library

communities, efficient delivery of knowledge will suffer, and workers will hardly be effective members of libraries.

One of the ways of reducing barriers to communication is to be sensitive to others' feelings and needs while speaking or writing. Some library workers talk or write to their colleagues or their clientele without considering that some words are perceived as derogatory and annoying. A would-be effective communicator must be conscious of his choice of words, phrases, or idiomatic expressions in order for his messages to be accurately decoded. Having a feeling for others while communicating involves being patient and doing much of listening, "*for speech is silver but silence is golden*". This enhances effective communication since both the sender and the patient receiver will be careful when encoding and decoding messages. Such situation creates understanding and rapport in places like academic libraries where people of different cultural backgrounds congregate.

The use of face-to-face communication enhances effective and accurate encoding and decoding of messages. Its positive effects on interpersonal exchange of information highly supersede written communication. Corroborating this fact, Drafke and Kossen (1998) observe that the impersonal character of a memo or letter can be easily misunderstood, especially when information of a negative nature is being conveyed. Furthermore, they believe that face-to-face communication is more effective than written messages in reducing misunderstanding because the sender can receive feedback instantly and discover if he or she has been misunderstood.

In order to minimize barriers to effective communication there is the great need to avoid a credibility gap. This has to do with communication that lacks believability. Once messages are tainted with distrust and cynicism, they lack merit and hinder normal perception and decoding. Since academic libraries serve communities of high-level intellects, communicators must be aware that they have to skillfully influence their audience with their messages. To do this, they have to take into consideration the fact that words are no substitute for actions. As such, communicators ought to convince their audience to hear what they are being told, to believe it, and to be willing to act on it. Losing credibility will deter one's audience from embarking on such actions.

In order to cut down barriers to information and enhance communication, senders of messages must be careful on how they make judgmental statements. This is because such statements can easily offend many, especially when it touches on their belief systems and personality. Any attempt to do that may render communication difficult. Library workers should always be ready to edit their utterances so as to keep the channels of communication open. It will also make for an enhanced encoding and decoding of messages and thus effective communication in libraries.

Conclusion

As one of the services-oriented institutions, academic libraries are assessed on the basis of their services delivery ability and promptness. For this to be precisely achieved, effective communication is a must. This is because much of what the library workers do to serve and deliver knowledge to their friends and clientele is communication through verbalization, non-verbalization methods, written messages, electronic services etc. For these to be a successful means of communication, library workers as well as their clientele must be effective communicators. Effective communication attracts a lot of usefulness in academic libraries. Yet, some factors seriously challenge and vitiate the success of effective communication by acting as barriers. This paper has discussed how best to assuage the effect of these barriers in order to strengthen communication and enhance knowledge delivery.

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