



An Assessment of Corporate Communications as a Top Management Function in Organizations: The Case of Lafarge Zambia Plc & Citizens Economic Empowerment Commission

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Abstract: This study aimed at assessing corporate communications as a top management function in organizations: the case of Lafarge Zambia Private Limited Company (Plc) and Citizens Economic Empowerment Commission (CEEC). The study used qualitative methods and employed case study research design. Data was collected using interview guide from 6 participants from Lafarge and 6 participants from CEEC that were analysed thematically. The study found that the main responsibility of corporate communication is meant to provide support to the Public Relations and Communication Manager by planning and directing public relations programmes designed to create and maintain a favourable public image for the institutions. Coordinating all internal communications throughout the company, managing all Health and Safety communications. As for challenges, corporate communication the biggest challenges for not having communications personnel in top management is inconsistent message leading to deteriorated public image, selecting wrong channels for message dissemination, poor internal communication leading to low morale amongst employees, inability to meet set goals. The study recommended that there was need for organisations to make corporate affairs its own department, by making sure they understand that they can lose a lot if the company name is in disrepute by showing how communications help achieve company objectives, tough decision making in sustainable operations.

Keyword: corporate communication, top management, Citizens Economic Empowerment Commission (CEEC), Lafarge Zambia Plc

1. BACKGROUND

Kayombo (2016) observes that the non-recognition of the corporate communications functions has resulted into the suppression of the profession in Zambia. This has consequently resulted in trained professionals being deployed in different unrelated fields instead of recognizing the profession. Banda (2018) mentions that if the prevailing situation of not recognising corporate communications as a top management position in organisation is not controlled, there will be lack of effective internal and external communication with stakeholders. Balmer and Gray (2010) identified three components of total corporate communication, and this takes account of the communications effects not only of formal communications channels but also that of products, services, management actions, and corporate behaviour. They argue that the role of the corporate communication department is to coordinate all internal communications throughout the company, managing all health and safety communications, ensure that safety communications is effective within the company and at all the plants, preparing key messages for internal communications, preparing the internal communications budget annually.

In addition, Grunig (2012) stated that the communications department was headed by the corporate communications manager who was in the top management of the decision-making body of the airline. Morsing and Schultz (2016) argues that employees are considered to be key stakeholder relationships because they are the medium through which information is clarified to the company and the clients. Others like Christensen et al., (2015) contend that speaking of alignment, integration, consistency, synergy, and so on, corporate communication holds the promise of order, stability, and predictability

in an otherwise fragmented and uncertain world. They added that corporate communication justifies a more centralized control of an organization's communication functions in a business environment that otherwise calls for participation, involvement, and decentralization from top management.

Further, Grunig (2017) revealed that it is key to understand how public opinion is formed and how the media and other key stakeholders like activists have important gate-keeping roles, such as the media operating in their communication behaviour. Meanwhile, Lock (2017) informed that there was consistency in information update on the Internet page and the communications department did this. The adverts were more of information provision to the clients on various services that the companies offer. The company's management cleared these services, and they were a true reflection of the company's profiles, mission and products that the public should know.

In the Zambian case, Chanda (2018) found that most companies in Zambia fail to meet the consumer needs because the communications officers have no effective skills to respond to the needs of the consumers regarding the needed products and services. The study also found that when the communications department was not reporting to the CEO, there was delay in information processing which made the company passive to the stakeholders and the entire clients. Earlier, Melewar (2013) also found that when the communications manager is not a top position, there is always inefficient communication taking place between the company and its clients which results into misinformation.

With regards to the challenges, Argenti (2005) noted that the challenge in most communication offices has been that the officers who are placed in the communications department hardly understand what the department has to offer and what has to be done at a given time hence there is lack of effective internal and external communication which crucial for a company's image. Moreso, Burnside-Lawry (2011) argues that communication management is a form of interpersonal leadership, a tool with which the manager may exercise specific powers: forecasting, training, organization, coordination, control, evaluation.

In mitigating these challenges, Kitchen and de Pelsmacker (2014) observed that it is essential to understand how to integrate all communications under one unique strategy so as to support marketing activities. In addition, it is crucial to understand consumers and suppliers, how their communication and identity is related with the communication and identity of the company, and also deeply to understand consumers' values and affinity with corporate brands. Also, Cornelissen (2018) indicated that corporate communication is increasingly understood as a management function and a function that offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communications with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent. Meanwhile, the communications theory which stand to strengthening communication stems from a desire and need to encourage a healthier interpersonal relationship with a constructed reality (Dutton, Workman & Hardin, 2014).

From the foregoing argument, some companies have the director corporate communications as top management while others do not which leaves the research gap for this study. It became necessary to explore the probabilities of having corporate communications as a top management position in Zambian private and public companies. If this study was not conducted, the speculation as to why corporate communications should be a top management position or not would not be clarified. This will eventually affect the company's overall brand reputation either positively or negatively depending on the side the company takes. It is from this background that this study examined Corporate Communications as a top Management Function in organizations at Lafarge Zambia Plc & Citizens Economic Empowerment Commission (CEEC) in Chilanga and Lusaka Districts of Zambia.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- i. To assess the strategic roles of corporate communication functions in top Management at Lafarge Zambia Plc and Citizens Economic Empowerment Commission (CEEC).
- ii. To explore the challenges of corporate communication function at Lafarge Zambia Plc and Citizens Economic Empowerment Commission (CEEC).
- iii. To establish measures needed to be put in place to improve corporate communication practices at Lafarge Zambia Plc and Citizens Economic Empowerment Commission (CEEC).

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study findings were useful in that being a new field, the findings may contribute to the existing knowledge gap on the subject, thus help the private and public organisations discover new strategies of corporate communications that could be used successfully in their organisations. It was further hoped that the study findings may help the policy makers recognise the practice of corporate communications role, as a strategic function that is core to the business. The study may also be used as a basis for other sectors to recognise the role of corporate communications not only as a management function but should be strategically positioned.

4. METHODOLOGY

The constructivism paradigm was the worldview that guided the study where knowledge comes from human experiences relating to the phenomenon. This qualitative investigation used a case study to collect data from employees of the two companies using interview guides from 6 participants from Lafarge and 6 from the CEEC that were analysed thematically. The data was coded and categorised in similarity, analysed and presented. In using thematic analysis, verbatims are presented in the study to show the authenticity of the responses in line with the objectives and succeeding research questions.

This study applied a non-probability sampling technique with the intention of selecting individual participants for the sample that did not give all the individuals in the population equal chances of being selected (Msabila and Nalaila, 2013). Purposive sampling was used to select the 12 participants for the study. The respondents of this study included chief executive officers of the two institutions (director general and managing director), directors' corporate services and other public relations managers and officers at the two institutions. Themes from the research questions are used to present the findings in this study and pseudo names have been used to present the findings in respect to the ethical clearance obtained from UNZAREC as stated in the methodology. The use of the pseudo names is to ensure participants are protected with regard to the information they provided to this study. The study ensured data quality by following Guba's four trustworthy strategies of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability were followed. Ethical standards were observed.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data was collected qualitatively using 12 key informant interview schedules. The study maintains to use the name 'Lafarge Zambia Plc' since during the time the study was conducted that was the actual name for the company. However, it should be noted that the 'Lafarge Zambia Plc' has since reverted to its old name Chilanga Cement Plc under new management. Therefore, it should be noted that the data was not collected under new management.

5.1. Perceived Strategic Roles of Corporate Communication Functions in top Management

The study also established that the perception that is devoid of any disrepute in the right mind of any stakeholder is to facilitate internal and external communications job description of the corporate communication position in the organization. The other function of corporate communication functions in top management is that of coordinating all internal communications throughout the company, managing all health and safety communications, ensure that Health and Safety Communications is effective within the company and at all the plants, preparing key messages for internal communications, preparing the internal communications budget annually. A participant revealed that:

The role the corporate communications officer play in the company is to coordinate all internal communications throughout the company, managing all Health and Safety communications, ensure that Health and Safety Communications is effective within the company and at all the plants, preparing key messages for internal communications, preparing the internal budget communications annually. Providing support to the company in terms of internal communication in consistent and integrated fashion, enhance the company image via proper communication of messages to all stakeholders, ensure proper Lafarge internal communications materials is in place at all times and position the company as the preferred employer via employer branding.

The findings are in tandem with Balmer and Gray (2010) who identified three components of total corporate communication, and this takes account of the communications effects not only of formal communications channels but also that of products, services, management actions, and corporate

behaviour. They argue that the role of the corporate communication department is to coordinate all internal communications throughout the company, managing all health and safety communications, ensure that safety communications is effective within the company and at all the plants, preparing key messages for internal communications, preparing the internal communications budget annually. With such functions if well aligned to the corporate office, there will be effective communications within and outside the department.

The study further established that the role of the communications department and officers is to prepare or oversee preparation of major communications products, including media briefs, briefings and speeches for management. To develop and manage the affiliate's communication budget following approval from the group brands and communication department within specific deadlines. One participant noted that:

The role of Corporate Communication is stakeholder engagement which include the media regulators, government and shareholders who cannot be divorced from this important function if the organisation is to function successfully with a positive public image. The department drives consistent communication through standardised corporate profile messages in the organisations.

The findings are supported by Grunig (2012) who stated that the communications department was headed by the corporate communications manager who was in the top management of the decision-making body of the airline. With this position being in top management, there was thorough information dissemination in the industry and public satisfaction is meeting that all briefings and communication products were thoroughly prepared. Further, Morsing and Schultz (2016) agrees that employees are considered to be key stakeholder relationships because they are the medium through which information is clarified to the company and the clients. A well organised corporate management position starts with internal circulation of information, then the external circulation. These functions become key in making sure that communication is effective in the companies to and from the stakeholders.

The study has also established that the role the of the corporate communications officer is to coordinate all training materials with human resource to ensure alignment of corporate image, improve corporate communications within Lafarge group and ensure all Lafarge materials are communicated to the entire company. Coordinate with all departments to ensure that all materials being produced regarding corporate brand are respected manage the internal portal, manage wellness programme. One participant said:

The role of Corporate Communication at CEEC ensures that the communication crisis plan is developed and updated enabling the company to respond proactively in times of a crisis. As top management, we ensure they draft timely press releases to inform the public on the happenings in the company and this is followed through the right structures until we approve such a message for public consumption.

The findings are in line with Christensen et al., (2015) whose study found that speaking of alignment, integration, consistency, synergy, and so on, corporate communication holds the promise of order, stability, and predictability in an otherwise fragmented and uncertain world. They added that corporate communication justifies a more centralized control of an organization's communication functions in a business environment that otherwise calls for participation, involvement, and decentralization from top management. These are the aspects we are seeing in the Zambian companies.

Additional findings state that the roles of the communication officers and department is to provide the writing and editing of official content for the company. To provide internal communications which include promoting mission and vision internally, develop PR material that consists of speeches, presentations and adverts. A participant noted that:

The other role of the communications officer is to ensure regular and accurate listening to and understanding of all stakeholders, conduct stakeholder survey and stakeholder mapping regularly (at least every 2 years), identify needs and wants of every stakeholder in the environment, support in analysing the group stakeholder relationship strategies and help assess the feasibility of local implementation, support the creation of community programmes that ensure the company's continued license to operate and undertake any other work as and when directed by the superior.

Grunig (2017) agrees with these findings by stating that it is key to understand how public opinion is formed and how the media and other key stakeholders like activists have important gate-keeping roles, such as the media operating in their communication behaviour. Also, communication plays an important boundary-spanning role for companies identifying key stakeholders, publics, and issues in order to understand who might create negative consequences and why, so as to avoid corporate crises. These roles have to be noted by the communication officers if they are to remain relevant in the companies and the people they service.

The study also found that with the advent of the internet, social media and the website serves as avenues for message dissemination company and its products. Internally, email and one-on-one interactions have proved to be popular ways of communicating messages. They have ensured that they have packed the company web page with the relevant information that may be needed before contacting the office. A participant said:

The role of the corporate communication is to facilitate internal and external communications in the organization. The other roles include the coordinating of all internal communications throughout the company, managing all Health and Safety communications, to ensure that Health and Safety Communications is effective within the company and at all the plants, preparing key messages for internal communications and also preparing the internal communications budget annually.

Lock (2017) concur that there was consistency in information update on the Internet page and the communications department did this. The adverts were more of information provision to the clients on various services that the companies offer. The company's management cleared these services, and they were a true reflection of the company's profiles, mission and products that the public should know. With such functions, the existence of the corporate communication function in companies has been justified.

The foregoing findings on the strategic roles of corporate communication functions in top Management are in tandem with the theory of communication as Duncan (1973) asserted that communication theory embraces the notion that the environmental context within which a message delivers and receives significant influences on communication. Organizations should place a high priority on communication at the management level. Managers with ineffective communication strategies have neither a negative attitude with regard to themselves nor a positive attitude toward others. Therefore, there was need to strengthen the strategic role of the communication theory in the companies if there is to be effective communication.

5.2. Challenges of Corporate Communication Function in the Companies

The study further found that the other challenge was the red tapes which are put in place for the officers to have feedback and also have clearance on which type of information to publish to the public. This challenge was embedded in the non-recognition of the communications officer as a top management position. One participant explained that:

We have the public to deal with and the people long for correct messages from our officers which takes time to actually reach the people because of the procedures which we have put in place. We ensure we go through the messages from the PR department so that they communicate what we want. So, the immediate supervising officer is the quality assurance before we can also have a say on the communication. Therefore, we have ensured the procedure is clear.

The findings are supported by Chanda (2018) who found that most companies in Zambia fail to meet the consumer needs because the communications officers have no effective skills to respond to the needs of the consumers regarding the needed products and services. Since most companies do not have a stand-alone communications department, the aligned department head find it difficult to process the communications for both internal and external use since they do not have the knowledge on its importance to the company and its stakeholders. Such challenges make the public to speculate and spread false data instead of providing the right information.

The combination of human resource and communications manager into one department brings a lot of challenges. These include lack of understanding of the local market from group level, making sure that the company's image is good, internal and external communications stakeholders losing trust in the brand. One participant stated that:

I have seen that some of the resolutions we make to be communicated to the employees and stakeholders are not well presented in the write up which comes to my office for authentication. I therefore ask the director to come with the PR so that we harmonize the communication so that it can reflect what we want to inform the public.

These findings are supported Argenti (2005) who noted that the challenge in most communication offices has been that the officers who are placed in the communications department hardly understand what the department has to offer and what has to be done at a given time hence there is lack of effective internal and external communication which crucial for a company's image. The reporting on behalf of or using a wrong department becomes a challenge in such companies and their employees. Such has brought about misinformation in the community and damage control becomes a challenge when such happen. One participant said:

I have also noted that our PR officers have a language which is different from my discipline and when I correct them, we seem not to make progress because what they want to communicate changes and the Director General rejects such write ups. This makes me and my PR officer to seat with the DG to make sure that the officer writes what we agree upon.

It was also found that that when the communications officer is not in the top management, there is always delayed and inefficient communication within and outside the company which delays results. The absence of the communications officer in the management meetings bring about miscommunication in the company. It is difficult to trust the second-hand reporting to the communications officer and wait for another response from the supervising officer. One participant explained that:

When a human resource officer or legal personnel is the head of the communication department, they hardly understand the importance of communication since it's not their field. Therefore, communication delays to reach the top management and also feedback delays which brings frustration in the process.

These findings are in agreement with Chanda (2018) whose study also found that when the communications department was not reporting to the CEO, there was delay in information processing which made the company passive to the stakeholders and the entire clients. Earlier, Melewar (2013) also found that when the communications manager is not a top position, there is always inefficient communication taking place between the company and its clients which results into misinformation. The company fails to make its image be known internally and externally as the position is either placed in the wrong department or the management hardly understands what the position is all about and what it is supposed to perform.

With these challenges at hand, the foregoing discussion is disputed by the theory of communication management process as the challenges are not supposed to be in the company communication structures. Burnside-Lawry (2011) argues that communication management is a form of interpersonal leadership, a tool with which the manager may exercise specific powers: forecasting, training, organization, coordination, control, evaluation. According to these boundaries of communication management, the manager can arrange tasks in a more efficient manner, he can communicate more easily with employees, have a starting point in making decisions, a well-developed plan. From these boundaries, it is evident that the challenges were a hindering factor to the effective and smooth communication in the companies and the communications departments which are not part of the top management position.

5.3. Practical Measures Needed to Improve Corporate Communications

The study also proposed that the strategic place of the role of PR and corporate communication should be directly under the office of the CEO and should be part of EXCO meetings where strategic business decisions are made. There should be no debate about this fact. Regrettably, when the role is assigned elsewhere other than its strategic place in an organisation, the PR and Corporate Communications person ends up taking the flak for things going wrong in this space not because of the person hired to perform in the role, but rather the misplacement of the function. A participant noted that:

If we are to work effectively, the strategic place of the role of PR and Corporate Communication should be directly under the office of the CEO and should be part of EXCO meetings where strategic business decisions are made. There should be no debate about this fact. Regrettably, when the role is assigned elsewhere other than its strategic place in an organisation, the PR and Corporate Communications person ends up taking the flak for things going wrong in this space not because of the person hired to perform in the role, but rather the misplacement of the function. However, we just do not have this position.

Findings of the study also established that communicators should succeed in assuming broad decision-making roles in their organisation. Appointing authorities should promote a health communication environment with the organisation. The fact that corporate communications dominate and handles any company's internal or external communication is the greatest strength and value that they bring to their company. One participant agreed with reservations that:

Corporate communication being a combination of public and media relations, internal communication between staff, managers and leadership and managing relationships with investors, customers and the public. When all of these are in sync, the message that is sent to internal and external sources is consistent and builds trust. When corporate communication falters, confusion can breed suspicion or feelings of betrayal and the overall company suffers-that is the value of the position in top management.

Kitchen and de Pelsmacker (2014) concur that it is essential to understand how to integrate all communications under one unique strategy so as to support marketing activities. In addition, it is crucial to understand consumers and suppliers, how their communication and identity is related with the communication and identity of the company, and also deeply to understand consumers' values and affinity with corporate brands. Corporate managers as top management position plays the marketing role to the management with the help of the communication strategies at the disposal. This position is important for every company if it is to make the public win confidence in them.

The other solution provided by the study was that the department should not be under any other department but independent with a top management position that can help in the provision of effective information to the people around and external community. This will enable the clients to realise the organisation in it and learn from such. One said:

There is need for the corporate affairs to be a department so that it is able to make decisions at that top level where communication is concerned. This will help the officers to make sure they protect the company name from being in disrepute. The creation of the department will be able to show how communication help achieve company objectives and tough decision making in sustainable operations.

Another participant added that:

The communications department should operate in the interest of the company and community. This will facilitate continuous operations by helping in decision making and significant budget allocation and human resource towards PR activities, sensitization within the organisation on the importance of the communications office. This will also make the companies realise the fact that communication plays a significant role in almost every facet of an organisation operations the PR units value cannot be over emphasised.

This was also noted by Cornelissen (2018) who established that corporate communication is increasingly understood as a management function and a function that offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communications with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent. The position in top management is important as it provides identity and legitimacy and, ultimately, organizational survival, organizational leaders increasingly seek to master communication as a general managerial competence.

The study discussion is also in line with the communications theory which stand to strengthening communication stems from a desire and need to encourage a healthier interpersonal relationship with a constructed reality (Dutton, Workman & Hardin, 2014). Organizations strengthen their internal

structure through using these concepts. Ineffective communication is a direct cause of the lack of subordinate motivation, well-being, and employee job satisfaction, and can be a factor in ineffective communication as seen in the study. The opposite is what has to be promoted in the Zambian companies if the communication office is to provide effective information to the people in the community.

6. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the strategic roles of corporate communication function in top management is to ensure that the company provides internal and external information, to eliminate misinformation and miscommunication that would lead to failure in meeting institutional objectives and creation of poor public image. It should also help in many ways such as in product development, customer relations, employee management that forms part of every aspect of any business operations through different communication platforms.

It can be concluded that the challenges faced by the corporate communications departments in companies is lack of a top recognition as a management position, not modern communication facilities, shortage of human resource, red tapes which are put in place for the officers to have feedback. It can also be concluded that not having communications personnel in top management is inconsistent message leading to deteriorated public image, selecting wrong channels for message dissemination, poor internal communication leading to low morale amongst employees and also leading to inability to meet set goals.

With regards to measures to improve corporate communications practices, the study proposed that there is need for the corporate affairs to be a department so that it is able to make decisions at that top level where communication is concerned. The corporate communication department should be directly under the office of the CEO and should be part of EXCO meetings where strategic business decisions are made so that they are able to provide effective communication to improve the corporate image of the company unlike going through other departments.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the foregoing conclusions, the following recommendations for the study were made:

- i. The Zambian companies, both public and private, should ensure that the PR and communications department be entrusted with the communication roles as they are the experts in this field. This should involve internal and external communications so that the stakeholders can be informed accordingly.
- ii. The government should ensure that all the public run companies should ensure that the communications office should have a top position in the management so that they information can be processed as it is presented unlike being under a different department and receive second hand information. When this happens, there will be no misinformation, as the communications officer will be reporting the right information.
- iii. The Zambia Public Relations Association (ZAPRA) should ensure that companies employ enough human resource in the communications department who will be used to disseminate the required information at the right time. Such will improve the commitment to communication in the companies.
- iv. The Zambia Institute of Human Resource Management (ZIHRM) should ensure that all companies modernize the communications department so that the corporate image can be well updated. The procurement of better information and technology equipment will lead to the department to making regular updates to the stakeholders on the operations of the company.
- i. The public and private companies in Zambia should ensure that qualified communications officers are given the chance to operate freely under a qualified officer and report direct to the CEO. This will improve the communication strategies the companies are using to reach out to the people.

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