

Transparent Internal Communication from Below and Above as a Part of the Total Quality Management Philosophy in Czech Organisations

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Abstract

The authors examine organisations' approach to internal communication from below and above as part of the philosophical approach of total quality management (TQM). The main objective of the research is to evaluate the implementation of selected forms of communication from below and above as a part of the TQM philosophy in the context of selected identifying variables of Czech organizations. To meet the main objective, a questionnaire survey of Czech organizations ($n = 183$) was conducted. The data were evaluated using statistical methods (chi-square test, Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test) at the 0.05 significance level. The results show that the use of most of the examined forms of communication from below and above depends on the size of the organisation, and the most frequent combination of used forms of communication is personal meetings and oral communication with employees. Setting up effective communication within each organisation fulfils the principles of total quality management.

Key Words

management system, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, organizational climate, communication process

JEL Classification: D83, M14

Introduction

Internal communication from below and above is the cornerstone of prosperity (Stacho et al., 2021), sustainability (Vrabcová et al., 2022), and the application of social responsibility enables the organisation's existence. It resembles the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy, where the primary goal is to compete and excel (Jimoh et al., 2019). It is a formalised concept based on systematic quality management in all areas of the organisation's activities with the involvement of all employees and a well-defined role for management. Apart from the fact that most experts (Jimoh et al., 2019; Khalil and Muneenam, 2021) agree that typical features of TQM include a focus on continuous improvement, customer focus, a systems approach, a process approach, evidence-based management, defect-free as the basis of any system, benchmarking, etc., leadership, mutually beneficial partnerships and employee involvement are also part of (Chen et al., 2020). People are the foundation of an organisation at all levels, and their full involvement enables their skills to be used to benefit the organisation (Vrabcová et al., 2022). An organisation will only achieve sustainable success if it has a clear strategy,

strong leadership, loyal and motivated employees, flexible processes and partnerships to add value to the products provided to its customers.

In the questionnaire survey ($n = 183$), the following forms of grassroots communication were investigated, which emerged as the most significant from a literature search of articles in Scopus and Web of Science: direct communication with management (Stacho et al., 2021), communication through immediate supervisor (Prouska et al., 2023), communication through employee representatives or a trade union (Chikazhe and Nyakunuwa, 2022), communication through the HR officer (Stacho et al., 2021), in-house grievance system – e.g. filing a complaint, anonymous mailbox, etc. (Chawla et al., 2016), surveys of employee opinion (feedback), views and attitudes (Dolamore et al., 2021). According to research (Chikazhe and Nyakunuwa, 2022; Siahaan, 2022), it is advisable to implement a combination of communication with the direct supervisor and other forms. If employee feedback towards management is viewed positively, optimal communication can be expected among all employees regardless of their hierarchy. According to several studies, the forms of communication above include (Gilmartin et al., 2019; Heller and Rowlinson, 2020; Djurkovic et al., 2021), brainstorming, electronic communication, communication through employee representatives or union, online meetings, webinars, video conferencing, face-to-face team meetings, workshops, discussions, written communication addressed directly to employees, a dedicated SW evaluation and feedback process, and oral communication addressed directly to employees.

However, quality care, education for quality, and the need for quality in all its aspects must be part of education and education for other cultural and human values, which communication from above and below strongly contributes to (Chen et al., 2020). Successful organizations are aware of this fact. Therefore they highly value the knowledge and skills of their employees, and hand in hand with this trend, they continuously expand and deepen the opportunities for smooth non-conflict communication, partnerships, training programs for all management, quality assurance and improvement activities that they gradually organize for their employees. Every employee of an organisation is not only a member of the social subsystem of that organisation (Vrabcová and Urbancová, 2021) but also a consumer of goods and services, a member of a particular family related to certain schools, churches, branches, political parties, etc. It follows that if a manager wants to lead the workers entrusted to them effectively, they must understand them in the context of a comprehensive social system that goes far beyond the boundaries of a given organisation (Stacho et al., 2021). Of all the perspectives for assessing the importance of quality to an organisation, the most important can be perceiving quality as a source of profitability in business. However, the TQM philosophy assumes that employees must be seen as complex individuals, not just as a set of abilities, knowledge and skills. When workers come to work, they are influenced by various external factors. It is the manager's job to be aware of these factors within their capabilities and to be able to use them to accomplish tasks.

The main objective of the research is to evaluate the implementation of selected forms of communication from below and above as part of the TQM philosophy in the context of selected identifying variables of Czech organizations. To our knowledge, no other research has examined selected aspects of internal communication (especially from below and above) in the context of TQM philosophy. Several types of research do not differentiate between bottom-up and top-down communication when examining partial aspects of internal communication (Dolamore et al., 2021; Zito et al., 2021). The present research fills this critical knowledge gap.

1. Methods of Research

850 Czech organizations were surveyed from 06/2020 to 12/2020. The questionnaire was designed to comply with ethical rules and the anonymity requirement. The questionnaire was filled in mainly by managers of organisations, or in the case of small organisations, by owners. A questionnaire survey in Google Forms obtained data ($n = 183$), and the return rate of the questionnaire was about 22%. The primary identification questions of the questionnaire survey include the following variables:

- the business sector of the organization (4.4% fall under the primary sector, 41.5% fall under the secondary, and 54.1% under the tertiary);
- the organization's size by the number of employees (26.2% fall under the category of fewer than 50 employees, 28.4% under the one with 51–249 employees, and 45.4% fall under the category of more than 250 employees);
- the majority ownership (45.4% have Czech owners and 54.6% have foreign owners);
- the annual turnover (38.3% fall under less than EUR 10 million, 37.7% under EUR 11–50 million, and 24% fall under EUR 50 million).

The Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test and chi-square test were used to evaluate the data. More details about the methods can be found in Mehta and Patel (2013). The statistical analysis was employed using the statistical program IBM SPSS Statistics, v. 28, with a significance level 0.05 corrected according to the Bonferroni correction, taking into account the number of identification questions. The Results chapter presents the results based on synthesis, induction and deduction.

2. Results of the Research

The results of the questionnaire survey on bottom-up communication showed that a large majority of the organizations surveyed use direct communication with management and through the immediate supervisor (see Table 1). Respondents were allowed to indicate more than one possible answer.

Table 1: Relative frequency of use of grassroots communication

Communication from below	Relative frequency (%)
Direct communication with management	55.2
Communication through immediate superior	52.5
Communication via employee representatives (trade union)	34.4
Communication via HR officer	29.5
Intra-company complaint system (e.g. filing a complaint, anonymous mailbox, etc.)	22.4
Surveys of employee opinion (feedback), views and attitudes	23.5

Source: author's elaboration

The quantitative research was further emphasized by examining the dependencies (Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test, chi-square test) of the implementation of communication from below and four selected identifying variables, namely the size of the

organization by the number of employees, the sector in which the organization is located, majority ownership and an annual turnover (see Table 2). The null hypothesis was tested with a significance level 0.05.

H₀₁: The chosen form of communication from below does not depend on the chosen identifying variable.

Table 2: Examining the relationship between the implementation of communication from below and the four identifying variables (Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test, chi-square test, $\alpha_{cor} = 0.0125$)

Communication from below	<i>p</i>-value (size by number of employees)	<i>p</i>-value (sector)	<i>p</i>-value (majority ownership)	<i>p</i>-value (annual turnover)
Direct communication with management	<0.001	0.255	0.006	0.016
Communication through immediate superior	0.002	0.471	0.025	0.005
Communication via employee representatives (trade union)	0.026	0.252	0.003	0.040
Communication via HR officer	<0.001	0.154	0.002	<0.001
Intra-company complaint system	0.009	0.769	0.002	<0.001
Surveys of employee opinion (feedback), views and attitudes	0.001	0.067	0.115	0.057

Source: author's elaboration

Table 2 shows that the null hypothesis H₀₁ is rejected at the adjusted significance level for all forms of communication examined except "Communication via employee representatives (trade union)" in the case of the identifying variable size of the organization by the number of employees and for most forms also in the case of majority ownership and annual turnover. On the other hand, the null hypothesis H₀₁ of dependence of the form of communication from below in the case of the sector to which the organization belongs cannot be rejected.

Direct communication with management is the most common form of communication for small and medium-sized companies by number of employees (up to 250 employees). It is also more common in domestic organizations. Communication through the immediate supervisor or HR officer dominates large organisations with predominantly foreign ownership.

Table 3 below shows the frequency of organisations according to the total number of forms of communication from below, i.e. 59 organisations (32%) use only one form, and 68 organisations (37%) use two forms. It can be seen that 1–3 forms of communication from below are used by almost 86% of the entire organization.

Table 3: Integrated number of communications from below

Number of forms of communication from below	Relative frequency (%)	Cumulative relative frequency (%)
1	32.2	32.2
2	37.2	69.4
3	16.4	85.8
4	9.8	95.6
5	3.3	98.9
6	1.1	100.0

Source: author's elaboration

The following Table 4 reflects the extent of use of selected forms of communication from above. Respondents were allowed to indicate more than one possible answer.

Table 4: Relative frequency of use of communication from above

Communication from above	Relative frequency (%)
Oral communication, addressed directly to employees	72.1
Personal team meetings, working meetings, discussions	65.6
Electronic communication	61.2
Written communication, addressed directly to employees	41.0
Communication via employee representatives or trade union body	38.8
Online meetings, webinars, video conferences	35.0
Brainstorming, brainwriting	22.4
Dedicated feedback evaluation process in SW	5.5

Source: author's elaboration

As shown in Table 4, the overwhelming majority use oral communication directly to employees, personal team meetings, work meetings, discussions and, last but not least, electronic communication. In contrast, fewer respondents indicated a "Dedicated feedback evaluation process in SW" (less than 6% of respondents). The quantitative research was further emphasized by examining the dependencies (Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test, chi-square test) of the implementation of communication from above and four selected identifying variables, namely the size of the organization by the number of employees, the sector in which the organization is located, majority ownership and an annual turnover (see Table 5). The null hypothesis was formulated at a 0.05 significance level.

H₀₂: The chosen form of communication from above does not depend on the selected identifying variable.

Table 5: Investigating the relationship between the implementation of communication from above and the four identifying variables (Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test, chi-square test $\alpha_{cor} = 0.0125$)

Communication from above	<i>p</i>-value (size by number of employees)	<i>p</i>-value (sector)	<i>p</i>-value (majority ownership)	<i>p</i>-value (annual turnover)
Oral communication, addressed directly to employees	0.932	0.641	0.965	0.088
Personal team meetings, working meetings, discussions	0.207	0.279	0.09	0.127
Electronic communication	0.001	0.193	<0.001	0.002
Written communication, addressed directly to employees	<0.001	0.729	0.002	0.013
Communication via employee representatives or trade union	0.003	0.209	<0.001	0.003
Online meetings, webinars, video conferences	<0.001	0.102	<0.001	0.081
Brainstorming, brainwriting	0.605	0.769	0.355	0.837
Dedicated evaluation and feedback process in SW	0.285	0.579	1	0.388

Source: author's elaboration

The results in Table 5 show that we cannot reject the null hypothesis H_02 at the adjusted significance level for the identifying variable "sector". On the contrary, the form of communication, "Communication via employee representatives or trade union", "Electronic communication" was found to be dependent on the identifying variables organization size by the number of employees, majority ownership and annual turnover. For the selected identifying variables the relationship was also confirmed for the form "Written communication, addressed directly to employees" and "Online meetings, webinars, video conferences". We cannot reject the null hypothesis H_02 at the corrected level of significance for the forms of communication "Dedicated evaluation and feedback process in SW", "Oral communication, addressed directly to employees", and "Personal team meetings, working meetings, discussions" for all the observed identifying variables.

Although the most common form of communication in large organisations with 250 employees or more is "Electronic communication" (74%), the vast majority of large organisations also report "Personal team meetings, working meetings, discussions" (72%), which ensures personal contact between employees. As can be seen from Table 4 and Table 5, the most common form of communication from above is "Oral communication, addressed directly to employees", which is represented relatively evenly in all types of organizations and its widespread use is reported by both domestic and foreign organizations (both over 70%) in all size categories by the number of employees.

The number of organisations that use face-to-face meetings and oral communication as a form of communication is 50%. Seven organizations indicated using only these two

forms of communication from above. The cumulative relative frequencies of the forms of communication used from above are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Integrated number of forms of communication from above

Number of forms of communication from above	Relative frequency (%)	Cumulative relative frequency (%)
1	16.4	16.4
2	16.9	33.3
3	18.6	51.9
4	17.5	69.4
5	20.8	90.2
6	7.7	97.8
7	1.6	99.5
8	0.5	100.0

Source: author's elaboration

The results in Table 6 show that 90% of the organizations surveyed use a maximum of 5 forms of communication from above. The majority of the surveyed organizations (52%) use a maximum of three forms of communication from above. It can be summarized that setting up quality internal communication helps set up total quality management in a given organization. It is a strategic factor in achieving process quality and increasing the organisation's competitive advantage. Organizational characteristics in practice significantly influence what types of communication are used and thus affect the TQM setup. The results of the research also show that the most common combinations of communication from below and above are "Direct communication with management", "Oral communication addressed directly to employees" (about 45% of organizations), and "Communication through immediate supervisor" again in combination with "Oral communication addressed directly to employees" (41% of organizations). This illustrates the central role of oral communication in organisations.

3. Discussion

Teamwork, cooperation, and quality circles are entirely unthinkable without the mutual communication of the employees of the organisation and their maximum awareness. Free and open communication means the free flow of information from the bottom up, from the top down and in all directions in the organisation. Free and open communication further means that mutual feedback can only work in an atmosphere of mutual trust, which is in line with Siahaan (2022) findings. The need for information is evident in the run-up to any organisational change, and the Covid-19 period was no exception, as confirmed by the research of Zito et al. (2021). Uncertainty tends to be a breeding ground for all sorts of rumours and is a source of employees' anxiety about their new tasks. The higher the uncertainty, the lower the quality and reliability of performance and the lower the productivity. Employees waste a lot of time trying to discover what is happening in the organisation and what is being prepared. Uncertainty and anxiety create the basis for completely irrational reactions. Communication and information are often selective or even reduced to assigning tasks to individual employees without the interrelationships and context in which they were to be implemented. Very often, employees only become aware of these problems immediately before or even after the implementation deadline.

Early information about the organization's goals and their upcoming concretization to individual workplaces creates essential motivation of employees and their creative cooperation, without which it is impossible to achieve quality and reliable performance of employees and hardly even quality production, which is in line with the TQM philosophy. The presented findings extend the research results of Djurkovic et al. (2021) in the area of labour productivity and also Stacho et al. (2021) in respecting organisational characteristics in TQM settings.

From the results of the literature search and quantitative research, some measures for successful communication can be recommended: Encourage open communication, be open to complaints, be decisive when giving instructions, be aware concerning workers and supervisors, remove stress and uncertainty from the workplace, be defined against verbal and physical aggression, respect the opinion of the partner, acknowledge mistakes, always start the work meeting in a friendly and positive way, let the partner speak, show sympathy for their views, address disagreements with questions, encourage every improvement, act in such a way that any mistakes are easily corrected. Further research will focus on selecting an appropriate method of communication to maximise knowledge and experience sharing amongst individual employees in the organisation.

Conclusion

Achieving effects in the organisation's activities and the associated high quality cannot be ensured by individual work but by an effective combination of skills and knowledge of individuals in the form of teamwork. The results show that using all forms of communication from below and above depends on organizational characteristics and, ultimately, the total quality management setup. The results showed that organizations should focus on using different communication methods to obtain quality feedback, based on which they can make the right decisions about the future direction of the organization and the setting of new goals. The theoretical contribution of the article is to demonstrate the importance of the choice of the type of communication in the total quality management setting. The practical contribution is presenting results from selected Czech organizations, which can be a best practice for other organizations. The limitation of the article is the relatively small sample of respondents. Still, nevertheless, the results are an essential picture of organisations' behaviour in the organisation's communication setting and the possibility of comparing organisations with each other.

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