# Evaluation Of Internal Communication Channels Used To Communicate To Employees During Unrest In Public Universities In Western Kenya

**Ali Molly Anyango**

Masters (Media Studies), Administrative Assistant, Maseno University

**Charles Nyambuga**

Ph.D. Media Studies, Department of Communication & Media Technology, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

**Yakub Adams**

Lecturer in Linguistics, Department of Linguistics, Maseno University

*Abstract: Communication experts have echoed the need for effective communication as a major factor leading to organizational success. Despite vast research on organizational internal communication, literature on how public universities in Kenya communicate to their employees during employee unrest is lacking. Public universities in Kenya have experienced recurrent employees unrest which could be as a result of ineffective internal communication between the university and its employees. This study evaluated internal communication channels used management of Kenyan public universities to communicate to their employee during unrest. It focused on quality of information, and communication models. During crisis, effective internal communication is vital as it is the only way the organization and employees can dialogue and stop the crisis. Statistics from 2013-2018 shows that most affected universities are in Western Kenya with 29.76% of unrest. The study was guided by Grunig's theory of Excellence (1985) and Media Richness theory by Lengel and Dafts (1988). 374 employees, 114 Union Officials and 6 PR Officers constituted the sample of the study. Data was collected through interviews, questionnaires and FGDs. The findings of the study established that the management of public universities in western Kenya uses noticeboard and internal memo to communicate to their employees during unrest.*

*Keywords: internal communication channels, unrest/crisis, employees unrest*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The study established internal communication channels used by management to communicate to their employees during unrest in Kenyan Public Universities in Western Kenya**.** It was based on the premise that internal organizational communication plays an important role in the performance of any organization and in meeting the competitive global market economy. Moreover, during crisis, effective internal communication is vital as it is the only way the organization and employees can dialogue and end the crisis. Despite varied research on organizational internal communication, literature on how public universities in Kenya communicate to their employees during unrest is lacking. Statistics from 2013-2018 shows that most affected universities are in Western Kenya, the former Nyanza region with 29.76% of unrest http://www.standardmedia.co.ke (2017).

The overall aim of crisis management is to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis (Coombs 2011). A fundamental feature of crisis management is crisis communication: the dialogue the organization has with its

stakeholders before, during, and after the crisis (Fearn-Banks 2007). In performing crisis communication, the main aspects are to provide information to stakeholders, and further to protect and maintain the image and reputation of the organization (Coombs 1995; Fearn-Banks 2007). Besides, Olsson (2014) noted that organizations that are strictly governed by upward and downward communication, crisis management plans and centralized leadership, are basically concerned with reputation protection and control information flow internally as well as externally. On the other hand, organizations that understand dialogue as a way of sharing experience with stakeholders, depend on discussion, decentralization leadership and improvisation are resilience oriented.

Organizational internal communication can be defined as the process whereby people within an organization give and receive messages (Dwyer, 2002 and Faules, 1994). Kreps (1990) defines Organizational internal communication as the process whereby members gather pertinent information about their organization and the changes occurring within it. According to Deresky (2000), managers use communication to coordinate activities, to disseminate information, to motivate people and to negotiate future plans. Olsson (2014) noted that organizations that are strictly governed by upward and downward communication, crisis management plans and centralized leadership, are basically concerned with reputation protection and control information flow internally as well as externally. On the other hand, organizations that understand dialogue as a way of sharing experience with stakeholders, depend on discussion, decentralization leadership and improvisation are resilience oriented.

Crises in any organization interfere with daily operations of employees which may influence their performance. During crisis, effective internal communication is vital as it is the only way the organization and employees can dialogue and stop the crisis. Communicating to those within the organization at the right moment is critical. Yet, it is also important that communicators convey much needed information through the appropriate channels, Schmidt (2011). This channel selection was examined in the foundational work of Robert Lengel and Richard Daft in 1988 in the development of their Media Richness Theory which the current study is rooted.

Employee unrest is a worldwide problem, they are agitations, strikes, picketing etc. Human assets in the 21st century are considered the most important asset of any organization as they are the key to success (Hazifa, sha and zaman, 2011). Article 37 of the Kenyan constitution provides that; every person has the right, peaceably and unarmed to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions to public authorities. Article 41(2d) that: every worker has the right to go on strike. University workers are represented in labor relations by: UASU, KUSU, KUDHEIHA as public officer defined by constitution of Kenya 2010 under article 260 (Constitution of Kenya, 2010).

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are to provide information to stakeholders, and further to protect and maintain the image and reputation of the organization (Coombs 1995; Fearn-Banks 2007). According to Schmidt (2011), crisis in an organization can take many forms. But whether they are accidental, financial, legal or otherwise, affected organization needs effective communication with both internal and external stakeholders. In times of crisis employees appreciate and increasingly demand feedback options such as face to face and intranet based two way communications. He further noted that, internal crisis communication should be conducted using established communication channels and venues in addition to those that may have been developed to manage specific crisis scenarios.

Communication practitioners perceive internal communication as a challenging area (Fitz & Partick 2004, Welch & Jackson, 2005), which significantly affects the ability of an organization to involve the employees into the environmental changes and understanding its evolving objectives (Welch & Jackson, 2005). Frank & Brownell (1989) defined internal communication as the communication transactions between individuals and/or groups at various levels and in different areas of specialization that are intended to design and redesign organizations, to implement designs, and to coordinate day-to-day activities. While Cheney and Christensen (2001), simply relate to internal communication as employee relations, statements of mission and organizational development. Furthermore, Welch and Jackson (2007), define internal communication as communication between an organization's strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designated to promote commitment to the organization, a sense of belonging to it, awareness of its changing environment and understanding of its evolving aims. Cornelissen (2008) defines communication strategy as the general set of communication objectives and related communication programs or tactics chosen by an organization in order to support the corporate strategy in the organization. In order to simplify within this study employees are recognized as internal stakeholders and the communication among them self, or across different hierarchies sharing the same context and communication channels as internal communication.

A strong relevance of detailed planning exists and crisis management plans are seen as a key to successful crisis management. Behind this emphasis on control and prediction there is also an information engineering approach to communication, which puts emphasis on information diffusion, carefully worded press release, media contact lists and training of spokesman (Gilpin & Murphy; 2008). Communication is thus reduced to a simple tool; skillfully and carefully planned communication is supposed to mitigate the effects of crisis.

Perfect communication is when the receiver understands exactly what the sender wants to express. Robbinson and Godbey (2010) noted that, inadequate communication is one of the most inhibiting factors of successful organizational performance. For instance, communication helps members in the organization to discuss relevant organizational issues and generate and share information for creating ideas and making decisions, so that both the organizational and individual goals are achieved. Jones; Gardener; and Gallois, (2004) assert that

every organization has a history and culture, reflected in current working practices. In addition, organizational capabilities are developed and enacted through intensely social and communicative process.

Communication structure in all organizations includes formal and informal communication. Informal communication or grapevine is between people within the organization. Downs and Adrian (2004) argue that it is an inevitable part of the organization that should be seen as a natural consequence of people interacting. Subramanian (2006) characterizes grapevine as a simple glance, smile or signal between people within the organization. Argenti (2009) asserts that face-to-face communication is still the most effective way to communicate with organizations, once the sender makes contact with the receiver the message is received instantly, thus the sender receives feedback there and then. He further explains that the sender has more control over message sent via face- to –face than a written message. Bratonand Gold, (1994) posit that, communication can flow in three directions: downward, upward and horizontally. An example for downward communication is managers communicating with their subordinates, upward communication flows to a higher level in the organization and communication that flows between employees at the same level in the organization is horizontal communication. Hartley and Bruckmann, (2002) noted that, there must be an effective balance between downward and upward communication. Communication should be an equal process between the sender and receiver in order to get the message through.

With the availability of multiple communication channels, organizations are faced with question of which channel to use for effective results. By matching the need of the audience, the aim and objective of the message and the urgency of the feedback, selection of appropriate media and medium is assisted. Channel selection should include consideration of message ambiguity, richness of media, organizational culture and resources at hand (Moyer, McKinnon, Rufus & Hart 2011). According to Smidts, Pruyn, & Riel (2001), it's the primary duty of the manager to create a fruitful internal communication climate by providing each employee opportunities to put forward their views get involved and guide them for the attainment of goals. Therefore the current study aimed at establishing the internal communication channels used by management of public universities, in western Kenya to communicate to their employees during unrest.

A. PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

The genesis of higher education in Kenya can be traced back to 1956 when the royal Technical College was established in Nairobi. It was then made a constituent college of University of East Africa in 1963 and grew to become the University of Nairobi in 1970, remaining the only university till mid 1980s. The government responded to increased demand for higher education, formalized the establishment of private universities in the 1980s and have now increased the number of public universities to thirty one. These public universities were established through Institutional Acts of Parliament under the Universities Acts, 2012 which provides for development of university education, the establishment, accreditation, and governance of universities (Universities Act No. 42 of 2012).

## II. METHODOLOGY

- ✓ *PARTICIPANTS* 374 employees from six accredited public universities in western Kenya, six public relations officers and 114 respective union officials took part in the study.
- ✓ *DATA COLLECTION* in this study, data was collected through a written questionnaire, focused group discussions and interview guides. The study targeted 374 respondents; only 302 respondents were able to respond to the instruments translating into 81% response rate which was quite adequate for the study. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate of 50% is adequate for analysis and reporting, while a response rate of 60% is good and that of 70% and above is very good. The response rate of 80.74% achieved in this study was indeed sufficient for analysis and reporting.
- ✓ *ANALYSIS:* Responses to the questions from questionnaires were coded in SPSS according to the theme derived from the research objective and analyzed. The responses to the interviews and focused group discussions were organized into themes and analyzed.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

These were the main findings of the paper:

### A. CHANNELS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION MOSTLY USED BY ORGANIZATION TO COMMUNICATE TO EMPLOYEES DURING UNREST

In order to achieve this, Public Relations officers of respective universities under the study were interviewed on the channels they use to communicate to employees during unrest. While the employees who participated in the study through questionnaires were also asked to choose channels of internal communication commonly used by the management of the organization they work for to communicate to them during unrest. The findings were presented in Table 1

From the findings it emerged that the internal communication channels commonly used by the management during unrest was university noticeboard 265 (87.7%) followed by internal memo 215 (71.2%) then union officials at 183 (60.6%). Meeting with management had 30.1%. University website scored 22.5%, while Whats App had 24.5%. Staff e mails scored 13.6%. Face book had 5.6%, newsletters scored 8.3% while short messages (sms) had 12.9%. The least used internal communication channel during unrest was twitter at 1.7%.

This finding differs with Gray (2009) who found out that immediate supervisor was a major source of information to employees and that communication from senior management was highly regarded. In contrary, Wyatt (2004) found out that,

those organizations who were rated as highly effective in communication used the Web to communicate, collaborate, and share resources. His conclusion was that highly effective organizations utilized the web and internet compared to others. For the current study, internet and web based channels were rated as follows: Staff e-mails (13.6%), WhatsApp (24.5%) and university website (22.5%) which is low compared to other channels.

| Item | | F | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Newsletter** | | | |
| Yes | | 25 | 8.3 |
| No | | 277 | 91.7 |
| **Notice board** | | | |
| Yes | | 265 | 87.7 |
| No | | 37 | 12.3 |
| **Staff e-mails** | | | |
| Yes | | 41 | 13.6 |
| No | | 261 | 86.4 |
| **Facebook** | | | |
| Yes | | 17 | 5.6 |
| No | | 285 | 94.4 |
| **Whats App** | | | |
| Yes | | 74 | 24.5 |
| No | | 228 | 75.5 |
| **Twitter** | | | |
| Yes | | 5 | 1.7 |
| No | | 297 | 98.3 |
| **Internal memo** | | | |
| Yes | | 215 | 71.2 |
| No | | 87 | 28.8 |
| **Meeting with management** | | | |
| Yes | | 91 | 30.1 |
| No | | 211 | 69.9 |
| **University website** | | | |
| Yes | | 68 | 22.5 |
| No | | 234 | 77.5 |
| **Short messages (s.m.s)** | | | |
| Yes | | 39 | 12.9 |
| No | | 263 | 87.1 |
| **Union officials** | | | |
| Yes | | 183 | 60.6 |
| No | | 119 | 39.4 |

*Key:f-frequency, %- percentage (Source:Field data 2018)*
*Table 1: Channels of Internal Communication mostly used by Organization to communicate to their Employees during Unrest*

The above findings was further supported by interviews with the Public Relations officers who confirmed that, the mostly used internal communication during unrest was the university noticeboard, internal memo and they also reach the employees through their respective union officials.

*Public Relations Officer3: "Whenever the university wants to communicate to employees, internal memos are sent to their heads of departments and some Pinned on the university noticeboards."*

The above findings was further supported by participants in both focused group discussions who reported that, the only official internal communication channel commonly used by the management whether there is unrest or not is internal memo pinned on the universities noticeboards and copies sent to various departments.

It was apparent from the results in table one that the management of public universities in western Kenya uses internal memos and noticeboards to communicate to their employees during unrest. Internal memo and noticeboard are kinds of one way communication that when used by the management the employees have no option but to read. That is they read and cannot give feedback, it does not give room for dialogue.

This was also mentioned by the following statement from the respondent:

*Respondent 120: "Our University operates only on one way communication, employees are served with memos on noticeboards but do not have a way of sending feedback. It's a kind of dictatorship in communication. We should have a particular channel where we can send our feedback……"*

Furthermore, memos have been in existence for decades thus needs to be integrated with other new media or new communication channels brought about by changes in technology. This idea is supported by Miller (2016), who opined that a number of changes have taken place in the process of communication mostly because of changes in technology. The ways employees communicate today compared to how they communicated in the last several decades have also changed. Therefore, they require constant evaluation of their communication practices to maintain and improve their effective functioning. This is not the case in the current study as shown by low scores of internet and web-based channels. This shows that despite changes in technology the managers of the public universities in Kenya still do not embrace it.

## B. QUALITY OF INFORMATION EMPLOYEES RECEIVED FROM THEIR ORGANIZATIONS

The respondents were asked to rate the statements on the information they received from the management of their organizations and its quality. The statements were rated through a five point scale: SA=5, A=4, 3=U, 2=D, 1=SD. The results were as shown in Table 2.

| Statement | SA (%) | A (%) | U (%) | D (%) | SD (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| You are always kept informed about organizational objectives and goals and how they are achieved | 12 (4.0%) | 30 (9.9%) | 34 (11.3%) | 196 64.9% | 30 (9.9%) |
| The management updates employees on current developments that relates to organization welfare | 10 (3.3%) | 22 (7.3%) | 9 (30%) | 158 (52.3%) | 103 (34.1%) |
| I am notified in advance of changes in the organization that | 2 (0.7%) | 42 (13.9%) | 11 (3.6%) | 191 (63.2%) | 56 (18.5%) |

| | SA | A | U | D | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| relate to my job | | | | | |
| The information received from the organization management is reliable and useful | 9 (3.0%) | 62 (20.5%) | 109 (36.1%) | 105 (34.8%) | 17 (5.6%) |
| The information received from the organization management is timely | 4 (1.3%) | 27 (8.9%) | 72 (23.8%) | 182 (60.3%) | 17 (5.6%) |
| In times of unrest my organization has a specific channel where employees get relevant information | 4 (1.3%) | 27 (8.9%) | 13 (4.3%) | 143 (47.4%) | 115 (38.1%) |
| My organization have a specific channel where employees channel their feedback | 3 (1.0%) | 28 (9.2%) | 18 (6.0%) | 153 (50.7%) | 100 (33.1%) |

*(Source:Field data 2018)*
*Key: SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, U=Undecided, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree*
*Table 2: Quality of Information Employees Received From their Organizations During Unrest*

Table 2 shows findings on the employees opinion on the quality of information received within the organization during unrest. Majority of respondents 196 (64.9%) said they were not always kept informed about the organizational objectives and how they were achieved. Summers, Humphrey, & Ferris, (2012), posit that internal communication provides employees with important information about their jobs, organization, environment and each other. Communication can help motivate, build trust, create shared identity and spur engagement; it provides a way for individuals to express emotions, share hopes and ambitions, celebrate and remember accomplishments. Basically, communication is the basis for individuals and groups to make sense of their organization, what it is and what it means. Effective communication entails an understanding of the nuances of organizational operations as well as the organizational culture. The study revealed that the employees were not always kept informed about organizational objectives and how they are achieved. This could be a sign that the employees are not aware of the objectives and probably where to get the information. For the organization to perform effectively which is the ultimate goal of any organization, its employees must always be kept informed about the organizational objectives. This is only viable when both employees and the management of the organization have a specific and common internal communication channels to access and send information.

109 (36.1%) of respondents who participated in the study were undecided on the reliability and usefulness of the information passed down to them from management. This finding means that the employees don't know whether information they got from the management of the organizations they work for is reliable or useful. This shows that the employees are not concerned about the information they got from their organizations, this could be because of dominance of grapevine which neutralizes the usefulness of the information received as it is the major source of information for the respondents. The respondents confirmed that grapevine was their main source of information 79.1%. (182) 60.3% of respondents felt that information they received from the management was not timely. When information does not reach the recipients in time then the recipients are left with no option but to depend on hearsay. This rumor caused by untimely information received by the respondents could be a contributing factor to employees unrest in public universities in western Kenya. The management of these organizations should ensure that the information reaches the employees in time. This would give both parties ample time to discuss and reach a consensus hence minimizing chances of misunderstanding and employees unrest. White et. al (2010), posit that complete timely information prevents rumor as incomplete and insufficient information causes people to speculate.

Wood (1999), noted that communication is one of the core management processes at any level of an organization, as staff in particular, need to receive information that is meaningful to their work and their commitments to the organization. As it is one of the core management processes during times of planning and change within any organization. Staff of the organization must understand the reasons for change and the process adopted to make decisions and implement those changes. For this to happen it is important that there be clearly defined channels of communication, and that staff receive information that is meaningful to their work. The respondents when asked if there is a specific channel where employees get relevant information during unrest 143 (47.4%) disagreed. This actually explains why grapevine was the main source of information to the employees during unrest It becomes necessary for the managements of public universities to have a specific channel where the employees can get information during unrest, this will reduce the use of grapevine which seems to be creating misunderstanding between the parties and equally aggravates unrest.

Lastly, 153 (50.7%) of the respondents said that the organizations they work for did not have specific channel(s) where employees can channel their feedback. Furthermore, some employees admitted that the information passed to them was relevant, complete and accurate but not timely. This is because they received grapevine first.

*Respondent 116: "Relevant, complete, accurate but not timely. Grapevine being the source of information in this university, it is distorted before receiving the actual information from the management. Due to changes in customer perception caused by technology and competitive environment, customers and employees demand timely and evergreen information".*

The above finding concurs with White et .al (2010) who observed that, information that employees got from the top management (CEO) had uneven distribution, and that information from top managers is often filtered, and sometimes distorted, as it is relayed through the layers of bureaucracy.

When considering the quality of information employees receive from the management during unrest, study revealed that, the employees were not satisfied with the quality of

information they received from management during unrest as they felt that they were not adequately informed. Furthermore, the employees felt that the information passed to them was not timely. This in turn paved way for grapevine as White et.al (2010) posit that complete timely information prevents rumors, since rumors occur when there is insufficient and incomplete information which causes people to speculate.

The study further revealed that there was no specific channel designated by the management where employees could get relevant information and channel their feedback during unrest. This was supported by the following statement from a respondent:

*Respondent 294: "……… employees should have a specific channel where they access information when there is unrest looming"*

Lack of proper channel where employees can receive and send information is a pointer that the employees of these organizations cannot get timely, adequate and relevant information from their organization during unrest and vice versa. This absence definitely can cause employees unrest as the employees will look for the information from fellow employees which may not be accurate, reliable and adequate. Therefore, the management of public universities in western Kenya should work on the modalities of establishing specific channel(s) which both employees and the management can use during unrest. Schmidt (2011) noted that, internal crisis communication should be conducted using established communication channels and venues in addition to those that may have been developed to manage specific crisis scenarios.

## C. INTERNAL COMMUNICATION MODELS USED BY ORGANIZATIONS

The respondents who participated in the study were asked to choose from variety of models the kind of communication model(s) their organizations commonly use. The responses were presented in Figure 1.
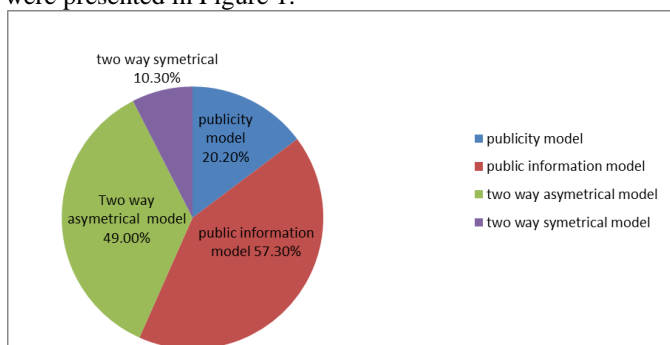


*Figure 1: Models of Internal Communication used by Organizations when communicating to its Employees*

When respondents were asked to choose the models of internal communication used by the management of organizations they work for, it emerged that, most organizations used public information model 173 (57.3%) which states that, the organization uses press releases and other one way communication techniques to distribute organization information. This was followed by two-way asymmetrical model at 49.0% which states that the organization uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as the organization desires and does not

use research to find out how stakeholders feel about the organization. It was also revealed that 61 (20.2%) of the respondents felt that their organizations used public model which states that, the organization uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave the organization desires. Lastly, 31 (10.3%) of respondents chose two-way symmetrical model which states that the organization uses communication to negotiate with the public, resolve conflict and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its stakeholders.

From interviews with public relations officers, it was noted that they used one way communication channels (noticeboard and internal memos) to communicate to their employees during unrest. But when asked about how the employees could send feedback or make enquiry about communication sent to them, they said that the employees are always free to write back to the relevant office. Hence they felt that they were using a communication model that allows for two way communication.

The above finding concurs with Grunig (2001) who observed that organizations practice several of the models together, with the public information model being the most popular Grunig's et.al (2001) research suggests the two-way asymmetrical model is more popular in corporations. Public information model is the commonly used model by the management of public universities in western Kenya as per the findings of the study. This model is not ideal as it denies the employees opportunities for feedback or dialogue with the management of the organizations they work for. Since the communication is one way, it creates room for hearsay which may aggravate unrest. This is because for example, after they have received one way communication pinned on their noticeboard from the management, they are left with no option but to read and accept since there are no channels for feedback. This scenario creates conducive environment for grapevine to reign.

Dunmore (2002) asserts that, to be able to suggest improvements or come up with new ideas is an essential part of employee self-confidence, commitment and participation. In order for employees to feel they are part of the organization, upward communication is important. Most systems of internal communication are asymmetrical, however, and they do not increase morale or organizational effectiveness.

Excellence theory by Grunig (1985) provides best practices in communication management in public relations. It offers four different communication models that organizations use to communicate to their publics. The recommended model of communication is a two-way symmetrical which is basically dialogue based approach Grunig (2001). This approach has been shown to be more effective than any other in resolving conflicts, preventing problems and building and maintaining relationship with the publics. Since the findings of the study shows clearly that the management of public universities in western Kenya use one way communication to distribute organizational information, the managers of these organizations should consider using a model that will allow dialogue between the employees and the management which may create mutual understanding between the parties hence no employees unrest. This is supported by Grunig (2001) who

noted that interpersonal communication is crucial in a symmetrical system, although employee media can complement it. Moreover, he noted that two-way symmetrical system of internal communication increases employees satisfaction with their jobs and with the organization.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The following were the conclusions for the study aimed at establishing internal communication channels used by management of public universities in western Kenya.

✓ On channels of internal communication used by management of public universities in western Kenya during unrest, the study concluded that the management of public universities in western Kenya uses noticeboard and memos to communicate to their employees during unrest.

✓ On quality of information employees received from their organizations during unrest the study revealed that, the employees were not satisfied with the quality of information they received from management during unrest as they felt that they were not adequately informed. Furthermore, the employees felt that the information passed to them was not timely this in turn paved way for grapevine. complete timely information prevents rumors, since rumors occur when there is insufficient and incomplete information which causes people to speculate. The study further revealed that there was no specific channel designated by the management where employees could get relevant information and channel their feedback during unrest

✓ The data gathered from respondents who participated in the study revealed that, most organizations used public information model which states that, the organization uses press releases and other one way communication techniques to distribute organization information.

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