



Exploring the strategic potential of internal communication in international non-governmental organisations



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ABSTRACT

The role and importance of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) has increased with globalization and the growth of global institutions. Despite this growth, academic research into INGO management remains limited and, due to their unique characteristics, management theories developed for for-profit organisations cannot be applied as is to INGOs. Internal communication is a critical area of management that has been proven to have a major impact on an organisation's effectiveness, particularly when managed strategically. Therefore this article explores the strategic management of internal communication within the INGO context. This study synthesised the current literature on this topic and included five case studies to understand the current state of internal communication within INGOs. It was determined that INGOs do not manage internal communication strategically. However, there is evidence that the implementation of strategic internal communication could help INGOs address several of their challenges and have an impact on their overall effectiveness. This study is exploratory and further research to identify the process for strategic internal communication in INGOs is needed.

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1. Introduction

With a growing impact on the social and economic welfare of people in modern society, the performance and management of INGOs is of increasing importance. Over the last two decades alone, globalisation has led to a rise of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) (Katsus, 2004). In 1981, there were 13,000 known INGOs worldwide. In 2001, this number had increased to over 47,000 (Anheier, 2005). Yet, while academic research into the management of NGOs has increased over the last decade, it has not kept pace with the growth of the sector (Anheier, 2005; Salamon, Sokolowski, & List, 2004).

Scholars like Anheier (2005) and Lewis (2007) argue that NGOs are a distinct type of organisation with specific management needs. They possess a set of unique characteristics that impact their management (Lewis, 2007). These characteristics do not excuse them from having sound management practice, but they do mean that management practices, generally developed for for-profit organisations, need to be evaluated within the unique context of NGOs. Internal communication is one domain in corporate management that needs to be evaluated within the NGO context.

Strategic internal communication has been called both the “promised land” (Oliver, 2000) and the “secret weapon” of successful organisations, particularly when managed strategically (Yates, 2006). Internal communication can be defined as strategic when it is managed for the purpose of aligning internal stakeholders with the organisation's strategic intent. When

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this occurs, strategic internal communication can lead to improvement in organisational performance as identified through the following indicators: increased employee engagement, commitment to and enhancement of the corporate reputation and organisational prestige (Dolphin, 2005; Meyer & De Wet, 2007). Yet, academic research on the process of internal communication generally (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Yeomans, 2006) and in INGOs in particular is not readily available.

This article aims to report on the main findings from a study that investigated both the gaps in literature on the strategic management of communication within INGOs and current practices of INGOs. The results of these two objectives are reported on in this article in order to provide insights into the current state of affairs in INGOs.

2. Theoretical background

This article depends on the synthesis of ideas from the INGO context *per se*, INGO management theory and strategic internal communication theory.

2.1. The INGO context

INGOs are the primary actors within global civil society, one of the three spheres of society, the others being the state and the market (Van Tulder & Van Der Zwart, 2006). All organisations within civil society are “organized, private, not profit-distributing, self-governing, [and] voluntary” (Salamon et al., 2004). In addition, INGOs are civil society organisations working in two or more countries and concerned with development (Salamon et al., 2004). Development is here defined as “improving the social, cultural, and economic well-being of certain sectors of society” (Swilling & Russel, 2002).

Despite these common characteristics, INGOs have diverse structures and roles. Van Tulder and Van Der Zwart (2006) identify three types of INGO structures: networks generally located in one country but operate internationally through networking and collaboration (Anheier, 2005); centralised global organisations with national offices tightly controlled by headquarters (Van Tulder & Van Der Zwart, 2006); and federations with a central coordinating body and a loose structure of associated organisations in various countries (Van Tulder & Van Der Zwart, 2006).

INGO roles can also be divided broadly into three categories: an operational service-oriented role providing aid delivery and development assistance (Lewis, 2007); a global policy and advocacy role playing “a key role in supporting democratic processes in the political sphere” (Lewis, 2007); and a counter-hegemonic activist role working outside government structures towards real social transformation (Lewis, 2007). A single INGO can often take on more than one of these roles, although this can lead to tensions within the organisation.

2.2. INGO management

Some NGOs have resisted the application of management principles because management evokes images of control and hierarchy, which contradict many INGO values (Lewis, 2007; Mustaghis-Ur-Rahman, 2007; Walsh & Lenihan, 2006). However, INGOs are increasingly criticised for failing to live up to expectations of their effectiveness. This lack of success can be attributed at least in part to underdeveloped management structures (Ossewaarde & Nijhof, 2008; Walsh & Lenihan, 2006). Therefore, the role and form of NGO management is now the focus of more attention and debate.

NGO management is not synonymous with business management. Campbell (in Lewis, 2007) showed that to understand NGO management both their organisational characteristics and their wider context need to be considered. For example, strategic management, and thus strategic internal communication, has been an uncomfortable fit for INGOs because of environmental and organisational characteristics.

The complexity and constant change of the INGO environment makes it difficult for INGOs to develop strategies for the three to five year period usually recommended in traditional strategic management approaches (Wilson-Graua, 2003). In addition, several INGO characteristics, including its values, its lack of a solid bottom-line and the vagueness of its mission make it necessary for INGOs to constantly strive to maintain their legitimacy. The unique characteristics of INGOs suggest that a postmodern strategic management approach may be appropriate for these organisations.

From the postmodern perspective, strategic management is no longer seen as a tool with definable steps and objectives, but rather a self-organising ever-changing process built through discourse and guided by complex and chaotic relationships and environments. Using the metaphor of a journey, Franklin (1998) describes the postmodern strategic management process:

“As we journey along our strategic route we remain ever alert to the need to change our pace and our direction as new events and unexpected futures cause us to reconsider, re-evaluate and re-strategize our future destination and take a new route on our eternal journey.”

This quotation serves to illustrate several key components of postmodern strategic management. The metaphor of an eternal journey highlights the need to approach strategic management as an on-going process rather than a distinct, time-limited tool. This characteristic fits well with the complex and changing environments of INGOs. The postmodern strategic management process is not a static top-down management approach, but rather a dynamic underlying process which

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