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Internal communication and organisational culture: The management interplay in the view of the Portuguese communication consultant

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to contribute to the extension of the internal communication theoretical field, and relate it to the professional practice of communication consultancies in Portugal. It aims at the understanding of internal communication and organisational culture from the standpoint of communication professionals, distinguishing it from other, most frequent studies, usually focused on the internal public (workforce) of the organisation.

Communication professionals were interviewed and asked about their perceptions on the use and further development of organisational culture towards definition of internal communication plans and how they manage this interplay. They were urged to think about it, to reveal their practices and to demonstrate the different ways to relate the proposed concepts, taking into account the communication routines of their clients and the ones from the consultancy.

1. Introduction

Contrary to what happens in management consulting, where we have a detailed and empirically grounded knowledge of the history, economics and sociology of this type of service, studies on communication consultancy are still incipient. Very little is known about the consulting work offered and performed by communication professionals in the field of strategic communication, despite the importance of these services in organisational decisions (Frandsen, Johansen, & Pang, 2013).

The growing pressure on CEOs to communicate with key stakeholders, both directly and through the media, also opened up opportunities for people working within the organisation, extending the role of former public relations departments towards an emerging group of communication consultants, first in the United States, then in Europe (United Kingdom and the Netherlands) (Engwall & Kipping, 2013, p. 88). The importance of management consulting is undeniable in the current context, and many of these companies have grown so much that they have exceeded the size of their clients. The need for companies to legitimize their communication decisions should also grow, so it is very likely that management and communication consultancy develop in increasingly integrated manner and that, in the future, communication consultancy may become part of management consultancy (Engwall & Kipping, 2013, pp.95).

In systemic consulting work, the consultant is an observer, who supports the client through various forms of learning, while in classical consulting, this work is much more directive. Regardless of the approach, the end result is increased business efficiency, so the task of professional consultants is to optimize the clients' ability to act, support them in finding alternative, upgraded courses of

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action and help them implement solutions to their problems (Röttger & Preusse, 2013, pp. 99–100).

Functions performed by consultants, and the position they hold in organisations differ greatly depending on context, but distortion often happens, “the consultancy market is, in fact, characterized by a lack of controls governing entry (open access to the profession, no protected professional designations) and the absence of standardized training” (Röttger & Preusse, 2013, p. 101). Consultants are hired on the assumption that they will correct deficits of human resources in communication and press departments, and bring expertise (Röttger & Preusse, 2013, p. 109). As external observers, the consultants are capable of recognizing their customers’ problems and observation blind spots and, in doing so, they are capable of reaching a better understanding of problems, thus providing more opportunities to advise and assist the client in achieving unbiased reflection capacity (Röttger & Preusse, 2013, p. 113). In addition to their knowledge, recognition of an expert status is essential for communication consultants’ role perception. Therefore, communication professionals need to prove their expertise and organisational role in order to be recognized and respected as internal communication consultants (Zerfass & Franke, 2013, p.123).

We positioned our approach in professional roles studies, as Dozier considers ‘professional roles’ – “abstractions of behaviour patterns of individuals in organisations” (Dozier, 1992, p. 327) and we intend to contribute to the understanding of communication consultancy practice. As external to organisations, consultants need to acknowledge organisational culture, in order to produce diagnosis and propose communication strategies. This need is even more acute in matters regarding internal communication. So this study’s main purpose is to examine how the internal communication consultants consider organisational culture in working out proposals for their customers and how the interconnection between internal communication and organisational culture influences their work and the choices of strategies to be applied. As such, qualitative method was used and in-depth interviews were conducted with Portuguese communication consultants, all of whom self-declared experts in internal communication services.

This article is divided into four main points. Initially, the concept of organisational communication and the importance of organisational culture are presented. Then, state of the art trends on internal communication, organisational culture and communication professionals in the context of communication studies are explored. Point three introduces the research methods, and finally results are presented. This section is divided in two main sub-sections: the viewpoint of the communication consultants on their work in internal communication; and the interconnection between internal communication and organisational culture in external consultancy service provision.

2. Organisational culture and communication

Culture can be envisaged as a coherent system of assumptions and values which distinguish one group from another and orient its choices. Culture tends to be an inalterable and tenacious phenomenon and the more deeply-rooted and diffuse its values, the more unchangeable culture will be. As set by Denison (1990, p. 2), organisational culture is “the underlying values, beliefs, and principles that serve as a foundation for an organisation’s management system as well as the set of management practices and behaviours that both exemplify and reinforce those basic principles”.

Organisational culture is created by the dominant coalition, perpetuated by the organisation’s functional systems and affected by social values and the organisation’s macro environment. Therefore, organisational culture is tied to structure and strategy, as well as, to the leader. Being an interdisciplinary subject, organisational culture has been studied in several disciplines, namely: organisational studies (e.g. Denison, 1990; Hatch, 1997; Hofstede, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2008); leadership studies (e.g. Schein, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 1987/2007; D’Aprix, 2011); management (e.g. Peters & Waterman, 1982; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and change management (e.g. Gagliardi, 1986; McCalman & Potter, 2015); organisational behaviour (e.g. Bauer & Erdogan, 2012; Robbins & Judge, 2005/1977) and human resources (e.g. Armstrong & Taylor, 1977/2014; Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson, 2011; Chalofsky, Rocco, & Morris, 2014); communication and public relations, specially tied to excellence theory (Grünig, 1992), power theories (Spicer, 1997; Plowman, 1998; Berger, 2005), organisational communication overviews (e.g. Miller, 1994/2012 Vella & Melewar, 2008; Mumby, 2013) and public relations approaches (e.g. L’Etang, 2008; Moss & DeSanto, 2011).

As for organisational communication, it is a discipline that has demonstrated scientific relevance since the end of the twentieth century, proved by an increase of publications on the subject, coupled with swelling involvement of worldwide communication consultancies (e.g. Vercic, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2012; Zerfass et al., 2013; European Communication Monitor, 2013) and top management (e.g. Zerfass, Schwalbach, Bentele & Sherzada, 2014). Also in Portugal, several studies have added to growing scholarship dealing with the strategic role of communication when integrated as a management tool, and conducted in integrated comprehensive and professional manner (e.g. Sebastião, 2012; Ruão & Kunsch, 2014).

Most of the approaches to organisational communication tend to identify two scopes: internal and external, derived from the main strategic public it targets, respectively: workforce and shareholders; consumers and community. But one must highlight that there are common traits and elements, so messages have to be coherent, involving multi-dimensional and concurrent engagement across multi-stakeholder and value networks. If we want organisational communication, or one of its scopes, to be strategic and provider of social, economic and legal acceptance, the approach must be consistently handled as a whole, and considering the elements of organisational and context cultures. Still, for the purpose of this article, the main concern is internal communication, i.e., communication prepared and established within the workforce of the organisation. The operational concept used for the present study is, as such, narrowed down to the geographical stand of the strategic public of internal communication itself, thus only considering communicative interplay of the whole staff and management of a given company.

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