**A qualitative enquiry into manager and non-management perspectives of internal relationship cultivation efforts in selected non-profit organisations in Kenya**

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*Abstract*

*Relationship management is a rapidly evolving paradigm in public relations research. Increasingly, public relations scholars recognise the pivotal role played by relationship cultivation strategies in sustaining healthy organisation relationships, which aid organisations meet their missions. Literature, however, has established the dearth of research on this subject in non-profit organisations NPOs in Kenya. The study was guided by one research question: How do management and non-management employees evaluate existing relationship cultivation strategies used in non-profit organisations? Subsequently, the purpose of this study was to establish how relationship cultivation strategies impact employee-organisation relationships (EORs). The study was guided by relationship management theory and two-way symmetrical communication framework. The non-profit organisations selected for this study comprise a large healthcare organisation and a faith-based organisation (FBO). Both organisations were purposively sampled as were the 24 participants in this study. An in depth interview guide was modified from an existing instrument to capture the objective of this study. The results of the study confirmed existing relationship cultivation dimensions. Participants identified a range of organisation-specific relationship cultivation strategies and reported a preference for more open and participatory relationship cultivation strategies and a participative leadership culture. Effective relationship building is hampered by among other factors, mistrust and inconsistent relationship cultivation strategies. In both organisations relationship cultivation was viewed as a human resource rather than a PR/communication manager role. The study concludes that for internal relationships to be effectively managed, relationship cultivation efforts should be a core task of public relations or communication managers. Further, these efforts should be intentional and invite employee participation. The study recommends a more robust public relations manager role that prioritises internal publics of non- profit organisations.*

*Keywords: Organisation-public relationships, employee-organisation relationships; relationship management; two-way symmetrical communication; public relation/communication manager*

**Introduction**

Relationship cultivation strategies are drawn from the theories of interpersonal relationships particularly from the early scholarly work of Canary & Stafford (1992; 1994), Stafford & Canary (1991). Public relations scholars including Grunig & Huang, (2000); Hon & Grunig, (1999) adapted the concept of relationship cultivation strategies in interpersonal communication and applied them to organisation relationships. Recent literature on relationship cultivation strategies confirms existing constructs and suggested additional dimensions (Kelly, 2001; Pressgrove, 2013& 2016, Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016). Relationship cultivation strategies are used by organisations to manage organisation relationship (Williams & Brunners, 2010) and have not been adequately studied in the non-profit sector.

Relationship management represents a paradigm in PR research. For over three decades, public relations scholars have shown a growing interest in the communication manager's role in managing those relationships that are critical to organisational success. This was largely influenced by the need to demonstrate the value of public relations in the organisation by linking PR activities and strategies to the fulfillment of organisation mission. The development of the relationship management paradigm is also associated to the push for measurement and evaluation of PR efforts, also called the strategic turn of public relations research and practice (Holtzhaussen & Zerfass, 2015).

Over time relationship management scholars adopted the term organisation-public relationships, (OPRs) as an overarching term for relationships external to the organisation's (Grunig, 2002), while employee-organisation relationships (EORs) describes internal relationships. Employees have long been recognized as the most critical of organisation stakeholders (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Broom & Shia, 2013) and relationship building as key to organisational success (Weymes, 2002).  However, little is known about the impact relationship that cultivation strategies have on employee organisation relationships in non-profit organisations in Kenya since much of the research on the subject has been carried out by scholars from the West as demonstrated in the literature section of this paper. The following research question was proposed:-

RQ1: How do management and non-management employees evaluate existing relationship cultivation strategies used in non-profit organisations?

Prior to 1984, public relations (PR) practice was centred on the three tenets of product publicity, media relations and employee communication (Bruning, 2001). This effectively narrowed the understanding of public relations practice as a product of mass communication efforts, where PR practitioners were viewed principally as information conduits. Although the terms "relationships" was common enough in public relations repertoire, no attempts, at the time, were made to measure them.

The relatively young history of relationship management studies point towards Ferguson's (1984) study as the catalyst that thrust relationship management to the fore. Ferguson's content analysis of over 170 research abstracts of the *Public Relations Review* found three main foci: social responsibility, issues management and public relationships. The research further revealed that of the three subjects, public relationships showed the most potential for theory development and further research. This study was followed by a flurry of immense scholarly interest that spanned three decades.

**Literature Review and Theory**

Relationship management theory is relatively recent with much of the early scholarly work done in the 1990s. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) advanced a five-dimensional scale drawing on concepts from other related fields including interpersonal communication and marketing. They proposed: trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment as key relational outcomes to be measured.

Hon & Grunig (1999) extended previous studies and proposed six dimensions:  control mutuality, trust, commitment, satisfaction, exchange and communication relationships. A year later, Grunig & Huang (2000) recast this model suggesting that organisation-public relationships develop along three stages: relationship antecedents, relationship cultivation strategies and relationship outcomes.

Relationship antecedents focus on the motivation or reason that parties form a relationship (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; 2000). Antecedents of organizational relationships define the phenomenon that causes organizational relationships to begin or the "impetus" that causes them to develop.

Over time, relationship management studies have shown a gradual shift from measuring relational outcomes to evaluating relationship cultivation strategies (Hung, 2004; Ki & Hon, 2009; Shen, 2011), which is the focus of this present study. Relationship outcomes is a measure of relationship quality and may be linked to relationship antecedents and relationship

cultivation strategies. Newer studies (have suggested stewardship as a new construct that lead to more positive relationship outcomes

Relationship cultivation strategies, are primarily communication strategies designed to promote healthy organisational relationships. These daily communication activities are aimed at improving the quality of organisation relationships Ki (in Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). Hon & Grunig (1999); Grunig & Huang (2000) identified six (symmetrical) cultivation strategies that produce positive outcomes: access; positivity; openness; shared tasks; networking and assurances.

*Access* refers to communication channels provided by organisations and or publics to facilitate meaningful intra-organisational relationships between management and non-management employees while *positivity* describes attempts to make the interaction between the organisation and stakeholders (in this context, employees), enjoyable or satisfactory. A key element of positivity is feedback (Ki and Hon, 2009).

Although literature shows that *openness* is not a predictor of positive relationships, it is assumed that all relationships, organizational and otherwise, require some level of openness (Ki & Hon, 2009). The fourth element, *sharing tasks*, describes how all parties in a relationship should perform their required tasks (Hon & Grunig, 1999), which is the effort an organisation makes to form relationships with a particular public, in the context of this study, its employees. The concept of *assurances* refers to an organisation's effort to demonstrate care for the relationship and commitment to the relationship.

Internal communication as an important facet of relationship management provides employees with critical information about their jobs, organisation, the work environment and of course, one another. Effective internal communication builds trust, creates shared identity and motivates an engaged work force.

In this present study, symmetrical communication (Grunig, 1992; 2006) was used as a secondary theoretical framework. While reiterating the importance of internal publics, Board (in Moss & Desanto, 2011) suggested that successful internal communication strategies ought to employ symmetrical communication.

Grunig & Hunt, (1984) conceptualised a typology for studying public relations. These original four models represent an evolution of PR research from earlier rudimentary communication and rudimentary models. The press agentry and public information models

represent the more traditional, one-way type of communication where organisations focus on sending information to stakeholders without much concern about feedback from them. One-way communication represents the more elementary understanding about how communication works.

The two-way asymmetrical model presents an improvement from the two earlier models, but proves to be relatively ineffective because the feedback may be ignored by organizations. Organisations carry out research in order to find out what their stakeholders are thinking, however, this intelligence is not applied to facilitate mutual understanding or to make internal changes. Communication in such a context only serves organization interests and is usually top-down.

Organisations that use the two-way symmetrical model employ research to negotiate with publics, resolve conflict, and promote mutual understanding and respect. Listening and dialogue become important aspects of this model to manage conflict and to cultivate relationships with both internal and external strategic publics (Grunig, 2009). Symmetrical communication uses open communication, listening, feedback and positive reinforcement as relationship cultivation strategies. This study combined three tenets drawn from the two theories: access; open communication; listening and voice.

Relationship cultivation strategies have been studied by several Western scholars. Ni's (2007) qualitative study of management and employees' perspectives of EORs offered a more unbiased perspective of EORs in contrast to Hung's (2005) study, which focused solely on management perspectives. This current study also explores perspectives about relationship cultivation strategies from both management and non-management perspectives.

Levenshus (2010) examined the 2008 US President Barack Obama online campaign strategy as a case study to demonstrate the potential of online platforms as a participatory and grassroots empowering tool. In a different study, Cho & Huh's (2010) examined how major US corporations used corporate blogs to build and maintain relationships with various publics.

Several studies on relationship cultivation strategies have focused on the non-profit sector. Bortree (2010) investigated relationship cultivation strategies between non-profit organizations and adolescent volunteers. The study suggested guidance as a new cultivation

strategy, which along with other existing constructs is a predictor of relationship quality outcomes between adolescent volunteers and a non-profit organization.

Cultivating relationships with prospective donors (Waters, 2008, 2009); communities (Penning, 2014) and other specialised publics becomes a core task of PR managers working in non-profit organisations often because their survival depends on initiating and maintaining healthy EORs and OPRs. Newer studies in the non-profit sector have suggested stewardship (Kelly, 2001) as an additional dimension of relationship cultivation (Waters, 2011; Waters & Bortree, 2013; Waters & Tindall, 2013; Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016) that predicts positive relationship outcomes.

Storie (2018) explored the confluence between relationship antecedents and relationship cultivation efforts in the realm of public diplomacy. Among other findings, the results of this study suggested newer relationship cultivation dimensions demonstrating the versatility of the subject.

In a different study, Huang, Lynn, Dong, Ni and Men's (2022) focused on the effect of relational efforts on public engagement in two culturally diverse environments during the Covid-19 pandemic by content analysing companies' social media posts drawn from China and US. A similar study carried out much earlier (Hung, 2004) discovered that culture indeed plays a role in how diverse cultural groups perceive relationship cultivation.

As a growing area of interest amongst PR scholars, Ki (2015) linked relationship cultivation strategies to strategic communication pointing out that both share some commonalities key of which is the intentional effort to produce an outcome.

**Observation Method**

A qualitative design was used since the central question of this study sought to establish participants' perspectives of relationship cultivation strategies used in their respective organisations. Subsequently, the case study method (Yin, 2014, 2018) was applicable to this study. Initially, seven NPOs were identified and approached by the researchers to participate in this research. The main selection criteria was that they have a public relations/communication department. Out of these purposively sampled organisations only two agreed to participate in this study. This was a limitation of the study.

The participating organisations were a large healthcare non-governmental organisation (NGO) with over 300 employees (both management and non-management) and a faith based university with about 250 employees. Both organisations requested anonymity and are identified in this study using pseudonyms. The healthcare organisation was identified in this study as AM, while the faith based university was identified as UD.

Entry into AM was facilitated by a key informant, who is part of management. Subsequently, management participants were purposively sampled in in order to get a good mix of upper, middle and lower level managers. Snowball sampling was used to identify non-management participants. Thirteen management and non-management staff agreed to participate in this study from AM.

Entry into UD was facilitated by the fact that one of the researchers in this study works there. Eleven participants comprising management and non-management staff agreed to participate in the study from this organisation. The researchers secured the requisite permissions to carry out the study in the two NPOs. Similarly participants were individually approached to voluntarily participate in the study. As per proper research protocol, their written consent was secured prior to the study. All participants' identities were concealed to protect them from any possible harm (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) and were identified using pseudonyms. To minimise bias in UD, participants were selected from different departments other than the one where one of the researchers in this study works.

Researchers carried out 24 in depth interviews with participants using an interview guide modified from Grunig's (2002) tool for exploring organisation relationships. The interview guide was pretested prior to the actual study and changes were made to pare down repetitive questions. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015). A research assistant transcribed all interview data for this study. Data was analysed drawing requisite codes and themes that are described in detail below under the key tenets of interest to this study.

Given the nature of qualitative interviewing and data analysis, Saldana (2013) suggests that a research question alignment for coding in order to enable the researcher is able to harmonise findings with the relevant ontological and epistemological positions. Subsequently, the researchers used *a priori* coding, which are theoretically driven and *in vivo* coding which allows the researcher to use the exact words of participants (Saldana, 2013; Bazeley, 2013).

In order to further minimise researcher bias, a code recode strategy was applied at the data analysis stage to test the consistency of the findings (Santana, 2013; Bazeley, 2013).

**Results Access**

In AM, participants identified several communication channels that the organisation used to builds EORs. Newsletters, intranet and other internal publications were mentioned by participants as one of the ways that employees hear from management. $AM_2$, who is in non-management, appreciated the newsletter as a forum that gave visibility to her programme, which was one of the smaller ones in the organisation and subsequently, not as well funded.

> It is a very good forum. I have really enjoyed it. At some point I even thought we were a separate entity from the rest of the organisation.

Team building, another relationship cultivation strategy was described more of a reactive rather than proactive measure:

> …I would say that this is a reactionary type of response to building relationships, usually when something is going wrong.

Participants expressed an appreciation and a desire for more face-to-face (FTF) communication, of which one form is management visits. Here, the contrast between management and non-management perspectives was stark. $AM_1$, a member of the dominant coalition said:

> …It takes the form of emails, but also it takes the form of staff meetings and impromptu meet the people visits. When you walk around, you listen to people, you observe and see.... all that is very important. You connect with people... We do that a lot, across the board…

Management visits, however, elicited fear from non-management employees. $AM_2$ linked this cultivation strategy to bad news due to previous experience. Subsequently, she suggested that management visits and meetings not only be convened to give bad news but also to share good news.

Open door policy was mentioned by 50% of the participants as common practice among several managers and thus became an important theme. Open door policy was linked to yet distinct from management visits and was largely appreciated. It was instituted by a past CEO and has since been embraced by subsequent managers and organisation leaders. Organisation

heads as positive culture bearers, therefore was an important sub theme emanating from the initial theme.

> …I think the senior management relates well with the top most managers than the others, the rest of the staff because to us it would be very rare to actually engage the senior management. But one person that I have found very open is the last two country directors, the top managers of the organization have an open door policy which we didn't have before…$AM_3$

Open door policy was appreciated by non-management employees because it empowered them and embraced all employees regardless of position. $AM_4$, however pointed out that depending on the manager, "…the door was not entirely open…" Open door was also identified as an important avenue to address issues.

Participants in UD outlined several relationship cultivation activities including: the weekly newsletter, the weekly Chapel that provides opportunity to interact, departmental team building activities, the Friday dress down policy, branded T-shirts and diaries, which build a sense of ownership with the organisation.

The two activities singled out by 80% of the participants were the Vice Chancellor Tea and Fun day.  The Vice Chancellor Tea was an activity that brought together employees and the senior management for fellowship and informal gathering around tea. A question and answer session formed part of this strategy. Participants however were divided on when it began and whether it was still a key feature in the life of the organisation.

The other frequently mentioned activity was a team building event that brought the entire University community together. Similar to the VC Tea, it was not clear to participants at the time of the study, whether this event was ongoing. They described these activities as sporadic and not well thought through. $UD_1$ was not sure what name was given to this activity but summed up her thoughts as follows:

> …I know we had fun here at some point. It was a fun day. But I think we don't have to have a hit and run. We need consistency. We need to buy in people. It was good beginning though. We should not have stopped...

$UD_2$ asserted that while the idea behind this relationship cultivation activity was good, it was also not marketed well. This response and others raised by other participants in UD pointed towards a greater need for involvement of employees in relationship cultivation efforts and more participatory communication. Some of the participants also mentioned that the Fun Day

lost its desired impact because of the perception that employees were required to attend as opposed to it being a voluntary event.

**Open Communication**

Participants in AM gave varying, and at times, conflicting responses, describing internal communication as one way, two-way, open and top-down. Following were some of the participants' voices on this subject.

$AM_5$, who is a member of the dominant coalition (senior management), described communication as open and two-way, which he credited to the HR and not the communication department, while $AM_4$, who is a team leader, but not part of the dominant coalition also described internal communication as "very open," where staff is given an opportunity to speak. In contrast, $AM_6$ described top-down communication particularly in regards to decisions affecting work-related decisions:

> ...there's no room for engagement. Like now you see, you came in through this door. We never used to use this door....so one day we come and find it's shut. It's for patients only. Use the other door. So, the other day they needed space, the clinic needed space. So we just got an email,  we are moving you guys … there's no engagement. You're just told this is happening…($AM_6$)

A different manager described internal communication as, "relatively open," and a factor of organisation culture. She also recognised the important place of the informal grapevine avenue of internal communication.

> ….Our culture here is quite relaxed. We also have of course, as any other organization, a lot of formal and informal channels of communication. So I can say generally, I wouldn't say there is restriction, there is free flow of information. But then of course there is also the grape vine that exists *(LAUGHS)* which is very healthy. So we have also a lot of information that goes via the grape vine…

In AM, the formal channels of communication come in to confirm or disconfirm what is in the grapevine. Open communication was positively linked to improved performance especially by non-management employees.

In UD, 70% of the participants described internal communication as one way or top down pointing towards asymmetrical rather than symmetrical communication.

> ...most of the communications we get are on email. That is why the less formal meetings like the teas can be used for some of those communications. But most of the times it will be a memo, an attachment that has information that needs to be

disseminated and of course when management meets, then at a department meeting the manager will report what was discussed in the meeting. Is it collaborative? To a certain extent. Can it be better? Yes it can. And I think now there are technology, there are forums that we can use to promote more two way communication between management and staff (UD$_1$).

The researchers noted that the use of the word "dissemination" in itself denotes one-way communication. The above excerpt and the one below portrayed little room for interaction in existing internal communication platforms, in this case, email.

"...The communication tends to not invite dialogue. It mostly informs. And here I am talking about communication that is between the management and the community…the way it is packaged. (UD$_2$). One manager admitted that decisions by management needed to be communicated more effectively.

> ...But you see again sometimes if you don't have an effective channel of communication, that gives room for all manner of speculation and sometimes even miss information or miscommunication. Of course there has been an effort to ensure that through the corporate affairs communication is made on issues that relate to whether it is management decisions and things like those…(UD$_3$).

The above responses were consistent across management and non-management participants, where all of the participants agreed that there is an information gap in internal communication channels in this organisation. Although there was an appreciation of internal communication channels, particularly the newsletter, there was some non-management employees who reported limited opportunities to raise issues affecting them.

**Feedback: Listening, Voice**

Feedback is an important aspect of symmetrical communication framework, particularly the constructs of listening and voice. AM$_2$ said that the organisation does not have a forum for employees to raise issues with management as other organisations, regardless of the established feedback mechanisms discussed earlier and highlighted by other participants.

One of the crucial aspects of feedback to (especially) management communication or raising issues was anonymity and this was raised by both management and non-management employees. Participants evaluated some of the formal feedback channels in the organisation.

The suggestion box was identified by several participants as one crucial way for employees to give feedback to management as AM$_3$ described:

> …There is this box. It is somewhere around the security office. I don't know...You know sometimes we have staff tea, and it is supposed to be opened around that time,

> just before people go for the staff meeting. And sometimes it doesn't have anything. People tend not to use it. People tend to lean more towards sending anonymous emails or anonymous tips, you know, just somebody writing a note and slipping it under somebody's door...

AM$_7$, who is a non-management,  expressed dissatisfaction with how the Suggestion Box was used during staff meetings, while making suggestions on how it could be improved as a feedback tool.

> … the only problem with that avenue is that the person who opens it is not a junior person, it must be a senior person. So when they are going through these contents, maybe some sensitive issues they don't bring them out. (LAUGHS DERISIVELY) They do editing. They cannot bring everything because sometimes they are attacked directly. We are told not to mention names, but sometimes some people get so annoyed that they write the names. Yes. It is not very open, it is selective. Even if it were you, you cannot open a box if you see something against you.

As a follow up question to this response, the researchers asked the participant to give suggestions on how the suggestion box could be better utilized.

> The way it should be done, me I am thinking and I had even said it, when opening this box, we should have about three people. Junior staff, middle class and maybe senior so that these things are put on the table. Then you go through them one by one. So if none is mentioned, you go and mention. But if you give it to one person, automatically *hautasikia* (you will not hear about it)…AM$_7$

AM$_7$ also raised the issue of trust and openness. Besides suggesting that the process should be participatory, he brought out the perceived mistrust of this feedback tool and the fear that employees experienced raising issues.

It was clear from both management and non-management participants that internal communication is wanting. Participants described poor communication, sporadic communication, inadequate or incomplete communication, one-way or top down communication.

About 80% of participants in UD linked listening with some of the arbitrary decisions that have been made by management illustrating management inability or unwillingness to engage employees on decisions made. Participants also indicated that internal communication is often inadequate and incomplete. Among other things, inadequate communication foments mistrust and leads to speculation.

Sometimes there is need to have a history or to have more details sent out to employees before even a memo is sent. I think a memo should just firm up what has already been discussed, especially for crucial matters. It may not apply to everything, that will not be practical, but there needs to prepare the landing space for the communication to come out. This should be very key to a communication specialist, because it only determines whether the communication is received…(UD$_1$).

…communication is critical to enabling the employees to understand where the organisation is going and certain changes within the organisation. And many times when communication is not taking place, when there is no communication, and  therefore there would be room for people to speculate on what is happening (UD$_4$).

About 60% of the participants in UD raised the importance of effective internal communication to facilitate work, which in turn affects work relationships. Some participants articulated the importance of clarity and etiquette in internal communication as having an impact on EORs.

Participants made several suggestions about how the relationship cultivation activities and internal communication may be improved. Over half of the participants said the cultivation efforts should be better communicated and more regular as opposed to being sporadic. Besides this, relationship cultivation efforts should be explained and as one participant said, management should involve employees in decision making about those efforts.

Over 40% of the participants appreciated department retreats as a way to build EORs, but were unsure whether they would continue. General staff meetings were also isolated as another means of building EORs rather than meeting when things were going wrong. Generally, there was an appreciation of FTF meetings. Another suggestion was that relationship cultivation strategies be honed at the department level before moving to the larger organisation. Department meetings and retreats were singled out as effective strategies in that regard.

**Discussion**

Participants outlined the importance of internal communication as a tool that facilitates work and work relations (the converse of this being true). Others highlighted the fact that communication is a learned skill as opposed to being innate. Internal communication was further described as an element of organisation culture, which was negatively described as sporadic and contradictory.

It is important to underscore that there was a consensus from both management and non-management in both organisations, that internal communication in this organisation was wanting and needed to be improved. Of interest to this study was how internal communication was perceived in relation to Grunig's (2002) symmetrical/asymmetrical divide.

Responses from AM participants raised some critical questions: If communication is open and bolstered by an open door policy, why don't employees exploit those avenues? Some of the non-management staff responses indicated fear of reprisals -  power relations (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

This present study brought to fore the importance of effective internal communication mechanisms that are trusted and have effective feedback mechanism as a prerequisite for good internal relationships. Key issues that emerged in relation to relationship cultivation strategies was the importance of employee voice in a management decision making processes and also the freedom to raise issues in a threat free environment.

In their extended study of excellence in public relations, Grunig, et al (2002); Grunig (2006) pointed out the value of listening to stakeholder voices as one of the hallmarks of excellent public relations.  Effective communication feedback mechanisms give voice to employee issues and in the absence of these, employees device their own ways of raising issues. As two sides of the same coin, listening and voice has attracted a growing body of scholarly interest including, Edwards (2018) and Mears, Oetzal, Torres, Derkaust & Ginossar (2001), who explored employees from a subaltern perspective. Studies on (organisational) listening is a growing area of interest among relationship scholars including Bodie (2013); McNamara (2015) Gordon (2011), Yeomans, (2016) and others.

Open communication or openness emerged as an important factor in aiding effective EORs as documented by Grunig & Huang (2000) and a concept of Grunig's (1992;  2006) symmetrical framework and Ledingham & Bruning's (1998) relationship management framework. Except for positive reinforcement, which was not a key focus of my study, the three other cultivation strategies were corroborated in this study.

Management and non-management participants in AM spoke about open communication and open door policy as a key relationship cultivation strategy. However, they also mentioned top-down or one-way communication perhaps highlighting the fact that internal

communication cannot be described in rigid terms. The fluid nature of organizational relationships means that they may shift horizontally along the spectrum of asymmetrical to symmetrical. It was clear from this present study, that the symmetrical/asymmetrical divide of internal communication and relationship cultivation strategies are too rigid to capture some of nuances of EORs, perhaps due to the changeable nature of human relational and communicative behaviour, which was one of the criticisms directed at the symmetrical framework (L'Etang, 2008) and brought out in the literature review section of this paper.

About 40% of the participants mentioned "engagement." One middle level manager said that management had successfully engaged employees, although non-management employees contradicted this claim. Engagement studies, which span corporate communication and HR (Eldor & Vigod-Gadot (2016) fields is a growing phenomenon in PR literature as evidenced from several studies including Men (2015). An engaged workforce is seen as a predictor of organisational success.

Non-management participants in the two organisations generally expressed varying levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with internal communication and other relationship cultivation measures; however the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction was dependent on various extenuating factors including work environment, leadership culture, and organisation leaders' handling of crisis.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

This present study brought to fore the importance of effective internal communication mechanisms that are trusted and have effective feedback mechanism. Key issues that emerged in relation to relationship cultivation strategies was the importance of employee voice in a management decision making processes and also the freedom to raise issues in a threat free environment.

It also emerged from this study that internal communication is a learned skill pointing toward the need for capacity building in this area. The fact that relationship management was construed by most participants as a human resource rather than public relations/communication manager role, presents some challenges for public relations scholarship. Although the human resource function employs communication, it cannot replace the need for effective internal communication, which ought to be facilitated organisation-wide by the public relations/communication manager. Although the two roles

converge, their distinctiveness ought to be appreciated so that internal communication is enhanced in order to maintain healthy EORs. This distinctiveness must be captured in organisation structure and explication of key roles communicated internally.

Further, internal communication is a product of organizational leadership culture but also an important relationship antecedent. Some participants also expressed the desire for more face-to-face (FTF) and participatory communication with top management particularly on critical matters affecting employee welfare as opposed to the more traditional top-down measures that negatively impact EORs. Mishra & Boynton (IPR, n.d.) reported in their study employees' preference for face to face communication with direct supervisors resulting in more engaged employees. Grunig (2006) pointed out that transformative rather than autocratic organizational leadership as a key feature of excellence in organisations. Importantly, the findings of this study point towards preference for a more participative culture bolstered by more dialogic forms of internal communication. Research shows that strategic organisational leads to a more engaged workforce (Men & Stacks, 2014; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Vercic & Poloski, 2017; Men, 2015)

The purposive sampling used in this study was a limitation, although this sampling strategy is not uncommon in qualitative studies. Another limitation of the study was that only two organisations participated in this study. As earlier explained, several of the organisations originally selected to participate in this study, declined.

Further research in employee-organisation relationships may examine the aspects of power relations between management and non-management employees and the impact that has on organisation relationships. Relationship cultivation studies may also examine whether relationship cultivation strategies change over time. For instance how Covid-19 and other disasters have impacted those existing strategies cultivation strategies since several organisations have had to shift to mediated platforms in the wake of the pandemic particularly in the local context.

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