

## Investigating employee perceptions of leadership communication: a South African study

**DAJ BORNMAN \***

Department of Business Management, University of Pretoria  
*dawie.bornman@up.ac.za* \* corresponding author

**G PUTH**

Department of Business Management, University of Pretoria  
*gustav.puth@up.ac.za*

### Abstract

There has been extensive communication research conducted from a leader's point of view regarding how leaders form an integral part in organisations but not a lot of research investigating leadership, and specifically leadership communication from the viewpoint of employees (i.e. specifically as followers).

The purpose of the study is to investigate employee perceptions of leadership communication. This was firstly done by conducting a literature review on key aspects and secondly through a newly developed e-mail survey questionnaire conducted with employees of different South African business organisations. Quantitative data was collected from three hundred and seventeen (317) employees as participants and the raw data was analysed using statistical computer software.

The findings of the study were reported through descriptive statistics and a factor analysis. The study revealed that South African employees perceive that leaders do not correctly utilise leadership communication and that leaders do not understand what it means to be a 'communicating leader'. Organisations should therefore implement training and development programmes for all individuals within leadership positions which will develop communicating leaders that are aware of what they are lacking and where they can improve themselves within their organisational environments.

### Key phrases

communication management; employees; leadership; leadership communication; perceptions; South Africa; survey questionnaire

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As organisations consist of many overarching rules or structures that have to be coordinated by certain individuals; management aspects such as planning, organising; leading and control have become critical. One of the main factors of success is often how to inspire qualified people to get things done or to accept change – which is one of the key aspects of leadership. Northouse (2010:171) supports this notion by pointing out that *leadership*; a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal; thus becomes a crucial issue internally and externally for any organisation that desires to compete in national and international markets.

To be effective leaders; top management within an organisation should demonstrate leadership by using influence; inspiration; power and knowledge through a series of effective communication and interactions with their teams (Barrett 2008:305; Hackman & Johnson 2009:11; Harvey & Riggio 2011:113; Northouse 2010:171).

In order to develop and employ effective communication management; the management cadre of organisations; and especially its executive management cadre; needs to demonstrate leadership communication abilities and have the necessary acquired expertise (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven & Moreno 2014:73). Hamrin (2016:382) found that when individuals in leadership positions do not communicate effectively; then employees perceive a deficient relationship between the leaders and employees as well as an unequal distribution of information among the leaders and employees.

Often there is confusion surrounding the term *communication management* and how it comprises of a combination of different types of communication. Within the context of the current study and within the management sphere the focus falls on *organisational-* and *corporate communication*. *Organisational communication* provides organisational direction and employee motivation (Barrett 2008:305) while Steyn and Puth (2000:5) defined *corporate communication* as communication on behalf of an organisation.

In the 2014 European Communication Monitor; conducted by Zerfass *et al.* (2014:74); a surveys amongst 42 European countries indicates that 88,3% of European communication professionals rate effective communication as very important for great leadership. Therefore; despite organisations having different structures; different goals and different

levels of responsibilities for employees and management; Zerfass *et al.* (2014:74) state that *leadership communication* could be one of the key drivers for organisational success.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Within the international body of knowledge; a vast majority of studies focus on the perceptions of leadership communication from the perspective of the leaders themselves (Brown & Treviño 2014; De Vries, Bakker-Pieper & Oostenveld 2010; Fairhurst & Connaughton 2014; Men & Stacks 2013; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin 2013). This normally creates a distorted picture of leadership communication; as most leaders perceive their leadership communication as flawless or even immaculate.

Only a few studies exist that focus on the research and measurement of the perceptions of employees regarding leadership communication within business organisations (Illes & Matthews 2015:12; Johansson, Miller & Hamrin 2014:147; Zerfass, Verčič & Wiesenberg 2016:37). This is even more evident within the South African body of knowledge.

## 3. PURPOSE STATEMENT

The study set out to investigate employee perceptions of leadership communication within various South African business industries.

This was done by firstly; conducting a *literature review* on key concepts investigating various conceptualisations and relationships within the different research fields of leadership; communication management and leadership communication.

Secondly; a sample of South African business organisations were identified and selected; where *quantitative research* was conducted and gathered among employees through an online survey questionnaire. This phase included employees who work under the executive and group management levels of the various business organisations.

The objective of the questionnaire was to measure key aspects and perceptions specifically focusing on leadership communication.

#### **4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study is based and guided by the following specific research objectives (from a business or organisational perspective) as they emanated from the problem statement and purpose statement:

- to focus on the body of knowledge and to investigate several concepts; perceptions and viewpoints specifically focusing on leadership communication;
- to develop a new structured quantitative survey questionnaire to measure employee perceptions of leadership communication in various South African business organisations;
- to conduct an online survey among employees within various South African business organisations to identify their perceptions of leadership communication within their respective organisations; and
- to identify shortcomings and barriers hindering leadership communication;
- to interpret implications; indicate areas for further study and prospects for future leadership and communication management research; practice and education.

#### **5. ACADEMIC VALUE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH**

The principal academic value and contribution of the research is that it addresses an important contemporary management issue, namely the perceptions of employees regarding leadership communication within business organisations. This could also contribute in developing the first building blocks of assisting top management in organisations to ensure that they are aware of their leadership communication; which could in turn ensure that organisations do not lose valuable employees or damage the organisational reputation (internally and externally).

#### **6. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature section of the study investigates the key concepts that make up the study; which include: organisational- and corporate communication; leadership; organisational leadership and leadership communication.

## 6.1 Organisational- and corporate communication

Steyn & Puth (2000:6) point out that organisational communication developed from speech communication and is strongly related to both communication and organisational theory. Steyn & Puth (2000:7) continue by stating that organisational communication concentrates predominantly on the organisation as a system and mostly follows a structural approach to studying communication *within* organisations.

A critical aspect when focusing on communication *within* organisations is that of internal communication (Barrett 2008:305). Barrett (2008:305) identified that effective internal communication will assist CEOs to achieve their organisational vision and will motivate employees to do their best work; as well as providing organisational direction and employee motivation.

Communication to employees needs to position employees to help achieve various organisational goals and should include the following objectives: (1) educate employees about the organisational vision and strategic goals; (2) motivate employee support for the organisation's strategy; (3) encourage high performance and discretionary effort; (4) limit misunderstandings and rumours that may damage productivity; and (5) align and position employees to help them achieve the organisation's performance objectives and goals (Barrett 2008:307). Landsberg (2000:97) states that to accomplish these goals; messages need to be clear; consistent; and targeted; and that there are certain tools that may assist to target communication such as vision; sense of urgency; symbolic actions; management of the 'grapevine'; and key performance indicators.

Organisational leaders cannot always regulate what occurs within an organisation; but they can exercise significant influence over how events are understood through organisational communication (Barrett 2008:305). Taking this into consideration; it is important that organisational leaders assist employees (as their followers) to correctly interpret organisational communication and messages.

By implementing a two-way symmetrical communication system; interpersonal communication and dialogue can occur between stakeholders and top management (Grunic & Hunt 1984:23). In the case of the study the focus falls specifically on how two-way symmetrical communication could and should function within organisations.

Steyn and Puth (2000:5) indicate that the purpose of *corporate communication* is to increase organisational effectiveness by means of creating and maintaining relationships with stakeholders.

Van Riel and Fombrum (2007:13) adds to this notion that corporate communication should be seen as a set of activities involved in arranging and managing all internal and external communication aimed at establishing favourable starting points with stakeholders on which organisations depend. Furthermore; Van Riel and Fombrum (2007:14) elaborated on corporate communication and stated that it should also have expressive characteristics. These characteristics should be visible; distinctive; authentic; consistent and transparent. Stakeholders such as organisational members develop a shared meaning for events as they gather and interact; as communication is not confined within the organisation but communication is the organisation (Hackman & Johnson 2009:238).

Due to the nature of the current study and the viewpoints it explores; it is imperative to take a detailed look into communication from an internal perspective; therefore focusing on organisational communication. Furthermore; before investigating the link between organisational communication and leadership (i.e. leadership communication); it is important to first focus on leadership in general; and then narrowing it down to leadership in a business context as organisational leadership.

## **6.2 An overview of leadership**

Within the body of knowledge; Hackman and Johnson (2009:10) identified four primary definitional themes of leadership have been identified: (1) leadership is about who you are; (2) leadership is about how you act; (3) leadership is about what you do and (4) leadership is about how to work with others. Leadership is a process of mutual influence amongst leaders and followers; in which each participant operates as part of integrated collective groups in a complicated and ever-shifting environment; in an effort to achieve desired goals (Harvey & Riggio 2011:70).

Leadership can also be regarded as a continuum of moments in time; which is based on an ancient philosophy called Phenomenology (i.e. the belief that everything is constantly changing and that each individual experiences a perception that is unique to him or her in

that moment in time) (Illes & Matthews 2015:16); therefore leadership changes constantly and individuals experience and perceive unique leadership moments recurrently.

### **6.3 Organisational leadership**

The broad concept of *organisational leadership*; as identified by Harvey and Riggio (2011:113); assists in providing an organisational vision; building commitment towards the vision; and contributing to strategy formulation and execution.

Through organisational communication; organisational leaders needs to help employees achieve various organisational goals and should include the following objectives: (1) educate employees about the organisational vision and strategic goals; (2) motivate employee support for the organisation's strategy; (3) encourage high performance and discretionary effort; (4) limit misunderstandings and rumours that may damage productivity; and (5) align and position employees to help them achieve the organisation's strategic and operational objectives and goals (Barrett 2008:307).

Furthermore; Barrett (2008:308) states that to accomplish these goals; organisational communication needs to be clear; consistent; and targeted which emphasises the importance of how organisational leaders should assist employees (as their followers) to correctly interpret organisational communication and messages.

Tools that may assist leaders to target organisational communication; according to Landsberg (2000:97); include: vision; sense of urgency; symbolic actions; management of the 'grapevine'; and key performance indicators.

Prahalad and Lieberthal (1998:109) stated that leadership; in an organisational context is therefore a universal phenomenon that is no longer the exclusive domain of the executive or managing officer of an organisation. Furthermore, Prahalad and Lieberthal (1998:111) indicated that due to organisational leadership (and leadership in general) being different from situation to situation and from individual to individual; employees should be seen as one of the key internal stakeholder groups for organisations.

Organisational leadership facilitates excellence in others; as it has a sensitive humanistic dimension; and is the mastery of anticipating; initiating and implementing change (Bass & Bass 2008:15). Bass and Bass (2008:15) also stated that organisational leadership is the

ability to *influence*; *motivate*; and *enable others* to contribute to the success and effectiveness of the organisations of which they are members. Within the same notion; organisational leadership is a process of influencing organisational members; including top management; which leads to management; which leads to collaborative endeavours (Choi & Choi 2009:293).

#### **6.4 Leadership communication**

Leadership communication in an organisational context can be used to modify the attitude and behaviours of others (Hackman & Johnson 2009:11); and in the case of the study; internally amongst organisational top management and non-managerial employees. Therefore; in order to meet shared group goals and needs; organisational communication; corporate communication and organisational leadership should function together as *leadership communication*.

Puth (2002:11) refers to the term *leadership communication* as the communication skills of organisational leaders which entails the understanding of leadership communication and how it directly influences all other management functions in an organisation. Whereas Zeffass and Huck (2007:120) labelled *leadership communication* as change leadership and the ability to create an environment that encourages innovation by shaping the meaning of new ideas; technologies; processes; products; and services within social relationships.

Thorpe and Gold (in Gold, Thorpe & Mumford 2010:77) found that effective leaders are skilled at sharing and responding to emotions through communicating affection; liking; and excitement to followers. In essence this means that these effective leaders know how to channel their emotions in order to achieve their objectives and to maintain friendly group relations. Furthermore, Thorpe and Gold (in Gold, Thorpe & Mumford 2010:79) elaborate that emotional intelligence also now becomes increasingly important with every step up the organisational ladder. Higher-level positions are generally more complex; involve more communication and have a greater impact on the bottom line; and so establish a positive emotional climate.

Leadership communication is therefore an essential balance between logic and emotion and requires five skills which include: (1) perception, appraisal, and expression of emotion; (2)



attending to emotions of others; (3) emotional facilitation of thinking; (4) understanding and analysing emotional information and employing emotional knowledge and (5) regulation of emotion (Gold, Thorpe & Mumford 2010:79).

Linking leadership communication in an organisational environment and how it will have an effect on employees; Solaja, Idowu and James (2016:113) found that where there is good leadership communication; that there is bound to be increasing numbers of employees who support the organisational values. Solaja *et al.* (2016:114) elaborate on this notion by stating that good leadership communication can then increase employee productivity and produce employees that would want collaborate with the management of their organisations; and ensure that critical organisational aspects are strategically managed.

This focus on different viewpoints within the body of knowledge regarding organisational communication; corporate communication; leadership; and ultimately leadership communication was examined through literature reviews of textbooks and academic journal articles. These viewpoints were then utilised as a framework to assist in developing the study's new structured survey questionnaire.

## **7. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

After conducting a literature review on the key concepts of the study; the second phase consisted of the development of a new survey questionnaire pertaining leadership communication. The newly developed questionnaire consisted of a 5-point Likert type scale (Cooper & Schindler 2013:308) which required respondents to indicate their current perceptions (i.e. an agreement scale) of each item in the questionnaire.

A pre-test was conducted using a draft survey questionnaire. Ten individual employees of one selected organisation were contacted and asked to respond in an on-site self-completion session at their organisation within a time frame of 15 minutes. Employees were asked to complete an informed consent form before beginning with the questionnaire and a facilitator was also available physically during the pre-test self-completion session to answer any questions that the respondents might have had.

The aspects that were tested during this pre-test included: respondent interest; continuity and flow; question sequencing; and length and timing. Cooper and Schindler's (2013:369)

respondent pre-testing method was used. This pre-test also assisted to identify if there were certain areas in the survey questionnaire that were unclear to the respondents. The respondents indicated that all the items were understandable and that each question asked was unique; therefore no repetitive items. Respondents indicated that it took a long time to complete the questionnaire but that they understood the items and that the questionnaire was easy to complete. Therefore the survey time frame was extended from 15 minutes to 20 minutes.

After the pre-test; a sample of twenty-three different South African business organisations were contacted to participate where an online survey would be conducted amongst employees. The selection criteria included that these organisations had to have a person or department dedicated to communication management (i.e. specifically internal communication management) and that the organisations had to have different branches throughout South Africa in different provinces. Seven organisations responded positively to participate and fell within either one of the following industries: (1) automotive; (2) mining; (3) banking and financial management; (4) medical and life insurance; (5) farming and agriculture or (6) communication management consulting.

Each organisation was asked to assist and provide a minimum of forty (40) employees to participate. As each South African business organisation is uniquely structured; the participating organisations consisted of a different number of employees with different responsibilities and work ethics. A total of three hundred and seventeen (317) employees responded and all of these responses were analysed. The study can be regarded as cross-sectional as it was conducted only once and at one point in time.

## **8. RELIABILITY, VALIDITY AND ETHICS**

Creswell (2014:141) indicates that reliability focuses the quality of a study's measurement method in terms of its ability to ensure that the same data could be collected each time the research is repeated and that the same results would be achieved if the research were to be replicated. As a pre-test was conducted using a draft survey questionnaire before the final data collection instrument was distributed; the researchers utilised internal consistency

reliability which reflects the extent to which the tests or procedures assess the same characteristic; skill or quality; and could be accurate; consistent or stable.

Neuman (2003:179) states that validity should reflect truthfulness and denote a match between a study's construct and a study's measure. Validity signifies how well an idea about reality fits in with actual reality; or how well the social reality being measured through research matches the constructs researchers use to understand it.

The study's literature assisted to correctly define the various concepts and categories within this study and by comparing the data collection method and data collection instrument with other studies that also investigates leadership communication through quantitative measures; the study's validity was tested (Illes & Matthews 2015:12; Johansson *et al.* 2014:147; Zeffass *et al.* 2016:36). The data was collected using Qualtrics software; captured in Excel and analysed using SPSS.

In terms of ethical considerations participants of the study electronically gave their consent by continuing with the online questionnaire. Participants in the study did not receive any incentives (i.e. monetary or non-monetary) to motivate them to participate and since they were older than 18 years of age; no parental consent was needed.

Since a convenience sampling approach was followed; descriptors such as gender; age or culture were not specified for participation. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any point without negative consequences.

## **9. RESULTS**

The data that was collected was interpreted in two ways; firstly by assessing the descriptive statistics; and secondly through a factor analysis.

### **9.1 Descriptive statistics**

The study required that respondents indicate their current perceptions of leadership communication on a survey questionnaire containing sixty measurement items. Eight leadership communication themes were identified through the literature review and analysed through a newly developed survey questionnaire.

The eight leadership communication themes were: (1) leadership skills; (2) leadership styles; (3) culture; (4) change; (5) power and influence; (6) ethics; (7) strategy formulation and sharing the vision; and (8) followership.

Within each of these eight themes; items were developed and constructed on a 5-point Likert type agreement scale where 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree. Items most and least agreed with regarding the perception of leadership communication is discussed in the following section.

### **9.1.1 Items most agreed with**

The ten highest mean scores **most agreed with** (along with its standard deviation) for the items interrelated to the perception of leadership communication amongst participants are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 depicts that item 15 within the total pool of leadership communication items was most agreed with in terms of perception and was calculated at a mean of 4,33 and a standard deviation of 0,70. This indicated that employees perceived that communicating leaders expected high performance standards of followers. This top box score was followed by item 60 (with a mean of 3,83 and a standard deviation of 0,93) and item 34 (with a mean of 3,76 and a standard deviation of 0,90).

Based on the items employees highly agreed with; the highest three top box scores displayed that employees perceived communicating leaders as individuals: (1) who currently expect high performance standards from followers; (2) who encourage followers to work independently; and (3) who make sure that followers are aware of their respective organisational strategies.

Although these results represent leaders who are operationally and strategically engaged; this does not necessarily imply trust relationships between leaders and followers; as indicated in the next section.

**TABLE 1: Ten highest top box scores for items most agreed with regarding the perception of Leadership Communication**

Mean	Standard deviation	Perception (Item) (To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement?)
4,33	0,70	Our leaders expect high performance standards of followers (15)
3,83	0,93	Our leaders encourage followers to work independently (60)
3,76	0,90	Our leaders make sure that their followers are aware of the organisational strategy (34)
3,75	0,90	Our leaders make it clear why organisational change is needed if it occurs (25)
3,73	0,91	Our leaders communicate well in a group situation (5)
3,70	0,89	Our leaders delegate challenging tasks and responsibilities to followers (54)
3,70	0,94	Our leaders persuasively communicate the organisational vision (10)
3,70	1,01	Our leaders concentrate on finding solutions instead of looking for problems or excuses (43)
3,68	0,97	Our leaders inspire followers to support change initiatives (58)
3,67	0,89	Our leaders communicate in a way that creates an environment that encourages change (1)

\* 1 = Totally disagree; 5 = Totally agree

Source: Self-constructed by authors (2017)

### 9.1.2 Items most disagreed with

The ten lowest mean scores (along with its standard deviation) for **most disagreed with** items that were related to the perception of leadership communication amongst participants are reported in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that item 17 within the total pool of leadership communication items was the most disagreed with in terms of perception and was calculated at a mean of 2,81 and a standard deviation of 0,92. This indicates how employees perceived follower involvement when communicating leaders made organisational decisions.

This bottom box score was followed by item 8 (with a mean of 2,86 and a standard deviation of 1,11) and item 32 (with a mean of 3,07 and a standard deviation of 0,99). Within the items employees disagreed with most; the three bottom box scores showed that employees perceived their leaders as individuals: (1) who lack the ability to involve followers when organisational decisions are made; (2) who listen to followers but do not act upon hearing follower concerns; and (3) who might possibly withhold information from followers in their respective organisations. This stands in stark contrast to the idea of a ‘communicating’ leader.

**TABLE 2: Ten lowest bottom box scores for items most disagreed with regarding the perception of Leadership Communication**

Mean	Standard deviation	Perception (Item) (To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement?)
2,81	0,92	Our leaders involve followers when organisational decisions are made (17)
2,86	1,11	Our leaders listen to follower concerns; but do not act on them (8)
3,07	0,99	Our leaders do not withhold information from their followers (32)
3,20	1,04	Our leaders speak to others objectively about followers when they are not present (49)

Mean	Standard deviation	Perception (Item) (To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement?)
3,26	1,10	Our leaders do not have hidden agendas during interactions with followers (42)
3,27	0,99	Our leaders look after the best interests of followers (48)
3,30	1,10	Our leaders show trust in followers in order to create more leaders (26)
3,33	1,04	Our leaders view followers' work output as more important than the followers themselves (14)
3,33	0,97	Our leaders act as mentors to followers (18)
3,33	1,04	Our leaders regard follower welfare as important as their own (29)

\* 1 = Totally disagree; 5 = Totally agree

Source: Self-constructed by authors (2017)

## 9.2 Factor analysis

The factor analysis entailed a Principal Component Factor Analysis using a normalised Varimax Rotation which was applied to all sixty measurement items. From the scree plot of the factor analysis of all items; it was evident that the total pool of items could be extracted into seven factors regarding perception. This assisted to identify which measurement items fell within which extracted factor; and within which dimension of leadership communication.

Only items with a factor loading value of 0,5 or higher; which represented two or more items; were used and represented in the factor analysis discussion. This was done due to the Cronbach's Alpha value calculations which could only occur if there were two or more variables that represented a factor. Nunnally (1967:68) suggested that for early stages of basic research; if the reliability falls between 0,5 and 0,6 (i.e. the alpha score or value) then

it is sufficient. Therefore; taking cognisance of this; very high levels of internal consistency and reliability were evident.

The seven perception factors (i.e. agreement) that were extracted for the leadership communication items focused on: (1) followership and interaction; (2) verbal and non-verbal feedback and direction; (3) communicating organisational strategy; (4) communicating change initiatives; (5) delegation and encouragement; (6) information sharing; and (7) communicating performance standards and work outputs.

The subsequent tables outline the extracted factors; the rotation sums of squared loadings; mean values; factor loading averages and the Alpha scores.

As indicated in Table 3 the Varimax Rotation was applied to the total pool of 60 items. This rendered a factor resolution of seven factors that cumulatively explained 68,7% of variance. The percentage variances indicated the ratio of the largest to the smallest item variances, while cumulative variance displayed how the percentage variance of each factor was added up to calculate the entire variance of all factors. Only factors with a factor loading value of 0,5 or higher, which represented two or more items, were represented above.

The first perception factor, followership and interaction, translated that employees perceived communicating leaders as individuals who do not clearly communicate while interacting with followers and that communicating leaders should show trust in followers in order to create more leaders.

Secondly, verbal and non-verbal feedback and direction, indicated that employees perceived verbal and non-verbal feedback and direction from communicating leaders as unclear and therefore needs to be improved.

The third factor, communicating organisational strategy, translated that employees perceived communicating leaders as individuals who currently do not share the organisational vision with employee and also do not included them when formulating strategies for the organisation.

Communicating change initiatives as the fourth perception factor highlighted that employees perceived communicating leaders as individuals who do not communicate effectively regarding change within their respective organisations.



**TABLE 3: Factor resolution and percentage variance explained for dimension 1: Perception**

Factor number and name	Rotation sums of squared loadings		Mean	Factor loading average	Alpha score
	% Variance explained	Cumulative variance explained			
1. Followership and interaction	20,78	20,78	3,44	0,66	0,97
2. Verbal and non-verbal feedback and direction	13,59	34,37	3,57	0,71	0,90
3. Communicating organisational strategy	8,85	43,23	3,62	0,69	0,88
4. Communicating change initiatives	8,73	51,96	3,55	0,58	0,88
5. Delegation and encouragement	7,85	59,81	3,65	0,60	0,87
6. Information sharing	3,21	63,02	3,31	0,58	0,78
7. Communicating performance standards and work outputs	2,80	68,72	3,83	0,67	0,65

Source: Self-constructed by authors (2017)

The fifth factor, delegation and encouragement, showcased that employees perceived communicating leaders as individuals who do not utilise their delegation and encouragement abilities in the correct manner, and that communicating leaders should assist followers to take initiative in finding ways to reach follower objectives. Information sharing as the sixth perception factor translated into the extent to which employees perceived whether communicating leaders shared important organisational information with them and whether they did or did not distort information when they gave information to their followers.

The final perception factor, communicating performance standards and work outputs, indicated that employees perceived communicating leaders as individuals who do not communicate performance standards or work output requirements that followers need to adhere to and that communicating leaders viewed follower work outputs as more important than the followers themselves.

In Table 3, the alpha score (also referred to as the Cronbach's Alpha) within this factor analysis was a model that displays measurement of internal consistency and reliability, ranging between 0 and 1, and was based on the average of inter-item correlation. The factor extraction method that was applied to the entire pool of items considered the variables in the analysis to be a sample from the universe of potential variables, which then were grouped within a certain number of factors. This method maximised the alpha reliability of the factors and indicated that seven factors were evident within the total pool of measurement items.

The factor that consisted of the highest mean value was the seventh factor: communicating performance standards and work output, with a value of 3,83 (with a factor loading average of 0,67 and a standard deviation of 0,87). This points out that the average mean score for all of the items included in Factor 7 and on the agreement scale were situated within the sphere of the scale point "Neither agree nor disagree", although this also indicated that Factor 7 could be moving towards the scale point "Agree". This can be translated that employees perceived communicating leaders as individuals who did not communicate performance standards or work output requirements that followers needed to adhere to. Employees did not perceive leadership communication and its link with communicating performance standards and work outputs as completely negative, however this indicated that employees wanted communicating

leadership to clearly set organisational goals, and should clearly communicate performance standards and the work outputs expected of followers.

## 10. ORGANISATIONAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

With the latest communication strategies and technology, an organisation can communicate more effectively with its target market and stakeholders on a global level and ensure that the organisation's reach is as big as possible. Although this is imperative for organisational success, if the internal stakeholders do not share in the mental model of their organisation, then the organisation will without a doubt be negatively affected. A critical internal stakeholder group such as the employees of an organisation therefore needs to be aligned with the organisation's mental models, strategies and vision. This can be addressed by investigating an aspect such as leadership communication.

All employees conduct their work activities under the guidance of departmental-, functional-, or general staff management. When an individual is assigned to a management position, he or she is sure to have individuals that will report to them. This is where leadership plays an integral role. As all managers are not leaders, the development of leadership should not be underestimated amongst employees in management positions. Once an individual is regarded as a leader, then he or she has a responsibility towards his or her followers or team members.

In overall terms, it is evident that leaders are not communicating as effectively or efficiently as employees need them to do. Therefore, it is imperative to identify the areas within leadership communication that are unsatisfactory and need improvement or growth within business organisations.

Furthermore, through the data analysis it is evident that communicating leaders should also strive to improve the ways in which they: (1) motivate employees (i.e. specifically followers) by showing them how their efforts contribute to the success of the organisation, (2) make sure that their followers are aware of the organisational strategy, (3) make sure that their followers know what is expected of them through performance standards and work output measures, as well as, know what the implications of the strategy are for them, (4) interact with followers in a way that influences followers positively, (5) look after the best interests of

followers, (6) treat followers with respect when delegating work, (7) be aware of their verbal and non-verbal feedback and direction when engaging with followers, and (8) really care about the personal well-being of their followers.

## **11. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

One of the possible limitations of the study was that only seven business organisations responded positively to participate, resulting in the question whether the study can be regarded as representative of the wider South African business context. This is, however, a moot point and the authors are confident that the number of participating respondents was sufficient to render adequate levels of reliability and validity in the statistical analyses.

The fact that the study focuses exclusively on an employee sample is also a limitation. It is important to not only focus on the perceptions of employees but also the perceptions of their communicating leaders. For the study however the use of an employee population or employee sample is relevant because the perceptions of employees regarding leadership communication was investigated.

Focusing on recommendations and the directions for future research, additional elements can be taken into consideration when focusing on leadership communication. These include elements such as how the strategy or vision of an organisation might establish certain requirements of leaders when communicating with employees (i.e. not being able to provide employees with open transparent information or limiting the interaction opportunities of leaders and employees).

Cultural diversity, especially within South African business organisations will without a doubt affect the leadership communication as cultural diversity sets certain 'un-written rules' (i.e. sensitivity to not be offensive) when interaction takes place between a leader and his or her culturally diverse followers or team members. This is also important when leaders need to communicate organisational change to his or her culturally diverse followers or team members as some information might be interpreted incorrectly.

## 12. CONCLUSION

As leadership has evolved as an area of focus and interest within the field of communication management research, recent research reports have indicated the importance of the link between these two concepts as leadership communication. These include for example the call for papers for a special issue focusing on Leadership Communication by the International Journal of Business Communication (2016), and the Westminster Business School at the University of Westminster's 2015 report *Leadership, Trust and Communication: Building Trust Through Effective Leadership Communication* (Illes & Matthews 2015:12). These reports, along with research conducted by Johansson *et al.* (2014:147), and Avolio, Walumba and Weber (2009:421), illustrate the importance and relevance of the study as it is in line with current communication research conducted and leadership academia modelling.

The study revealed that South African employees within various business industries perceive leadership communication as inadequate in terms of what employees require from their management cadre or organisational leaders. In order to improve and enhance the leadership skills of communicating leaders, organisations should implement skills training programmes for all individuals within management or leadership positions. This will make the communicating leaders aware of what they are lacking and in which areas they can improve themselves within their organisational environments.

Within their various organisational relationships, communicating leaders should be able to successfully create a balance between their employees, followers, team members and their organisations. Leaders need to keep in mind how their communication skills along with their styles of communication will be understood or misunderstood by culturally diverse employees, followers and team members. Leadership communication could possibly then be perceived in a higher positive esteem and a holistic organisation can strive towards organisational success. The ways in which leaders then communicate with their employees and followers becomes critical in aligning followers with the organisation's mental models, strategies and vision.

## REFERENCES

- AVOLIO BJ, WALUMBWA FO & WEBER TJ.** 2009. Leadership: current theories, research, and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology* 60(1):421-449.
- BARRETT DJ.** 2008. Leadership communication. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- BASS BM & BASS R.** 2008. The Bass handbook of leadership: theory, research, & managerial application. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York, NY: Free Press.
- BROWN ME & TREVIÑO LK.** 2014. Do role models matter? an investigation of role modelling as an antecedent of perceived ethical leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics* 122(4):587-598.
- CHOI J & CHOI Y.** 2009. Behavioral dimensions of public relations leadership in organizations. *Journal of Communication Management* 13(4):292-309.
- COOPER DR & SCHINDLER PS.** 2013. Business research methods. 12<sup>th</sup> ed. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- CRESWELL JW.** 2014. Research design. London, UK: Sage.
- DE VRIES RE, BAKKER-PIEPER A & OOSTENVELD W.** 2010. Leadership = communication? The relation of leaders' communication styles with leadership styles, knowledge sharing and leadership outcomes. *Journal of Business and Psychology* 25(3):367-380.
- FAIRHURST GT & CONNAUGHON SL.** 2014. Leadership: a communicative perspective. *Leadership* 10(1):7-35.
- GOLD J, THORPE R & MUMFORD A.** 2010. Gower handbook of leadership and management development. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Burlington, Vt: Gower.
- HACKMAN MZ & JOHNSON CE.** 2009. Leadership: a communication perspective. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- HAMRIN S.** 2016. Communicative leadership and context: exploring constructions of the context in discourses of leadership practice. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 21(3):371-387.
- HARVEY M & RIGGIO RE.** 2011. Leadership studies: the dialogue of disciplines. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- ILLES K & MATTHEWS M.** 2015. Leadership, trust and communication: building trust through effective leadership communication. London, UK: Westminster Business School, University of Westminster.
- JOHANSSON C, MILLER VD & HAMRIN S.** 2014. Conceptualizing communicative leadership – a framework for analysing and developing leader's communication competence. *Corporate Communication: An International Journal* 19(2):147-165.
- LANDSBERG M.** 2000. The tools of leadership. Hammersmith, UK: Harper Collins Business.
- MEN LR & STACKS DW.** 2013. The impact of leadership style and employee empowerment on perceived organizational reputation. *Journal of Communication Management* 17(1):171-192.

- NEUMAN WL.** 2003. Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- NORTHOUSE PG.** 2010. Leadership: theory and practice. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- NUNNALLY JC.** 1967. Psychometric theory. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- PRAHALAD CK & LIEBERTHAL K.** 1998. The end of corporate imperialism. *Harvard Business Review* 76(4):68-79.
- PUTH G.** 2002. The communicating leader: the key to strategic alignment. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Hatfield, Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- SOLAJA OM, IDOWU FE & JAMES AE.** 2016. Exploring the relationship between leadership communication style, personality traits and organizational productivity. *Serbian Journal of Management* 11(1):99-117.
- STEYN B & PUTH G.** 2000. Corporate communication strategy. Cape Town: Heinemann.
- VAN KNIPPENBERG D & SITKIN SB.** 2013. A critical assessment of charismatic-transformational leadership research: back to the drawing board. *The Academy of Management Annals* 7(1):1-60.
- VAN RIEL CBM & FOMBRUN CJ.** 2007. Essentials of corporate communication. New York, NY: Routledge.
- ZERFASS A & HUCK S.** 2007. Innovation, communication, and leadership: new developments in strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1(2):107-122.
- ZERFASS A, TENCH R, VERČIČ D, VERHOEVEN P & MORENO A.** 2014. European communication monitor: excellence in strategic communication – key issues, leadership, gender and mobile media. (Results of a survey in 42 countries.) Brussels, BE: EACD, Euprera, Helios Media.
- ZERFASS A, VERČIČ D & WIESENBERG M.** 2016. Managing CEO communication and positioning: a cross-national study among corporate communication leaders. *Journal of Communication Management* 20(1):37-55.