

Research Note

Communication Ethics at Workplace

Saadah Wok and Norhafezah Yusof*

Abstract: *This study attempts to find out the level of communication ethics practiced in Northern University of Malaysia (UUM) and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and its relationship with personal and organizational factors at workplace. The study found that the respondents (UUM = 230 and IIUM = 145) practiced a high standard of communication ethics. It is a good sign because Malaysia's vision of becoming the centre of educational excellence in the Asian region will be materialized through the ethical practices of University staff.*

According to Harshman and Harshman, the communication process and content should be based on, and demonstrate values such as respect, dignity, trust, and shared authority.¹ In addition, a communication system that supports the success of the enterprise must reflect and reinforce these values. Communication will be effective only if employees perceive it to have integrity, that is, the behaviour of leaders is seen as consistent with organizational values.

In the context of openness, trust elements such as being relevant, understandable, useful, and timely communication conducts, allow the organization to build powerful, ethical communication processes that mirror the stated values.² Having communication that is understandable, credible, and useful requires the organization to have communication systems that

*Saadah Wok is Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: wsaadah@iiu.edu.my. Norhafezah Yusof is Lecturer, Department of Social Development, Northern University Malaysia. E-mail: norhafezahy@hotmail.com.

provide for a two-way, open, and honest information exchanges as its feedback mechanism.

Communication is a powerful factor in an organizational performance. When the content and process of communication begin to conflict with the fundamental values of the workforce or with commonly accepted ethical principles, people tend to respond negatively rather than just to ignore the dissonance.

From organizational communication perspective, communication ethics is an art of persuasion.³ Communication ethics is a part of work ethics as employees use communication in managing their duties through speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Therefore, scholars believe that there must be communication ethics to follow that are set by the organization.⁴

This study tries to explore and to compare the communication ethics practiced at workplace within an Islamic nation, but with different management emphasis in higher learning institutions.

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Communication, according to Harshman and Harshman, is a regular entity, is congruent with actions and behaviour, and is a courageous effort of expressing to be understood. They argued further that communication activities and content are coordinated and orchestrated and is a collaborative work between management and employees. Communication should be seen as credible by stakeholders and consumers.⁵ They argued strongly for ethical communication practices that will contribute to credibility and trust in the organization.

A similar emphasis on the communication ethics are found in the East mainly of Japanese and Korean cultures. Basically, the principles of communication ethics from the Eastern perspectives are quite traditional in nature. Culture is deeply embedded in their life and it is highly reflective of their communicative behaviour. Mente describes the Eastern communication ethics as follows: (1) respect for the elder, (2) withholding unpleasant news, (3) saving face, (4) friendliness not to be mistaken for acceptance, and (5) implicit meaning in nonverbal communication.⁶

Islamic viewpoint on communication ethics differs greatly from the way it has been conceptualized in non-Muslim cultures. Islam is universal and its prescriptions are universally applicable. There are prescribed Islamic

communication ethics outlined in the Qur'an and the *sunnah* (sayings, deeds, and approvals) of Prophet Muhammad (SAS). The emphasis of Islam on such ethical communication principles is truth, justice, politeness, and practicing what one preaches.⁷ However, the extent to which communication ethics is practiced at workplace is determined by human traits and culture of an organization. These traits include, among others, the gender, race, age, education, salary level, etc of those working in the organization. Based upon the above observations, the following hypotheses are developed to test communication phenomena at workplace.

Hypothesis 1: Selected personal characteristics are positively correlated with communication ethics

Hypothesis 2: Selected organizational characteristics are positively correlated with communication ethics

Methodology

The study was conducted in two universities in Malaysia, namely, Northern University of Malaysia (UUM) and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), using a survey method. The first sample contained 230 lecturers from a population of 575 academic staff in UUM. The second sample comprised of 145 academic lecturers from 899 academic staff in IIUM.

The research instrument was developed from IIUM Work Ethics Guidelines and was tested for its reliability. The alpha value for UUM is 0.86 and for IIUM is 0.92. The questionnaire consists of two parts: Part A covers the personal and organizational characteristics of the respondents. Part B encompasses issues pertaining to work ethics and communication ethics practiced. Responses are recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Fifteen questions were developed for each practice. In this study, only communication ethics are analyzed.

On the whole, the respondents are Malay males with an average age of 35 years, mainly with Masters degree, receiving an average income of RM3500, with 2 years experience in previous organizations, and presently working at UUM for about two years while those at IIUM have been working for about six years.

Findings and Analysis

The results of the study indicate that the respondents do practice some degree of communication ethics (Table 1). To some extent, most of the items in communication ethics practiced in IIUM are higher than those practiced at UUM with the exception of items “encourage teamwork” and “seek advice from authority for external activities.”

Table1: Means and Standard Deviations of Communication Ethics Practiced

Communication Ethics	UUM		IIUM	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Communicate for the pleasure of Allah	3.95	0.79	4.39	0.96
Concern for the quality of communication	4.14	0.79	4.31	0.86
Conscious of the purpose of communication	4.10	0.75	4.24	0.92
Always thinking good of others	4.22	0.75	4.26	0.85
Able to accept criticism sincerely	3.99	0.72	4.12	0.94
Be polite in dealing with people	4.37	0.73	4.50	0.88
Encourage teamwork	4.30	0.82	4.25	0.93
Seek advice from authority for external activities	3.94	0.89	3.78	1.20
Use appropriate channel when complaining	4.00	0.87	4.06	1.07
Observe punctuality at all occasions	4.19	0.79	4.30	0.93
Promote the good name of the organization	4.32	0.74	4.47	0.88
Avoid conflict	4.19	0.85	4.37	0.96
Provide accurate information	4.37	0.67	4.41	0.89
Ignore rumour	3.74	0.92	4.33	3.57
Concern over slandering act	4.00	0.84	4.13	1.25

Scale: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most of the times, 5 = always

The two hypotheses were tested by using correlation analysis. In other words, the variables under personal characteristics and those under

organizational characteristics were correlated with communication ethics. As shown in Table 2, age is positively correlated with communication ethics ($r = 0.23$, $p = 0.0001$) in UUM. This implies that older staff tended to be

Table 2: Correlations between Communication Ethics with Selected Personal Characteristics and Organizational Characteristics

Variables	Communication Ethics			
	UUM ($n = 230$)		IIUM ($n = 145$)	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Personal Characteristics:				
Gender	-0.047	0.238	0.004	0.489
Race	0.128	0.026	0.083	0.175
Age	0.237	0.0001	-0.071	0.213
Organizational Characteristics:				
Education	-0.147	0.013	-0.118	0.091
Present Service	0.101	0.063	0.157	0.038
Previous Service	0.108	0.051	-0.100	0.130
Salary	0.127	0.028	-0.039	0.345

more ethical than the younger ones. Hopefully, the older lecturers are able to instill proper communication ethics into the younger staff. Race is also positively correlated with communication ethics in UUM ($r = 0.13$, $p = 0.026$). It seems that in UUM the Non-Malays are more ethical when communicating than the Malays themselves.

In IIUM, no selected personal variable is correlated with communication ethics. This means that the IIUM staff practice communication ethics regardless of sex, race and age. Besides that there could be other factors that help explain communication ethics practiced, such as, socialization, religiosity, and self-consciousness with regards to IIUM approach in fostering Islamic teachings.

Organizational factors to a certain extent influence communication ethics practiced. In UUM, education is negatively related with communication

ethics ($r = 0.15, p = 0.013$). This gives the impression that the higher the educational level, the less ethical the person is in relation to communication ethics. An educated staff normally holds a high position in the organization and he or she tends to overlook the communication ethics that relate very much with human relations at the expense of task. Nevertheless, there may be a lot of intervening variables that should be considered, such as, work pressure, stress, and the structure of the organization itself.

Another organizational factor that influences communication ethics in UUM is salary ($r = 0.13, p = 0.028$). Salary is positively correlated with communication ethics. Those with higher income tend to be more ethical in their communication practices.

In IIUM, present service is positively correlated with communication ethics practiced ($r = 0.16, p = 0.038$). While other factors, such as, highest educational achievement, previous service, and salary seemed to be negatively correlated with communication ethics practiced but they are not significant. The result indicates that present service in IIUM has helped the respondents to practice communication ethics more profoundly than before. The environment is able to reform the academic staff to be more ethical. In a way, IIUM is successful in grooming and nurturing its academic staff in abiding to the Islamic communication ethics.

It is apparent from the findings that respondents in both universities practice communication ethics effectively. The hypotheses need to be modified accordingly and be specific to relevant factors. This is because some factors are significantly correlated with communication practices while others are not. As this is a pioneer study on communication ethics conducted in two different universities in Malaysia with different background and principles, nonetheless it is a good start when respondents in both places show high level of communication ethics at workplace.

Conclusion

Based on the results, lecturers do exhibit communication ethics regardless of sex and previous experience. The higher learning institutions have the responsibility to nurture and tailor their academic staff towards Islamic communication ethical practices. Nonetheless, the management is not the sole factor accountable for providing ethical communication practices. There are other factors that need to be considered, such as, work pressure,

socialization, stress, organizational structure, and work culture of the organizations.

The study would be richer if quantitative research design is combined with qualitative research design, such as, using in-depth interview and case study to complement the results obtained through self-report to really determine the practices of communication ethics at workplace.

Notes

1. E.F. Harshman and C.L. Harshman, "Communicating with Employee: Building on an Ethical Foundation," *Journal of Business Ethics* 19, no. 1 (1999): 3-19.
2. Ibid.
3. G. Cheney, and P.K. Tompkins, "Toward an Ethic of Identification" (Paper presented at the Burke Conference, Temple University, March, 1984).
4. Ibid. See H.W. Johnston, Jr., "Toward an Ethic For Rhetoric." *Communication* 6, no. 2 (1981): 305-314; R.L. Johannesen, *Ethics in Human Communication*, 3rd ed. (Illinois: Waveland, 1990).
5. Harshman and Harshman, *Communicating with Employee*.
6. Mente, B.D. *How to do Business with a Japanese: A Complete Guide to Japanese Customs and Business Practices* (Illinois: NTC, 1988); see Mente, B.D. *Korean Etiquette and Ethics in Business: A Penetrating Analysis of the Morals and Values that Shape the Korean Business Personality* (Illinois: NTC, 1991).
7. The International Islamic University Malaysia has drafted "Work Ethics Guidelines" for its employees that are based on Islamic ethical principles.