

## **Deviance in organizational communication: A case from Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Deviant behaviours are aimed at expressing needs by some workers. The relationship between deviance and communication gaps is examined as a means of identifying bottlenecks in improving workers' productivity. Forty senior and sixty junior staff of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, Ibadan, Nigeria were interviewed. Results show, among others, that the greatest causes of disobedience to rules in the organization were wrong information and lack of relevant information. There was significant difference in the rates at which information materials were received by workers, thus creating a gap in communication. One of the recommendations is for the organization to give out relevant information early to workers as a means of attaining a greater degree of compliance to rules by workers.**

**Key words:** Deviance, communication, organization, workers.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Deviance is a mode of communication used by workers to elicit some desirable responses from employers. Scholars agree that it is either a result of ineffective communication, lack of communication or a means of communication.

Deviant behaviours are aimed at expressing the problems or needs of dissatisfied workers with a view to accelerating the solutions of specific problems. Apart from these reasons, deviant actions are backed up by excuses, justifications and rationalizations. Actions of persons become deviant when such patterned reactions are not approved by the social system. Yet, workers may decide to make their feelings known by deliberately resorting to 'deviant' behaviours such as strike actions and demonstrations.

There are a number of theories of deviance. The Physiological theory claims that there is a causal relationship between physical built and delinquent activity (Haralambos and Heald 1984). The Psychological theory of deviance share some similarities with physiological theory because the deviant is seen as an abnormal person in a normal environment (population). However, the abnormality is considered as a function of abnormal experience, not of abnormal genes. Therefore, most deviant acts do not just happen; they develop over a period of time.

Both theories have ignored the place of the disruptive forces and disorganization in the actor's

physical and social environments as an important factor accounting for deviant behaviour.

The Sociological theory examines justifications of crimes in society. Sociologists contend that change is necessary for the growth of society and, since social change begins with some form of deviance, it becomes functional and is inevitable. Haralambos and Heald (1984) agree with researchers who trace the origin of deviance to the culture and structure of society rather than the individual. According to Merton (1957), "it is typically members of a rising class rather than the most depressed strata who organise the resentful and rebellious (individuals) into a revolutionary group."

Other views about deviance abound. One such view is that an area with a high population density will have greater number of deviants, because such an area called 'zone of transition' does not make for the formation of a stable community; the outcome is 'social disorganization'. According to the Labelling theory of deviance (Becker 1963), a group creates deviance by making the rules which when broken, define the breaker of the rules as deviant.

Deviance theories appear to have neglected the effects of communication gaps in man's relationships. It is believed that there would be a relationship between deviance and gaps or breakdowns in the flow of information. Organizations rely on the dissemination of information in shaping the behaviour of workers. The degree of perceived change varies depending on how the message has been designed. The effects of message take the forms of changes in the receiver's knowledge, his attitudes and his overt behaviour.

For effective mobilization of workers, there is

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need to first influence them by giving correct and adequate information (Schwartz 1973). Effective organizational communication greatly elicits group participation and cohesion which make the organization climate capable of motivating the individuals to increase their performance level (Usifo 1986). Through communication, everyone seeks some non-material aspirations such as freedom, independence, respect for human dignity, mutual aid and participation in reshaping the environment (MacBridge *et al.* 1980). Communication, as with the need to know, is seen as a fundamental right which is necessary for the proper functioning and development of human beings and the social environment. All workers in an organization should be fed with relevant and enough information that serves both their personal and organizational goals.

The behaviour of workers largely depends on the 'ethics' of the organization (guidelines or rules of conduct by which a company exists), especially as it concerns the giving of information. Changes in the actions or behaviour and attitudes of workers are, often, responses to changes in management behaviour. Workers have been found to utilize various means to make their feelings known (Odiaka 1988).

Deviance, in whatever form, represents a feedback to management by workers. It is an instrument of communication which can assume the forms of body signs (gestures, facial expression, dress etc.) and conflicts (open confrontations). Conflicts are designed to resolve divergent dualism in order to achieve a kind of unity such that they resolve the tension between contrasts. Presented in good faith, conflicts could become legitimate solutions to some organizational problems. In an organization where workers have cause (resulting from management decisions) to continuously put up negative reaction, the workers generally would eventually create a deviance-related culture.

Every communication behaviour aims at eliciting specific response from a specific person or group. Organizational communication embraces disseminating information (appealing to the mind) and persuading or influencing workers' opinion (appealing to emotion).

Three major elements make up what is referred to as deviance in an organization. Graphically, the deviance model as proposed by Odiaka (1988) indicates that one element leads to the other (Fig. 1). The deviance model suggests that for deviance to occur, there are three conditions. First, is the hypothesis of self-regulation (a consequence of communication gap or breakdown in

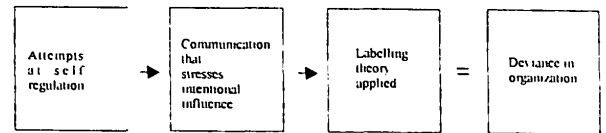


Fig. 1: Deviance Model in an Organization

communication). It leads to a search for alternative means of information gathering outside the official source and is, therefore, illegal. Second, the consequences of communication gap lead to communication that stresses intentional influence (the purpose of this influence is two-fold: to inform and to persuade). Finally, management applies rules on users of this means of communication and labels them as deviants. The application of the rules on users of communication that stresses intentional influence presupposes that management understands the meaning of the message being sent. Thus, both management and users of the communication technique have the same "field of experience".

The social and economic implications of deviant behaviours call for attention. Pertinent research questions are:

- (i) Does the management place emphasis on communication?
- (ii) Do staff of the organization consider communication practices of the management adequate?
- (iii) Are there observable deviant reactions to what staff consider inadequate communication practices or break-down in communication?

The objectives of the study were:- (1) To determine the relationship between deviance and information flow in an organization. (2) To find out if deviant behaviour is used as a step towards 'construction' or as a means of 'destruction' in an organization.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study comes up at a time when there is increase in the rate of strikes and other deviant-related behaviours in many organizations. Deviance, therefore, is a major determinant in improving productivity - a result of reconciliation and good inter-personal relationships. Profit-making organizations particularly consider deviations to organizational rules and regulations entirely undesirable.

Staff of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Ibadan, Nigeria constituted the population of the study. The staff (particularly the management cadre) comprises people from different parts of the world. The institute is a research organization.

Twenty members (five senior and fifteen junior) in each of the ten departments were served with appropriate questionnaires, giving a total of 200 respondents. However, only 45 and 100 questionnaires were returned by senior and junior staff respectively. After discarding poorly completed instruments, 40 (88.8%) and 60 (60%) questionnaires were selected from the senior and junior categories respectively for analysis.

The questionnaires were designed to seek information on the communication system in IITA, the pattern of staff utilization of the system and the consequences of insufficient communication or gap in it. Specific information sought from junior staff included demography, appraisal of the effectiveness of the communication practices in the organization and existence of communication gap, as well as workers' reaction to communication breakdowns and worker's method of communication in times of such breakdowns. For senior staff, information sought included opinion of staff on IITA's structure, existence of communication gaps and use of deviance for communication. A Likert scale was used in most cases consisting of either agree/undecided or don't know/disagree or often/few/none or regularly/occasionally/never.

Interviews were also conducted, although the questions were not structured. They were designed to supplement the questionnaires and to elicit responses from selected senior and junior staff. The hypothesis is that there is no difference in the rates at which information materials are received by staff.

Simple percentages, graphs, analysis of variance, t-test and the chi-square test were used in analysing data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Majority of the respondents possess post-secondary education (82.5% and 48.30% of senior and unionized junior staff respectively) while 17.50% and 48.30% of senior and junior staff respectively have post-primary education.

The greatest causes of disobedience to rules at the organization were wrong information and lack of relevant information (Table 1), as shown by 75% of the senior staff.

The consequences of deviance as indicated by senior staff are numerous including, planned demonstrations and strikes, frowning of faces, disobedience of even simple instructions, reluctance to carry out instructions, work-to-rule and rumours, in that order of importance.

Deviance could be increased in situations where minutes of general meetings, research highlights,

Table 1. Percentage distribution of causes of disobedience to rules as given by senior staff (N=40)

Causes	No. of Respondents	%
Lack of relevant information	12	30.0
Wrong information	18	45.0
Ambiguity of message	4	10.0
Political mindedness/motivation	4	10.0
Biases	2	5.0

research briefs and minutes of union meetings are not issued to staff (Table 2).

It is recognized that some categories of staff might not be entitled to receive information through certain sources. Despite this assumption, most workers believed that information from the listed sources could be very useful to them in the performance of their duties.

In order to determine if there was any statistical difference in the rates at which information materials were received, analysis of variance (F-Statistics) was calculated using data in Table 3. There was significant difference in the rates at which information materials were received by workers (F-ratio = 3.46,  $P < 0.05$ ).

There was a gap in information dissemination, thus, establishing a relationship between variation in information dissemination and the former (gap in information dissemination).

In a similar result (Table 4), it was found that not many workers were aware of the open door policy of IITA management, possible compensation in case of accident, rules of employment and collective agreement between management and workers, and existence of opportunity for staff training. Most staff did not know what they needed to have knowledge about. In other words, there was an obvious gap in communication within the organisation and this readily would cause disaffection among workers. Thus, even though the organization had in place what could be referred to as good administrative mechanisms as listed above, the workers were not made aware of the existence of such measures. Therefore, the opportunities that existed were not fully explored by the workers. To further ascertain the occurrence of gap in communication, a chi-square test was performed, using the data presented in Table 4. It was found that there was a gap in communication, significant at 0.05 probability level.

Deviance shows up as a result of any or all of physiological, psychological and sociological factors. Deviance is communication-related. An analysis of the methods used to make their feelings known to management showed that workers mostly utilized body signs (91.85%), dodging of

**Table 2. Rates at which information materials are received**

Information sources	Rates received by union/unionized staff				Never		(B) Field workers. (Supervisors) perception of effectiveness of information sources (%)	
	Regularly		Occasionally		N	%	Effective	Not effective
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Research briefs	5	8	15	25	40	67	52	48
Research highlights	1	2	15	25	44	73	52	48
Weekly bulletins	48	80	9	15	3	5	90	10
Minutes of general meetings	4	7	4	7	52	86		
Minutes of union meetings	-	-	20	33	40	67	73	27
Internal memos	4	7	24	40	-	20	33	
Service orders	14	23	18	30	32	53	53	47
Oral instructions	32	53	19	32	28	47	67	33
					9	15	87	13

**Table 3. Difference in the rates of information perception**

Source of Variation	SS	DF	Mean Square	F. ratio
Variation from the information	1468	2	734	3.46*
Residual (error)	4460	21	212	

\*P&lt;0.05

**Table 4. Evidence of gap in information dissemination (%), N=60.**

Item	Aware		Not aware	
	N	%	N	%
1. Open-door policy of Management	7	11.67	53	88.33
2. Accidental entitlement	16	26.67	44	73.33
3. Rules of employment and collective agreement	17	28.33	43	71.67
4. Opportunity of being trained	20	33.33	40	66.67

Chi Square=8.36; P<0.05

assignments (83.50%), improper dress (83.50%), work delay (75.15%), work-to-rule (75.15%), and disobedience to orders (50.10%). The use of these measures by workers was due to a breakdown in communication. A Chi-square test on these methods showed that there was a significant association between deviance or "malpractices" and communication gap (Chi-square Cal. = 34.22; tab. = 11.07; P<0.05).

## CONCLUSION

The behaviour of workers, to some extent, could be determined by the giving out or hoarding of information. The suggestion is for heads of departments and others to audit the kind and quality of communication in their departments. Even though IITA management established various sources for information dissemination, the actual enforcement or use of the sources was not carried out by the

respective management supervisors.

Lee (1987) has stated that 'human rights spring from human need, and human life apparently depends on communication', adding that if persons are cut off from it, they 'cannot develop or attain their full potential'. Any attempt to stop providing information to people would result in frustration and misunderstanding. Deviance, therefore, is meant to communicate, as shown through the junior workers in this study.

In an organization, if employees experience sufficiently acute deprivations of relevant information, they express one form of dissatisfaction or the other, initially by low deviance such as frowning of face, improper dressing and then by high deviance, using disobedience to rules, exchange of aggressive words, not attending to duties, demonstrations, strike actions, and so on.

Recommendations include the need to avoid delays in information dissemination by superior staff to those who would use or need it.

Workers' representatives should be encouraged to participate more actively or regularly in important meetings with management.

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