

Understanding Effective Communication as a Catalyst for Employee Performance in Selected Municipalities in KZN, SA

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Abstract: *Communication is the adhesive that binds people, irrespective of their backgrounds, through the skill of passing information from one person to another. However, effective communication requires understanding emotions and intentions behind the shared information; therefore, managers in leadership positions need to comprehend how best-effort can be obtained from the workforce, with communication systems management reviewed constantly to ensure effectiveness. The study aimed to establish whether communicating effectively with employees could improve performance in a municipality, including: the extent to which idea sharing creates openness among municipal employees; whether regular feedback contributes to improved municipal employee performance; open communication channels mitigate misunderstandings; and recognizing employee opinions increases performance. A mixed method research approach was used, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, with data collected quantitatively by questionnaire, from a sample drawn through simple random sampling from the uBuhlebezwe Municipality. For the qualitative research, a focus group discussion with employees selected by convenience sampling, was held at the Ray Nkonyeni Municipality. Results from both methods showed effective communication was the best tool to change municipal employee performance, acting as a catalyst, which mostly depends on communication channel effectiveness and availability. Main recommendations to municipal managers and heads of departments are to use effective communication as a strategic tool, appreciate all employee opinions, regardless of their positions, and involve employees in decision-making, most importantly during policy formulation, while municipal employees are provided with sufficient resources to perform day-to-day duties. Providing employees with regular and honest feedback regarding their strengths and weaknesses could additionally improve employee performance and increase productivity. Conversely, lack of communication could lead to misunderstandings and incorrect interpretation of information messages by employees.*

Keywords: *Effective Communication; Strategic tool, Performance, Municipality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The general view of communication is that it is the giving, receiving or exchange of information, opinions or ideas so the message is completely understood by all involved. This exchange can be achieved by means of one or more of the five types of communication, which are verbal, non-verbal, written, and listening, as well as visual (Willkomm, 2018).

While there have been many studies that examine communication between municipalities and the communities they serve, these seem to be focused on policy communication to citizens, with yet other research focused on employees and enhanced job satisfaction or service delivery. Recent South African research in this regard includes Jarvis (2016), who investigated whether service delivery could be improved at a local municipality through enhancing policy communication. In another study, communication was determined a major factor in a municipal case study by Khoza, (2019), who investigated factors that influence job satisfaction. A further example is that of Worku (2020), who undertook a critical examination of municipal service quality, where communication was found to be key in clearly detailed job descriptions, which was significantly associated with employee performance. However, this paper reports on a study that investigated whether effective communication acts as a catalyst for employee performance within selected municipalities.

The importance for an organization to improve employee skills and abilities is highlighted by Obiageli, Uzochukwu and Ngozi (2015: 66), because it can potentially change employee performance and contribute to organizational productivity. However, organizational objectives can only be accomplished when employees and managers practice effective communication, as it provides a sense of direction to managers and employees on action to be implemented (Lewis and Reicher 2016: 1603).

Managers, therefore, have the responsibility to convey accurate information and design proper job descriptions for all employees, in addition to creating a clear set of instructions that leaves no room for distortion. This also holds true for

government organizations and institutions, with the Government Communication Policy Document (SA Government 2018: 7) outlining this in detail.

This study was premised on the basic communication methods that enable management, corporate and municipal, to effectively communicate with their subordinates, in order to perform at their full potential. It examined how effective communication is in selected municipalities in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa (SA) and whether employee performance is improved as a result thereof.

Flaherty *et al.* (2012: 127) stated that in today's unpredictable and changing economy, worldwide management in the business sector has been forced to rethink strategies that can sustain their organizations. At the heart of those strategies is effective communication which will result in the envisaged performance improvement. Oline (2015: 67) asserted, in order for the communication process to be completed successfully, the information exchanged between both parties must be understood, or the process is ineffective.

Transmission of the message to employees might appear uncomplicated, yet it is a procedure constantly filled with communication mistakes. Failure of smooth communication can be found where communication is ineffective, while it ought to be a pillar of performance and, as a result, organizations may not do well in achieving objectives. This matter seems to be a major problem underlying managers conveying perfect messages and correct information to employees, with regard to the performance of day-to-day duties. In order for a response and result to be achieved once communication is undertaken, the information transmitted between managers and employees must be clearly understood.

Any organizational decision, whether strategic or operational, cannot be made without communication of the necessary information. Communication is the mainstream and a critical factor in organisational success. Most importantly, as Sadia *et al.* (2016: 1) observed, a relationship exists between organizational communication and employee productivity.

Despite this well-known fact, globally and nationally, weak communication processes have been blamed for a number of productivity and employee performance shortcomings and failures. At a global level, Lovari and Valentini (2019: Ch. 4.4, p. 2) also added social media to the communication mix in their study of how public organizations' services and processes have been modified with technological advances and electronic media. The authors highlighted this 'trending' communications method "is also changing relationships between PSOs, citizens, and mass media. The impact is evident in administrative procedures, data storage and management, delivery of public services, and communication with strategic publics". Social media as communications tool was, however, not under study thus not pursued.

Whether in a municipal or corporate organizational setting, continuous and clear communication is a pre-requisite to a successful outcome. In this regard, Levenson (2017) and De Kadt and Lieberman (2017) determined that, although service delivery protests at local municipality level are due to the inability to maintain service quality standards and expectations, communication plays a major role in both prevention and maintenance.

South African Municipalities have a mandate to achieve specific goals, as with any other organization, in addition to Government objectives. To attain these, as scholars have observed, they should use effective communication as a strategic tool. Judging by the general outcry of the country's citizens against the lack of or poor municipal service delivery, there seems to be a problem with employee performance, which ignited a desire to investigate the situation in the selected municipalities.

With the backing of literature, this paper is restricted to four main elements of effective communication and to this regard we seek to establish the extent to which sharing of ideas creates openness among the employees of the selected municipalities; to establish the extent to which the sharing of ideas creates openness among municipal employees within the identified municipalities; to examine whether regular feedback contributes to improved employee performance; to determine whether open channels of communication mitigate misunderstandings between municipal management and employees and also to determine whether the recognition of employee opinions increases municipal employee performance at these Municipalities.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Several models have been expounded to explain organizational communication, but none did so with the utmost satisfaction, as the Convergence model. The Convergence model of communication is applicable to this study because it emphasizes two-way communication in an organization to guarantee effective communication. It suits the objective of this study, which is to highlight the need for effective communication.

A. The Convergence model

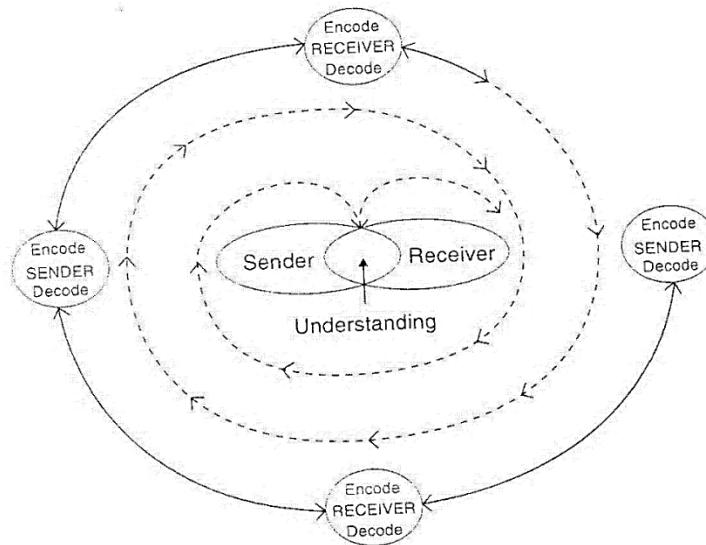
The Convergence model of communication is the brainchild of Bormann (1972: 396). It describes communication as a two-way process in which participants substitute positions as sender and receiver of communication, thus producing the same

meaning when sending and receiving feedback. In the convergence model, the sender repeats the message to the receiver and the receiver responds appropriately to the sender.

Fielding (2014: 4) subscribes to the notion that the model is very relevant in organizational settings, explaining that the manager must send an information message to the employee that is clear and accurate through a proper channel of communication. While noise can interrupt the message before the employee receives the original message, the receiver sends the feedback back to the communicator to establish whether the employee understood the message correctly. During this process of communication, the employee must ensure the results match the original idea of the message.

Fielding’s convergence model of communication is depicted in the diagram below, which illustrates exactly how the information between manager and employee in an organization is communicated to reach an understanding of the information by both parties.

Figure 1: The convergence model of communication



Source: Fielding (2014)

The Convergence model of communication is applicable to this study because it stresses communication as a transaction, in which the sender and the receiver work together to design the meaning, as there are times people need to share the same meaning of words in order to communicate effectively. The model emphasizes two-way communication in an organization to guarantee effective communication. The message communicator, being the manager in this case, needs to send an accurate message and repeat the message to the receiver until the message receiver, the employee, understands the message correctly. In return, the message receiver needs to understand the message in order to respond effectively, so that the outcomes match the original idea of the message sender (Fielding, 2014). Subsequently, what needs to be done in the organization has been well-communicated and can thus be successfully implemented.

III. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

According to Kreitner and Kinicki (2013: 440), communication is a human activity that binds people together, irrespective of their backgrounds. It is a method of transferring information from sender to receiver, such that the information is understood by the receiver so as to produce feedback to the sender and act according to the received message. Through communication, interaction takes place between culturally diverse people who communicate in different languages. In other words, it is a cooperative activity among two or more people exchanging thoughts, ideas, facts, and emotions, as well as opinions, in which all participants in the shared task construct the meaning.

A. Elements of effective communication

The main elements of effective communication that emanate from the above discussion are: idea sharing; regular feedback; open communication channels and recognition of employee opinions (Brown, 2013: 17; Cacciattolo, 2015: 80; Greenberg, 2011: 323; Wuim-Pam, 2014: 49; Agarwal, 2010: 32; Hellriegel et al. 2012: 224; Salie and Schlechter, 2012:3).

a) To share ideas and information

Brown (2013: 17) stated the process of sharing ideas and information in the workplace takes place between two people or in a team, working together to accomplish a common goal. It is the most important tool managers use to involve employees in decision-making. However, the author points out managers need to involve employees at the beginning of projects when sharing project information, as sharing information with individuals and between teams, on the one hand, unites them, forms a dialogue, and encourages collaboration. It is done through meetings and brainstorming sessions, where employees exchange information and offer their perspectives and expertise to solve common problems. On the other hand, the sharing of ideas and information assists new employees with knowledge and helps them understand how the organization operates at a high level. Nonetheless, as Brown (2013: 17) explains, this requires proper communication channels in the workplace to be in place to ensure effective communication.

Cacciattolo (2015: 80) described proper listening as a process that requires concentration and good listening skills, so that employees correctly and accurately capture messages and on-the-job information their managers communicate to them. Managers need to listen to employees to facilitate a bi-directional flow of information, as managers with poor listening skills are more likely to threaten their working relationship with employees. The resulting uncertainty builds aversion that Cacciattolo (2015: 80) states may result in demotivated employees and high employee turnover. When managers listen to employees and respond positively to their inputs as part of an open-door policy, employees are more inclined to believe and trust their managers. Furthermore, trust between managers and employees increases performance, while listening helps employees accomplish their duties effectively, while clarity assists employees to maintain concentration when performing tasks (Soeker et al. 2016: 569).

b) To provide regular feedback to employees

Greenberg (2011: 323) affirmed feedback is a two-way communication, because the sender sends a message and the receiver responds to the message. In an organizational context, managers provide feedback in a form of two-way communication to their employees. With two-way communication, everyone is in the position of giving and receiving feedback, but in one-way communication, feedback on performance is delayed; employees become defensive and bored. Feedback is, therefore, one of the key factors that affects employee performance, not only because of the motivational aspect embedded therein, but because it increases job performance and job satisfaction.

Wuim-Pam (2014: 49) mentioned providing employees with regular feedback has two positive effects, with it first, being a way to improve performance and possibly adjusting problems emanating in an organization, as well as, second, to release a tense atmosphere. For these reasons, managers needed to provide feedback in a manner that will assist employees to improve their performance, since different employees respond differently to different approaches. Managers should thus provide information in the form of feedback either formally or informally, for each task accomplished.

c) To establish channels of communication

Agarwal (2010: 32) stated a channel of communication is a systemic approach through which people in the organization communicate. In an organization, the assumption of conveying a message or system of interaction from one person to another must be clearly defined, particularly where job descriptions, task performance and other operational activities are concerned.

Communication flows in different directions in an organization, according to Hellriegel et al. (2012: 224), such as an upward channel of communication, downward channel, sideways, and horizontal. All these channels form the structure of the organization with their communication linked. The different styles use diverse contexts when communicating within their organizations, depending on the situation and on the issues at the time or moment, such as meetings in boardrooms and staffrooms. The results depend on the message the sender sends to the receiver, whether he or she interprets or understands the message correctly, so the outcomes and decoding of the original message is the same as the original message.

d) To recognize employee opinions

Recognition of employee opinions, as Salie and Schlechter (2012: 3) explain, refers to a system of acknowledging employee opinions as an individual employee or that of a team, on formal and informal participation in decision-making, performance, and accomplishment of tasks that support the organizational goals, values and objectives. Employee opinions are recognized by managers, particularly on suggestions made with regard to job satisfaction and job performance. Salie and Schlechter (2012) suggested recognition of employee opinions is a way of motivating workers to put in their absolute best.

B. Employee Performance

posit that is The degree to which an employee contributes towards the achievement of organizational goals is described by Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011: 256) as employee performance, while Hilman (2015: 385) explains it as the extent to which an employee participates in the attainment of organizational goals. Saleem and Amin (2013: 194) added that employee performance in an organizational context is referred to as the duties and tasks performed by employees in an efficient and effective manner to achieve organizational goals.

Contributing to the discourse, Thomas (2015: 8) states that employee performance refers to responsibilities or roles, which entails employees have a willing attitude, the skills, and the required knowledge to perform the necessary duties. In addition, Waiyaki (2017: 17) contended that employee performance is a continuous process for improving the performance of individuals, by aligning the actual performance with the desired strategic organizational goals, through a variety of means such as standard-setting, appraisal and evaluation.

IV. MONITORING EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

Activities and projects in an effective organization are monitored continually. To achieve this requires consistent measurement of performance and the provision of on-going feedback to employees and work groups on their progress toward reaching their goals. Nzimakwe and Ntshakala (2016: 114) added that “the regulatory requirements for monitoring performance include conducting progress reviews with employees where their performance is compared against their elements and set standards”.

Monitoring is, therefore, a continuous process by which managers obtain regular feedback on the improvement made towards the accomplishment of organizational objectives. Employee performance monitoring is the most important function of human resource management (HRM), because it contributes to the operative decision-making of individuals and of the team in order to attain organizational goals. Monitoring serves as a primary aspect and measure of organizational growth and development (Ramukumba, 2014: 20).

Ko (2015: 66) pointed out that employee performance can be measured on a quarterly or annual basis to ensure employees are in line with organizational objectives and constantly improving their performance. After the quarterly performance, review processes take place and managers are able to provide proper feedback on areas that need improvement and identify a number of factors that affect employee performance, such as organizational support for career development, supervisor support, monetary benefits and training programmes. Current managers are aware that employee performance is the most important factor behind any organizational success (Makki et al., 2015: 1008).

V. METHODS

A descriptive research design was deemed the most suitable for this mixed methods study as it identifies the characteristics of variables and provides facts on what has been revealed in reference to the event or the organization. This study employed a positivist survey strategy that made use of a structured questionnaire to collect data through a survey and a focus group discussion. The target population comprised employees under the Municipal Manager of uBuhlebezwe and Ray Nkonyeni Municipalities, in the KZN province. A sample size of 250 was selected as suitable for the study, with the quantitative survey data collected from a sample size of 80 respondents, drawn from the uBuhlebezwe Municipality by means of a simple random sampling technique. The qualitative focus group discussion took place with 10 employees, selected at the Ray Nkonyeni Municipality through convenience sampling. To minimize bias in employee selection, a systematic random sampling method was adopted, with every 10th employee selected from an electronic employee list. The quantitative data were captured and analyzed on IBM SPSS version 25. The study employed Cronbach’s alpha to measure the internal consistency of the measuring items, while content validity ensured the questionnaire was pretested and reviewed with the assistance of two academics. Convergence was assessed by examining factor loadings, with factor loadings above 0.5 but preferably above 0.7 providing evidence that the indicators converge on the same latent factor (Malhotra, 2010: 734).

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Sharing of ideas and openness

The following results pertain to responses to the first research objective.

Table 1: Statements on sharing of ideas and openness

STATEMENTS	Valid percent
I am involved in sharing ideas during policy formulation	84%
Openness creates a good relationship among employees	83%
Openness of management about tasks creates new ideas about the accomplishment of tasks	83%
My manager must discuss work issues openly with subordinates	79%
My involvement in decision- making gives me an opportunity to open up	76%

These results (Table 1) indicate consensus among respondents that sharing of ideas and openness are good for accelerating the level of information sharing between managers and employees. Agreement was indicated by 84 percent of respondents that they were involved in sharing ideas during policy formulation, with 83 percent in agreement that openness of management about tasks creates new ideas with regard to task accomplishment. A further 76 percent of respondents agreed their involvement in decision-making affords them an opportunity to open up.

This is in line with Brown (2013: 17), who explained sharing of ideas and openness in an organization is the best way to ensure success. Managers should involve employees in decision-making and in policy formulation to ensure organizational goals are attained effectively in the workplace. Through sharing of ideas and information in the workplace, employees are able to discuss performance matters with their managers.

B. Relationship between feedback provision and performance

The following results relate to how provision of feedback by managers can improve employee performance.

Table 2: Statements on provision of feedback and performance

STATEMENTS	Valid percent
When managers excel in providing feedback to employers about their jobs that satisfies employees	80%
Managers should organize adequate training programs to change employee performance	80%
Skilled employees are able to achieve employee performance effectively	79%
Providing feedback helps towards the attainment of organizational goals	77%
When employees are satisfied their level of commitment increases	72%
Feedback improves job performance	71%

As illustrated (Table 2), regular feedback on how employees have performed resulted in an increased level of commitment (72 percent), improved employee performance (79 percent) and the accomplishment of organizational goals (77 percent).

This is also what Brian (2016: 2) alludes to, in stating that feedback is a powerful tool in the workplace that guides employees on what they are doing to reach their goals. It is a key source of communication managers use to encourage employees; a tool that shapes employees on job performance and to achieve organizational success. Provision of feedback to employees by managers is imperative, as it assists in correcting small mistakes before they escalate. Feedback additionally prevents tension between managers and employees (Ajjawi et al. 2017: 136).

C. Open Channels of Communication and Employee Performance

The following results pertain to the third research objective the study aimed to establish.

Table 3: Statements on open channels of communication and performance

STATEMENTS	Valid percent
Clear channels of communication on information from managers about tasks can reduce misunderstanding	84%
The good relationship I have with my manager eliminates misunderstanding	74%
I can approach my supervisor on any issues that concern me	72%
Open channels of communication change employee attitude towards managers	72%
Open channels of communication increase job performance	66%
Open channels of communication improve commitment	65%

The results (Table 3) show agreement among respondents that open channels of communication reduce misunderstandings (84 percent), improve job performance (66 percent) and commitment (65 percent), and change employee attitudes towards managers (72 percent).

This echoes findings by Agarwal (2010: 32), who posited that open channels of communication are a systemic method through which people in an organization communicate. These channels are a technique of conveying messages from one person to another; a system of interaction that clearly defines task performance, other operational activities and information. Channels of communication either channel the information downwards, upwards, horizontally and sideways to reduce incorrect interpretation and misunderstandings between managers and employees.

D. Recognition of employee opinions

The results below pertain to the fourth research objective of this study.

Table 4. Statements on recognition of employee opinions

STATEMENTS	Valid percent
My opinion is valued by my manager	84%
Recognition of employees can change perceptions	81%
The recognition of employees by managers promotes job involvement commitment	79%
Good and creative opinions can create new job designs for employees	79%
Being recognized by managers improves my commitment to the organization	78%
When an employee's opinions are recognized by the managers, their level of trust and honesty increases	78%
Employees' good opinions can play an important role in decision- making in an organization	78%

The results (Table 4) indicate agreement by the respondents was overwhelmingly unanimous (78 percent) that recognition of employee opinions by managers in an organization plays a crucial role during decision-making. Recognition of employee opinions promotes trust and honesty (78 percent), builds employee self-esteem and instils confidence towards their duties (79 percent).

Salie and Schlechter (2012: 3) confirmed recognition of employee opinions is a system of acknowledging employee opinions, whether individually or in teams. This is done formally or informally to inspire employees to participate in decision-making. Managers in the municipality were found to recognize and value employee opinions (84 percent), especially on suggestions made on job satisfaction, job performance and other work-related matters within an organization.

E. Testing the Reliability of the Scales

The test for reliability was conducted on IBM SPSS version 25, with the aim of ascertaining the possible limitation in the structure of the constructs. To ensure the considerable scale for reliability that guarantees consistency in measurement, the Cronbach's Alpha should be above 0.7, according to Pallant (2010: 97).

Table 5: Reliability

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha
Sharing of ideas and openness	0.848
Recognition of employee opinions	0.839
Provision of regular feedback and performance	0.829
Open channels of communication	0.766

All the constructs measured have a Cronbach's alpha above 0.7, showing high reliability of the questionnaire as measurement instrument, in both the survey and to guide the focus group discussion.

F. Testing the Validity of the Scale

The results of the questionnaire pre-test indicated the potential to measure the determinants of effective communication. Items on all of the constructs had factor loadings above 0.5, indicating they converged on the same factor.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that sharing of ideas creates an open platform for employees to share knowledge and experiences. In turn, this encourages employees to own their work and fosters harmony and trust; they are then able to produce quality outputs and perform beyond the call of duty. According to Brown (2013: 17), knowledge sharing in an organization fosters working relationships. This is because employees share different experiences for different jobs, enabling new employees to grow in knowledge, especially during brainstorming sessions. Subsequently, the pressure of completing work and meeting deadlines or delivery times is reduced, as engaging with knowledgeable workers in the communication process saves time.

It was established that employee value feedback, be it formal or informal, because it creates awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, with improving on weaknesses assisting to improve their performance. These findings are in line with Král and Králová (2016: 169), who postulated that constructive feedback is of vital importance to employees, as it provides progress and performance analyses in detail, allowing employees to learn from their mistakes and build self-confidence. Furthermore, the ability of a manager to relate well with employees promotes friendliness, providing employees with the courage to be open with their manager, particularly when they lack full comprehension of how to deal with a difficult task. Hence, the manager should ensure a continuous two-way flow of information to avoid any doubt or tentativeness (Krylova, Jolly and Philips 2017: 196).

Channels of communication create an environment where misunderstandings can be mitigated and errors timeously corrected. In the process, performance expectations are clarified and employees come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses. It is the view of Yukl et al. (2013: 39) that organizations adopt different styles to maintain information flow to the various organs that form work systems. The style of the communication network must be the type that is completely understandable by the entire workforce and public members, in order for work productivity to yield corporate goals (Zheng, Shen and Wang, 2014: 198). A plain and transparent change management or communication strategy is needed amongst workers to function with honesty and strength (Tregidga, Milne and Kearins, 2018: 293). However, poor communication channels affect the implementation of organizational goals and the attainment of task efficiency (Walumbwa, Hartnell and Misati, 2017: 16).

The study concluded that recognition of employee opinions provides feelings of acceptance, equality, respect, and a sense of belonging. This degree of comfort results in devotion to tasks given and the desire to go the extra mile. Islam (2013: 235) believes an approach to applaud workers in an organization is through recognition or appreciation of the effort they contribute towards the predetermined plan of goal achievement. This action aims to inspire employees to be more committed to their work by exerting their talent, skills, knowledge and experience, particularly where transformation requires restructuring the monumental shift in the area of administration. Therefore, organizations should accept as true that recognizing employee opinions has positive effects on their work engagement. The study concurs with findings by Tessema, Ready and Embaye (2013: 3) that recognition and reward encourage staff to be loyal and hardworking, and to work towards achieving either a collective or an individual goal.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to managers of organizations, specifically Municipal Managers.

A. Sharing of ideas and openness

Managers should involve employees in decision-making, regardless of their positions in an organization. They should also consider and appreciate employee opinions during the policy formulation process. Therefore, management should consider all employee opinions, irrespective of the position held in an organization.

B. Provision of feedback

Managers should provide formal and informal feedback to employees regarding the attainment of organizational goals. This will motivate employees to improve their performance, advance their strengths and reduce their weaknesses.

Management ought to also provide employees with sufficient resources to be able to perform their duties daily as inadequate resources lead to poor performance.

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