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APPRAISING THE CORE COMMUNICATION PROFICIENCIES
OF PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

A short study was carried out to appraise the internal and external Core Communication proficiencies of mid-career professionals using an evaluation model. A random pre-selected cohort was constituted in a telecommunication setup by the organization, consisting of professionals having different backgrounds, competencies, designations, varied experiences and years of service. Initially the evaluation model, selected by the company was shared with them to give them a level ground to be able to perform well according to the competencies being assessed. They were given a mock scenario with role-play opportunities and their language communication skills were measured through an evaluation questionnaire assessed by their peers during the simulation based on the corporate competency model. This survey was repeated with two batches of thirty-five professionals each. The data was analyzed using the Image and Self-concept Measurement on a Likert scale. The feedback/suggestions received from the employees showed that they were unaware of the competency components stated in the evaluation model used by their organization and therefore were not fully aware of what the company expected of them. The results also showed where they stood with reference to their communication proficiency based on the evaluation model used for this purpose and suggestions and solutions were discussed. Better communication was recommended between the administration and the employees. This information may be useful as a broad based error analysis practice for improving the internal and external communication of these employees, other employees in the same organization and other employees in other similar telecommunication setups.

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Keywords: Communication, competency model, assessment, error analysis.



1. Introduction

This study was based on using an evaluation model to appraise the internal and external Core Communication and language proficiencies of mid-career professionals in a corporate organization. Internal corporate communications are those messages that are conveyed to employees and stakeholders that have an interest in the production side of the business. On the other hand, external communications are those messages meant for the consumer of the goods or services the company produces. (Kenilans, 2012). A ‘Corporate Organization’ essentially means an organization formed by some people, having a separate entity and perpetual succession. A company, statutory corporation, co-operative ventures, etc. are considered to be corporate organizations because these are registered and have separate legal entity and perpetual existence. (Sharma 2018). This research was conducted in a telecommunication setup, consisting of professionals having different backgrounds, competencies, designations, varied experiences and years of service. The company constituted a random sample from this varied group, and the study was carried out on this pre-selected cohort. The purpose of the training was to upgrade the English communication skills of the employees.

Past research showed, according to Khan (2010) that learning problems in English can be dealt with if the English instructor studies the nature of the problems faced by the target learners and evolves compatible strategies. Asit Bhattacharyya’s (2010) research gave an Asian perspective and aimed to highlight the initial problems (related to English language, communication skills, learning approaches and cultural background) and how they overcame these difficulties....In Your Guide to ESL, Beare (2017) talks about speaking English on the telephone, speaking English in situations at work, and speaking English in everyday situations, also known as small talk. Inculcating English language into corporate culture is one of the steps taken towards making the organization a successful member of the global community (Quelch 2009). The internal environment is highly congenial for its employees, providing them with skill based trainings especially related to English language proficiency and competence (Munir 2006). The research focused on communication skills and also showed where the employees stood with reference to their communication proficiency based on the evaluation model used for this purpose. Suggestions and solutions were also discussed to come to some useful conclusions based on the survey.

The value of using a competency model cannot be undermined. A competency model defines what separates “good” from “great.” Not everything a person does in a role should be part of the competency model...In essence, the value of a competency model is that it identifies what skills each person in the company must be able to do to be “great.” If everyone performs at the “great” level, then company strategy is achieved, and a company is likely to have a competitive advantage. (Lasse, 2015) The evaluation model used by the company to appraise their performance was shared with them to give them a level ground to be able to perform well according to the expectations of the organization and the competencies they were being reviewed for.

1.1. What is VEON?

To understand the research and its usefulness, it is vital to share the VEON Competency Model and its origin (1992), which was used as the peer evaluation criteria for this study as selected by the company. The local company is using and has implemented this borrowed model from VEON. VEON, formerly

VimpelCom Ltd. is a multinational telecommunication services company with their headquarters in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Operating predominantly in the regions of Asia Africa and Europe, it is the sixth largest mobile network operator in the world by number of subscribers with 214 million customers. VEON's brands include Beeline, Kyivstar, Wind tre, Djezzy, Jazz Pak, Banglalink and others. These brands use the VEON competency Model for quality assurance as well as performance appraisal of the employees. The VEON model is based on eight major values with supplementary competencies elucidated below:

1.2. The VEON Competency Model

1.2.1. Value: Customer Obsessed Competency: Customer Focus

It is based on the concept that a competent employee considers customers, and encourage others to do so, demonstrates how to form customer relationships and respect and places customers at the forefront of all decision-making customer experience at every stage, and personalizes approaches based on customer preferences.

1.2.2. Value: Entrepreneurial Competency: Digital Business Acumen

According to this value, a proficient employee maintains, expands, and applies knowledge of information technology practices, strategies, and analytics, and applies knowledge of technology and analytics to propose improvements to work processes and results and the negative consequences of technology adoption and the consequent change.

1.2.3. Value: Entrepreneurial Competency: Growth Mindset

The employee practicing this value consistently delivers results despite obstacles or challenges and is quick to learn and adapt in the light of new information, motivating the team to take on challenging assignments and deliver results using new approaches to solve problems.

1.2.4. Value: Innovative Competency: Experimentation

This value encourages others to try new things, take risks and learn from their mistakes, using logic, imagination, intuition, and systemic reasoning, to explore possibilities of what could be while embracing failure as an opportunity for learning and adaptation.

1.2.5. Value: Innovative Competency: Strategic Thinking

According to this competency the employee interprets the company's strategic direction into clear, specific and achievable targets for their team and balances future focus with current operational excellence.

1.2.6. Value: Collaborative Competency: Collaborative Working

This value encourages the employee to leverage a diverse network of others' skills and to gain their support by asking for their ideas, opinions, and participation when solving problems, making decisions, and carrying out plans together.

1.2.7. Value: Collaborative Competency: Leading Virtual* & Diverse Teams

The employee practicing this value tries to understand and anticipate change –sees it positively and is able to inspire others, demonstrates self-awareness by modifying behaviour to improve himself/herself, and motivates and energizes those around him to contribute towards the organization's overall vision and goals.

1.2.8. Value: Truthful Competency: Integrity & Ethics

According to this value the employee demonstrates and encourages the highest level of ethical standards from all team members and takes actions that show consideration for cultural concerns and expectations; continually examines own biases and behaviours to avoid inappropriate, or stereotypical, responses to others.

Taking the VEON values elaborated above into consideration, after sharing them with the employees, they were given a mock scenario with role-play opportunities and their communication was measured through an evaluation questionnaire assessed by their peers during the simulation based on the corporate competency model. This survey was repeated with two batches of thirty-five professionals each.

1.3. The Measuring scales for performance appraisal

Several scales are available for measuring the performance of the employees. Malhotra (1981) describes the construction of a scale to measure self-concepts, person concepts, and product concepts. Multivariate analysis and multidimensional scaling procedures are employed to develop a 15-item semantic differential scale. Measures of test-retest reliability are reported. Validity of the scale is assessed by the multi-trait, multi-method matrix approach. Newman, Sheth, & Mittal (1998) use a variety of concepts and numerical scales to assess employee behaviour. Typical ones include attitude research, image and self-concept measurement, multi attribute attitude models and preference mapping. Newman's model was used for this study and the data was analyzed using the Image and Self-concept Measurement on a Likert scale.

The surveys were based on the empirical evidence collected from the peer evaluation of the employee behaviour responses regarding the appropriateness of the internal and external communication while dealing with their colleagues and customers. The feedback received from the employees showed that they were not fully in line with the competency components stated in the evaluation model used by their organization and therefore did not know what the company expected of them. The results showed where they stood with reference to their communication proficiency based on the evaluation model used for this purpose and that they needed more knowledge of the assessment standards which could be perhaps provided through tutorials, seminars, workshops or training. Based on the survey evaluation, better communication was suggested between the administration and the employees. Making a renewed effort towards communication between the administration and the employees was suggested by the employees themselves for improvement in communication, after an interactive discussion at the end of the activity.

The information collected through this research may be useful as a broad based error analysis practice for improving the internal and external communication of these employees in their present telecommunication setup.

2. Problem Statement

It was observed that usually the employees in most organizations are unaware or not fully aware of the assessment criteria used for quality assurance and compensation in their specific organizations, and therefore are not able to perform accordingly.

Furthermore, after the knowledge of the assessment model they may still lack up-to-the-mark competence, especially in fields like internal and external interpersonal communication. It may only be with time and continuous conscious effort on the part of the employer as well as the employees, that they may learn to conform to the competency model set as a standard operating procedure to function efficiently in the corporate environment.

It was also observed that the employees were initially hesitant to evaluate their peers. To eliminate this issue they were asked to evaluate their peers anonymously. This gave them the freedom to evaluate freely with analytical and candid comments, leading on to useful solutions.

3. Research Questions

3.1. Can sharing the assessment model used for quality assurance by a telecommunication setup with the employees, help in bringing awareness among the employees regarding the expectations of the organization from them?

3.2. Can peer evaluation be used as a productive tool to identify and analyze errors in interpersonal communication in a telecommunication setup?

3.3. How can these errors be lessened, to bring in conformity to the core values shared in the competency model used by the organization for appraisal and compensation?

4. Purpose of the Study

To bring awareness to the employees regarding the evaluation criteria components that the company uses for quality assurance and appraisal, and be able identify and analyze errors in interpersonal communication and improve the internal and external communication skills of these employees. Other employees in the same organization and other employees in other similar telecommunication setups can also benefit from similar practices.

5. Research Methods

This research involved collecting appropriate and new data through a survey. It will focus on, what is and what is not considered culturally appropriate in communication according to indigenous corporate culture. Furthermore, it will study the employees' responses towards their colleagues, and the effect of their communication on them as co-workers, co-existing in a common environment.

A random sample was constituted by a telecommunication setup, consisting of professionals having different backgrounds, competencies, designations, varied experiences and years of service. Initially the evaluation model was shared with them to give them a level ground to be able to perform well according to the competencies being assessed. They were given a mock scenario with role-play opportunities and their communication skills were measured through an evaluation questionnaire assessed by their peers during

the simulation based on the corporate competency model. This survey was repeated with two batches of thirty-five professionals each. The data was analyzed using the Image and Self-concept Measurement on a Likert scale.

To assess the proficiency level of the employees based on the VEON model with reference to effective internal and external communication, the following mock scenario was built up simulating Customer Communication at the Front Desk. Its total Duration was 30 minutes.

Problem: Malfunction in Online Money Transfer via Customer Services at Dhoka, DIG Khan District, Punjab.

Venue: Customer Care Center, Shabistan road, Lahore

Customer: Antonio Bota and Rosa Mandis

Customer Care team: Mr Sultan, Mr Imran, Mr Hasan and Ms Sara

Customer Care Branch Manager: Mr Esa

Characters: 5 gentlemen and one lady (Rosa doesn't appear in the simulation)

Scenario

A tourist from Portugal, Antonio Bota sent money from Lahore to his friend Rosa visiting Dhoka Village, a remote area of Dera Ismail Khan. He sent it via Jazz Cash Money transfer. Rosa did not get the money due to bad signals at Dhoka Village. So she couldn't buy the air ticket to Lahore and consequently, both she and Antonio missed their international flight back home to Lisbon, Portugal. Rosa is still stranded at Dhoka Village without money as she had lost her wallet, with all her money and credit cards in it. Now Antonio is at the Lahore customer care center to complain about it and to make sure Rosa gets the money and can make it back to Lahore. The foreigners have faced inconvenience, loss of money and time due to this issue. They will have to spend a large amount of money to buy new international tickets, apparently all because of a faulty network service at Dhoka Village, DIG Khan.

Mr. Bota is short tempered and abusive and wants the money delivered to Rosa as soon as possible, but there are still problems in the network at Dhoka which might last up to twenty-four hours. The Customer care team tries to be polite and patient but finally Mr. Imran loses his temper. The argument escalates to such a level that eventually the Manager Mr Esa has to be called to sort out the issue and propose a solution to the argument and Mr Bota's problem.

The manager tries to calm down the customer and pushes his colleagues to speed up the process. Eventually Mr. Bota leaves as an unsatisfied customer but the customer services team vows that there process itself could not have been accelerated any more than it was is the present circumstances and technological limitations.

6. Findings

The data was collected and findings were analyzed to conclude what is and what is not considered culturally appropriate in corporate communication according to telecom culture. The results of the

evaluation questionnaire were based on the competencies mentioned in the VEON competency Model used by the organization for performance appraisal and quality assurance and are shown in Table 01.

Table 01. VEON Core Communication Proficiencies Assessment

No.	Values	Competency	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree	Disagree
1	Customer obsessed	Customer Focus	2%	6%	9%	62%	20%
2	Entrepreneurial	Digital Business Acumen	5%	8%	5%	20%	60%
		Growth Mindset	4%	8%	6%	20%	60%
3	Innovative	Experimentation	8%	13%	3%	72%	4%
		Strategic Thinking	8%	20%	1%	62%	9%
4	Collaborative	Collaborative Working	72%	11%	5%	8%	4%
		Leading Virtual & Diverse Teams	62%	23%	3%	8%	4%
5	Truthful	Integrity & Ethics	4%	8%	6%	62%	20%

With reference to Customer Focus majority of the respondents believed that their peers did not conform to the ideal standards of the company propagated VEON model values. The Customer Care Branch Manager Mr Esa could have given the customer a politer attitude. With reference to the Digital Business Acumen the customer care representatives could have been more agile in finding out a solution for Mr. Bota in spite of the technological limitations that were being experienced. The Entrepreneurial abilities regarding having a Growth Mindset despite obstacles or challenges and adapting in the light of new information needed some support. Their approach should have been more considerate in terms of pacifying the customer. Experimentation and Strategic Thinking was visible in problem solving but did not quite satisfy the customer, nor did it solve his problem. A better example of strategic thinking could have been, to give the customer some alternate solutions instead of saying outright that that the process might take upto twenty-four hours. Although Ms. Sara, Mr Sultan., Mr. Imran and Mr. Hasan, together with the manager Mr. Esa, tried to work together, perhaps more creativity and tact was required in this area. Mr. Imran losing his temper worsened the situation and triggered anger and frustration in an already upset customer. According to the respondents, considering the business Ethics, the company and the customer care staff could have gone an extra mile to perhaps compensate the customer for his financial losses fully or at least partially. Beside all these hurdles and limitations in problem solving, the peer evaluation also revealed two positive aspects discovered in this communication skills performance, namely, the ability to practice Collaborative Working and Leading Virtual & Diverse Teams. The group of employees did try to work together to handle the situation as best as they could, and the manager also tried to dissipate the awkwardness, embarrassment of the customer care representatives and the anger and frustration of the customer.

The overall feedback received from the employees showed that their peers did not consider most of the employee behaviour to be culturally appropriate and acceptable in a telecom organization. Moreover, the employees needed more insight into the values which the company expected them to follow, and therefore did not know how exactly they were being assessed and were expected to behave. Such responses from the customer care team may result in or instigate a negative opinion of the company in the minds of the customers, and may also consequently have an adverse effect on employee assessment and compensation and may harm a congenial work environment.

7. Conclusion

It was concluded from the study that the employees were not fully in line with the competency components stated in the evaluation model used by their organization. The results also showed where they stood with reference to their communication proficiency based on the evaluation model used for this purpose. It also identified the specific areas that needed improvement with reference to interpersonal communication skills, namely, customer focus, digital business acumen, a growth mindset, experimentation, strategic thinking and integrity & ethics. The employees suggested making a renewed effort towards communication between the administration and the employees after an interactive discussion at the end of the activity.

Valuable information was found through this exercise and concluding discussion. Each employee was given a specific feedback for improvement at an individual level. At the organizational level, it was suggested that the company could enhance their communication and that they needed more knowledge of the assessment standards, which could be perhaps provided through tutorials, seminars, workshops or training. At the end of the research it may be concluded that promotion and enhancement of English language in organizations will not only help to set their organizational goals high as a team (“Work smart: It’s all about teamwork”, 2010) but can also help to build the confidence of each individual employee in English language communication. Hence this study may be useful as a broad based error analysis practice, at an organizational level, for improving the internal and external communication of these employees, other employees in the same organization and other employees in other similar telecommunication setups.

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Disclaimer

The name of the company, training venue, respondents and trainees have not been revealed and have been replaced/changed and kept confidential to preserve the privacy of the organization and the individual employees.

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