

## COMMUNICATION AND EMPLOYEE RELATIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES OF SRI LANKA: PERCEPTION OF STAFF MEMBERS

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### **Abstract**

Communication is a medium used by people to interact and relate with each other. The purpose of this paper is to identify the management styles in relation to communication and employee relations, barriers to open communication and the factors that impede effective employee relations in Sri Lankan university libraries. The research study was based on two universities in the Colombo area. The sample data was collected by interviewing eight para-professionals and four minor staff members from each university library. The study found that the autocratic management styles of the majority of the management in both libraries adversely affected the morale of the employees when performing their duty in the library. The study further revealed that conflict situations between management and employees are common in both universities. Finally, the respondents stated that both libraries predominantly use interpersonal or informal communication methods to transmit messages to the employees in comparison to formal and technological methods.

**Keywords:** Leadership Styles, Librarians, Paraprofessionals, Perceptions, Sri Lanka.

### **Introduction**

#### **Education System in Sri Lanka**

The educational system of Sri Lanka is based on the British educational system introduced by the British during the colonial era in the 19th century. Even though Sri Lanka had a very strong education system based on temples prior to the colonial era, the British colonial government, however, established colleges for boys and girls separately. These colleges consisted of Primary Schools, Lower Secondary and Higher Secondary Schools. The University education is also a vital segment of the State 'free education system'. Since the university system is highly competitive, only the students who receive best results/aggregate /score at the G.C.E. (A/L) examination from each districts are guaranteed the chances of having access to tertiary education. The Students who fail to qualify for university entrance are eligible to enroll in higher educational institutions as external students of traditional universities or at the Open University of Sri Lanka. There are currently 15 major State funded universities in Sri Lanka. The most prominent ones are 'University of Colombo,' 'University of Kelaniya', 'University of Sri Jayewardhenapura', 'University of Moratuwa', 'University of Peradeniya', 'University of Jaffna', 'University of Ruhuna', and 'Eastern University of Sri Lanka.' Taking into consideration the history of the university system in Sri Lanka, the decision to set up the first university university in

Sri Lanka was taken as far back as 1921. However, it was only in 1942 that the first university with a library system was established in Colombo; when the 'University of Ceylon' was inaugurated by incorporating the 'Ceylon Medical College' established in 1921. University education in Sri Lanka in modern times has a short history of just over six decades. From 1921 to 1959 there was only one University College (1921–1942) or University on the island. With the establishment of two other universities in 1959, the need for co-ordination of higher education activities through the 'University Grants Commission' (UGC) or similar administrative structure arose.

The establishment of the 'National Council of Higher Education' (NCHE) in 1966 was part of a policy of bringing greater government influence to bear on universities and was therefore resented and resisted by the latter. However, the new body, while it lasted, served as a very effective buffer against undue government interference in university affairs. The six year period beginning in 1972 saw the centralization process of university education under strong government control. The UGC established in 1979 has much the same powers as the NCHE; a wider range, in fact, than those enjoyed by the British UGC, and much greater influence in university education than the British prototype. Universities in Sri Lanka have always depended on the State for a greater/major percentage of funding. While this has naturally given government much influence in shaping the structure and expansion of universities, the principle of university autonomy was strongly entrenched between 1942 and 1966. There was a departure from this autonomy in 1966, but more particularly between 1972 and 1978. The Universities Act., No. 16 of 1978 re-introduced the concept of autonomous universities. The major area in which state influence has been the predominant factor is in university admissions. This influence began in the mid-1950s, long before the concept of university autonomy came under systematic attack from the government's ministry of education.

### **Role of the University Library**

According to Hunt (1990), the primary purpose of a university library is to support the teaching and research carried out within the university. Therefore, the library is particularly the best university department for throwing open the wealth of knowledge for effective use. University libraries in Sri Lanka comprise a remarkable component of the academic libraries in the country, which cover a wide range of collection size, type and service provision from other libraries. They play a vital role in supporting the instructional, research and development programs of the university. Taking into consideration the university libraries in Sri Lanka, the library may consist of branch libraries. All these branch libraries are specialized in some areas such as medicine, agriculture, engineering etc. However, all these branch libraries are under the control of the librarian of the respective university (concerned). However, libraries in campuses, institutes, university schools or centers affiliated to the university are not functioning under the direct directions of the librarian. These libraries are controlled by an assistant librarian or senior assistant librarian under the administrative directions of the Director of the particular institution.

### University Library Staff

According to the existing library staff in Sri Lankan universities, the university library organization structure represents a three tier pyramid:

- Professionals
- Paraprofessionals
- Minor staff

Professionals comprise of Librarian, Deputy Librarians, Senior Assistant Librarians, and Assistant Librarians. They comprise the management of the library and are responsible for the day-to-day professional work and administrative functions of the library. All professionals are headed by the Librarian who is the head of all libraries in the university. Paraprofessionals consist of Staff Assistants, Library Assistants, Computer Application Assistants, Bindery Foreman and Minor staff members, who are Library Assistants, Library Attendants, Laborers and binders. They work under the supervision of the professional staff member in charge of a particular section of the library. Guidance and instructions usually comes from the particular professional staff member concerned in the branch to the staff member. The minor staff is highly labor intensive and the participation of men is exceptionally high in this sector.

In accordance with the university act in 1978, librarians are academic members of the university and the academic positions available to librarians in the Sri Lankan university system are as follows:

- Librarian
- Deputy Librarian
- Senior Assistant Librarian (Grade I)
- Senior Assistant Librarian (Grade II)

Assistant Librarian

Assistant Librarian (Probationary)

The positions of librarians are equivalent to the academic status of relevant counter parts in the university as indicated below:

Librarian	Professor
Deputy Librarian	Associate Professor
Senior Assistant Librarian (Grade I)	Senior Lecturer (Grade I)
Senior Assistant Librarian (Grade II)	Senior Lecturer (Grade II)
Assistant Librarian	Lecturer (Grade II)
Assistant Librarian (Probationary)	Lecturer (Probationary)

The position of the librarian is being a principal officer in the libraries of a university and he or she enjoys the status of a professor and is entitled to the salary scale of a professor. According to the university act, no 16 of 1978, "the librarian of a university shall be appointed by the council upon the recommendation of a selection committee, the

comparison of which shall be prescribed by ordinance. He shall be a full time officer of that university and shall exercise, perform and discharge such powers, duties and functions as may be conferred or imposed on or assigned to him by this act or by any appropriate instrument." (University Act, 1978: 20). The librarian shall subject to the direction and control of the vice-chancellor, be responsible for the administration of the library or libraries of the university.

However, the librarian is not a member of the highest executive body and the governing authority, which is the council of the university. The 'council' is the highest body of a university, which exercise powers, perform and discharge the duties and functions conferred or imposed on, or assigned to a university. Nevertheless, librarian is a member of the university senate. The university 'senate' is the highest academic authority, which has control and general direction of instruction, education, research and examinations in the university. The advantage of being a librarian being a member of the senate is that, he keeps himself in touch with all academic developments, because it is in the light of such developments that he must necessarily plan and operate the university's library facilities and other appropriate services.

### **Communication in University Libraries**

A number of public and private organizations have begun to add a different form of employee assessments in the field of "organizational climate and culture" surveys. Schneider (1990, p. xiii), argues that there is an urgent need to understand how the activities of organization get translated into the reality of organization for organizational members. Organizational climate assessment examines the impact on an organization of various factors: viz, morale and work conditions and etc. Kopelman et al. (1990) document the extensive research on climate and culture in productivity and notes that this research includes studies of employee feedback surveys such as job satisfaction and climate surveys. Current "organizational climate" assessment initiatives in the library profession have begun to appear, including a project managed by the 'University of Maryland'. (Lowry & Hanges, 2008).

In most organizations, employers deal with some unhappy or unfulfilled employees. What if these employees were not really the problem employees and it was the employer that created the performance problem? It is often the supervisor's behaviour towards the perceived weaker performers that ends up doing just the happening by triggering a vicious circle of worsening performance and growing alienation. Basically, many employees fail because of their supervisor's efforts, which may be called a dysfunctional boss-subordinate relationship.

Communication is the medium through which people interact with others. University libraries are the backbone of the university system. The universities' academic quality also depends on the quality of libraries. Thus, investigation of the system of library is very important for the success of university objectives. The libraries employs a larger number of labor force of the university and thus, keeping this sector working at a high level of efficiency and motivating its staff to generate maximum of performance should be

considered as one of the most important objectives of the library system. To conduct the study on communication, the researcher selected the library sector which requires effective communication to performance workers relations to maintain the quality of library system.

Supervisors must learn to enter situations with an open mind, how to approach difficult situations and alleviate the downward spiral in order to cure the syndrome. The Set-up-to Fail Syndrome book outlines five concrete steps that can act as a guiding framework to help stop the plunge downward:

- Agreeing on the symptoms. Both parties must identify the specific areas where they agree the employee has struggled.
- Diagnosing the causes. The supervisor and employee must jointly explore the causes of weak performance, including how the supervisor's behaviour has affected performance.
- Finding the cure. Both must agree on performance objectives and on specific actions to improve the relationship.
- Preventing relapse. The supervisor and the employee should pledge to address future problems earlier and open the door to more open communication.
- Monitoring the effectiveness of the treatment. Beyond the initial discussions, both parties must hold periodic progress reviews.

While it is up to the supervisor to initiate, the employee needs to be an active partner in the process. Will the employee be receptive to feedback? The ultimate solution is to prevent the syndrome from the start. Supervisors whom Manzoni and Barsoux (2002) dub "syndrome busters" seem to work on several fronts to get information from their perceived weak performers. They invest time and energy in the early stages of the relationship in order to build and develop the relationship. They monitor their tendency to label the employee incorrectly and invite the employee to act as joint owners of the relationship.

### **Statement of the Problem**

An effective communication is a two way process, where there should be a mutual interchange of opinions, ideas and values. According to the views of the management of the university libraries, some librarians have expressed that they are good communicator who have built up a strong communication relationship with library employees, However, on the other hand, employees express that there is a communication gap between management and staff. Therefore, this research attempted to investigate the real ground situation of the existing situation and relating communication challenges and conflicts.

Especially, in the university library sector, the management and the employees should strength their relationships by coordinating their activities to achieve common goals of the organization such as increasing the productivity and serving internal, external customers, decreasing disputes and strikes etc.

This study will enable the readers to see the applications and applicability of various communication strategies in the sampled communities of university libraries. However,

the research is limited in its scope as the study focused on only the two university libraries in the capital; that is Colombo region, though the 15 universities are in the country. The research is also limited to a small sample size due to the difficultness of finding respondents due the higher sensitivity of the study.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study

- To identify to what extent the management style has an impact on employee relations.
- To identify the barriers to open communication existing in the university library sector.
- To identify the common factors those impede effective employee relations.
- To ascertain methods and ways to improve employee relations through effective communication system in the university library field.

### **Methodology**

#### **Target Population**

Although there are fifteen universities in Sri Lanka, the target population of the study was limited to two universities located in the Colombo area, based on the number of staff available in the library. Particularly, it was apparent that the employees of these two universities are more active in their trade unions and many trade union actions against the university authorities had taken place during the last five year period. Thus, it assumed that final outcome would yield interesting results in relation to the employer-employee relationship.

#### **Sample and Sampling**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher selected two university libraries in Sri Lanka.

1. University Library I
2. University Library II

Based upon the staff composition of these two universities, 20% from the total staff of para-professionals and minor staff were selected from the University Library I. Thus, the number of staff selected for the sample was 12 and based on the composition of paraprofessionals and minor staff of the library, only 8 paraprofessionals and 4 minor staff members were selected for the sample. In applying the same procedure, 7 paraprofessionals and 4 minor staff members were selected for sample from University Library II. The selection of subjects for the sample was based on purposive sample as they had to express their consent to participate in the interviews at the outset. As experience is an influential factor in assessing any phenomena (Woodruff, Cadote & Jenkins 1983; LaTour and Peat 1979), only the employees with a minimum of one year's experience was included in the sample as the inclusion criteria. Some staff members declined attending the interview because of the respondents was reluctant to express their own feelings due to high sensitivity of the questions. Thus, the survey method based on purposive sampling technique was chosen as the most appropriate data collection technique due to the nature of the sample.

### **Data Collection**

This research also aimed to uncover the deeper complexity of the association between employer and employee relationship in the context of university libraries. It was recognized that these relationships were complicated and needed to be understood in qualitative terms to uncover the real dynamism relationship in the context of university libraries in Sri Lanka. Thus, the more advantageous phenomenological research paradigm was used in this study, to ascertain the inherent dynamism of the problem area. The phenomenological paradigm presents the world as socially constructed and subjective phenomenon considers the observer as part of the phenomenon observed and not as something outside it and that science in general is driven by human interests (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 1991).

### **Data Analysis**

The methodology of this research was the survey method, utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques. The key data collection technique was in-depth interviews and the interviews were not based on any pre-determined questions. Employees were facilitated by the interviewer to express their own feelings freely. In this study, as the researcher was well acquainted with most of the respondents in the selected sample, he hired a qualified person who is not familiar with the library staff in both universities to survey the subjects. Though this technique, the researcher made the maximum effort to obtain reliable information from the respondents. The collected data was written into piece of papers as the researcher was not allowed for any kind of recording by the respondents. However very little non-respondents (80%) were in the sample and others participated for the study on an agreement that their identity will not disclose to any party in any case.

The other method of gathering information was personal observations. All the questionnaires were constructed on utilizing the Norman Kemp Labor Relations theory (1992). Because of the qualitative nature of the research, data analysis was mainly done by qualitative analysis methods by content analysis technique introduced in the qualitative analysis methodologies. For the quantitative analysis, the data were initially cleaned by removing invalid responses. Thereafter the data normality were checked by examining skewness of distribution (Hair et al. 1998). The procedure for theoretical validity and construct validity was subsequently carried out to limit errors and to enhance the validity and reliability of the process. Subsequently, the processes of identification of key terms expressed in relation to the employer-employee relationship in libraries were analysis quantitatively by means of frequency, mean and standard deviation statistics.

## **Findings**

### **Degree of Democracy**

#### **University Library I**

According to the information given by the paraprofessionals and laborers of the group, the management that is professional staff of the library falls to more autocratic type personality in the University Library I.

General opinions of the workers towards their management are:

1. Difficult to approach them, that is very distance relationship with the management of the library.
2. Scared to talk with them in a friendly manner.
3. They maintain good relationship with a few paraprofessionals and minor grades people who favor to them.
4. Can not get a favorable solution to the staff from the management in a critical situation as they always work to the rule only for the staff. However, they change their rules at times when it applies to their own management and colleagues among in the teaching counterparts. 67% of the sampled cases have these opinions towards their management and 25% of the sample expressed that.
  - (i) The management is very friendly and provide satisfactory solutions and lead the staff in an effective manner in all critical situations.
  - (ii) The management maintains good relationship with the staff for official work though the staff cannot access to them for very personal problems. 8.3% of the sample declined to express their views regarding management. However, it is interesting to know that 92% of the sample expressed that the management has created a very personal circle around them and within the circle they are very friendly behave like a family. Others cannot damage this circle as it is very strong.

The majority of the sample population showed that although the management constitutes many rules and regulations for library use, they usually breach the rules and regulations to help some of the patrons of the library, specifically their teaching counterparts in faculties. For instance, if the paraprofessional and minor staff members refuse to help some patrons because of the prevailing rules and regulations, these patrons straightforwardly reach the management and obtain their permission. They never communicate with the paraprofessionals or minor staff members who dealt with the situation earlier. As a result of these circumstances, the morale of the staff has gradually decreased and finally it would be a denominative factor among the motivated workers who normally perform their duties effectively and efficiently in the library environment. However, the majority of the workers (100%) stressed that the management of the library comprises of very competent people in education, professionalism and practical dealings. They feel that the management consists of good decision makers and they are genuinely equivalent and sometimes even greater than their teaching counterparts in some of the departments or faculties in the university. Conversely, 92% of the respondents expressed that all the professionals in the management are not good administrators, but only two professionals out of them were recognized as very good administrators in the University Library I.

### **University Library II**

Here the staff expressed that frequently their suggestions were accepted by the management, but the suggestion were never implemented practically. In the usual cause of events, they never incorporate opinions of the staff members in the decision making process. 17% of respondents did not response to the questions of the research study. 67% of the respondents stressed that there were some conflicts between the staff and management in the library. However, a few people in the management performed their professional duties satisfactorily,



while others were sluggish and did not even carry out assigned responsibilities properly. Although they implemented several labor regulations to maintain the regularities perfectly, regulations were applied only to the paraprofessional and minor staff. The common opinion of the staff towards the management was that they weren't not good personnel in the process of decision making. It was interesting to know that the staff felt that the management consisted of incompetent personnel, especially in taking strong decisions at critical times. This is perfectly contradicted with the statements made by the staff members of the University Library I. The staff members also felt that the professionalism and the qualifications gained by the management were not adequate, when compared to their teaching counterparts in the academic departments in the same university.

### Conflict Situations in Libraries

Table 1 summarises the conflict situations of the selected libraries to provide a clear picture of the circumstances.

**Table 1: Conflict Situation in Libraries**

Library	Among the Management	Between Management and workers	Between unions and management	Among unions	Between union and workers
University Library I	No	Yes (R)	No	Yes (S)	Yes (S)
University Library II	Yes (S)	Yes (F)	Yes (R)	No	No

R – Rarely      S – Sometimes      F – Frequently

University Library I does not provide substantial evidences regarding the conflicts among its management. However, conflicts among unions happen sometimes. On the contrary, conflicts between the management and workers of the University Library II are higher than the University Library I. The conflicts between staff and management are very rare in the University Library I, when compared to University Library II. According to the respondents, the management is not good listeners and is incapable of making decisions in critical/challenging/difficult times in order to develop good governance in the library. The top manager of this library always consults other peers in the same discipline to sort out some problems when critical incidents arise in the library. She never faces the problems courageously and the assistance given by the other professionals who are also in the management is not significant. However, the staff in the University Library I presented very contradictive opinions about their management and the top official is a very dexterous and expert decision maker who is always supported by the other management professionals who are effective and fast decision makers.

### Interpersonal Skills

The respondents in the university library I articulated that the majority of the management is fluent in both English and Sinhala Languages, the two most commonly used official languages of the country. However, respondents of the University Library II stressed that

only two professionals in the management are fluent in both languages and others are not component in English. University Library II people stated that “through facial reactions only we can come to understand whether s/he accept our opinion or not. When we ask about the opinions of our suggestions from him, he always says “OK, Will see”. Library staff of both university libraries stressed that “we can express our feelings freely [to the management] but we are frustrated to do the work when our opinion are ignored.” However, the management of University Library I was accused by the employees that the mistakes were sometimes done by workers deliberately and sometimes unintentionally. Nevertheless, the reaction of the management was the same as in both situations. However, the people in university library II showed that the management does not interrupt their activities. Furthermore, they explained that the top manger does not give power to the other professionals in the management to sort out the problems and take decisions in relation to the good governance of the library. The power devolution of this library has not been done properly. Though s/he directly attend everything, no proper solution become manifest. However, the situation in University Library I is entirely different from the university library II. The top manager has devaluated her/his power unto the other professional members in the management and decisions are taken by them as well. Nevertheless, no conflicts had arisen with the top manager and other members of the management.

### **Communication Channels**

All libraries in this study had both vertical and horizontal communication channels.

### **Communication Methods**

Some items in questionnaire were designed to measure the construct that indicates the type of communication preferred by the librarians in their activities in the library. The methods of communication can be divided into three types; namely interpersonal or informal communication, formal communication, and technological communication. Table 2 shows that interpersonal communication is still very important to librarians. Technological communication is very much underused. It was observed that a few librarians who used IT as a method of communication were young librarians who had recently entered into the field.

**Table 2: Communication Methods Among the Librarians**

<b>Method of Communication</b> <b>Interpersonal or informal</b>	<b>University</b> <b>Library I</b>	<b>University</b> <b>Library II</b>
1. Personal	20	30
2. Letter	29	18
3. Notice	18	22
4. Informal bulk gathering	04	02
5. Telephone	12	16
<b>Formal</b>		
1. Formal Meeting	02	01
2. Seminar/Workshop	00	00
3. Reports	00	00
4. Books/monographs	00	00
<b>Technological</b>		
1. E-mail	04	01
2. Intranet	00	00
3. Internet	00	00
4. Fax	00	00
5. Teleconferencing	00	00
6. Other	00	00

All the libraries in this study use both written and oral communication methods in their daily operations. Although oral communication is widely used in both libraries, University Library I basically uses more written communication, when compared to the university library II. Oral communication is being widely used in both libraries.

In oral communication, both Sinhalese and English is used as a medium of instruction. In these two libraries oral communication takes place either face-to-face or through telephone. Both these libraries oral communication takes place in the hierarchy is not considered. For example, the worker can directly approach the librarian to express his/her grievance as part of open door policy. However, though the university library II people always go directly to the top manger, the University Library I people consult the head of their department or mostly their immediate boss prior to visiting the top manager. University Library I staff stressed that they do not have even one formal meeting with the management within a year. Furthermore, they claimed that no suggestions for work improvements and service improvement have come up with them properly in any case.

Though disciplinary procedure in libraries has both formal and informal procedures, disciplinary actions will arise with the formal written communication. Under an informal disciplinary procedure, a warning is issued for minor misconduct behaviors such as lateness, absenteeism etc. Under a formal procedure domestic inquiry is held in the university for alleged serious acts of misconduct such as insubordination and assault. It will not be carried out by the management of the library. The responsibility belongs to the university council, which is the highest authoritative body of any university in the country. Some workers in both libraries have been dismissed after formal inquiries. Letters and notices are the only methods of written communication used in both libraries.

## Conclusions

Any organization can not survive without communication. Whatever the action one does in this regard, communication is a mandatory necessity that facilitates the functioning of an organization. Communication transmits information and knowledge from person to person and it also serves to motivate and direct the people to perform their work properly and satisfactorily. Democracy in the workplace implies a domestic style of management on the part of the leaders. Libraries have open door policy for grievances. Though it is always good, the librarians need to concentrate much on the workplace democracy when taking decisions about the employees. Managers in libraries should have characteristics such as trust in workers, open and spontaneous communication and collaborative problem solving. Consequently, a positive relationship climate can be created.

The more autocratic and authoritarian management style is not favorable for labor relations. There are lots of subordinates under the study who believe in worker democracy. It is realized through this study, the librarians who wish to become more democratic, have in the first place to achieve better results.

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