

LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION THROUGH WHATSAPP APPLICATION IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

In an organization such as the school, leadership style is often related to the success of the head of the school in leading and managing the staff. One important factor in any leadership style is communication between the superior and his or her subordinates. The study examines a leadership communication tool using 'WhatsApp' (mobile instant messaging application) in everyday communication between the staff and administrator of the school. The consistency and frequency of messaging texts were observed and it was found that the criteria of messaging can be classified into two categories which are social communication and official communication. Data was collected through survey questionnaire, interviews and observations and documents on the text conversations in the WhatsApp application of participants show that, leadership communication through WhatsApp application is useful and effective in the school administration and management and also in maintaining good relationship between superiors and subordinates.

Keywords: WhatsApp, leadership communication, subordinates, superiors.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

WhatsApp is a free to download messenger application used for smartphones which was introduced in 2009. Acton & Koum (2014), as the founders of the application stated that WhatsApp has reached more than 500 million users worldwide, sharing more than 700 million photos and over millions of videos daily. According to the official WhatsApp statistics, as of May 2018, it has become an alternative to short messaging service (SMS), offering real-time texting or communication, including the ease of sharing information (e.g. contact list) or media content (e.g. audio, video files, images and location data). Thus, this study aims to extend the current knowledge on the use and effects of WhatsApp, as a tool for leadership communication between the administrator and teachers in a rural primary school.

1.1 Background of The Study

WhatsApp application has become popular as a convenient communication application in our everyday lives. Despite individual sharing, there is also the benefit of group sharing such as the formation of 'Warga SKSL' group by an 'administrator' (a term used by the application) who is a teacher in a rural national primary school, Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Leman, Sekinchan, Selangor. The group participants are the school administrators, the assistants, the teaching staff and the school workers. Since its formation and establishment, it has been an important channel of communication for the school. The head of the school is the most

respected participant in the group. He is normally the first to greet the group. Usually, he starts with greetings to all the members as early as seven in the morning then followed by responses from the teachers. The programme of the day is being posted in the application to remind who is in charge, inclusive of details of the programme, what is supposed to be done and when is the event going to be held. This is followed by other teacher participants who post images of birthday cakes with a birthday wish to whoever is celebrating his or her birthday on that day. The image of the cake and the birthday wish then starts multiplying until they are settled. There are also posts of images of activities of sports training and competitions the students are participating in during the week. Lately, there are also posts of teachers teaching extra classes, doing extra work such as cleaning up the staff room, repairing a broken table and putting up new notice boards to replace the old ones outside school hours.

The choice of communication through WhatsApp application has become a communication style within the school community. Since its adoption last year, it has become popular. This has escalated with the installation of WIFI system in the school, where everybody gets free access. More participants are added to the official group 'Warga SKSL' and each day more messages and images are being sent and posted. The superiors, like the heads of subject panels, societies and clubs in the group keep reminding the participants in the WhatsApp group to gradually check the updates which are posted in the application every day. Even tentative programmes and calling letters for meetings are being posted on the WhatsApp group channel before they are passed to the teacher concerned. The updates are supposedly important messages and official such as reminders, announcements about work.

Majority of the teachers in this school are graduates and only eight teachers are Diploma holders or college graduates from the 80s. These differences in academic background and achievements has somehow developed a gap between the teachers; the 'graduates' and the 'non-graduates'. It has not seriously affected the performance of teachers as a whole but sometimes there is a small breakdown in communication which are caused or created by negative attitudes. Being aware of this situation or issue, the headmaster who as a leader, has kept them as participants in the group so that they would not let this issue go out of hand. Initiation in building friendship and creating rapport in WhatsApp school group is a solution. 'Warga SKSL' has included all the teachers in it, and from the series of conversations displayed in the table, seniors as well as juniors participated. There is no age gap in this WhatsApp group. Everybody has turns and chances to 'voice' out their opinions and ideas.

1.2 Statement of The Problem

The style of communication between the superior and subordinates is an important contributing factor to the success or effectiveness of an organization. There should exist mutual understanding between both parties as to how and what rules of communicative guidelines or behavior should be maintained during interactions. This means that, the superior and the subordinates should restrict their conversation to official or business and avoid unofficial and social conversations which could be misinterpreted. However, beside the restriction and formalities involved, this nature of communication seemed like a sensible and safe approach. Thus, this case study observes the dialogues of these group of participants during their correspondence in the WhatsApp application for a duration of two weeks.

1.3 Objectives of The Study

The objectives of the study are:

- (i) to find out positive factors which contribute to the effectiveness of using WhatsApp application in the communication between the leader of the school and the subordinates;
- (ii) to examine positive attitudes that the participants show in maintaining good social and working relationship in the WhatsApp group 'Warga SKSL'.

1.4 Research Questions

The questions are:

- (i) What are the contributing factors for effective communication in using WhatsApp application between the leader of the school and the subordinates?
- (ii) What are the positive attitudes that participants show in maintaining good social and working relationship in the WhatsApp group 'Warga SKSL'?

1.5 Significance of The Study

Maintaining good and effective communication between the superior and the subordinates is vital in an organisation such as the school. The willingness of subordinates to participate in any matters that benefit and help in the management of the organisation prove that they are responsible, dependable and committed. Barriers in communication between the superior and the subordinates are overcome through the manipulation of non verbal communication technology.

1.6 Limitation of The Study

The study is limited to:

- (i) Staff of the school however, not all the staff participated. Only forty out of forty-five teachers were in the school. During the course of this case study, there are few teachers who are on maternity leave and were away attending servicing courses;
- (ii) The WhatsApp application may not be the only networking communication available. There are also other social networkings available such as the Telegram, Skype, Wechat applications.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses the role of the leader and manager in an organization. Another important aspect in leadership and management is effective communication between the superiors and the subordinates. Such communication needs to be maintained so that there is good rapport and development of positive attitudes among the superiors and the subordinates. This will enhance understanding, cooperation and healthy working environment.

2.1 Leadership and Management

Raz (2003) clarifies that a leader with good network skills possesses basic characteristics, good relationship towards the members of the networks and good administrative characteristics. Thus, he would be able to elicit co-operation and teamwork from a large network of people by giving mandates, motivation and persuasion wherever and whenever possible. In other words, a leader has to have the most influence in performance and morale of the organization that he is leading. There should also be understanding and cooperation between the leader and his subordinates as leaders need the support of the environment and relationship which starts from effective communication.

2.2 Communication

Effective communication helps transmit information and also create mutual understanding between superior and subordinates in the administration of an organisation such as the school. According to Adu-Oppong (2014), the superior and the subordinates should have an open and easy kind of correspondence where they are able to talk, exchange and discuss ideas and opinions mutually. This creates work-friendly environment that enhances work performance which brings to job satisfaction. Besides that, mutual open communication in the workplace help reduce and resolve conflicts among the staff thus, enable them to work professionally.

2.3 Social Intelligence

Another important criteria of a leader is having 'social intelligence' or 'people skill'. By having the cognitive ability to understand and act wisely in human interactions, a leader is able to navigate in the social world (Snow, 2010). In addition, Honeywill (2015) also stressed that Social Intelligence is human potential in socialising with people thus navigate complex social relationships and environments. Moreover, Cacioppo et al. (2015) shared empirical evidence from research studies that found that having strong relationships, being integrated in one's social network resulted in happier working atmosphere and are better at coping with stresses in life, protected from incidence of disease and probably live a longer life.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This case study examines the effectiveness of communication tool through the wide access on mobile technology called the WhatsApp application. 40 respondents comprising the administrators and the staff represent the whole population of teachers in Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Leman.

3.1 Research Methods and Instruments

The study engages a mixed method research approach. There are basically three instruments employed in this study. First was the the questionnaire used to collect data from 40 respondents. The second instrument was the conversation from the WhatsApp group formed by Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Leman called 'Warga SKSL'. The final instrument was the interview with three headmasters of three different neighbouring schools.

3.1.1 Questionnaire

It was constructed mainly to find out the respondents' opinions and perceptions on the usage of WhatsApp application as a communication tool between the administration and management of the school and the subordinates. A 4-point Likert scale, also called a forced Likert scale since the user is forced to form an opinion is used. The Likert scale is used in the survey; Ranging from 1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Agree and 4- Strongly Disagree. This is more essential as respondents has to state their stance and there is no safe 'neutral' option or fence sitters.

3.1.2 WhatsApp Conversations

In this study, as the researcher is one of the teacher participants in the WhatsApp 'Warga SKSL' group in the school, the WhatsApp conversations were collected from the researcher's email which was sent through the researcher's WhatsApp application. The conversations were read and categorized as Social and Official conversation for analysis.

3.1.3 Interviews

Interview is an important method to check the accuracy of the impressions derived from the observation. In this study, the standardized open-ended type of interview was used. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were utilized extensively as interviewing format possibly with an individual (Corbin, 2008). This type of interview is conducted once only, with an individual or with a group and generally cover the duration of 30 minutes to more than an hour. All the interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order. Questions were worded in open-ended format (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010).

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Questionnaire

The set of questionnaire administered was based on the respondents' choice of communication with the WhatsApp application, perceptions on the leadership communication style through the usage of WhatsApp application. The outcome of the questionnaire is categorised into positive and negative factors. Table 1 shows the details of the positive and negative factors derived from the findings of the questionnaire administered.

The data from the questionnaire administered showed that the respondents had positive attitudes towards the usage of the application as an important and useful tool for communication as they had the privilege to use it with easy and convenient internet access in the workplace. Majority of them subscribed their own data plan to get in touch with their colleagues after working hours especially outside the school. Being active users or subscribers of data plan, WhatsApp application has become the most commonly and convenient use for them. The respondents have not only become comfortable to communicate with each other, but also built good rapport with their superiors and vice versa. They overcame their inferiority with other subordinates and their superiors and in fact, began informal communication which helped in their workfield as well as friendship. Most respondents neglected the very few negative responses by a few respondents who were not satisfied with the internet system which broke

down most of the time, they however suggested that the administration should maintain the access with better Wi-Fi system for the school. Other comments and suggestions include proper and appropriate use of language in the channel to avoid offending anyone, considering the fact that there are administrators, superiors and all the staff of the school in the group. However, majority of the staff have shown very positive support, perceptions and thoughts on the adoption of WhatsApp application between the subordinates and the superiors that have benefitted them. They also agree to continue with the choice of leadership communication in the school i.e. ‘Warga SKSL’ group in WhatsApp application.

Table 1: Positive and Negative Factors Based on Teachers Perceptions on Leadership Communication Style Through the Usage of WhatsApp Application

| NO. | POSITIVE FACTORS |
|------------|--|
| 1 | useful source of information during working or after working hours |
| 2 | keep up the good work. Well Done |
| 3 | build friendship up-to-date modern technology in school management and leadership |
| 4 | healthy communication |
| 5 | mutual understanding and good cooperation among the school staff |
| 6 | helps in the effectiveness of the leadership communication |
| 7 | working in group is better than working alone |
| 8 | get better Wi-Fi system for school |
| 9 | school administrator should monitor the usage of application to avoid unnecessary communication after midnight |
| 10 | an alternative communication tool because of the reliability of mobile network |
| 11 | necessary posts of images should be avoided and this application should only be about work |
| 11 | admin should answer or respond to questions or inquiries by members |
| 12 | all teachers & staff should use the application and become member of the group |
| 13 | have a guideline in using WhatsApp in school |
| 14 | superior and management should be aware on the needs of the subordinates |
| 15 | create WhatsApp groups for panels in school |
| 16 | should be separate groups - social and official |
| 17 | should have a guideline in using this application |
| 18 | teachers should be able to accept any comments or advice |
| 19 | be careful with negative influence online |
| 20 | continue using WhatsApp with suitable language |
| NO. | NEGATIVE FACTORS |
| 1 | still prefer face to face communication |
| 2 | not satisfied with the internet system |
| 3 | can give bad impact if rumours and negative things are being spread |

The effectiveness in the communication using WhatsApp application between the leader and the subordinates are based on mutual sharing and understanding between them in both social and official conversation purposes. This shows that the participants of ‘Warga SKSL’ are more responsive in social conversation. Their responses are consistent.

4.2 Observation – WhatsApp Conversation

The conversation dialogue scripts for three weeks in a row were recorded and categorized as:

- (i) Social conversations:
 - These are casual chattings between the participants about students, issues, promoting things to sell, asking and answering questions;
 - These include birthday wishes and condolences.
- (ii) Official conversation:
 - School work, about meeting, completion dates and rules, examinations, final submissions keying in marks, reminders, etc.

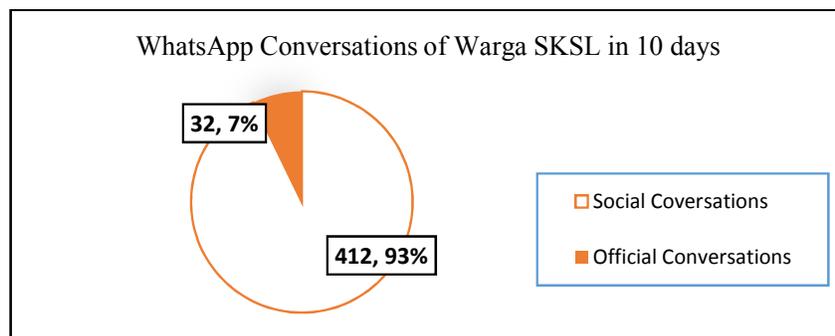


Chart 1: WhatsApp Conversations of Warga SKSL in 10 days

Chart 1 above shows there are 412 times social conversations and only 32 times of official conversations in a duration of 10 days, selected from 14 March until 1 April, 2016. The group of Warga SKSL is a channel for communication between teachers, superiors and subordinates in the school. Chart 1 shows how the group in Warga SKSL interact or communicate both for the purpose of work and also social life.

Excerpts From The Social Conversation

Based on the social conversations in the WhatsApp group channel 'Warga SKSL', several excerpts taken from the social conversation category are analysed.

I) The sentences below describe how the members of group WargaSKSL shows their sympathies upon the death of a teacher's mother:

- (i) 14/2/2016 at 0855 a.m. "*Al Fatihah...Emak cg Arman telah kembali ke rahmatullah srbentar td..moga diterima srgala amal ibadah n trgolong dalm gol org yg beriman n mndapt ramatNya...aminnn*" (Al Fatihah ... teacher Azman's mother have returned to her creator just a while ago, may all her piousness and prayers be accepted and she be put among the pious and receives mercy from the Almighty, aamiin) and these words of condolences went on until 15:45 p.m. by other participants on the same day.

II) A few other conversations recorded shows the impression that the participants are concerned and care about their colleagues and the students. An incident about a student being stung by a hornet was informed to the head and he quickly went into the group's attention:

(ii) 21/3/2016 at 1152 a.m. "dah ok ka murid yg kena sengat tabuan. Dua kali cg ke klinik". (is the pupil who was stung by a hornet ok? The teacher went twice to the clinic).

The teacher on duty that day responded with few and answers confirming the good condition of the student involved.

(iii) "Doc thn die dlu..sebb kna lebih dri 5 sengatan." (Doctor asked her to rest as she was stung five times).

Other participants also responded on the issue and it continued until 12:25 p.m. that day finally with a suggestion:

(iv) "kena bgitau penjaganya(emak)" (have to inform her guardian(mother)).

There are also conversations on wishing birthdays with images of birthday cakes with lighted candles on them, excvchanges of views, opinions, and stories aboutt their vacations and pictures shared.

Excerpts From The Official Conversations

On the other hand, the official conversation of 'Warga SKSL' is meant to announce, remind respondents on responsiblities of teachers per say.

I) This announcement was made by the school sports secretary.

(i) 16/3/2016, 11:15 a.m. "Assalamualaikum dn selamat pagi. Dukacita dimaklumkan bhw disebabkan factor kepanasan melampau, setelah diperbincangkan secara mendalam dgn Tuan PPD dgn mengambilkira impak kepanasan cuaca ini, maka kejohanan balapan padang terpaksa dibatalkan. Tuan Pengarah jg maklum perkara ini stelah dihubungi oleh Tuan PPD. Disbabkn tarikh kej negeri pd 4-7 April, maka MSSD akan mengadakan pemilihan shj pd tarikh yg akan ditetapkan. Mohon maaf atas keputusan ini."

(Peace be upon you.. and good morning, It is sad to inform that due to extreme temperature, the District Education Office has agreed all track events for the championship are put off. The State Education Director has been informed that there would only be selections for the MSSD on April 4-7).

The participant who wrote the message is a teacher cum secretary for examination, reminding the teachers to key in the markss before March 24.

(ii) 21/3/2016, 0729 a.m. " Assalamualaikum...semua guru mata pelajaran Ujian pengesanan 1, bolehlah key in markah sebelum 24 Mac ya.....Tq...."

(Peace be upon you.....all detection tests 1 subject teachers, you can key in the marks before March 24 ya.....Tq...).

Being the researcher and also participant in this group, it is found that they are ‘silent reader’ participants. They rarely participated in any conversations. The most responses made are from the younger batch of teachers who repeat and continuously respond to any matters brought up or posted on the screen.

Overall, WhatsApp application has been accepted in the school group by most teachers and workers in the school. They enjoy using the application and seem to show more interests. They continue their chats, post and respond in the WhatsApp group of ‘Warga SKSL’ even after school hours, at nights and during weekends. This shows that they feel comfortable and keep them connected with their colleagues. In other words, they are close and always find each other in the ‘Warga SKSL’ channel.

By categorising them into Social and Official conversations, it is obvious that there are more social texts than official ones. The social part included jokes, comments, remarks and were not connected to work or business. They were just talks and chats. But in doing so, still, messages, reminders, information and updates are delivered. This can be regarded as mixing business with pleasure. That shows how they stay connected and as they do that they still want to get the job done. Interestingly, if the media were not omitted, there would be many of them on the table. However, for the convenient of this study, they were omitted.

4.3 The Interview Results

The interview sessions were held with three respondents who are the heads of the neighbouring schools. The interview was conducted in Malay but has been translated into English for the purpose of this study. The overall common themes are derived from the responses given by the respondents (R1, R2 & R3). Similarity in the themes were identified and analysed as part of findings derived from the interview.

Overall Summary of Emerging Themes (Q1-Q5)

The themes derived from the teachers’ interview results are divided into three categories: A=Positiveness, B=Negativeness and C= Indifferent as shown in the diagram 1 below:

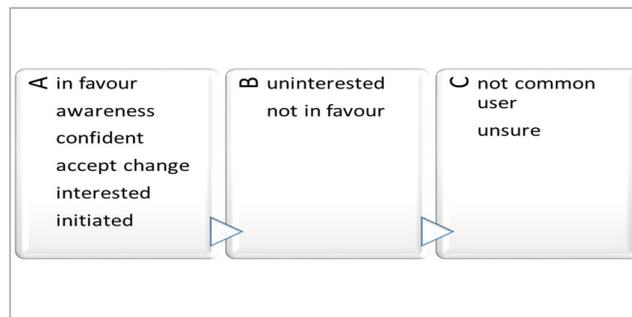


Diagram 1: The emerging themes from the interview results

The final instrument, the interviews involved three heads of schools from the neighbouring schools, Respondent 1 (R1) from school 1, Respondent 2 (R2) from school 2 and Respondent 3 (R3) from school 3. The same open ended questions were asked. The overall summary of emerging themes listed are from the themes derived from the nature of responses of the interviewees. R1 was more interested in the idea of adopting the WhatsApp application in his school. Although he did not directly mention it, he seemed familiar with the application

and aware of its convenience. He realized that the application is fast as a communication tool and that it will be good for the staff of his school. However, R1 still prefers the natural, real way of communication such as gatherings or meeting for birthday parties as they are more natural face-to-face communication. Finally, he ended up showing his interest and would initiate a WhatsApp group that is more official with rules and guideline so that no participants could misuse the channel of communication of the school.

On the other hand, R2 showed that his awareness of the existence of the application although was not an active user as he does not have a data plan. But if the teachers in his school prefer to have a school WhatsApp group, he would agree to follow. However, he stated that he wanted the teachers to use the channel for a good purpose, meaning, they will not use it for chatting and neglecting their work. He was unsure about this way of communication. He still prefers the teacher to personally come to see him if there is a problem. He explained that he was not against the idea of creating the school group but he must know what the teachers think of it.

R3 showed a negative response towards the idea of adopting it as a school leadership communication tool. He found the 'face to face' communication is more effective and meaningful as he has a small number of staff in his school. He thought that WhatsApp made people be distracted from work. He believed that teachers should not waste time engaging in WhatsApp communication.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The objectives of the study were to find out the positive contributing factors to the effectiveness of using WhatsApp application in communication between the leader of the school and the subordinates and to examine the positive factors of attitude that the participants show in maintaining good social and working relationship for the school in the WhatsApp group 'Warga SKSL' based on the observations of the text messages. The interview results from three heads of the nearby schools had given some opinions and perceptions on the use of WhatsApp application.

This case study on WhatsApp application as leadership communication tool in SK Sungai Leman has shown that there are positive factors which contribute to the effectiveness of communication between the superiors and the subordinates. The most important factor in the group relationship is support. The support that the superiors and the subordinates give to stay as an organization. There may be many wasted and meaningless responses in the conversation texts but they seemed to settle down when certain issues or messages are understood and successfully delivered.

Although there are some silent readers in the Warga SKSL who stay quiet, that does not mean they are protesting. They are either just not interested to join in or occupied with other more important matters. Since the application became a school communication channel, participants such as the school staff is friendlier towards one another. There are discussions on decision making for example, the dates for the family gathering and when and where the UPSR camp going to be held. More teachers are posting their suggestions.

There is good rapport among the participants who are in the WhatsApp group of Warga SKSL. The age difference does not make a gap in their relationship or friendship. Everyone's birthday is being reminded by greetings with posts of images of birthday cakes. This might seem childish but in some ways, he or she feels that people remember his/her birthday and it

makes him/her happy. Before this application became the channel for communication, birthdays are personal.

These positive factors have contributed to the support and good rapport as well as the effectiveness of leadership communication using WhatsApp application. Another important factor which has kept the group going, is the leader himself. His understanding, tolerance and patience in following the Warga SKSL WhatsApp group made him a respected person and leader. This leadership communication using the WhatsApp application has benefitted the school in many ways as the head and the teachers developed a rapport that is priceless and has kept them in sync with so many happenings among the community of the school as well as outside the school.

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