



Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM) in Managing University Conflict: A Mixed Methods Study at the University of Eldoret

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates communication strategies in managing university-based conflicts and introduces the Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM) as an empirically grounded contribution to the field of communication and conflict management. Conflicts in university unions often escalate due to poor communication, lack of transparency, and misalignment between management and union expectations. Utilizing a mixed methods approach, quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews were conducted among University of Eldoret management, staff, and union representatives. Findings revealed multi-layered communication challenges, inadequate message adaptation, systemic weaknesses, and mismatched crisis responses. The ILCCM, integrating Systems Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) through the lens of Onion Theory of Conflict, provides a comprehensive framework comprising four interrelated phases: layered communication, strategic adaptation, systemic response and crisis-type strategies for layered, strategic, and systemic communication. By introducing ILCCM, the study offers a proactive, context-sensitive approach to conflict management as well as an innovative framework for scholars and practitioners in communication and conflict management, emphasizing tailored messaging, coordination across stakeholders and adaptive crisis communication training, transparent feedback mechanisms mediation structures, cultural sensitivity programs and employee support systems while enhancing institutional trust, conflict resolution, and organizational productivity.

Keywords: Integrated layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM), crisis communication, conflict management, university conflict, mixed methods

INTRODUCTION

Universities, as complex organizations, face persistent conflicts arising from structural, interpersonal, and policy-related issues. These conflicts are often exacerbated by ineffective communication between management and labour unions. Communication breakdowns may lead to protracted disputes, reputational damage, and reduced institutional productivity (Rahim, 2018; Lempereur et al., 2021). This study introduces the Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM) into the field of communication and conflict management, offering a comprehensive framework to address multi-level communication challenges in organizational conflicts.

Despite the extensive literature on crisis communication and conflict management, many existing framework emphasize reactive strategies and media-centered responses, offering limited guidance on how internal communication failures evolve into sustained organizational conflicts. This study addresses this gap by introducing the ILCCM which is empirically grounded framework designed to explain and manage conflict progression within universities in providing a comprehensive lens for understanding how communication practices shape conflict dynamics by integrating Systems Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory through the lens of Onion Theory of Conflict.

Research Problem

Public University unions often experience prolonged disputes characterized by strikes, stalled negotiations, and deteriorating trust between management and staff. These disputes persist despite existing communication



channels, suggesting that the problem lies not merely in the absence of communication but due to insufficient communication structures, lack of transparency, and inadequate adaptation to stakeholder expectations. There is a critical need to introduce a systematic, empirically validated communication model such as ILCCM that integrates communication theory and conflict management practices to enhance organizational conflict resolution.

Objectives of the Study

- a) To analyze communication patterns and challenges between university management and labour unions.
- b) To introduce and apply the Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM) in communication and conflict management.
- c) To generate practical recommendations for strengthening institutional communication and conflict management systems.

Significance of the Study

By introducing ILCCM into the field of communication and conflict management, this study provides scholars and practitioners with a proactive, layered, and systemic framework. Adoption of ILCCM can enhance conflict resolution effectiveness, improve stakeholder trust, and strengthen institutional harmony and productivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Systems Theory

Systems Theory posits that organizations are interconnected systems where changes in one component affect the entire structure (Luhmann, 2021). Applied to crisis communication, systemic interdependencies necessitate coordinated responses across departments, leadership, and stakeholders to prevent escalation.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

CAT emphasizes the strategic adaptation of communication to accommodate the expectations and cultural backgrounds of diverse audiences (Giles, 2016). Aligning messages with stakeholder needs fosters trust and mitigates conflict.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

SCCT categorizes crisis responses based on severity and responsibility, including denial, diminishing responsibility, rebuilding trust, and reinforcing reputation (Coombs, 2023). Tailoring responses to crisis type is crucial for preserving organizational credibility.

Existing Crisis Communication Models

Traditional crisis communication models often focus on reactive strategies, failing to integrate multi-layered organizational realities. The ILCCM synthesizes Systems Theory, CAT, and SCCT, introducing a proactive framework for conflict management that integrates communication and organizational theory into practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a pragmatically grounded, explanatory sequential mixed methods design to examine communication strategies for managing group conflict in a university context. Through the integration of stratified and purposive sampling, validated instruments, and rigorous analytical procedures, the methodology ensured credibility, reliability, and contextual relevance. The approach provided a strong empirical foundation for interpreting communication practices and informing institutional conflict management strategies.

Research Approach

This study adopted a pragmatic research paradigm, which emphasizes practical inquiry and methodological flexibility in addressing complex social phenomena. Pragmatism supports the integration of quantitative and



qualitative approach, making it appropriate for examining communication strategies in conflict management within higher education institutions (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Biesta, 2020).

A mixed methods approach was employed to capture both measurable patterns and contextual experiences related to communication and conflict. This approach enhances the depth, credibility, and applicability of findings through methodological triangulation (McLeod, 2024).

Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was utilized, whereby quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to explain and contextualize the initial results (Ivankova & Wingo, 2022). This design was appropriate for understanding not only the prevalence of communication strategies but also the underlying reasons influencing their effectiveness.

The study adopted a case study design, focusing on the University of Eldoret as a bounded institutional context. This allowed for in-depth exploration of communication practices and conflict management processes within a real-life organizational setting, consistent with Yin's (2018) recommendations for complex social inquiries.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised approximately 1,500 staff members drawn from academic staff, administrative staff, unions officials (UASU, KUSU, KUDHEIA), and management. A sample of 125 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation complemented by purposive sampling for interview participants. Although a large sample was statistically desirable, the selected sample was methodologically adequate for inferential analysis within mixed methods case study and consistent with comparable organizational communication research. Yamane's (1967) formula suggested a larger sample size. This was methodologically justified and analytically sufficient owing to the fact that the study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, where the quantitative phase was intended to identify patterns rather than produce population-wide generalizations; stratified sampling ensured proportional representation of key stakeholder groups which include management, union officials, academic and non-academic staff hence enhancing internal validity despite the reduced size and comparable mixed methods studies in organizational communication and conflict management have demonstrated that samples between 100-150 respondents are adequate for regression analysis and thematic integration when complemented with qualitative data (Lohr, 2021; Sathyanarayana et al., 2024), practical considerations such as time, access, and resource constraints necessitated a reduced but methodologically acceptable sample.

Research Instruments and Data Collection:

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and virtual focus group discussions (VFGDs). Questionnaires incorporated Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to capture both measurable trends and contextual perspectives. Qualitative data collection through interviews and VFGDs facilitated deeper exploration of perceptions, experiences, and institutional dynamics. Digital platforms enhanced accessibility and flexibility, aligning with contemporary data collection practices (Archibald et al., 2021). Ethical procedures, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS (Version 26), enabling examination of relationships between communication strategies and conflict management outcomes.

Quantitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, involving systematic coding, categorization, and theme development. This process enabled identification of recurring patterns and explanatory insights. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced analytical rigor and facilitated triangulation (Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2023).

Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged, confirming adequacy of the sample and analytical completeness (Guest et al., 2020).

RESULTS

This section presents the findings on communication dynamics and conflict management within the university, guided by the Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM). Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated to examine how structural, relational, and interactional communication processes influence the emergence and management of group conflicts. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS (Version 26), including Cronbach’s alpha for reliability (overall $\alpha = 0.81$; subscales $\alpha = 0.74–0.86$) indicating strong internal coherence across communication dimensions and regression analysis to test the predictive power of communication practices on conflict escalation ($\beta = .62, p < .001; R^2 = .38$). These findings empirically validate the central proposition of ILCCM that structural, relational, and interactional communication failures are significant predictors of conflict intensity. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Integration occurred at sampling, analysis, and interpretation stages to ensure triangulation (Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2023).

Integration occurred at three analytical points: During qualitative sampling, where interviewed participants were selected based on qualitative response patterns; during analysis, where qualitative themes were used to explain statistically significant quantitative trends; and during interpretation, where both datasets jointly informed the development and validation of ILCCM. For example, quantitative findings indicating delayed feedback as a predictor of conflict escalation were qualitatively explained through narratives describing bureaucratic bottlenecks and leadership inaccessibility. This integrative approach aligns with best practices in explanatory sequential mixed methods research (Fetters et al., 2023).

Structural Communication Factors and Conflict Escalation

Findings indicate that structural communication deficiencies significantly contribute to conflict escalation within the university. As shown in **Table 1**, lack of communication emerged as the leading contributor (35.9%), followed by inadequate conflict resolution skills (28.3%) and power struggles (19.6%). These findings demonstrate that communication breakdowns form the foundational triggers of conflict, consistent with ILCCM’s structural layer, which emphasizes how systemic communication gaps destabilize organizational functioning (Coombs, 2021; Luhmann, 2021).

Table 1: Factors Contributing to Escalation of Group Conflicts in University Unions

Response	Number of Respondents	Frequency Percentage
Lack of communication	33	35.9
Power struggles	18	19.6
Inadequate conflict resolution skills	26	28.3
Job insecurity	9	9.8
Cultural differences	6	6.5
Total	92	100.0

Qualitative findings further revealed delayed feedback, hierarchical decision-making, and limited consultation as key contributors to mistrust and escalating tensions.

Relational Communication and Trust Dynamics

Relational communication between management and union members significantly shaped conflict intensity. Respondents emphasized that transparency, empathy, and inclusive dialogue reduced tension, while authoritarian

communication styles aggravated disputes. As illustrated in **Table 2**, clear communication channels (23.4%) and open communication (22.5%) were perceived as the most effective strategies for managing conflict.

Table 2: Effective Communication Strategies for Managing Group Conflicts

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Active listening	40	17.3
Open communication	52	22.5
Mediation	30	13.0
Conflict resolution training	30	13.0
Clear communication channels	54	23.4
Arbitration	25	10.8
Total	231	100.0

These findings support ILCCM's relational dimension, which posits that ineffective interpersonal communication transforms operational disagreements into identity-based conflicts (Giles & Ogay, 2021; Brown & Thompson, 2021).

Interactional Communication Processes

The effectiveness of interactional mechanisms such as meetings, grievance handling, and negotiation forums varied considerably. As shown in **Table 3**, only 38.1% of respondents perceived existing communication strategies as very effective, while 29.0% rated them as ineffective.

Table 3: Effectiveness of Current Communication Strategies

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very effective	29	38.1
Somewhat effective	25	32.9
Not very effective	20	26.4
Not at all effective	2	2.6
Total	76	100.0

Qualitative evidence indicated that meetings often lacked follow-up mechanisms and consistent feedback, resulting in unresolved grievances. These findings align with ILCCM's interactional layer, which emphasizes coordination and message consistency as essential to conflict resolution (Barge & Little, 2020).

Overall Effectiveness of Communication Strategies

Thematic analysis (see **Table 4**) revealed that conflicts were primarily driven by Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) implementation challenges, promotion and welfare concerns, and policy misalignment. Communication breakdowns, mistrust, and delayed feedback were recurrent themes across unions and management. These findings support the ILCCM proposition that communication effectiveness depends on alignment across structural, relational, and interactional layers (Giles et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023 & Ristika et.al 2024).

Table 4: Types of conflicts, factors affecting conflicts, strategies for managing conflicts and recommendations

Thematic Findings from Qualitative Interviews through FGDs/VFGDs			
Research Objective	Theme	Description	Supporting Evidence
Objective 1: Types of Group Conflicts	CBA-Related Conflicts	Disputes over signing, implementation, and financial implications of CBAs.	HR reported “major conflict on national CBA implementation.”
	Promotion & Welfare Conflicts	Delays in promotions, unclear criteria, and perceived unfair welfare policies.	Interviewees cited “issues to do with promotion and staff welfare.”
Objective 2: Factors Escalating Conflicts	Communication Breakdowns	Delayed feedback, unclear communication channels, lack of structured crisis communication	Back and forth delays... seeking authority from management
	Distrust & Poor Collaboration	Staff believe management is not transparent or honest in communication.	They believe we are not acting in good faith.”
	Policy Misalignment	Lack of harmonization between university policies and SRC guidelines.	SRC advised zero CBA; unions rejected.”
Objective 3: Effectiveness of Communication Strategies	Open-Door Policy	Considered effective but inconsistently applied across departments	We encourage open-door policy... they are effective.”
	Face-to-Face Engagement	Helps diffuse tensions and facilitate dialogue.	VC addresses staff directly during picketing.”
	Use of Digital Channels	Bulk SMS, emails, memos, and union social media walls disseminate updates.	We use bulk SMS and memos; unions post on social walls.”
Objective 4: Recommended Improvements	Training Needs	Need for negotiation, assertiveness, and conflict management training.	We need staff to be aware of communication channels... and be trained
	Honest & Transparent Communication	Building trust through consistent messaging and honouring commitments.	We should improve how honest our communication is.”
	Harmonization of Compensation Policies	SRC policies should align with university realities to reduce recurrent disputes.	HR recommended “harmonization of SRC guidelines.”

Participants noted that although open-door policies and digital communication platforms existed, their inconsistent application undermined trust. This supports existing literature that identifies poor communication structures as a key driver of organizational conflict (Kalle et. al, 2024; Tawfig, 2023 & Makhdoom et. al, 2024).

Summary of Key Results

The findings demonstrate that conflict within the university is not caused by isolated events but emerges from interconnected communication failures across institutional levels. The Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model effectively explains how structural rigidity, relational mistrust, and interactional inconsistencies collectively intensify conflict dynamics. Strengthening communication systems through participatory



engagement, leadership accountability, and coordinated messaging is therefore essential for sustainable conflict management.

Quantitative Results:

Survey results indicated that 68% of staff perceived communication as inadequate, with delayed feedback and inconsistent messages contributing to conflict escalation. Trust levels were low, with 57% of respondents reporting limited confidence in management communication.

Qualitative Insights - Four major themes emerged:

1. **Internal Responses:** Slow or inconsistent management reactions aggravated disputes.
2. **External Perceptions:** Unions relied on leaders for information, creating parallel narratives.
3. **Media Influence:** Social-media amplified tensions through misinformation and rapid dissemination.
4. **Message Adaptation:** Management often failed to adjust communication to union expectations, resulting in perceived insensitivity.

Communication Misalignment

Conflicts persisted due to misalignment between surface-level communication (e.g., memos, briefings) and deeper layers of organizational tension, highlighting the need for layered communication strategies.

DISCUSSION

Onion Theory of Conflict as an Integrative Analytical Lens/ Integrating Theoretical Frameworks

The Onion Theory of Conflict conceptualizes conflict as a multi-layered phenomenon comprising positions, interests, and underlying needs (Fisher et al., 2011). In this study, the theory serves as an integrative lens through which Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), and Systems Theory are jointly interpreted. At the positional level, conflicts between university unions and management are expressed through overt disputes over CBAs, promotions, and welfare issues. These surface manifestations correspond with SCCT, which emphasizes strategic organizational responses to visible crises and stakeholder attributions of responsibility (Coombs, 2022). At the interest level, conflicts reflect concerns related to power, fairness, and job security, which align with CAT's assertion that effective conflict management depends on adaptive and accommodative communication responsive to stakeholders' expectations and identities (Giles, 2016). At the core needs level, conflicts are sustained by deep-seated issues of trust, recognition, and institutional legitimacy. Systems Theory explains how these unmet needs are embedded within interconnected organizational structures, where communication failures in one subsystem occur across the institution (Luhmann, 2021). Viewed through the Onion Theory, the study demonstrates that sustainable conflict management in university unions requires layered, adaptive, and systemic communication strategies that address not only surface disputes but also the deeper interpersonal and structural dimensions of conflict.

The findings confirm that integrating Systems Theory, CAT, and SCCT is critical for understanding conflict escalation and designing effective communication strategies. Introducing ILCCM into the field of communication and conflict management provides a structured, context-sensitive framework that addresses multi-layered challenges.

Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM)

Overview

The Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM) is a comprehensive framework designed to explain how organizations should communicate during conflict and crisis situations. The model recognizes that crises, whether organizational, relational, or reputational does not occur at one level, instead, they unfold in

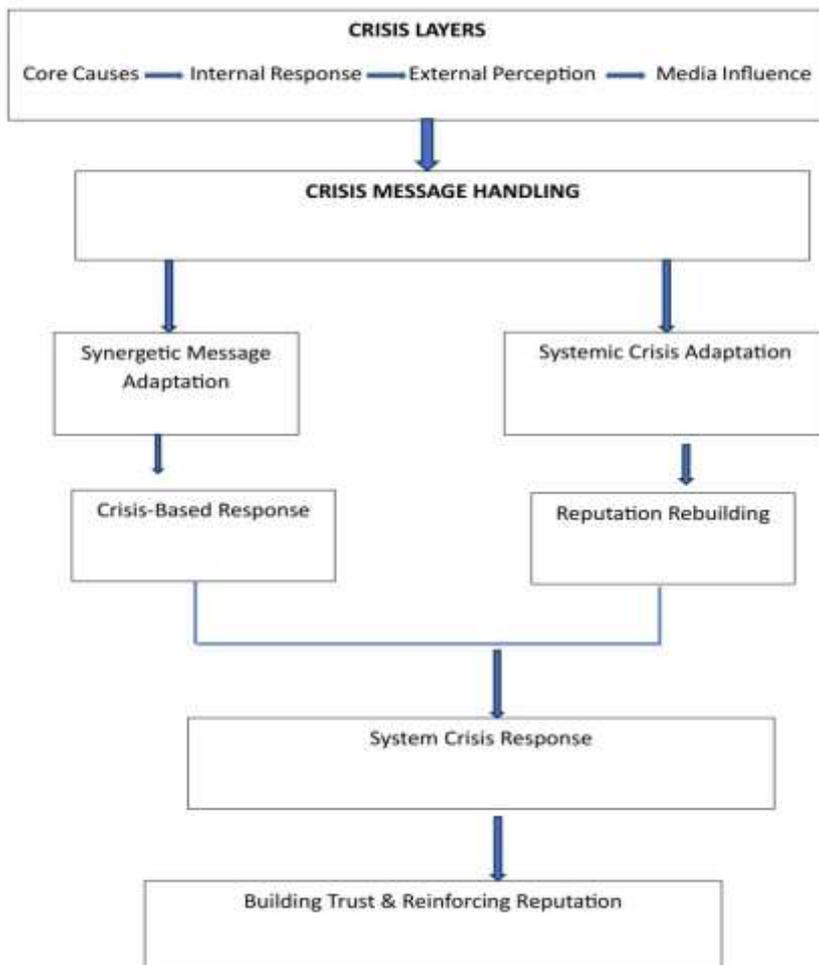
layers, involve multiple actors, and require communication strategies that are adaptable, systemic, and context specific.

ILCCM helps explain why communication challenges between university management and labour unions escalate into prolonged disputes and how improved communication structures can enhance conflict resolution.

ILCCM addresses conflicts unfolding in multiple layers, involving various stakeholders, and requiring adaptive communication strategies. Its introduction into the field of communication and conflict management bridges theoretical insights with practical strategies for conflict resolution.

While ILCCM synthesizes Systems Theory, CAT, and SCCT, its novelty lies not in theoretical aggregation alone but in empirical operationalization within a conflict-prone institutional context. Unlike existing crisis communication frameworks that are predominantly reactive and media-centered, ILCCM is empirically grounded in organizational conflict data and explicitly models how communication breakdowns evolve across structural, relational, interactional, and perceptual layers. The model therefore advances crisis communication scholarship by shifting focus from episodic crisis response to layered conflict progression and intervention, offering a testable, context-sensitive framework applicable to public institutions and labour relations.

Figure 1: INTEGRATED LAYERED CRISIS COMMUNICATION MODEL



Layered Crisis Communication

In understanding the Multi-Level Nature of Conflict, this component emphasizes that crises evolve through several interconnected layers such as:

Core Causes: These are the root factors triggering conflict, such as delayed collective bargaining agreements (CBA) implementation, unclear policy or guidelines, lack of transparency, or staff promotion disputes at the University of Eldoret.

In the study, these “core causes” reflect underlying tensions linked to mistrust, inadequate communication, and policy misalignment.

Internal Responses: These involve how management reacts whenever there is conflict through either emergency meetings, memos, staff briefings, or negotiations with unions concerning existing issues. Findings revealed that internal responses at the University of Eldoret were often slow or inconsistent, contributing to conflict escalation.

External Perceptions: This refers to how external stakeholders such as clients, media and the public perceive the conflict, shaped by their own experiences or limited information.

The study showed that unions mainly rely on their leaders' communication rather than management, creating parallel narratives and mistrust (Burns et. al. 2025).

Media Influence: The role of media in shaping narratives about the crisis, which can either amplify, distort or mitigate the situation depending on coverage and framing. Media platforms, either formal or social can amplify tensions. Union WhatsApp groups, social media posts, and public commentary often escalate pressure on an institution. In otherwards social and traditional media amplified tensions and shaped public narratives (Littlejohn & Foss, 2022).

Relevance to the study

This layered understanding explains why conflicts persist: surface issues such as feedback, medical cover and salary delay often mask deeper problems resulting into mistrust and communication breakdown. ILCCM therefore, supports the study’s argument that addressing deeper layers of conflict is essential for lasting solutions.

The study reveals that crisis communication is understood in layers; core causes, internal responses, external perceptions, and media influence. Each layer requires tailored messaging and engagement strategies, while conflict communication requires gradual information disclosure, moving from superficial to deep layers based on trust and relationships.

Strategic Message Adaptation

ILCCM emphasizes that communication must be strategically adapted based on convergence and divergence:

Convergence: Aligning messages with stakeholders’ expectations to build trust and credibility, for example using transparent language, offering explanations, or acknowledging grievances.

Divergence: Differentiating the institution’s stance to maintain its integrity and avoid misinformation, such as clarifying Salaries and Remuneration Commission (SRC) conditions on adopting harmonized compensation system as government agency even when unions disagree. Communicators must adjust their messaging style, tone, and medium depending on the audience’s expectations and cultural background. For the interest of the institution, it is paramount to differentiate institutional stance to maintain integrity and clarify constraints (Giles et al., 2023).

Application: The study found that management sometimes failed to adjust messages to union expectations, creating perceptions of arrogance or insensitivity. Conversely, unions adapted their communication styles depending on their goals, exemplifying convergence and divergence in practice.

Systemic Crisis Response – It involves interconnectedness of people, processes, and structures, this component is rooted in Systems Theory and highlights that crisis communication must involve:

Coordinated Teams: Effective crisis communication requires alignment across departments, Human Resource, Union representatives, Public Relations (PR)/ Corporate Affairs, Legal advisors and Leadership/Management such as Council members, must communicate consistently.

Strong Leadership Involvement: Effective crisis communication depends on visible, decisive leadership which enhances credibility and trust. The study showed that unions sometimes demanded direct communication from the Vice Chancellor because they did not trust delegated communication.

Transparent Stakeholder Engagement: Regular updates, feedback loops, and clear channels are necessary to prevent rumours and tensions because it prevents rumour proliferation (Luhmann, 2021; Akpene Mawasi).

Weak departmental communication, delayed feedback, and lack of a unified crisis strategy reflect systemic issues. ILCCM shows how these interconnections, when poorly aligned intensify union-management conflict.

Crisis Type-Based Strategies: Matching Response to Conflict Severity

This phase outlines four crisis response categories;

Denial: Used when allegations are false.

Diminishing Responsibility: Clarifying constraints or justifying actions.

Rebuilding Trust: Apologies, corrective actions, negotiated agreements, compensation to regain credibility and restore relationship;

Reinforcing Reputation: Long-term credibility management (Coombs, 2024).

Application: The University of Eldoret used denial or diminishing responsibility during CBA disputes such as SRC restrictions in relations to adopting harmonized salary scales, and occasionally used trust rebuilding strategies like negotiated agreements. The model therefore helps interpret which strategies were effective or ineffective in given situations.

Summary Interpretation

The ILCCM explains crisis communication as a step-by-step layered process:

Crises have layers which include root causes, internal responses, public perceptions, and media influence. The layered frameworks enhance understanding of deep-seated issues (Littlejohn & Foss, 2022).

Messages must be adapted to different audiences to avoid conflict escalation. Adaptability in communication is critical for conflict resolution and crisis mitigation (Giles et al, 2023).

Crisis response is systemic whereby decisions in one part of the organization affect the whole structure. Systemic approaches acknowledge interdependencies, ensuring a comprehensive response to conflicts (Luhmann, 2021).

Different crises need different strategies, from denial to reputation rebuilding. Crisis communication models provide tailored responses, preventing escalation and ensuring institutional reputation management (Coombs, 2024).

Effective crisis communication is layered, flexible, and systemic. Addressing only surface issues is insufficient; strategic, transparent, and coordinated communication is essential for conflict resolution. ILCCM thus introduces a valuable framework into the field of communication and conflict management.

Linking ILCCM to the University of Eldoret

Applying ILCCM to the University of Eldoret demonstrates the following:

- a) Conflict escalated because communication did not adequately address deeper layers related to values, mistrust and policy misalignment.
- b) Messages were not always adapted to union expectations, causing misalignment.
- c) Systemic weaknesses such as slow feedback and unclear communication structures amplified conflicts.

d) Crisis responses were not always matched with crisis severity.

Thus, ILCCM underscores the importance of strengthening communication systems, improving transparency, training staff, and aligning institutional responses. These insights directly shape the recommendations in this section, which propose practical strategies for enhancing communication and managing conflicts more effectively.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that communication plays a central role in both escalating and resolving university-based conflicts. Poor communication channels, lack of transparency, and limited accommodation of diverse perspectives intensify conflicts, whereas open, assertive, and adaptive communication fosters understanding and cooperation. Integrating Systems Theory, CAT, and SCCT illuminates how communication failures disrupt organizational balance and how adaptive, transparent, and systemic communication can restore stability. Introducing ILCCM into the field of communication and conflict management offers a proactive, layered, and systemic framework for conflict resolution, strengthening institutional trust and productivity.

Each layer of ILCCM corresponds to empirically measurable constructs used in this study. Structural communication was operationalized through indicators such as communication channels, feedback timeliness, and policy clarity. Relational communication was measured using trust, transparency, and empathy indicators. Interactional communication was assessed through effectiveness of meetings, grievance procedures, and negotiation forums. External perception and media influence were captured through qualitative narratives and thematic analysis. This operational linkage enhances the model's applicability and replicability in future research.

RECOMMENDATION

- a) **Communication and Conflict Management Training:** Regular workshops on negotiation, mediation, and assertive communication (Rahim, 2023; Lempereur et al., 2021).
- b) **Open Communication and Transparency:** Consistent feedback loops and accessible platforms for timely information (Malik & Aftab, 2024).
- c) **Mediation and Arbitration Mechanisms:** Formal structures with clear protocols for impartial resolution (Dai & Chen, 2022; Gelfand et al., 2023).
- d) **Cultural Sensitivity:** Training on intercultural communication to support CAT principles (Giles, 2016).
- e) **Proactive Conflict Policies:** Clear communication and conflict management policies guided by SCCT principles (Coombs, 2022).
- f) **Employee Support Systems:** Counselling and peer support programs to mitigate emotional impacts (Bodenhausen et al., 2021).

The recommendations outlined above are designed to enhance the effectiveness of communication strategies in managing group conflicts within university unions. By investing in communication training, fostering open and transparent communication, implementing mediation and arbitration mechanisms, promoting cultural sensitivity, developing proactive conflict management policies, and establishing support systems for affected employees, universities can create a more harmonious and productive work environment. These recommendations are grounded in both the findings of this study and the broader literature on conflict management, providing a comprehensive approach to resolving conflicts in university unions.

Further, the study recommends an enhanced model that can singly deal with the multiple emerging issues in communication, conflict management and resolution for a successful and peaceful working environment. The recommended model is termed as Integrated Layered Crisis Communication Model (ILCCM) which can be further developed to simplify the process of communication and conflict management.

Limitations and Further Research

This study is limited by its single-institution case study design, which constrains generalizability beyond similar public university contexts. Additionally, while the sample size was methodologically adequate, broader multi-site studies would strengthen external validity. Contextual factors such as national labour regulations and SRC policies may also limit direct transferability to private or international institutions. Future studies should empirically test ILCCM using structural equation modeling across multiple organizations to further validate its predictive power, investigate the effectiveness of meetings as communication tools in universities, examine the role of communication in conflict resolution in other public institutions and parastatals, explore adaptation and application of ILCCM in broader organizational contexts and study communication strategies in public universities.

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Ethical Consideration

Permission was obtained from the Administration of the University of Eldoret before data collection and research permit from NACOSTI.

Conflict Of Interest

I declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Both raw and processed data is available on request for official and academic use subject to approval by University of Eldoret and the researcher.

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