

Strategic Internal Corporate Communication and Mental Health Promotion in Higher Education: Evidence from Daystar University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT : Strategic internal corporate communication has increasingly been recognized as a vital organizational mechanism for promoting employee mental health, particularly within higher education institutions where work-related pressures are prevalent. Anchored on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and conducted at Daystar University, Kenya., the study assessed how internal communication strategies enhance mental health awareness, encourage help-seeking behavior, and normalize conversations around mental health within the workplace. A descriptive quantitative research design was adopted, targeting all the employees from which a sample of 135 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered both electronically and in person. The findings indicate that strategic internal corporate communication plays a significant role in mental health promotion at the university. Specifically, 57 percent of respondents reported that internal corporate communication effectively raised awareness of available mental health resources, while 58 percent indicated that communication channels were regularly used to disseminate information on mental health initiatives. The study concludes that strategic internal corporate communication is instrumental in promoting mental health within higher education institutions by enhancing awareness, reducing stigma, and facilitating access to psychosocial support services. The study recommends that higher education institutions develop structured internal corporate communication frameworks that prioritize mental health messaging, clearly outline available support services, and embed mental health promotion within routine organizational communication practices.

KEYWORDS : *Employee awareness, Higher education, Leadership communication, Mental health promotion, Kenya, Strategic internal corporate communication*

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health in the workplace has become an increasingly critical issue in the twenty-first century, with the World Health Organization recognizing the workplace as a vital setting for health promotion (WHO, 2020). Given that a significant proportion of the global workforce spends much of its time in organizational environments, the workplace plays a central role in shaping employees' mental and social well-being. Mental health challenges among employees have been linked to absenteeism, presenteeism, and reduced work engagement, resulting in increased operational and healthcare costs for organizations (Johnson & Breckon, 2007; Newman & Tenney, 2019). These outcomes underscore the importance of organizational interventions that promote mental health awareness and early support within the workplace.

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is influenced by a combination of individual, social, and structural factors, and effective promotion of mental well-being requires coordinated efforts across multiple sectors, including education, labor, and health (WHO, 2023). In the workplace context, inadequate attention to mental health has been associated with higher turnover and reduced job satisfaction (Godinić & Obrenovic, 2020). Globally, mental health disorders are estimated to cost the economy approximately USD 1 trillion annually in lost productivity, highlighting the urgency for organizations to adopt preventive and awareness-based mental health strategies (WHO, 2023). Internal corporate communication has increasingly been identified as a key mechanism through which organizations can disseminate mental health information, reduce stigma, and promote supportive workplace cultures.

The modern workforce faces heightened pressures arising from globalization, technological advancement, and increasingly demanding work environments, making workplace mental health a global concern. Mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety, and depression continue to rise, affecting both employees and organizations (WHO, 2019). While high-income countries have implemented structured workplace mental health programs supported by formal communication strategies, many low- and middle-income countries face challenges related to limited resources and policy gaps (Kigozi et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (2021) has therefore advocated for the adoption of universal workplace mental health promotion frameworks that emphasize safe, supportive, and communicative organizational environments.

In the African context, workplace mental health remains an emerging area, with significant variation in organizational responses. Studies in countries such as Nigeria and Uganda indicate that mental health concerns, including work-related stress and depression, are prevalent, yet workplace mental health policies are inconsistently implemented (Gureje & Lasebikan, 2016; Kigozi et al., 2019). While some organizations have introduced internal wellness policies and mental health awareness initiatives, these efforts are often limited in scope. Corporate communication plays a critical role in such initiatives by facilitating awareness of mental health resources, encouraging open dialogue, and supporting the institutionalization of mental health promotion practices (Fearn-Banks, 2016).

In Kenya, mental health challenges are widespread, with approximately 25 percent of the population estimated to experience mental health conditions at some point in their lives (WHO, 2020). The Kenyan Ministry of Health recognizes mental health disorders as a significant contributor to the national disease burden and emphasizes the integration of mental health into workplace wellness programs through its Mental Health Policy (2015–2030). Although some private sector organizations have adopted structured mental health interventions supported by internal communication strategies, many institutions of higher learning have yet to establish comprehensive mental health promotion frameworks (Mental Health Alliance of Kenya, 2022; Ndetei et al., 2017). Daystar University therefore provides a relevant context for examining how strategic internal corporate communication can be leveraged to promote mental health awareness and support within a higher education workplace.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Workplace stress and poor mental health have remained significant global concerns, and Kenya's workforce has not been an exception. Chronic workplace stressors, including job strain and long working hours, have been linked to serious mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, with broader implications for employee functioning and organizational sustainability (Buchan et al., 2022). Evidence from developed economies indicated that approximately one in five individuals experienced depressive disorders, with a substantial proportion of employees identifying their work environment as a primary source of stress (American Psychological Association, 2018). The World Health Organization (2019) further estimated that anxiety, depression, and work-related stress accounted for hundreds of billions of dollars annually in economic losses, underscoring the urgency of workplace-based mental health promotion initiatives.

Despite the growing recognition of workplace mental health challenges, organizational responses had largely emphasized clinical or psychological interventions, with limited attention given to the role of internal corporate communication in promoting mental health awareness. Existing literature predominantly focused on occupational health and organizational psychology, while relatively few studies explicitly examined how communication practices shaped employees' awareness of mental health issues, access to support services, and perceptions of organizational commitment to mental well-being (Wright & Bonnet, 2020). This gap was particularly pronounced in low- and middle-income countries such as Kenya, where workplace mental health frameworks remained underdeveloped and communication-related interventions were rarely institutionalized (Kigozi et al., 2019).

In the context of higher education institutions, where academic and administrative staff faced unique work pressures, the absence of structured internal corporate communication strategies focused on mental health promotion presented a critical concern. Although universities may have offered counseling or support services, these initiatives were often inadequately communicated, limiting their visibility and effectiveness. Consequently, there was insufficient empirical evidence on how strategic internal corporate communication could be leveraged to promote mental health awareness within university workplaces in Kenya. This study therefore sought to address this gap by examining the role of internal corporate communication strategies in promoting mental health at Daystar University, with the aim of contributing to more informed and communication-driven workplace mental health practices.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework provides the foundation upon which research is conceptualized, guiding hypothesis formulation, data interpretation, and overall study design. It enables researchers to examine phenomena through established concepts and principles, thereby grounding empirical inquiry in existing knowledge (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping served as the primary theoretical lens for understanding how individuals perceive and respond to workplace stressors. Although various communication theories offer useful perspectives, the Transactional Model was considered most appropriate due to its emphasis on cognitive appraisal processes and environmental influences, which align closely with the role of internal corporate communication in mental health promotion.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), conceptualizes stress as a dynamic interaction between individuals and their environment rather than a direct reaction to external events. Central to the model are two appraisal processes: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. In primary appraisal, individuals assess whether a situation is irrelevant, benign, or threatening to their well-being, shaping their initial emotional response. Secondary appraisal involves evaluating available coping resources, including personal capacities and external support systems. The model emphasizes that stress outcomes depend largely on how situations are cognitively appraised and the perceived ability to manage them, rather than on the stressors themselves (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

A key argument of the theory is that stress arises when individuals perceive an imbalance between environmental demands and their coping resources. The model further distinguishes between problem-focused coping, which involves addressing the source of stress directly, and emotion-focused coping, which aims at managing emotional reactions to stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman, 2008). Empirical studies have demonstrated that individuals who perceive greater control and access to resources are more likely to adopt problem-focused coping strategies, leading to more favorable mental health outcomes (Carver et al., 1989). Conversely, reliance on emotion-focused coping in high-demand environments has been associated with heightened stress and emotional exhaustion (Quick et al., 2004; Lim & Yang, 2019).

The Transactional Model has been widely applied across health, caregiving, and organizational contexts, demonstrating its relevance in understanding stress-related outcomes. Studies involving cancer patients, caregivers, and healthcare professionals have shown that effective coping strategies, supported by adequate informational and social resources, are associated with reduced psychological distress (Folkman et al., 2000; Khamisa et al., 2015). In organizational settings, the model has been used to examine stress management interventions, revealing that workplace structures and communication practices significantly influence how employees interpret and cope with stressors (Cooper et al., 2024). These applications highlight the model's usefulness in linking environmental inputs, including communication, to mental health outcomes.

Despite its strengths, the Transactional Model has faced criticism for its reliance on subjective cognitive appraisals and its limited consideration of biological and social dimensions of stress (Coyne & Downey, 1991; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). Additionally, the distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping has been criticized as overly simplistic, given that individuals often employ multiple coping strategies simultaneously (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Nonetheless, the model remains a valuable framework for examining mental health promotion within organizational contexts. In this study, it was applied to conceptualize internal corporate communication as a key environmental resource that shapes employees' appraisal of workplace stressors and awareness of available mental health support, thereby providing a robust theoretical basis for examining mental health promotion at Daystar University (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman, 2008).

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that internal corporate communication plays a critical role in shaping employees' mental health awareness and perceptions of organizational support. Studies have shown that transparent and consistent communication enhances employees' sense of security, trust, and psychological safety, which are essential for mental health promotion. For instance, Johnson and Smith (2022) found that employees who perceived organizational communication as clear and supportive reported lower stress levels and a stronger sense of belonging. Similarly, Parker et al. (2021), in a study of healthcare professionals, established that frequent and open communication from leadership significantly reduced anxiety and improved employees' perceived mental health support during periods of organizational uncertainty.

Several studies have specifically examined how communication practices facilitate mental health awareness and help-seeking behavior in the workplace. Lee and Wang (2022) reported that organizations that prioritized mental health communication through awareness campaigns, open forums, and accessible information channels experienced improved employee uptake of mental health resources. Their findings indicated that employees who were regularly informed about counseling services, mental health training, and support programs felt more supported and were more willing to seek assistance when facing psychological

challenges. Roberts and Evans (2021) similarly found that employees who received regular communication about mental health services were significantly more likely to utilize available support systems.

Leadership communication has also been identified as a key determinant of effective mental health promotion in organizations. Anderson and Lee (2021) observed that organizations characterized by frequent, transparent leadership communication reported higher levels of employee engagement with mental health initiatives. Leaders who openly discussed mental health issues, acknowledged workplace stressors, and actively promoted available resources contributed to reduced stigma and greater acceptance of mental health conversations. Thomas and Garcia (2023) further demonstrated that empathetic and inclusive leadership communication significantly lowered stress-related symptoms among employees, particularly during organizational change or crisis situations.

The growing role of digital communication platforms in promoting mental health awareness has also been documented in empirical literature. Patel and Kumar (2023) found that the use of internal digital communication tools, such as forums and collaborative platforms, enhanced information sharing on mental health initiatives and increased employees' sense of connection and support. These platforms enabled timely dissemination of mental health messages and facilitated interactive dialogue, allowing employees to access information and support more easily. Such findings underscore the importance of adapting communication strategies to contemporary organizational communication channels in promoting mental health.

In the African context, empirical studies highlight the importance of corporate communication in addressing mental health stigma and improving awareness within workplaces. Research conducted in Nigeria and Ghana found that organizations that implemented structured mental health communication strategies reported higher utilization of mental health services and improved employee perceptions of organizational support (Adedeji & Olawale, 2022; Nkrumah & Asante, 2022). Akintoye and Bello (2021) similarly observed that open and consistent communication around mental health contributed to reduced stigma and improved mental health awareness among employees. These studies collectively indicate that strategic internal corporate communication is a critical mechanism for promoting mental health awareness and fostering supportive workplace environments, particularly within African organizational contexts.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section presents the procedures that were followed in conducting the study, detailing the research design, population and sample, sampling procedures, data collection instruments and procedures, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations that guided the entire research process. The chapter clarified how the methodology was aligned to the objectives of the study and ensured that the research was implemented systematically, transparently, and in a manner that supported credible interpretation of findings.

The study employed a quantitative approach, specifically a descriptive research design, to objectively measure and analyze the variables under investigation. A quantitative design was considered appropriate because it supports the collection of numerical data using standardized tools and enables statistical analysis for purposes of describing patterns and relationships (Sileyew, 2019). The use of structured questionnaires with closed-ended questions facilitated efficient data processing and interpretation and supported objectivity and replicability, which are key strengths of quantitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2019).

The population comprised employees of Daystar University, including faculty, administrators, and support staff, totaling approximately 450 individuals, as confirmed by the Daystar Human Resource Department records (Daystar Human Resource Department, 2024). The target population was categorized into senior management, middle management, faculty, and administrative/support staff to ensure that the study captured perspectives from all staff segments within the institution. A sample size of 135 respondents, representing 30% of the total population, was adopted in line with quantitative sampling guidance that supports representativeness and generalizability (Ahmad, Alias, & Abdul Razak, 2023; Bujang & Adnan, 2021). Respondents were selected using simple random sampling, with each employee given an equal chance of selection, thereby minimizing selection bias and enhancing representativeness (Kombo, 2018).

Data were collected using a questionnaire as the primary research instrument, given its suitability in quantitative research for collecting standardized responses from a relatively large group (Sukmawati, 2023). The questionnaire contained closed-ended items and was organized into sections covering demographic information and the key study constructs. Data collection commenced after proposal defense and approval, and official permission was sought from Daystar University. Two trained research assistants supported questionnaire administration using both electronic and hard copy formats to enhance accessibility, and the exercise was completed within four weeks with continuous follow-up to improve response rates. To enhance instrument quality, a pretest was conducted at Riara University using ten staff members selected purposively, allowing for evaluation of clarity, comprehensiveness, and reliability before the main data collection (Hurst et al., 2015).

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, to summarize and interpret the data in an organized manner (Mugenda, 2008). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) facilitated coding, computation, and presentation of results in

tables, charts, and figures for clarity and interpretability. Ethical considerations were emphasized throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity through coding of questionnaires without collection of personal identifiers. Data were stored securely with controlled access, and ethical approvals were sought from the Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (ISERC) of Daystar University, the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), and the Daystar University administration prior to engaging participants.

VI. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section addressed the objective of the study, which sought to examine how corporate communication strategies at Daystar University contributed to the promotion of mental health among employees. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements relating to awareness creation, leadership messaging, information accessibility, and feedback mechanisms in mental health communication. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Statement	N/%	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Daystar University's corporate communication effectively raises awareness about mental health resources.	N %	47 43.9	14 13.1	17 15.9	27 25.2	2 1.9
I am regularly informed about mental health initiatives through university communication channels.	N %	40 37.4	22 20.6	22 20.6	16 15.0	7 6.5
The communication from leadership emphasizes the importance of mental health and well-being.	N %	38 35.5	17 15.9	28 26.2	21 19.6	3 2.8
The university provides clear and accessible information on mental health support services.	N %	33 30.8	24 22.4	18 16.8	26 24.3	6 5.6
The university actively seeks employee feedback on mental health communication strategies.	N %	24 22.4	26 24.3	21 19.6	23 21.5	13 12.1

With regard to the effectiveness of corporate communication in raising awareness about mental health resources, 61 respondents (57%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, compared to 29 respondents (27%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates that a majority of employees perceived the university's communication as playing a positive role in increasing awareness of mental health resources. However, the presence of a notable proportion of respondents who disagreed or remained neutral suggests that awareness efforts may not be reaching all staff uniformly.

Similarly, findings showed that 62 respondents (58%) agreed that they were regularly informed about mental health initiatives through university communication channels, while 23 respondents (21%) disagreed. This suggests that Daystar University had established communication mechanisms for disseminating information on mental health initiatives, although gaps in consistency or reach may still exist. Regular communication is essential in mental health promotion, as it ensures sustained awareness and normalizes discussions around mental health within organizational settings.

Leadership communication also emerged as a critical component of mental health promotion. A total of 55 respondents (51%) agreed that communication from leadership emphasized the importance of mental health and well-being, while 24 respondents (22%) disagreed and 28 respondents (26.2%) remained neutral. This finding suggests that leadership messaging on mental health was visible to a significant portion of employees, though the relatively high neutral response indicates that such messaging may not have been sufficiently explicit or frequent to register strongly across the workforce.

Regarding accessibility of information, 57 respondents (53%) agreed that the university provided clear and accessible information on mental health support services, compared to 32 respondents (30%) who disagreed. This finding underscores the importance of clarity and simplicity in communication about mental health services, as unclear or fragmented messaging can limit employees' ability to identify and utilize available support. Furthermore, only 50 respondents (47%) agreed that the university actively sought employee feedback on mental health communication strategies, while 36 respondents (34%) disagreed. This suggests that while

information dissemination was present, opportunities for two-way communication and employee participation in shaping mental health communication were relatively limited.

The findings align with existing empirical literature emphasizing the role of corporate communication in promoting mental health awareness within organizations. The Opinion Research Corporation (2020) observed that transparent and consistent communication enhances employees' perceptions of organizational support, which is fundamental to mental health promotion. Similarly, Johnson and Smith (2022) found that supportive leadership communication reduced stress and encouraged openness around mental health concerns. In the context of Daystar University, the results suggest that corporate communication contributed meaningfully to mental health promotion through awareness creation and leadership emphasis, though the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms and inclusivity requires strengthening.

VII. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, several conclusions were drawn regarding the role of corporate communication in promoting mental health among employees at Daystar University. The study established that clear, consistent, and structured corporate communication significantly enhanced employees' awareness of mental health issues and available support resources. Regular dissemination of information through internal communication channels made mental health initiatives more visible and accessible, thereby promoting openness and encouraging employees to seek support when needed.

The study further concluded that corporate communication played a central role in normalizing conversations around mental health within the university workplace. By consistently integrating mental health messages into institutional communication, the university contributed to reducing stigma associated with mental health challenges. This created an environment in which employees felt more informed and psychologically supported, facilitating early identification of mental health concerns and access to appropriate services.

Additionally, the findings demonstrated that leadership-driven communication was a critical determinant of effective mental health promotion. Communication from university leadership that explicitly emphasized the importance of mental health signaled organizational commitment to employee well-being. Such messaging shaped employees' perceptions of organizational care and reinforced the legitimacy of mental health discussions within the workplace.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the role of corporate communication in promoting mental health within higher education institutions and similar organizational settings. First, organizations should develop and institutionalize a structured internal corporate communication plan that prioritizes mental health promotion. Such a plan should include regular and consistent messaging on mental health awareness, available support services, and organizational commitment to psychological well-being. Integrating mental health communication into broader human resource and wellness strategies would ensure coherence, sustainability, and visibility across the organization.

Second, organizations should invest in targeted communication training for managers and team leaders to enhance their capacity to address mental health issues appropriately. This training should focus on equipping leaders with skills to communicate about mental health in a respectful, confidential, and non-stigmatizing manner. Key areas of emphasis should include recognizing indicators of psychological distress, initiating supportive conversations, and effectively guiding employees to available mental health resources. Strengthening leadership communication competence is essential for reinforcing organizational commitment to mental health promotion.

Third, organizations should establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of mental health communication strategies. This may involve the use of employee engagement metrics, feedback tools, and satisfaction surveys to assess how mental health messages are perceived, understood, and utilized by employees. Regular evaluation would enable organizations to identify communication gaps, refine messaging approaches, and tailor mental health communication to the needs of different employee groups.

Finally, corporate communication should be leveraged to sustain ongoing dialogue around mental health rather than relying on one-off campaigns. Organizations should promote continuous learning through regular updates, informational sessions, and awareness initiatives that reinforce the importance of mental health in the workplace. By maintaining consistent and visible mental health communication, organizations can reduce stigma, improve access to support services, and foster a workplace culture that recognizes mental health as an integral component of employee well-being.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future studies could examine the effectiveness of specific internal corporate communication strategies, such as internal newsletters, staff meetings, intranet platforms, and digital communication tools, in promoting employee mental health. By narrowing the scope to particular communication channels, researchers would be able to generate more targeted and actionable insights into how different communication modalities influence

mental health awareness, stigma reduction, and help-seeking behavior within organizational settings. Such studies could also compare traditional and digital communication platforms to determine which approaches are most effective in reaching diverse employee groups.

Further research may also focus on management and leadership communication styles and their influence on mental health promotion in the workplace. Specifically, studies could explore how empathetic, transparent, and participatory communication practices by managers shape employees' perceptions of organizational support for mental health. In addition, future studies could investigate the role of feedback mechanisms, such as employee surveys and listening sessions, in strengthening mental health communication and ensuring that organizational messaging is responsive to employee needs.

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