

## The Influence of Communication Patterns on Strategic Communication

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### Abstract

Strategic communication is a form of strategic action that is central for organisational development as it regarded as a major contributor to organisational efficiency. The main purpose of this study is to identify communication patterns used by Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB), to analyse the relationship between communication patterns and strategic communication as well as to analyse the influence of these patterns on strategic communication. Communication patterns that being analysed are top-down communication, bottom-up communication, horizontal communication, diagonal communication and external communication. Elements of strategic communication that being discussed are communication planning, top management support, targeted messages, selection and use of communication tools, on-going assessment and work culture. The determination of these elements were based on Strategic Communication Model by (Barret, 2002). Barret's model has been modified by adding two more elements namely communication planning and work culture. This study using a content analysis and survey method. A total of 28 complaints about commuter services sent via e-mail by KTMB customers were collected and analysed using a content analysis approach. Then, a survey was conducted on 200 respondents among commuter staffs to identify the communication pattern used and how strategic communication was practiced in KTMB. The findings showed that customers often complaint to KTMB and most of the complaints are related to service management and work culture. At the same time, KTMB was practiced horizontal communication and external communication compared to vertical and diagonal communication patterns in their daily activities. Through correlation analysis, the study found that there is a positive relationship between communication patterns and strategic communication. Meanwhile, regression analysis showed that communication patterns had influence a total of 52.4 percent variance towards strategic communication.

**Keywords:** Strategic Communication, Message Delivery, Communication Patterns, Strategic Communication Model, Organizational Communication

**Introduction**

Communication is a key aspect to achieve organizational goals. Communication is a transfer of meaning from one individual to another or many individuals, either verbally or non-verbally. Communication from one person to another is usually described as a triangle consisting of context, sender, message and recipient (Barret, 2006). This can be seen when communication has a significant impact on ensuring the smooth running of activities within the organization. Communication element involves the transmission of messages, recipients, messages and channels (Yusof, 2010). Therefore, clear communication is crucial to ensure recipient's understanding of the message being delivered (Butler, 2010).

This in line with the function of communication itself that serves to inform, influence, convey intentions and to build credibility (Walker, 2011) as well as to meet needs, express themselves, establish relationships and exchange information (Zawiyah, 2009). Consequently, communication is an important aspect of organizational relations not only between one to one organization, but also as a key catalyst that triggers close relationships between top management and subordinate (Idros & Maizatul, 2015). Therefore, in the process of communication, messaging is also an important part of establishing effective communication and delivery systems.

Accordingly, organizations become a group of individuals who working together to achieve goals that are impossible to achieve on their own (Abdul Mua'ti, 2006). This is because, organizations that are efficient in their governance require the cooperation of all members (Mohamad Said & Zulhamri, 2012). Through the communication approach, organizations easily can communicate information and to inform staff and the public about an issue. Having the right work ethic coupled with efficient communication practices, makes it imperative for directives, employee and employer relationships and conflicts be implemented and resolved successfully (Wan Idros, 2015).

Therefore, organizations need to organize communications strategically to avoid any misunderstanding of messages. This in line with the concept of strategic communication itself, that was defined as a macro-level communication based on organizational goals and audience reactions. Among the concepts discussed in communication strategies, are communicators who clearly or implicitly choose what to discuss, and what to ignore. Strategies also involve setting goals and anticipating the response of others. In addition, strategies naturally serve as the basis for action, providing the basis for structuring, implementing, and evaluating communication practices. Selection of communication forums, quarterly meetings, company emails, and others is naturally based on strategy (Clampitt, 2005).

Through strategic communication, organizations obtain quality communication as a result of effective interactions between management and staff (Zuri & Aznan, 2008). The key thing to apply is the use of language that is easy to understand, encouraging staff to provide ideas, clear instructions and a conducive environment at work. This is because communication strategies are also at the core of communication, and strategies are the basis on which every effective communication depends on strategic planning. Leaders also need to analyse the audience in each situation and develop strategies to achieve their goals (Barret, 2006). In addition, Barret also emphasized that good communication depends on strategy, but as the

audience becomes more diverse and larger, communication strategies become more complex.

Like most other disciplines, approaches in developing communication strategies include elements such as context, vision, goals and objectives, insights, strategic choices, stakeholders, online messages, outline of approaches, resources, dependencies, risks and responses (Government Communication Service, 2014). Upik (2016) explains that communication strategies are required to achieve particular goal. It is intended to ensure that the recipient understands the message and can motivate the recipient to make changes.

Communication involves delivery of ideas and feelings in a way of easy-to-understand. Because communication is a two-way process, managers in one organization not only act as informants, but in other cases they are also the target of information acquisition (Hasniza & Ab Aziz, 2011). In addition, an effective communication has four fundamentals, which includes positive attitude. Second, strive for information. Third, need communication plan before any action. Finally, it is necessary to develop trust between sender and receiver (Newstrom, 2015). In addition, effective communication occurs when there is a two-way interaction between the two parties. The exchange of information from one side to the other is a good communication during discussions and the recipient can ask questions and receive answers to clarify the message. Effective communication is also a prerequisite for a more organized organizational strategy (Kartini et al., 2012).

Therefore, the upper management must communicate effectively in interpreting the information he or she wants to convey in order to avoid confusion. The feedback provided is seen as a catalyst for the interpretation of correct information by subordinate. The impact of information acquisition patterns and how employees interpret the received information will have a direct impact on the way they work, their attitudes and their administration (Wan Idros & Maizatul Haizan, 2014). Guidance on effective communication also shows that we must make sure everyone knows who should be informed, consider the recipients, know who the recipients are, find and select information, choose the right medium, clear message, use the right tone and the message should simple and easy to understand by the recipient (Hasniza & Ab Aziz, 2011).

### **Literature Review and Theory Framework**

Strategic communication is a new area of learning in the field of communication and social science management (Thomas & Stephens, 2015). The comparisons made to the study of strategic communications, indicate that Malaysia has less research on it. Most organizations in Malaysia are less concerned with the importance of strategy in communication. Many researchers discuss and find solutions to organizational communication issues by focusing on internal and external audiences, but less on strategic communication. Therefore, the need for communication strategies arises to achieve organizational goal systematically. An organization needs to resolve problems and identify resources and support from the internal and external environment. This is because strategic communication can enhance organizational commitment among stakeholders with the visible impact on external audiences (Ressler, 2012).

Strategic communication is very important for organizational development because communication is considered a contributor to organizational effectiveness. Second, it relates to the importance of the image of the organization. Third, it serves as a tool for enhancing organizational identity among employees. Finally, it relates to openness between organizational members and between organizations and stakeholders (Falkheimer, 2014). Meanwhile, Day et al (2017) state that a lack of strategic communication will lead to decline levels of trust and create emotional conflict among organizational members. The solution that needs to be taken is to choose the right communication strategy to ensure stability in the organization.

In general, strategic communication can be related to how organization chooses their communication strategies as well as to create strategic planning. Mahoney (2013) argues that the elements of strategic communication planning should include situation analysis, goal setting, message, target audience, communication strategy, tactics, implementation and evaluation. According to him, organizations need to focus on strategic communication planning, such as what needs to be done, what issues are being addressed, why they are important, what to do about them, who is the most important person to them, what they need to know and how they should tell. As such, internal messages are one of the most important organs of organizational. Considering these elements, communication planning can go smoothly especially during coordination of organizational functions (Bharadwaj, 2014).

In addition to communication planning, organizations also need to look and evaluate the work culture that exists in the day-to-day work environment. This is because, the culture of an organization is closely related to how employees perceive the culture and it will color the way employees act in the daily work activities. Organizations that have a strong culture may influence every employee's actions (Mujiasih & Ratnaningsih, 2012). However, cultural aspects are also included in the 7S framework (structure, strategy, systems, shared values, skills, staff and style) that must be present in the implementation of organizational strategies (Peters & Waterman, 1992).

In Barret's Strategic Communication Model (2002), she highlights the elements of top management support, targeted messages, selection and use of communication tools and ongoing evaluation. Elements in the model were used in this study to measure strategic communication variables. The researcher also added two other elements, namely communication planning and work culture. This is because these two elements are an essential element of any communication strategy. The researcher also wants to test and examine if these elements also affect the effectiveness of message delivery.

Turning to the elements of the Strategic Communication Model, the first element is the support of top management, that is an act of encouragement to personnel management who are at the top of the organizational hierarchy and who responsible for the entire organization (Aizzat, 2006). The support is not only in the form of consent, but also in terms of involvement (Zafir & Fazilah, 2003). The study conducted by Low et al (2007) shows that by engaging employees in the collective decision-making process, employees are able to freely express, discuss and share their ideas. This process allows for more interaction between employees. Next element, the selection and use of communication tools, can be understood as a means of communication or communication between two or more individuals. Samsudin (1993)

argues that the choice of communication tools should follow the hierarchy of effectiveness of communication such as, the two-way of communication, or less effective communication which is through a one-way process such as writing a letter or a report. Mohd Hazim & Lokman (2014) argue that management should be able to take advantage of current technological developments. This is because there are many applications like WhatsApp, Telegram, WeChat, Facebook and others that make communication possible without hindrance. Meanwhile, Ahlam (2016) views communication technology as having a positive impact on the organization and its top managers. This is because activities within the organization can be improved with the help of communication technology and it requires cooperation and commitment of all parties to ensure the technology selected will have a positive impact. The study also found that organizations that are efficient in communicating technology will achieve their goals faster and be able to compete with other organizations.

Continuous evaluation is the fourth element in the Strategic Communication Model, which is an organizational management effort to evaluate and improve the communication practices used continuously (Rosli, 2016). This was also added by Low et al (2007) who argued that the assessment stage should be carried out jointly by management and staff. Employee participation will increase their acceptance during the implementation phase. Kamaruzzaman et al (2013) also emphasized that one of the best ways for organizations to determine whether their training investment is profitable or not is through an efficient and systematic evaluation process. Although he sees from the perspective of training investment, the relationship between the role of communication is important in launching the training agenda in the organization. Training assessment methods such as influence of communication on the process of delivering knowledge and skills, are needed. Next, make a more thorough assessment of the effectiveness of the training. His research has resulted in an ongoing assessment from a communication perspective that can provide insight into the influence of communication on training success. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2017) states that continuous evaluation of communication should look at the messages, elements used and audience participation. This assessment will also look at improving message reception and communication activities within the organization. Meanwhile, David (2001) argues that strategy evaluation is important for evaluating organizational strength. Appropriate assessments can alert the organization to problems or potential problems before the situation becomes critical.

Next, is the element that researchers add, namely communication planning. According to a study conducted by McLean & Egan (2008) planning is an ongoing process in helping leaders to think more critically and flexibly. They argue that the planning process is very complex and requires experienced individuals to guide the process. A study conducted by Arasa & K'Obonyo (2012) found that company planning and performance have a strong relationship between the two. Planning methods include identifying goals, reviewing the scope of business, identifying company issues, improving performance, evaluating and controlling systems show a positive relationship with the company's performance. This is supported by Samsuni & Zakaria (2005), who argues that strategic planning is a key aspect in setting the direction of the organization so that the strategies and services provided are always up to date, relevant and current.



Meanwhile work culture, demands on integrity. Timeliness, integrity in communicating information, integrity in providing the best service, integrity in communicating with department heads, colleagues and even support staff (Institute of Malaysian Integrity & National Integrity Plan). Prasetyo (2011) argues that work culture is capable of transforming traditional communication into modern management behaviour, thus instilling a high degree of trust and cooperation. In a study conducted by Suhana & Kartini (2015), adherence to high-level directives was an important factor for staff. Focus on the task can make the staff productive and complete the task quickly. In addition, the work culture is also beneficial when top employees need cooperation from their colleagues, but this work culture has a negative effect on the employee's self-esteem by thinking that he or she can work alone without the help of others (Wibowo, 2013). Therefore, David (2001) argues that strategies should strive to protect, prioritize and build on cultural aspects that support the proposed new strategy. Cultural aspects that are contrary to the proposed strategy must be identified and modified. This is because changing the organizational culture to adapt to the new strategy is more effective than changing the strategy to fit the existing culture.

Therefore, strategic communication is incomplete without planning. Managers are the key person who needs to plan the strategic communication. The top management needs to strategically plan and manage to determine the direction of the organization they belong to. Careful planning must take into account at all internal and external aspects in order to gain competitive advantage and subsequently dominate the market and generate higher profitability (Kassim, 2003). Strategic communication can also be seen as a new discipline based on some basic assumptions and covering communication activities for all types of organizations (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015). In the context of this study, strategic communication plays an important role in organizational communication, especially communication between management, staff and audience. It also refers to the process of communication that occurs within the organization which involves the process of upward communication, horizontal communication and downward communication. This, in turn, indirectly affects the effectiveness of message delivery. Thus, the combination of strategic communication elements will produce good work quality and improve communication practices in the organization.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a quantitative approach, focus on content analysis and survey methods. For content analysis, the researcher randomly selected and analyses samples of consumer complaints submitted to KTMB through an e-mail of KTMB Customer Service Unit. A total of 28 complaints sample were obtained and then analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science Version 23.0 (SPSS).

As for the survey, the population consisted of 700 KTMB staffs in the Klang Valley. The sample size, however, involved 248 respondents who were randomly selected based on the (Krejcie & Morgan Sample Size Table, 1970). The random sample is intended at the beginning of the study to test the form of the questionnaire and determine the respondents according to the purpose of the study. A total of 250 sets of questionnaires were distributed to the organization and only 200 completed questionnaires were returned. This study uses descriptive analysis to identify the communication patterns used by the respondents in relation to the unit, between the unit and between the KTMB organization and the

stakeholder. To examine the relationship and influence of communication patterns towards strategic communication practices, this study used inference analysis namely correlation and regression.

### **Results and Discussion**

Based on descriptive analysis of 200 respondents', 86.0 percent were male, while only 13.5 percent were female respondents. It was also noted that 50.5 per cent of the study consisted of people aged 18-29, 33.0 per cent aged 30-40, and staffs between 41-50 years, only 5.5 per cent. Meanwhile, 11.0 per cent were staffs who aged 51 and older. In addition, the majority of the respondents were SPM holder (55.5 per cent) followed by 41.5 per cent having STPM/Diploma and only 2.0 per cent having degree. In addition, 12.5 per cent served less than a year, 31.5 per cent of respondents served between 1 and 5 years, and 30.0 per cent served between 6 and 10 years. Furthermore, the smallest percentage were respondents who served between 11 and 20 years with only 12.0 percent. Meanwhile, respondents who served 21 years and above gained 13.5 percent.

In addition, respondents were also required to fill in their locations, divisions, units or stations. The results showed that KL Sentral had the highest percentage of respondents on duty at 14.5 per cent representing 29 respondents, followed by Sg Buloh Station, 9.5 per cent represented 19 respondents and Rawang Station gained 6.5 per cent representing 13 respondents. While Kepong Station gained 4.0 percent or 8 respondents, followed by Kuang Station only 3.5 percent or 7 respondents and other 62.0 percent stations covered Angkasapuri Station, South Lake City, Batang Kali, Batu Caves, Batu Tiga, Templer Road, Kuala Lumpur, Port Klang, Jalan Kastam, Kajang, Kg. Batu, Central Kepong, Kg. Dato' Harun, Klang, UKM, Pantai Dalam, Putra, Seputeh, Rasa, Kuala Kubu Bharu, Midvalley, Padang Jawa, Petaling, Salak South, Segambut, Sentul, Serdang, Serendah, Seri Setia, Setia Jaya, Shah Alam, Subang Jaya, Subang Skypark, Taman Wahyu, Telok Gadong and Telok Pulai.

Descriptive analysis of the elements of communication pattern found that the mean recorded for each element was horizontal communication (min = 4.23, external communication (min = 4.14), diagonal communication (min = 3.61), downward communication (min = 3.52), upward communication (min = 3.41). Based on the mean readings of all five elements, it shows that perception of the respondents on communication pattern elements used in KTMB are at a high and moderate level. It is based on the rule of thumb in defining levels that are, high level, mean = 3.67-5.00, medium, mean = 2.34-3.66 and low, mean = 1.00-2.33. Therefore, based on the mean values obtained, it can be seen that the pattern of communication most frequently used by respondents is horizontal communication. This is because, horizontal communication receives the highest mean. The second pattern of communication is the external communication; this type of communication is accepted by the respondents as one of the most commonly used patterns and falls into the category of higher mean. This is followed by diagonal communication, downward communication and upward communication that are categorized as moderate mean. Therefore, it can be seen that KTMB's exact communication pattern is a horizontal communication and external communication pattern which both patterns have a high mean of average.

The findings of this pattern can be concluded that employees communicate more with colleagues and with customers. This is in line with KTMB's own service situation where frontline staffs such as counter guards and master stations are closer to the customer and therefore they deal with customers and co-workers more than with their superiors and subordinates. The upward communication (bottom up) is minimum and this indicates that the communication between the staffs and the managers are low. This should be taken into account by KTMB as the bottom up communication pattern is important for reporting service weaknesses, as it is often possible that improvements can be made to improve service quality. Not only does upward communication, downward communication is also shows the same trends. Thus, there is less interaction between upper and lower staff, and this can actually affect the flow of information and expose the weaknesses of the organization.

Next, this study used inference statistic, Pearson Correlation to examine the relationship between communication pattern and strategic communication based on the effect size of Guilford's Rule of Thumb. Overall, the correlation of the communication patterns and strategic communication elements, has a moderate relationship since the effect size value is  $r = 0.672^{**}$  and the significance level value is .000.

Table 1

*Correlation test of communication patterns and strategic communication*

VARIABLES	Strategic Communication
Communication Pattern	.672**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
N	200

The table shows the test results of the Pearson Correlation of communication patterns and strategic communication elements. This study showed that the correlation coefficients for the communication and strategic communication variables were large, .672 to 1.00, with a Pearson Correlation ( $r$ ) value of 0.672 \*\*, and a significance level ( $p$ ) of .000. This shows that the pattern of communication and strategic communication has a strong moderate relationship. Therefore, this indicates that there is a significant positive relationship between communication patterns and strategic communication. This explains that the better the communication patterns are implemented within the organization, the better the communication strategies being used.

Table 2

*Model Summary*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.732 <sup>a</sup>	.536	.524	14.34144

a. Predictors: (Constant), horizontal communication, external communication, diagonal communication, downward communication, and upward communication.

The influence of communication patterns on strategic communication is seen in the context of the extent to which various communication patterns used by organizations will



affect strategic communication practices. Five communication patterns are being tested are horizontal communication, external communication, diagonal communication, downward communication, and upward communication. Accordingly, regression tests were conducted to determine the effect.

Table 3  
ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	46101.271	5	9220.254	44.829	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	39901.324	194	205.677		
	Total	86002.595	199			

a. Dependent variable: Strategic communication

b. Predictors: (Constant), horizontal communication, external communication, diagonal communication, downward communication, and upward communication.

Table 2 shows that the regression values between communication patterns and strategic communications indicated by R is .732. An adjusted R squared value of .524 indicates that communication patterns account for 52.4 percent of the variance in strategic communication.

Table 3 shows the results of the ANOVA analysis to confirm the initial model of both the communication patterns and strategic communication. The results show that the entire model has a value of  $F = 44,829$  with a significant value of  $p = .000$ . These independent variables (horizontal communication, external communication, diagonal communication, downward communication, and upward communication) will be explored in greater detail. Based on Table 4, the multiple regression analysis coefficients are shown to identify which independent variables contributed the most to the strategic communication variables.

Table 4  
Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1 (Constant)	38.763	12.269		3.160	.002	14.566	62.960
Downward communication	.383	.360	.089	1.063	.289	-.327	1.093
Upward communication	.462	.328	.120	1.411	.160	-.184	1.108
Horizontal communication	1.023	.239	.214	4.282	.000	.552	1.495
Diagonal communication	.788	.356	.147	2.215	.028	.086	1.490
External communication	2.404	.284	.467	8.458	.000	1.843	2.964

a. Dependent Variable: Strategic Communication

Based on Table 4, it can be seen that the organizational pattern of external communication was the most influential in strategic communication when it obtained a value of  $\beta = .467$  and reached a significant  $p < .000$  level. This was followed by a horizontal pattern of communication with a value of  $\beta = .214$  reaching a significant level of  $< .000$ . Subsequently, followed by a pattern of diagonal communication ( $\beta = .161$ ) reached a significant  $p < .05$  level. This is, in contrast to the downward communication pattern when the pattern reaches a significant level of  $p > .05$ , with a value of  $\beta = .089$  and upward communication patterns reaching a significant level of  $p > .05$  with a value of  $\beta = .120$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that external organizational patterns, horizontal communication and diagonal communication have a significant impact on strategic communication. Meanwhile, the downward communication and the upward communication pattern did not have a significant impact on strategic communication.

This indicates that vertical (top-down, and bottom-up) communication is less significant in influencing strategic communication than organizational external communication, horizontal and diagonal communication. This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Ridha (2013) who found that communication with customers has a significant relationship with communication strategies within the organization. This signals that inter-level communication is more important than the hierarchical communication in shaping communication strategies. Therefore, it is not surprising that the pattern of external

communication is that communication with customers has the greatest influence over other communication patterns.

This finding may be related to the state of service provided by the organization. The respondents consisted mainly of frontliner's staffs, who met with customers on a daily basis. Thus, customer feedback is very important in strategic communication especially in designing communication strategies because through feedback, benchmarking can be done to provide better service in the future.

Meanwhile, the results of the study conducted by Iloafu (2016) also support that the methods and communication patterns used in the organization contribute to the communication efficiency that ensures the success of an organization. According to him, organizational structures must be designed and implemented in an easy-to-follow pattern of communication.

### **Conclusion**

This study aims to discuss and understand the communication issues faced by KTMB in improving the efficiency of its services to commuter users. In understanding this issue, this study focuses on aspects of communication patterns and strategic communication on the effectiveness of message delivery. Using several approaches to facilitate the measurement of these aspects, this study uses the Strategic Communication Model by (Barrett, 2002). Based on this model, the researcher has taken four items in the context of strategic communication, namely top management support, targeted messages, selection and use of communication and evaluation tools. However, for communication planning and work culture items have been added by the researcher to examine if they also affect the effectiveness of the message delivery.

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed to all KTMB commuter staffs working around the Klang Valley. However, only 210 forms of questionnaire were collected and returned by the respondents. There are 10 forms of questionnaire were rejected due to technical issues such as defects, incomplete and so on. In total, there were 200 questionnaire forms from respondents that were successfully analysed. The demographic involved male and female respondents and it could be said that the sample of the study was dominated by men, age range between 18 and 29 years old, had SPM education level, experienced staffs and most respondents were placed in KL Sentral.

Overall, the results show that there is a link between consumer complaints and the communication patterns and strategic communication practices in KTMB. This is because the results obtained from content analysis clearly indicate that complaints are being sent regularly to KTMB. Through the results, the highest categories of complaints were work culture, followed by the selection and use of communication tools, continuous assessment, targeted messages and finally top management support. This category of complaints clearly indicates that it has to do with the communication patterns and strategic communication practices prevailing in KTMB.

In addition, it can be seen that KTMB practices horizontal and external communications more frequently than other communication patterns. This indicates that staff communicate more with colleagues and users, while upward and downward communication is less common at KTMB. Having this pattern of communication can be a factor in increasing consumer complaints when staff may be missing information from top employees or information from subordinates thus causing misunderstanding and staff didn't get the right information. Therefore, the results show that communication patterns have a strong moderate relationship with strategic communication. Therefore, choosing the right communication pattern can help to build effective strategic communication within the organization, while reducing service complaints.

### Biodata

Maizatul Haizan Mahbob (PhD), is senior lecturers at the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. This paper is derived from a study on strategic communications at KTMB through the GUP-2017-104 grant.

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