

EXPLORING COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN MANAGING COMMUNICATION CRISIS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN MALAYSIA'S SERVICE SECTOR

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Abstract: *Communication crisis inside organizations can profoundly impact employee performance, satisfaction, and organizational stability. This study investigates the function of communication management methods in mitigating communication crisis among customer care officer in Malaysia's service industry. Efficient communication management guarantees the precise and timely delivery of pertinent information, so enhancing job satisfaction, bolstering employee commitment, and diminishing turnover intentions. A qualitative study methodology was employed to investigate employees' experiences during communication crises. Data were gathered via comprehensive interviews with eight individuals from various service sectors in Malaysia. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed with ATLAS.ti to discern important themes pertaining to communication management methods in emergencies. The findings underscore the significance of organized communication tactics in alleviating adverse effects, including employee stress, anxiety, and diminishing morale. This study presents a Communication Management Strategies Model to assist organizations in more successfully handling internal communication crises based on these findings. The proposed paradigm offers pragmatic insights for public and private sector organizations aiming to enhance crisis communication and elevate employee happiness.*

Keywords: *Communication, customer service officer, crisis communication, communication management strategies.*

Introduction

Communication is essential for organizational efficiency, especially in service-oriented sectors where employees engage directly with clients and stakeholders (Leal D'Avila et al., 2025). Effective communication guarantees that employees comprehend organizational goals, policies, and expectations, so facilitating seamless operations and enhancing overall organizational performance. Organizations may encounter communication crisis when information is inadequately conveyed, misinterpreted, delayed, or inconsistently disseminated among personnel (Abbas & Miller, 2025; Kim & Lim, 2023). Such crisis can adversely impact employee morale, job satisfaction, and productivity (Sawhani, 2024; Solnet & Golubovskaya, 2023), particularly among customer service professionals who operate as the frontline ambassadors of an organization (Pangarkar et al., 2022; Leo et al., 2023). A communication crisis inside an organization frequently results in uncertainty, disinformation, and heightened employee stress. When employees lack accurate or timely information from management, it can lead to confusion, unhappiness, and diminished faith in leadership. Prior research indicates that inadequate communication during crises might diminish organizational performance and increase employee turnover intentions (Men & Bowen, 2022; Heide & Simonsson, 2023). Conversely, proficient communication management practices can assist organizations in alleviating the adverse effects of crises by facilitating transparent, prompt, and consistent information dissemination among personnel (Citrawijaya, et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2024). In the service sector, effective communication management is crucial since staff must promptly address consumer requests while concurrently adjusting to internal organizational changes (Madanchian et al., 2022).

Customer service representatives are crucial in upholding organizational reputation and service excellence. Communication problems inside an organization predominantly impact employees, who must navigate both internal ambiguities and external consumer expectations. Consequently, organizations must create systematic communication management methods to successfully address communication crises and sustain employee happiness and organizational stability. As asserted by Liu-Lastres et al. (2023), effective internal crisis communication is the key to a positive, trusting employer-employee relationship during and after a crisis.

However, despite extensive scholarship on crisis communication and organizational communication management, there remains a notable conceptual and theoretical imbalance within the literature. Existing studies predominantly privilege external crisis communication particularly in relation to reputation management, stakeholder perception, and media engagement while comparatively neglecting the internal communicative realities experienced by frontline employees in service-oriented contexts (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023; Solnet & Golubovskaya, 2023). This imbalance reflects an underlying conceptual tension between organization-centric perspectives, which prioritize institutional image preservation, and employee-centric perspectives, which emphasize the lived experiences, emotional labour, and communicative challenges of frontline staff.

Moreover, a theoretical contradiction emerges in how communication management is framed within crisis contexts. While dominant frameworks advocate for transparency, consistency, and clarity as core principles of effective crisis communication, these ideals are often operationalized with an external stakeholder focus, thereby overlooking how such practices are enacted or at times contradicted within internal organizational settings. In practice, frontline employees frequently encounter fragmented information flows, delayed messaging, and ambiguous directives during crises, which can undermine both their role performance and

psychological well-being. This disjuncture highlights a critical gap between normative communication theories and the empirical realities of internal crisis communication, particularly within the Malaysian service sector (Bahrain et al., 2023; Krystalyn & Omar, 2026). Accordingly, this study seeks to reconcile these tensions by examining how communication management strategies are experienced and interpreted by customer service representatives during internal communication crises. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research foregrounds employees' perspectives to uncover how organizational communication practices shape their sense of clarity, trust, and job satisfaction in times of uncertainty. In doing so, the study advances a Communication Management Strategies Model that integrates both organizational imperatives and employee-centric needs.

By addressing the theoretical contradictions and empirical gaps in existing literature, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of crisis communication—one that bridges external and internal dimensions. The proposed model offers actionable insights for organizations to align strategic communication principles with internal practices, thereby strengthening communication resilience, enhancing employee well-being, and mitigating the adverse effects of internal communication crises in the workplace.

Literature Review

Communication is widely recognised as a fundamental driver of organisational effectiveness, particularly within service-based industries where frontline employees must simultaneously manage customer interactions and internal organisational expectations (Krystalyn & Omar et al., 2026). In such contexts, internal communication plays a critical role in ensuring that employees receive timely, accurate, and meaningful information necessary for effective task performance, especially in increasingly digitalised work environments (Parojčić et al., 2024). Existing research consistently demonstrates that internal communication is strongly associated with employee engagement, trust, empowerment, and job satisfaction, positioning it as a strategic organisational function rather than merely an administrative process (Verčič, 2023; Gehrau et al., 2024).

However, despite these established relationships, the literature reveals a lack of theoretical integration in explaining how and why communication practices influence employee outcomes. Much of the existing work adopts a descriptive or outcome-oriented perspective, focusing on communication effectiveness without sufficiently grounding these relationships in coherent theoretical frameworks. This creates a conceptual limitation, as communication is often treated as a functional tool rather than a socially embedded process shaped by relational, psychological, and uncertainty-based dynamics.

From a theoretical standpoint, **Social Exchange Theory (SET)** suggests that effective communication signals organisational support, thereby fostering reciprocal employee attitudes such as trust, commitment, and engagement. Yet, a contradiction arises when communication practices during crises often characterised by information withholding, inconsistency, or delayed messaging undermine this reciprocal exchange. Similarly, **Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT)** posits that individuals seek information to reduce ambiguity, particularly in high-stress situations such as organisational crises. While crisis communication frameworks emphasise clarity and transparency, empirical evidence suggests that internal communication during crises frequently fails to meet these expectations, thereby intensifying rather than reducing uncertainty. Furthermore, the concept of **Psychological Safety** highlights the importance of open, supportive communication environments where employees feel safe to

express concerns and seek clarification. However, hierarchical organisational cultures, particularly within Asian contexts such as Malaysia, may inhibit such openness, revealing a tension between theoretical ideals and organisational realities.

Within crisis situations, communication becomes even more critical as employees experience heightened uncertainty, stress, and ambiguity (Ruppel et al., 2022). While existing crisis communication literature acknowledges employees as important internal stakeholders (Ndone & Heath, 2023), it remains heavily skewed toward external communication priorities, such as reputation management and media relations. This creates a conceptual imbalance, where organisational image preservation is prioritised over employee sensemaking and well-being. As a result, internal communication crises characterised by fragmented messaging, lack of transparency, and inconsistent guidance remain underexplored.

Empirical studies have identified transparency and communication frequency as critical factors influencing employee responses during crises (Liu-Lastres et al., 2024). While these findings align with normative crisis communication principles, they also expose a theoretical contradiction: although organisations advocate for transparency, internal practices often fall short due to structural constraints, power dynamics, or strategic information control. This inconsistency disrupts employees' ability to interpret organisational actions, thereby weakening trust and undermining the communication process as a mechanism for uncertainty reduction. The relationship between internal communication, employee well-being, and job satisfaction further highlights this tension. Research indicates that supportive communication can enhance psychological well-being and reduce emotional strain during crises (Wu et al., 2024; Patrichi et al., 2025). However, without integrating **Psychological Safety** into communication frameworks, these outcomes remain difficult to sustain in practice. Employees may receive information, but still feel unable to question, challenge, or seek clarification due to perceived risks, thereby limiting the effectiveness of communication strategies.

Leadership communication and feedback mechanisms are also widely recognised as central to effective crisis management. Leaders play a key role in shaping meaning, reinforcing trust, and guiding employee behaviour during uncertainty (Mohamad et al., 2023; Gigliotti et al., 2025). Nevertheless, a critical gap persists in understanding how leadership communication aligns with employees' psychological needs. While leadership messaging may aim to provide direction and reassurance, it can simultaneously reinforce top-down communication structures that limit dialogue, thereby contradicting the principles of two-way communication and psychological safety.

Similarly, although feedback mechanisms are promoted as essential for organisational adaptability (Urbancová et al., 2024), their effectiveness depends on the extent to which employees feel safe and empowered to participate. This highlights an unresolved tension between **formal communication structures** and **informal communicative experiences**, where the presence of feedback channels does not necessarily translate into meaningful employee voice.

Overall, the literature demonstrates several critical gaps. First, there is a persistent focus on external crisis communication, with limited attention to internal communication crises affecting frontline employees. Second, there is insufficient contextualisation within non-Western settings, particularly Malaysia, where cultural norms, hierarchy, and organisational practices may shape communication differently. Third, and most importantly, there is a **lack of**

theoretical integration, as existing studies rarely combine relational (SET), cognitive (URT), and psychological (Psychological Safety) perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of communication in crisis contexts.

Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining communication management strategies in handling internal communication crises among customer service officers in Malaysia's service sector. By adopting a qualitative approach and foregrounding employees' lived experiences, the study aims to reconcile existing conceptual tensions and theoretical contradictions. It further proposes a **Communication Management Strategies Model** that integrates Social Exchange Theory, Uncertainty Reduction Theory, and Psychological Safety to provide a more holistic and context-sensitive framework for managing internal communication crises.

Integrated Communication Management Strategies Model



Figure 1: Integrated Communication Management Strategies Model

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the role of communication management strategies in addressing internal communication crises among customer service officers in Malaysia's service sector. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of communication practices during organisational crises. Such an approach is particularly valuable when examining complex organisational phenomena that are context-dependent and cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants comprised eight customer service officers drawn from various service-related industries in Malaysia. The service sector was selected due to the nature of frontline roles, which require employees to continuously navigate communication between management and customers, particularly during crisis situations. A purposive sampling technique was employed

to identify individuals who had direct experience with internal communication challenges during organisational crises. This approach ensures the selection of information-rich participants who are capable of providing meaningful and relevant insights into the research phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

Although the sample size was relatively small, it is consistent with qualitative research principles that prioritise depth, richness, and contextual understanding over statistical generalisation. The selection of eight participants was guided by the concept of data saturation, which refers to the point at which no new themes, patterns, or insights emerge from the data. During the analysis process, it was observed that recurring themes related to communication challenges, leadership practices, and employee responses began to stabilise, indicating that sufficient depth of understanding had been achieved. Therefore, the sample size was considered adequate to address the research objectives while maintaining analytical rigour.

The participants represented diverse service organisations, allowing the study to capture a range of perspectives on communication management practices across different organisational settings. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided a balance between consistency and flexibility. This method allowed participants to freely express their experiences while ensuring alignment with the study's key research themes (Bryman, 2016). The interview protocol focused on three main areas: (i) experiences of internal communication during organisational crises, (ii) perceptions of communication management strategies implemented by their organisations, and (iii) the impact of these practices on job satisfaction and work performance.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via online communication platforms, depending on participants' availability. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure data accuracy and completeness. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by ATLAS.ti software, which enabled systematic organisation, coding, and categorisation of qualitative data. The analysis followed several iterative stages, including data familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation. First, the researchers reviewed the transcripts to gain an overall understanding of the data. Next, meaningful segments of text were coded based on emerging concepts related to communication management strategies and internal communication crises. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories to identify key patterns, relationships, and recurring issues experienced by the participants.

The final themes derived from the analysis informed the development of a proposed Communication Management Strategies Model, which aims to provide a structured and context-sensitive framework for managing internal communication crises within the service sector.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Participants	Date of Interview for Pilot Study
Participant 1	21 November 2023
Participant 2	1 December 2023
Participant 3	8 December 2023
Participant 4	1 July 2023
Participant 5	8 July 2023
Participant 6	15 July 2023
Participant 7	26 July 2023
Participant 8	29 July 2023

Source: Authors (2026)

Trustworthiness and Inter-Coder Reliability

To ensure the rigour and quality of the qualitative findings, this study adopted several strategies aligned with established criteria for trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data and iterative analysis. The researcher carefully reviewed the interview transcripts multiple times to ensure an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. In addition, member checking was employed, whereby selected participants were invited to review the interpreted findings to confirm that their experiences were accurately represented. This process helped minimise misinterpretation and enhanced the authenticity of the data.

To enhance dependability, a systematic and transparent research process was maintained throughout the study. All stages of data collection and analysis including interview procedures, coding decisions, and theme development were carefully documented to create an audit trail. This allows the research process to be reviewed and ensures that the findings are consistent and logically derived from the data.

Confirmability was addressed by minimising researcher bias and ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' narratives rather than the researcher's assumptions. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study, where the researcher remained aware of personal perspectives and their potential influence on data interpretation. Supporting evidence from verbatim interview excerpts was also used to justify the identified themes.

Transferability was achieved by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings. This enables readers to assess the applicability of the results to similar organisational settings, particularly within the service sector and comparable cultural contexts.

In addition, inter-coder reliability was incorporated to enhance the consistency and credibility of the coding process. A second independent coder was involved in analysing a subset of the interview transcripts. Both coders independently coded the data based on the emerging coding framework. The coding results were then compared to assess the level of agreement and identify any discrepancies. Differences in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus, leading to refinement of the coding scheme and clearer definition of thematic categories. This collaborative process helped to reduce subjectivity, improve coding consistency, and strengthen the overall reliability of the findings.

Through the integration of these strategies, the study ensures that the qualitative analysis is robust, transparent, and methodologically sound, thereby enhancing confidence in the validity and credibility of the proposed Communication Management Strategies Model.

Findings

This study examined the function of communication management methods in mitigating internal communication crises among customer service representatives in Malaysia's service industry. Data were gathered via comprehensive interviews with eight individuals who possessed experience in navigating communication problems inside their organizations. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed with ATLAS.ti software to enable systematic qualitative analysis.

A thematic analysis method was utilized to discern patterns and repeating themes within the interview data. The analytical approach encompassed multiple steps, including data familiarization, open coding, code categorization, and the formulation of principal themes. During the coding process in ATLAS.ti, numerous codes were produced and subsequently categorized into overarching themes. The investigation identified four primary themes that delineate the function of communication management methods during internal communication crises: clarity and transparency in communication, leadership communication, bidirectional communication and feedback, and the emotional well-being of employees.

Clarity and Transparency in Communication

The initial theme identified in the analysis underscores the significance of open and straightforward communication in crisis situations. A few interviewees noted that ambiguous instructions and conflicting information from management frequently resulted in employee bewilderment. In organizational crises, the lack of timely updates or precise information generated ambiguity about organizational decisions and operational procedures. Participants highlighted that open communication mitigated misunderstandings and facilitated employees' effective responses to organizational changes. When management offered explicit clarifications concerning policies, procedures, or crisis-related information, employees exhibited increased confidence in executing their duties. This discovery indicates that clarity and transparency in communication are vital elements of good communication management techniques.

Communication in Leadership

The second issue derived from the analysis pertains to the significance of leadership communication in organizational crises. Participants emphasized that managers and supervisors are crucial in conveying organizational choices and directing people during difficult circumstances. Effective leadership communication is characterized by consistency, supportiveness, and empathy. Numerous participants indicated that when leaders spoke consistently and transparently with employees, it alleviated worry and fortified trust within the organization. A deficiency in communication from executives engendered uncertainty and adversely impacted staff morale. The findings indicate that leadership communication is crucial for sustaining employee confidence and organizational stability during communication crises.

Two-Way Communication and Feedback

A notable theme that arose from the investigation is the significance of reciprocal communication between management and employees. Participants articulated the necessity for communication channels that enable employees to pose inquiries, offer comments, and seek

clarification during crises. The results demonstrate that organizations fostering open dialogue are more adept at managing communication crises. Employees experienced heightened engagement and appreciation when afforded opportunity to articulate their ideas and concerns. Conversely, organizations that depended only on top-down communication frequently saw elevated levels of employee discontent and misinterpretation. Consequently, bidirectional communication methods are vital for enhancing communication management tactics during organizational emergencies.

Employee Emotional Well-Being and Job Contentment

The concluding topic discerned in this study pertains to the emotional repercussions of communication crises on employees. Numerous individuals indicated experiencing stress, confusion, and dissatisfaction due to confusing or irregular organizational communication. These emotional reactions influenced employees' motivation and job satisfaction. Participants observed that proficient communication management practices could mitigate these adverse consequences. When organizations engaged in transparent communication, offered reassurance, and upheld supportive communication practices, employees experienced increased security and motivation to fulfil their responsibilities. This discovery underscores the significance of communication management in fostering employee well-being during crises.

Table 2: Themes, Codes, and Sample Quotations from Participants (ATLAS.ti Analysis)

Theme	Codes Generated in ATLAS.ti	Sample Quotations from Participants
Communication Clarity and Transparency	Clear instructions, timely information, transparency in communication, consistent messages	<p><i>“During the crisis, we sometimes received different instructions from different departments. It made it difficult for us to know which information was correct.”</i> (Participant 2)</p> <p><i>“When management explained the situation clearly and updated us regularly, we felt more confident about handling our tasks.”</i> (Participant 5)</p>
Leadership Communication	Manager support, leadership guidance, communication from supervisors, management visibility	<p><i>“Our supervisor kept updating us about the situation and that helped us understand what was happening in the organisation.”</i> (Participant 3)</p> <p><i>“When leaders communicate openly, we feel more supported and less worried about our job.”</i> (Participant 7)</p>
Two-Way Communication and Feedback	Employee feedback, open discussion, communication channels, employee participation	<p><i>“Sometimes we want to ask questions or give suggestions, but there are limited opportunities to communicate directly with management.”</i> (Participant 1)</p> <p><i>“When the organisation allowed us to share feedback, it helped solve many misunderstandings.”</i> (Participant 6)</p>
Employee Emotional Well-being and Job Satisfaction	Work stress, emotional support, job satisfaction, employee morale	<p><i>“When communication was unclear, it caused a lot of stress because we didn’t know what to expect.”</i> (Participant 4)</p> <p><i>“Good communication from management helped reduce our anxiety during difficult situations.”</i> (Participant 8)</p>

Source: Authors (2026)

Overall, the thematic analysis conducted using ATLAS.ti identified four key components that contribute to effective communication management during internal communication crises: Clear and transparent communication to minimise confusion and misinformation. Effective leadership communication to provide guidance and reassurance. Two-way communication and feedback mechanisms to encourage employee participation. Support for employee emotional well-being to maintain job satisfaction during crises. These themes form the foundation for the proposed Communication Management Strategies Model, which aims to guide organisations in strengthening internal communication practices and managing communication crises more effectively within the service sector.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the impact of communication management strategies on resolving internal communication crisis among customer service officers in Malaysia's service sector. Employing a qualitative methodology, comprehensive interviews were performed with eight individuals, and the data were analyzed with ATLAS.ti to discern major themes about communication methods amid organizational crises. The results indicated that proficient communication management strategies are crucial for sustaining organizational stability and employee satisfaction during crises.

The research revealed four principal themes that affect the efficacy of communication management during internal crises: clarity and transparency in communication, leadership communication, bidirectional communication and feedback systems, and the emotional well-being of employees. Lucid and transparent communication was determined to diminish uncertainty and mitigate misconceptions among personnel. Leadership communication was crucial in offering direction and reassurance, especially during times of organizational uncertainty. Moreover, bidirectional communication facilitated employee feedback and knowledge clarification, enhancing organizational comprehension and diminishing workplace friction. The findings indicated that effective communication tactics enhance employees' emotional well-being and job satisfaction by alleviating stress and anxiety in crisis situations. This study provides a Communication Management Strategies Framework that underscores the significance of systematic communication practices in addressing internal communication crises. The framework demonstrates how transparent communication, impactful leadership messaging, and accessible feedback mechanisms enhance employee well-being and organizational performance.

This study enhances the current literature on organizational communication and crisis management by offering empirical insights into the impact of communication management practices on employee experiences during internal communication crises. The findings underscore the significance of prioritizing internal communication techniques, especially among frontline staff engaged in service delivery and organizational operations.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to improve communication management strategies within organisations. First, organisations should prioritise clear and transparent communication practices, particularly during crisis situations. Management should ensure that accurate and consistent information is delivered promptly to employees to reduce uncertainty and prevent misinformation. Second, organisations should strengthen leadership communication by encouraging managers and supervisors to engage actively with employees during organisational challenges. Leaders should provide clear

guidance, demonstrate empathy, and maintain open communication to build trust and confidence among employees.

Third, organisations should establish effective two-way communication channels that allow employees to provide feedback, ask questions, and express their concerns. Encouraging open dialogue can help organisations identify potential communication issues early and improve organisational decision-making during crises. Fourth, organisations should pay greater attention to employee emotional well-being by recognising the psychological impact of communication crises. Providing supportive communication and ensuring that employees feel informed and valued can help maintain job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

Finally, future research should expand this study by examining communication management strategies across different industries, such as tourism, oil and gas, and financial services. Including a larger sample size and employing mixed-method approaches could also enhance the generalisability of the findings and provide a broader understanding of internal communication crises in organisational settings. Overall, effective communication management strategies are essential for organisations seeking to navigate communication crises while maintaining employee satisfaction and organisational resilience.

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