COMMUNICATION: THE "MULTIPLIER COMPETENCY" FOR EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

This study examines communication as a vital competency for executive management in South African universities of technology. Interviews with executives reveal that communication consistently amplifies other managerial skills, functioning as a multiplier competency across both routine and crisis contexts, and is therefore essential for effective higher education leadership. This exploratory study adopts a qualitative design, using semi-structured online interviews held through videoconferencing with 13 executive management members of UoTs. This approach provides a secure and flexible means of collecting real-time audio-visual perspectives from participants, closely resembling face-to-face interviews while maintaining compliance with COVID-19 safety measures. To examine management competencies in depth, the study applies Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). Communication competency emerged as a core multiplier competency for executive management in universities of technology. In normal operations, it

strengthens leadership, decision-making, negotiation, and accountability, while in crises, it reinforces risk management, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and stakeholder reassurance. It is therefore indispensable for effective leadership across both stable and turbulent contexts. This study highlights communication as a pivotal "multiplier" competency for executive management in universities of technology, enhancing both routine and crisis leadership functions. Its dual-context impact—strengthening decision-making, accountability, and stakeholder engagement under normal operations, while supporting risk management and problem-solving during crises—offers novel insight. These findings underscore the strategic value of developing communication skills to reinforce multiple leadership competencies and promote resilient, adaptive management.

1. Introduction

In higher education, communication is a strategic cornerstone, shaping both routine operations and crisis management. It enables leaders to convey clear, credible messages, align stakeholders with institutional goals, and foster trust and collaboration (Perovic, 2023; Katlip 2005; Grunig 2002). Effective communication translates into coordinated action, supports student retention, and strengthens organizational values (Chattapadhyay, 2024).

Its significance intensifies during crises, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, where transparent, timely, and empathetic messaging sustains legitimacy, confidence and belonging (Christensen & Laegried, 2020, Bion et al., 2017, Fernandes & Shaw, 2020; Yang et al., 2021). Emotional intelligence and relational communication further promoted psychological safety and resilience, enhancing institutional adaptability (Doraiswamy, 2012; Gofee & Jones 2000; Edmundson, 2020; Field, 2020).

Communication is thus a dynamic, multifunctional process that underpins leadership effectiveness, strategic guidance, and stakeholder engagement in Universities of Technology (Tobin et al., 2021). This study explores these dimensions through in-depth interviews with thirteen executive management members of Universiies of Technology.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in crisis management and competency theories, recognizing that effective leadership in crisis demands competencies beyond those required in routine contexts (Szczepanska-Woszczyna, 2013). However, such competencies remain underexplored within South African Universities of Technology (UoTs). Guided by an exploratory theoretical framework, the study employs multiple data sources to generate rich, in-depth insights into this complex phenomenon. (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Cavana et al., 2001; Thomas & Lawal, 2020; Khan, 2014).

2.2 Communication as a Leadership Competency in Higher Education

Communication competency is widely recognized as a foundational attribute of effective higher education leadership, enabling leaders to convey ideas clearly, foster collaboration, and engage constructively with diverse stakeholders (Obid, 2024; Martin, 2024). In complex institutional settings, such as universities where governance structures intersect with multiple stakeholder interests, effective communication is essential for building trust, promoting

participation, and advancing strategic objectives. Beyond information transmission, communication embodies a relational process rooted in mutual understanding, empathy, and contextual adaptability (Sipahioglu, 2024).

The rapidly evolving higher education landscape, which is influenced by globalization, digitalization, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has further amplified the significance of communication in leadership (Martin, 2024). Leaders are increasingly expected to manage institutional transformation while ensuring inclusivity and engagement across academic, administrative, and community stakeholders. This dual role underscores communication as both a strategic and relational competency, essential for navigating complex organizational dynamics (Obid, 2024; Buthea et al., 2025).

2.3 Communication as a Multiplier Competency

The concept of communication as a "multiplier competency' highlights its foundational role in enhancing other managerial skills. Effective communication strengthens interpersonal relationships, fosters team cohesion, and supports conflict resolution, thereby amplifying competencies such as leadership, decision-making, and problem-solving (Moradi et al., 2024; Garcia et al., 2020; Jongwe et al., 2024). Across sectors, including healthcare, crisis management, and corporate administration, communication consistently emerges as a core determinant of managerial performance. In broader managerial contexts, Hola et al., (2020) demonstrate that communication shapes leadership styles, which in turn affect employee satisfaction and organizational commitment. Hassan (2020) noted its critical role in ethical decision-making, while Vasylengo et al., (2025) and Rasulong (2025) highlight its contribution to collaboration, teamwork, and informed decision-making.

During crises, the multiplier effect of communication is particularly salient. Moradi et al., (204) demonstrate that effective communication enhances clarity, efficiency, and coordination, reinforcing other competencies such as problem-solving, leadership, and stakeholder engagement. These findings are corroborated by evidence from corporate management, indicating that strong communication enables leaders to inspire, motivate, and guide teams under high-pressure conditions ("Analysis of Managerial Competencies and Performance of State Corporations in Antalya, Turkey", 2023).

System reviews further validate this integrative effect. Andino-Conzalez et al., (2025) highlight the interrelationship between communication, leadership, and decision-making in

sustaining organizational development. Fatahi et al., (2021) demonstrate that analytical, interpersonal, and leadership competencies are strengthened through effective communication, while Udod eta l (2023) show that communication fosters collaborative environments and enhances team dynamics across sectors.

Communication consistently functions as a multiplier, enhancing leadership, team dynamics, conflict management, and crisis responsiveness (Moradi et al., 2024; Garcia et al., 2020; Jongwe et al., 2024). These trends underscore communication's centrality in high-performing and adaptive leadership, complex, multi-stakeholder environments such as the Universities of Technology in South Africa. By prioritizing communication development, institutions can cultivate leaders who are not only technically competent but also relationally astute, ethically grounded, and strategically effective.

3. Methodology

This study employs an exploratory research design within a qualitative methodological framework to investigate complex, underexplored phenomena (Saunders & Lewis, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Cavana et al., 2001). Exploratory research is particularly suited to guide future inquiry. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews were used to encourage open dialogue and capture rich participant experiences (Phillips & Pugh, 2000; Brown 2006).

Qualitative research emphasizes the depth and complexity of human experience, allowing exploration of participants' lived realities in natural contexts and capturing cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Malterud, 2001; Ryan et al., 2007; Devers & Frankel, 2000). The study examines communication as a management competency among executive leaders at South African Universities of Technology, focusing on practices during both stable and crisis periods (Brynard & Hanekom, 1997; Wilmot, 2005)

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select executive management members with direct experience in navigating institutional operations and crises, while excluding deans and business unit directors to maintain focus on top-tier leadership (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Etikan et al.,2016). Data were collected via semi-structured and unstructured online interviews, a flexible approach for the COVID-19 context. Enabling interactions and efficient recording through video conferencing platforms (Salmon, 2012; Tuttas, 2015; Irani, 2019).

Data analysis followed Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), which systematically identified themes, patterns, and categories to generate comprehensive insights into leadership competencies and communication interrelations (Bengtsson, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004; Elo & Kungas, 2008; Vaismoradi et al.,2013). The study upholds qualitative rigor through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, ensuring trustworthiness and contextually relevant findings for higher education leadership (Cuba and Lincoln, 1994; Viasmoradi et al.,2013).

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the data on communication as a management competency delivered rich and in-depth insight, revealing key thematic areas that highlight how communication functions both as a standalone competency and a multiplier that enhances other competencies, which are central to effective leadership within Universities of Technology.

4.1 Communication as a Multipplier of Leadership and Decision-Making

Participants consistently emphasized that decisive leadership and sound decision-making are contingent upon clear and credible communication, both during routine operations and crises. As one participant noted, " Effective communication, the ability to listen and to make decisions adequately at the right time to show that you are in charge and aware of the situation", highlighting how communication underpins authoritative leadership. Effective communication reinforces strategic intent, cultivates trust among staff and students, and legitimizes leadership during uncertainty. These findings support Szczepanska-Woszczyna (2013), who asserts that leadership effectiveness extends beyond technical expertise to encompass competencies such as communication, which aligns leadership intent with institutional action. This perspective resonates with Obid (2024) and Martin (2024), positioning communication as foundational for clarity, engagement, and alignment across hierarchical levels.

In a volatile post-COVID context, communication functions as both a strategic tool and an emotional anchor, fostering confidence, order, and collective purpose (Sipahioglu, 2024). As Buthea et al., (2025) emphasize, communication is central to decision-making efficacy, translating institutional strategies into shared understanding. Collectively, these insights underscore communication as a critical yet underexplored dimension of leadership in South African UoTs (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Cavana et al., 2001; Thomas & Lawal, 2020).

4.2 Communication Supporting Problem-Solving and Risk Management

The responses from the participants indicated that structured information-sharing mechanisms promote accountability and proactive risk identification during normal operations, while transparent communication during crises facilitates problem diagnoses, coordinated response, and risk mitigation. One participant observed, " Communication is important, need to communicate with internal and external stakeholders. Demonstrate that you are in control, that you have a plan, put at ease…". These findings align with Fatahi et al., (2021), who argue that analytical and interpersonal competencies are strengthened through clear communication.

Effective information sharing supports evidence-based decision-making and uncertainty management, corroborating Andino-Conzalez et al., (2025), who position communication as integral to continuous organizational development. In multi-campus UoTs, communication functions as the connective tissue linking risk identification to decisive actions, echoing Hassan (2020) on ethical and timely communication as central to credible leadership. Further, these practices mirror sensemaking processes, where transparency transforms potential institutional chaos into coordinated resilience (Moradi et al., 2024). Thus, communication is instrumental not only for problem-solving but also as a preventative mechanism enhancing institutional adaptability and integrity.

4.3 Communication Strengthening Negotiation and Conflict Management

Participants stressed that transparent, empathetic communication mitigates interpersonal tensions and supports constructive negotiation during routine operations, while in crises, it becomes essential for managing stakeholder expectations and mitigating conflict around unpopular decisions. A participant stated that, "Clear and concise communication is crucial and is the basis of any negotiations, be it with student leadership, or the unions", reflecting communication's pivotal role in conflict management. These findings echo Vasylengo et al., (2025) and Rasulong (2025), emphasizing the link between communication, collaboration, and informed decision-making.

Within higher education, negotiation spans complex stakeholder engagements with unions, student bodies, and external partners, where clarity and tone shape perceptions of fairness and trust. Hola et at., (2020) similarly demonstrate that communication affects leadership style and directly influences employee satisfaction and commitment. Participatory communication within UoTs enhances cohesion, moderates tensions during reform, and fosters mutual understanding,

aligning with Udod et al (2023). Consequently, communication functions as both conflict -conflict-resolution tool and a preventative competency, nurturing inclusivity, transparency, and shared institutional goals.

4.4 Communication Enhancing Emotional Intelligence and Staff Support

Emotionally intelligent communication was highlighted by respondents, as well as acknowledging staff, providing reassurance, and sustaining morale are key competencies that support relational trust during uncertainty. As one respondent noted, " You need to ensure clear communication, especially when the crisis hits. Check updates from the different managers…. Monitor your staff's physical and mental condition… emotional intelligence plays a very active role during this process.
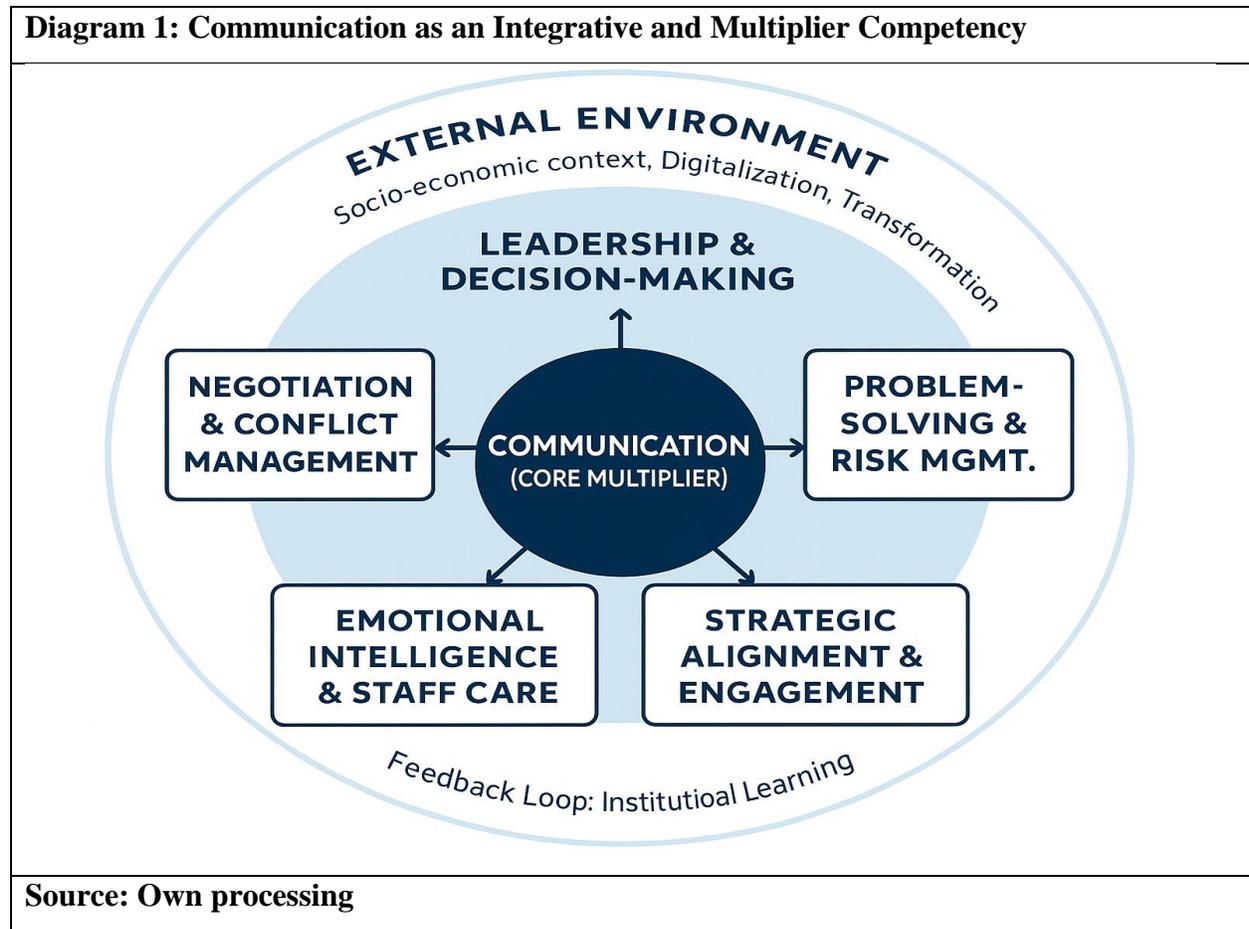
Empathetic communication cultivates psychological safety and reinforces relational trust, corroborating Martin (2024), who stresses relational intelligence alongside technical proficiency in post-pandemic leadership. Sipahioglu (2024) and Moradi et al., (2024) further highlight that emotionally attuned communication embeds mutual respect and resilience in managerial practice. When UoTs, where hierarchical gaps and workload pressures can affect morale, communication bridges divides between leadership and staff, translating vision into emotionally resonant narratives that sustain engagement and performance.

4.5 Communication Supporting Strategic Alignment and Stakeholder Engagement

Participants emphasized that consistent, transparent communication ensures alignment across academic, administrative, and strategic objectives, fostering coherence and stakeholder buy-in. One of the participants remarked. "For me, communication is very important between the higher executive management and my faculty… I need to be able to take decisive decisions… and to convey those decisions and the reasons… SO clear communication as people need to know what's going on".

These insights support Andino-Conzalez et al., 2025), who position communication as linking operational processes to strategic intent for sustainable organizational development. Effective communication ensures institutional policies are internalized and enacted, reflecting Moradi et al (2024) view of communication as a strategic multiplier, amplifying leadership impact by harmonizing stakeholder efforts. By fostering shared meaning, communication transforms abstract strategies into coordinated action, enhancing institutional agility in responding to evolving policy and socio-economic conditions.

The diagram below illustrates how communication strengthens and integrates key leadership competencies, such as decision-making, problem-solving, negotiation, emotional intelligence, and strategic alignment, into a cohesive model of effective leadership within Universities of Technology.

Diagram 1: Communication as an Integrative and Multiplier Competency

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT
Socio-economic context, Digitalization, Transformation

LEADERSHIP & DECISION-MAKING

NEGOTIATION & CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

COMMUNICATION (CORE MULTIPLIER)

PROBLEM-SOLVING & RISK MGMT.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE & STAFF CARE

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT & ENGAGEMENT

Feedback Loop: Institutioal Learning

Source: Own processing

5. Recommendations and Conclusions

This study highlights communication as a pivotal leadership competency that amplifies decision-making, problem-solving, and strategic alignment within UoTs, and the broader higher education sector. Findings highlight that effective leadership depends not only on technical proficiency but on the ability to communicate with clarity, empathy, and ethical intent. It is recommended that higher education institutions institutionalize communication within leadership development frameworks by integrating training on strategic and crisis communication, negotiations, and emotional intelligence. Structured communication policies, feedback systems, and standardized crisis protocols are essential to foster transparency, accountability, and coordinated institutional response. Furthermore, leadership evaluation and succession planning should explicitly assess communicative competence as a determinant of readiness and resilience.

Furthermore, this study contributes to management and leadership scholarship by conceptualizing communication as a multiplier competency, a unifying capability that enhances other leadership functions and transforms institutional strategy into collective actions. It offers theoretical advancement by situating communication as an integrative framework linking leadership, organizational communication, and crisis management, particularly in resource-constrained and volatile contexts such as South African UoTs. Practically, it provides a model for embedding communication into leadership development and governance, promoting sustainable, inclusive, and ethically grounded institutional culture. By reframing communication as the linchpin of leadership effectiveness, this study enriched both academic discourse and practical approaches to cultivate resilient and adaptive higher education leadership.

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