COMMUNICATION INDICATORS FOR INTEGRATING DIVERSE CULTURES IN JUNIOR FEMALE RESIDENCES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN TERTIARY INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Residences are directly affected by transformational change in South Africa, as these are key areas in transformation strategies of South African tertiary institutions. Although inroads have been made in this area, there is still room for improvement as transformation targets seem difficult to reach. To address this problem, the primary objective of this study was to recommend a theoretical communication framework that can contribute towards more effective communication during the process of change in multicultural junior female residences. A qualitative approach and grounded theory strategy were used as research design. As the grand theory of this study is based on the general systems theory approach, the Mitroff model (Mitroff et al. 1974) of problem-solving was applied. As a holistic perspective is deemed essential in order for an organisation to change successfully, the four dimensions of a contemporary organisation impacted by change were explored. The importance of organisational culture, and the essential place of the learning organisation where constant development of employees is encouraged to ensure that the organisation survives in, and adapts to, an ever-changing environment were emphasised. The central role of the manager, the importance of leadership communication, the engaging of employees, as well as the fact that listening to employees should be regarded as an action step critical to successful change implementation were discussed. An important factor often overlooked, namely the human factor or micro-emotional level of the organisation, was addressed. A five-pillar communication framework with indicators that can contribute towards more effective communication during a change intervention was recommended.

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INTRODUCTION

Residing in a residence is an important part of the university experience for many students. It is in this home away from home that friendships are forged that sometimes last a lifetime. As a result of the changes that took place in South Africa since democratisation in 1994, the relatively calm waters in which higher education institutions functioned previously has become stormier. Although residences are synonymous with a healthy spirit that characterises student life on campus, residence life at tertiary educational institutions was not excluded from these changing conditions. This study was conducted at a multicultural tertiary institution which offers on-campus accommodation to approximately 3000 students in 17 junior residences.

The problem under investigation is the partial failure of the cultural integration process in residences as most of the traditionally "white" residences have reached their integration goals, while at the time of this study the traditionally "black" residences have not reached their transformation goals. There were many factors that could have contributed to this problem, one of which was the way the communication in the organisation was managed during this process of change implementation. The article addresses this issue and recommends a five-pillar communication framework with indicators that can contribute towards more effective communication during a change intervention.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION

Organisations do not merely exist. They are scientifically managed in order to attain predetermined goals and objectives. The main focus of organisational behaviour is organisational design, management, teams and the dynamic interaction between people and their working environment. The challenge is to create an organisation that is managed in such a way that its members are energised and engaged (Werner 2007: 3).

Changing conditions pose a particularly strong challenge to organisations. Changes in organisations have significant impact on the organisation as well as the employees that have to implement these changes (Werner 2007: 5). The organisation can be seen as a complex set of systems and sub-systems, all of which interact with one another within an existing environment. Change, according to Burnes (2004), is an ever-present feature of organisational life, both at operational and strategic level. The implementation of change is a complex process that is often unsuccessful, mainly as a result of poor communication or an underestimation of the amount of retraining required (Price & Chahal 2006: 237).

The importance of communication and collaboration cannot be highlighted enough according to Smeltzer (1991, in Richardson & Denton 1996: 203). Keyton

(2005: 13) is of the opinion that organisational communication is a complex and continuous process through which organisational members create, maintain, and change the organisation. It is important to note that all organisational members participate in this process and that communication is not the sole responsibility or privilege of managers. Even if managers create and send most of the messages, their subordinates and peers create meaning from the messages. While the process is said to be transactional, involving and enacting both sender and receiver roles to create mutual and shared meanings, shared meaning is not always achieved in organisational settings.

Werner (2007: 5) refers to the different dimensions of an organisation as the environmental, organisational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions. Supporting this view, Rollinson *et al.* (1998: 647) differentiate between two broad levels, namely the micro- and macro-level of an organisation. At the micro-emotional level the focus is on parts (or sub-systems) of an organisation, and so the unit of analysis is the individual or group. The focus at this level is to further the understanding of human behaviour in organisational settings, be it at an individual level or that of individuals in social groupings. The behaviour in these organisations tends to have a very humanistic approach, and there is often a very real concern for the well-being of individuals and groups. The macro-rational level perspective has a focus on the organisation as a whole: that is, the total system made up of all the subsystems. This can be highly technical in approach and lead to the impression that there is a lack of concern for the human element. The ideal according to Rollinson *et al.* (1998: 647) would be the integration of these two levels in what they refer to as the meso-level. One would expect to find this type of approach in a contemporary organisation.

Contemporary organisational functioning requires a paradigm shift from traditionally "closed" operating procedures (characterised by one-way hierarchical interorganisational communication) to highly flexible innovative and collaborative functioning (Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers 2003). The contemporary organisation is a constantly changing organisation in which constant learning is essential (Van Tonder 2010: 49). Contemporary organisations are learning organisations that are able to adapt to new circumstances and constantly change in order to be able to deal with the demands placed on them by pressures from inside and outside the organisation. The essence of organisational learning is the organisation's ability to use the amazing mental capacity of all its members to create the kind of process that will improve its own functioning (Mansor, Malik & Mat 2010: 63).

Organisational learning will enable an organisation to transform information into valued knowledge, which in turn, enriches the organisation's capacity and capability for adapting to environmental changes and demand (Yang 2003, in Mansor, Malik & Mat 2010: 63). It can be argued that effective organisational

learning or an effective learning organisation that has obtained unique knowledge, will acquire a competitive advantage over other organisations in the same field (Mansor, Malik & Mat 2010: 63).

Furthermore, organisations with strong, positive cultures inspire employees. When an organisation espouses one philosophy but practices another, employees become disheartened and disillusioned. The organisational culture essentially provides a unique point of commonality and identity and distinguishes employees from those in other organisations (Clampitt *et al.* 2005: 50). Saee (2005: 142) refers to Trompenaars (1993) and Mead (1998) who state that a strong positive organisational culture is one in which its members support senior management, and the relationship between senior management and workers is good. Mead (1998, in Saee 2005: 142) states that a culture in which there are incongruous and often contradictory value systems and a lack of communication among members, is referred to as a weak culture. When the culture is negative, relationships with management are bad and conditions opposite to those that prevail in strong cultures. Disunity, mistrust, and a lack of communication among organisational members are traits of a negative culture.

Strong organisational cultures give rise to positive relationships between management and staff. Communication is easy, open, and fruitful; morale is high and productivity climbs (Mead 1998, in Saee 2005: 142). A learning organisation's culture is one in which everyone agrees on a shared vision and everyone recognises the inherent interrelationships among the organisation's processes, activities, functions, and external environment. A strong sense of community, caring for each other, and trust are perceived in such an organisation. Employees feel free to communicate, share, experiment, and learn openly, without fear of criticism or punishment (Hellriegel *et al*. 2006: 385).

The role that leadership plays becomes very important as an organisation moves towards becoming a learning organisation with a strong culture. As has been stated, the creation of a shared vision and then keeping organisational members working toward that vision is one of a leader's most important functions (Hellriegel *et al*. 2006: 384-385).

The implication behind the concept of leadership is that there is a combination of personal qualities and skills that allow some people to obtain from their employees a response that is cohesive, effective and enthusiastic, whereas other people in the same situation cannot accomplish such results (Guerra 2009: 122).

Without communication there can be no management or leadership. The communication skills of an organisation's leaders, and their understanding of leadership communication, directly influence all other management functions in the organisation. Corporate philosophers, such as Mintzberg, Kanter, Nasbitt,

and many others, indicate new directions in the nature and actual processes of leadership which will require a much greater emphasis on the communicating abilities of the modern leader (Puth 2002: 11-12).

According to Baldoni (2004: 20) effective leadership communication is rooted in the values and culture of the organisation. Effective communication is furthermore grounded in the character of the leader and the values of the organisation. Leaders of character communicate with openness, integrity, and honesty. Effective leadership messages work to create a bond of trust between a leader and follower. These messages give the followers good reason to support the leader and what he or she is trying to accomplish. Leaders should also create an environment that encourages learning. In learning organisations, all employees share at least some leadership responsibilities. This shared leadership that involves the sharing of decision-making and leadership creates a culture that fully supports the goals and efforts of the learning organisation (Hellriegel *et al.* 2006: 384-385). The most frequently used tactics for effectively managing change are engagement of employees and encouragement of participation. Another important factor that has to be taken into account is the role that leaders have to play in sense-making. The important role of internal communication and the use of the appropriate communication media are also essential. The value of "rich" media such as face-to-face communication cannot be stressed enough. The construction of meaning takes place through social interaction, the role of bottom-up communication and leaders that are prepared to listen to subordinates are also essential.

Against this background it is clear that there are several aspects that could have had an influence on the successful integration of diverse cultures in the residences of which communication is but one. However, as communication is essential for an organisation's survival, the goal of this study was to formulate a theoretical communication framework that will provide indicators for more effective communication towards the successful integration of diverse cultures in junior female residences at a South African tertiary institution.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the role of communication during a change intervention. Grounded theory was used as research strategy, and in-depth interviews and focus group sessions were used as primary data collection techniques. The detailed procedures of the grounded theory method prescribed for data analysis was used (Strauss & Corbin, in Cresswell 2007: 160). This type of analysis consists of three phases of coding, namely open, axial and selective coding. In this study, the analytical process started with initial coding – this was the first step in the coding process and moved towards later decisions about defining the core conceptual categories. The second major phase in coding was focused

coding. Focused coding entailed using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Deciding which initial codes made most sense to categorise data incisively and completely, was done at this stage of the coding process.

Theoretical sampling was employed (Charmaz 2006; Dick 2001). As categories emerged from the data, the researcher added to the sample in such a way that diversity was increased in useful ways. The purpose was to strengthen the emerging theory by defining the properties of the categories, and how these mediated the relationship of category to category. The data collection and analysis were completed when theoretical saturation was obtained (Charmaz 2006).

A non-probability, purposive sample was used for the in-depth interviews. The respondents for the focus groups and in-depth interviews were selected based on their specific position in the organisation being impacted by the change intervention; therefore in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents that were part of the change process in the specific division chosen. These respondents represented a theoretical "population" in that they were spokespersons for the topic of inquiry (Henning 2004: 71). From the ten junior female residences, a sample of eight Residence Heads partook in the study. Work experience of the respondents varied between twenty years and one year of service in this specific position, with the majority of respondents having between eight and twenty years of experience.

The research commenced with the in-depth interviews in which certain themes were identified, after which two focus group sessions took place to explore the themes in more detail. Finally, respondent validation was employed to check the authenticity of the results. The indicators derived from the data were presented in a preliminary theoretical communication framework. This framework was presented to the respondents of the study for validation. They had to determine if they agreed, were neutral to, or disagreed with the indicators included in the framework.

The grand theory that this study is based on, is the general systems theory. The systems thinking perspective was adopted as systems theory is considered in many quarters to be the dominant perspective in current thinking about organisations and their management (Van Tonder 2010).

In order to meet the goal and objectives of this study, the research process was based on the Mitroff model (Mitroff, Betz, Pondy & Sagasti 1974). The Mitroff model was used as guiding principle. As the Mitroff model implies that legitimate research need not address all the activities and elements in the model (Niemann 2005: 16), the scope of this study covered the first three circles of the model (Reality problem situation, Conceptual model, and Scientific model) and then the

path (Conceptualisation 1 and Modelling 2) that connects them. Circle I represents the first phase of the research methodology of the study. The second phase, namely the identification of indicators that can lead to more effective communication for the successful integration of female residences, materialise in Circle II. Circle III refers to the respondent validation of the suggested model.

Within the scope of this study, the indicators were used to develop a model that was conceptual in nature and validated by the respondents in order to continue to Circle IV (Solving). Thus, in the first phase of the current research (exploring the literature on contemporary organisations), the activity of reality problem solving took place. This in turn led to the next phase (Circle II) where the conceptualisation of the indicators took place. In Circle III the model was presented to the respondents to determine the authenticity of the suggested framework.

An interactional approach to communication was adopted. Communication is seen as a process, not a structure. It is inherently interactive, adaptive and transactional, and it evolves. It is regarded as the process by which meaning is shared and association is built up in the formation of groups and cultures, and by which interpersonal transaction, social position, action status and power are manifested, changed and, in some cases, diminished. The interactional view does not describe communication as an entity or activity that exists apart from people and their interactions. At the core of organisations are communicating, interacting and transacting individuals who actively shape their own behaviour (Charmaz 2006).

The theoretical domains within the paradigm of the systems theory in this study were the contemporary organisation, and change management communication. It was reasoned that the contemporary organisation forms the context within which both integrated communication and leadership communication are practised. It was further argued that a contemporary organisation is a constantly changing organisation. Van Tonder (2010: 49) opines that contemporary theories suggest a more naturalistic and less controlled (i.e. organic) form of change, which is anchored in the view that organisations are organic and have within them the seeds of self-organisation despite increasing complexity and the likelihood of chaos. Furthermore, as all organisations in South Africa function in a multi-cultural environment and consist of employees from different cultural backgrounds, intercultural communication is part and parcel of a contemporary South African organisation. Finally, it was reasoned that to be effective in a changing environment, management should act as leaders and not as managers, thus the focus on leadership communication.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Communication is often referred to as the nervous system of an organisation. With regard to the communication approach in the mentioned study, respondents indicated that, at the time of the study, a serious lack of communication was experienced and existing communication was described as of poor quality. It became clear that communication channels were not effective and that there was no communication system in place. Communication that did take place, took the form of top-down communication. Furthermore, a silo approach to communication, where each department functioned on its own, lead to isolated functioning. There was no lateral communication between different departments and inconsistent messages were often being sent out. It was reported that when problems arose, there was no retrospective communication. Respondents also reported that they were not consulted, never received feedback and experienced a disregard for communication or input from their side.

Regarding the culture and structure of the organisation, respondents experienced the organisation's culture to contain aspects such as reciprocal distrust, rigid decision making on management's side, and being too "politically" inclined. Jandt (2004) states that culture is a set of values, goals, and priorities that is encouraged through the policies and procedures of an organisation. One of the biggest obstacles to change in an organisation is the self-reinforcing value structure of the existing organisational culture. Therefore, if change has to take place, organisational culture must be changed (Nelson & Coxhead 1997: 35). This has been found to be easier said than done. An organisation's culture is the product of its history, of its accumulated experiences and the lessons it has learnt in seeking to survive and prosper. What is valued, what is assumed and what is lodged in the organisational memory, often unconsciously, is what has worked for it in the past (Nelson & Coxhead 1997: 35). An organisation with a strong culture creates an environment where employees feel nurtured and valued.

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that at the time of the study, respondents experienced the culture and climate of the institution as negative. Furthermore, the existence of an offensive organisational climate was a problem reported by the respondents. On an emotional level the climate was experienced as threatening and abusive. Furthermore, the organisation was polarised by active political involvement and activities. The respondents felt that the culture was politically driven and that most strategic decisions, such as the integration of the residences, were informed by political agendas. As a result, integration was experienced as forced. As such, a client-responsive culture which is indicative of a successful organisation was absent. The climate was further experienced as negative as no relationship of trust existed between respondents and students on the one hand, and management on the other. Verwey and Du Plooy-Cilliers (2003:

135) refer to this type of communication climate as a defensive communication climate. The staff members of the division under investigation reported that they were functioning in a stultifying climate. To add to this, the organisational structure also did not continuously provide the necessary support to the people who had to implement the change process.

The implementation of change in any organisation poses many challenges. Therefore, the proper management of the change process is extremely important. According to the respondents this was another area where problems were encountered. It was reported that the process was not focused, no direction was provided in the change process and activities were repeated without any progress. The process commenced without key role players' understanding and insight into the scope, dynamics and complexity of the environment. As a result of the lack of planning, the process seemed disorganised and too many changes were attempted at once. The practical implications of the process were also not considered. This led to many crisis situations that had to be managed under pressure. Other issues that arose included the absence of proper consultation, and the lack of transparency and feedback.

Following the inefficiencies identified in the process, the important role of leadership surfaced. A serious lack of leadership communication skills was identified. Leaders were described as unapproachable, non-transparent, and unprofessional in their conduct; they were seen as autocratic and that they undermined the authority of the respondents. The respondents reported that leadership was inconsistent, could not be trusted and double standards prevailed. Furthermore, leadership was experienced as lacking expertise, being absent, and not acknowledging cultural differences between the respondents. Strained relationships between leadership and the respondents were common because of serious distrust on both sides. Respondents felt that they were left to their own devices and received no support from leadership. The success achieved by some of the residence staff groups was also not recognised.

The important communicative role of the transformational leader as change agent has a great influence on the outcomes of change initiatives. Robbins (1992: 398-406) predicts that the communication in organisations will continue to become more complex, forcing leaders to evaluate their communicative effectiveness. The use of clear and open communication where listening and verbalising are equally important and communication is viewed as a transaction is essential. The competencies of effective change agents are described as clarity of goals, the specification of goals, communication skills, negotiation skills, and "influencing skills" in order to gain commitment to goals, as well as team building activities. Throughout this study it became apparent that trust in top management had a significant influence on the support of change.

Another topic that surfaced during the investigation was the consultative process. Consultative intervention can assist in creating a platform where open communication and dialogue is stimulated. Consultation should also contribute towards a context in which the human factor is acknowledged and respected. However, the consultation experienced by the respondents reflected a totally different picture. The consultants were described as disrespectful, unapproachable, and uninformed. In contrast to what has been described in the literature as effective consultative communication, the respondents in this study experienced communication as openly one-sided, ineffective and without insight as the content was not well thought through. The consultants did not listen to input from participants; input was often disregarded. Great frustration was experienced with the facilitation of the process. Most of the respondents reported that when they did not agree with the consultant they were treated with disrespect. The consultants' conduct made respondents feel unsafe, frustrated and discontent. The appointment of the consultants created certain expectations with staff members, as it seemed as if the respondents were eventually going to be able to state their point of view and be listened to. According to the respondents they were however disillusioned very early on in the process. This might have resulted in the fact that the consultants were incapable of securing everybody's buy-in into the process.

Last but not least, the human factor in change communication proved to be an important factor in the success of the process. As stated earlier, an organisation is constituted, enacted, and exists through the interaction of the people who constitute it at any point in time. In this study the respondents indicated and were adamant that the human factor was totally disregarded. Respondents reported feelings of despair, helplessness, frustration, humiliation and deceit. This gave rise to individuals being inhibited as they were constantly criticised or attacked personally. Clearly the impact of change on individuals was not regarded as important. Based on the results discussed, conclusions were drawn and recommendations identified that are discussed in the rest of this article.

CONCLUSIONS

The main themes mentioned by respondents which stood out as barriers to effective communication were: communication approach, organisational culture and climate and organisational structure, management of change, management approach and the role of leaders, the consultative process and finally, the human factor. Three of the themes, namely the communication approach, the management of change, and the consultative process surfaced as more prominent themes. It was evident from the data that essential elements like organisational culture and climate did not receive the necessary attention, and the importance of the human factor was ignored completely.

It is evident that contemporary organisations need to change as part of their evolution. It is important to recognise that change has an impact on all the dimensions of an organisation, especially as contemporary organisations are viewed from an open systems perspective in which an organisation is seen as a dynamic living system consisting of sub-systems that influence and are influenced by one another. The implementation of change in an organisation should therefore be viewed from a holistic perspective. The macro-rational level of change that refers to the organisation as a whole should ideally be integrated with the micro-emotional level in order to prevent a technical approach that gives the impression that there is a lack of concern for the human element in the change process. Change in organisations is implemented and sustained through human communication. Throughout this study it became clear that the communicative role of leadership during a change effort is essential for the success of any change intervention. The importance of considering the context within which the change takes place should also not be neglected.

The integrated approach to communication where different aspects of communication are combined in one strategy was not employed by this institution. This change initiative was unsuccessful, primarily due to the fact that the communication was not integrated, or approached from a holistic point of view. The need for a communication framework with indicators that can be used during change was therefore re-established.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A theoretical framework with its roots in the theory of contemporary organisational communication and change management communication is recommended. The concepts and the constructs that evolved from the research data, verified against the literature review, form the body of the framework. The pillars of the communication framework as identified consider important aspects highlighted by Jandt (2004) and Saee (2005). Jandt (2004) underlined the importance of *policies* and *procedures* within an organisation, while Saee (2005) added organisational *processes* to the equation. As human interaction forms the nucleus of an organisation, the *human element* was considered an essential pillar within the context of this study. Furthermore, the importance of *principles* to guide conduct in the organisation was added as the final pillar. The function of the processes and procedures are to manage the context of the change intervention, the principles and policies are added to address the quality of the intervention and the people affected by the change intervention therefore form the five pillars of the framework. These five pillars embrace the main themes identified in the data. The process is representative of the *communication approach*, the *management approach*, and the *consultative*

process. The procedures refer mainly to the themes of *organisational culture, climate and structure* and *the management of change.* As the principles and policies are considered as regulating the quality of the communication in the change intervention, it is linked to all of the identified main themes. Finally, the people are representative of the *human factor.* In the following section the five categories will be elaborated on to demonstrate the indicators relevant to each.

The process

With regard to the process the following aspects are indicative of success:

- Change should be approached from a holistic perspective;

- An evaluation of the nature, scope and context of the change intervention that must be communicated should be regarded as the first step in the process;

- The most relevant components of the different approaches to change management should be identified and combined according to the context-specific requirements;

- A theoretical background on the nature, reasons of, and mechanisms for the change should be developed;

- Change should be approached as a consultative process;

- The macro-rational and micro-emotional levels of change should be implemented simultaneously;

- A strong organisational culture and positive climate should be created;

- Clients' needs should be taken into consideration during the change process;

- The quality of the process should be regarded as important; and

- Change should be implemented systematically.

Procedures

Procedures that should be in place to enhance the quality of the communication during change are:

- Adequate resources to assist with the implementation and to support the process should be in place;

- The formulation of planned and purposeful communication strategies to direct behaviour and motivate participants are essential;

- The micro-emotional level in change management should be adequately managed to ensure that the human component receives preference in the process;

- Channels that accommodate two-way communication should be established and should receive precedence as it enables feedback;

- A combination of top-down and bottom-up involvement should be encouraged;

- In change management the receiver should be considered the most important participant in the process;

- Practical implications of decisions should be considered before implementation of such decisions;

- Professional training should be provided at all levels of the organisation to enhance the organisational culture;

- The implementation of too many changes at once should be avoided; and

- Wide-scale consultation should take place.

The people

The people in charge of the change process should demonstrate effective interpersonal communication skills. They should:

- Be competent communicators that are approachable, transparent in conduct, and possess basic management skills;

- Be consistent in their conduct;

- Be open to dialogue;

- Listen with an open mind;

- Take emotions into consideration as aspects such as fear, frustration, despair and anxiety could impede on the effectiveness of the communicative process;

- Encourage individuals to engage in open communication;

- Value relationships of mutual trust and respect;

- Establish a culture of support;

- Acknowledge individual differences;

- Manage the process without preconceived ideas and unbiased; and

- Realise that strong leadership is necessary in a changing environment.

The principles

Principles that will guide the ethical conduct during the change process include:

- Acknowledgement of cultural differences;

- Practicing of two-way communication;

- Establishing a relationship of trust;

- Underwriting values such as fairness, trustworthiness, honesty and integrity;

- Genuinely starting from the point of view of the other;

- Including the four areas of great leadership – envisioning, enabling, energising and focusing;

- Achieving buy-in from the receivers whom are most affected by the changes;

- Communicating clearly;

- Having no hidden agendas;

- Communicating timely, consistent and accurately;

- Making use of rich channels of communication such as face-to-face techniques;

- Acknowledging the personal values of all participants;

- Recognition of success during the process should be seen as important;

- Objectivity towards all participants in the change process is essential; and

- Non-verbal communication should at all times enhance the verbal communication.

Policies

Policies stipulating the necessary conduct regarding the process and procedures should be formulated and these policies should be honoured. It is important to align these policies with the principles of the King III report on corporate governance pertaining to responsible leadership and ethical conduct.

As the five pillars presented in the recommended framework address the macro-rational level (the process, the procedures, and the policies), as well as the micro-emotional level (people and principles), it is in line with the ideal suggested by Rollinson *et al.* (1998) of a mesa level where the mentioned macro and micro levels are integrated to enhance the effectiveness of communication during a change intervention. Although this study was conducted within the context of

junior female residences at a South African tertiary institution, the suggested communication framework is not restricted to this context and could easily be applied to any change intervention.

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