

STABILIZING MEANING IN VERTICAL COMMUNICATION: CROSS GENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN A MULTINATIONAL ORGANIZATION

ESTABILIZANDO O SIGNIFICADO NA COMUNICAÇÃO VERTICAL: PRÁTICAS DE LIDERANÇA INTERGERACIONAL EM UMA ORGANIZAÇÃO MULTINACIONAL

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Abstract

This study examines how leaders across generations construct and sustain clarity in vertical communication within a fast-moving multinational organization. Drawing on Path Goal Theory, Leader Member Exchange, and communication clarity perspectives, this research employs a qualitative single case study design in a Korean multinational operating in Indonesia's competitive tobacco industry. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten leaders across hierarchical levels, including head division, regional managers, area managers, and supervisors representing Generations X, Y, and Z, supported by participant observation and document analysis. The findings show that communication effectiveness is shaped less by generational category and more by leaders' ability to stabilize meaning throughout the vertical communication chain. Generation X leaders tend to filter and rationalize strategic messages before cascading them, Generation Y leaders translate targets into structured operational actions through ongoing monitoring, and Generation Z leaders emphasize concise, data-based communication supported by rapid clarification through digital channels. Across generations, communication clarity is

Resumo

Este estudo examina como líderes de diferentes gerações constroem e mantêm a clareza na comunicação vertical dentro de uma organização multinacional em rápida evolução. Com base na Teoria Path Goal, na Leader Member Exchange e em perspectivas de clareza na comunicação, esta pesquisa emprega um desenho de estudo de caso único qualitativo em uma multinacional coreana que opera na competitiva indústria do tabaco da Indonésia. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas aprofundadas com dez líderes de diferentes níveis hierárquicos, incluindo chefes de divisão, gerentes regionais, gerentes de área e supervisores representando as gerações X, Y e Z, com o apoio de observação participante e análise de documentos. Os resultados mostram que a eficácia da comunicação é moldada menos pela categoria geracional e mais pela capacidade dos líderes de estabilizar o significado ao longo da cadeia de comunicação vertical. Os líderes da geração X tendem a filtrar e racionalizar as mensagens estratégicas antes de transmiti-las, os líderes da geração Y traduzem as metas em ações operacionais estruturadas por meio de monitoramento contínuo e os líderes da geração Z enfatizam a



strengthened through meaning translation, prioritization during policy change, iterative verification practices, and appropriate media selection, particularly the use of face-to-face interaction for strategic alignment. This study introduces the concept of the information flow manager as a leadership function that filters, simplifies, and stabilizes communication before it reaches operational teams. The findings extend existing communication and leadership theories by positioning clarity as an adaptive and relational process rather than a static message attribute. Practically, organizations can improve execution reliability by strengthening communication transparency, ensuring documentation continuity during leadership transitions, and fostering psychological safety that supports upward clarification in multigenerational environments.

Keywords: Vertical Communication. Message Clarity. Instruction Clarity. Role Clarity. Cross Generational Leadership. SDG 8 -Decent Work and Economic Growth.

comunicação concisa e baseada em dados, apoiada por esclarecimentos rápidos por meio de canais digitais. Entre as gerações, a clareza da comunicação é fortalecida por meio da tradução de significados, priorização durante mudanças de política, práticas de verificação iterativas e seleção adequada de mídia, particularmente o uso de interação face a face para alinhamento estratégico. Este estudo introduz o conceito de gestor do fluxo de informações como uma função de liderança que filtra, simplifica e estabiliza a comunicação antes que ela chegue às equipes operacionais. As conclusões ampliam as teorias existentes de comunicação e liderança, posicionando a clareza como um processo adaptativo e relacional, em vez de um atributo estático da mensagem. Na prática, as organizações podem melhorar a confiabilidade da execução, fortalecendo a transparência da comunicação, garantindo a continuidade da documentação durante as transições de liderança e promovendo a segurança psicológica que apoia o esclarecimento ascendente em ambientes multigeracionais.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação Vertical. Clareza da Mensagem. Clareza da Instrução. Clareza da Função. Liderança Intergeracional. ODS 8 - Trabalho Decente e Crescimento Econômico.

1 INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizational environments, success depends not only on strategic planning but also on the consistency of message understanding across hierarchical levels. Leaders play a central role in vertical communication by ensuring clarity of direction, stability of expectations, and alignment in task execution [1]. This challenge becomes increasingly complex in Indonesia, where demographic composition has created workplaces characterized by generational diversity involving Generation X, Y, and Z [2]. While such diversity enriches organizations through varied experiences and perspectives, it also introduces differences in communication preferences that may increase the risk of role ambiguity, inconsistent interpretation of instructions, and coordination challenges when communication clarity is not effectively maintained [2]. Communication clarity becomes particularly critical in highly competitive industries such as tobacco, where

multinational organizations must translate strategic decisions rapidly and accurately into operational execution. In companies such as KT&G TSPM, strategic directives pass through multiple hierarchical layers before reaching frontline teams. In this context, distortions or inconsistencies in vertical communication may directly affect target execution, coordination effectiveness, and overall operational performance [3].

Although organizational communication research has extensively discussed message design and media selection, clarity is often treated as an inherent attribute of messages rather than a process constructed through interaction [4]. This perspective overlooks the adaptive and relational mechanisms through which leaders continuously interpret, translate, and stabilize meaning in practice. In addition, while generational differences in workplace communication have been widely explored, empirical evidence explaining how leaders across generations actively build and maintain communication clarity within multinational and cross-cultural contexts remains limited. This study addresses these gaps by examining how leaders from Generations X, Y, and Z construct message clarity and instruction clarity within vertical communication processes in a Korean multinational company operating in Indonesia. Specifically, this research investigates how leaders build clarity when delivering information and work instructions, how subordinates perceive variations in these communication practices, and how communication clarity influences task execution and leader member relationships. By positioning clarity as an adaptive and relational process rather than a static message characteristic, this study contributes to organizational communication theory while offering practical insight for managing vertical communication in multigenerational and cross-cultural organizational settings.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Vertical communication in organizations

Vertical communication refers to the flow of information across hierarchical levels within an organization, encompassing both downward communication from leaders to subordinates and upward communication from subordinates to leaders [5]. Effective vertical communication is essential for translating strategic objectives into operational

action, coordinating activities across levels, and maintaining organizational alignment [5]. Downward communication typically involves the delivery of goals, policies, instructions, and performance feedback [6], yet research shows that messages may become distorted as they move through multiple hierarchical layers, leading to misinterpretation and inconsistencies in implementation [7]. Conversely, upward communication enables leaders to receive feedback, identify operational challenges, and make informed decisions [8], although psychological and cultural factors may limit subordinates' willingness to communicate openly, particularly regarding problems or disagreement [9]. In multigenerational workplaces, vertical communication becomes increasingly complex as differences in communication preferences, technological familiarity, and expectations toward hierarchy shape how messages are interpreted and responded to [10]. These dynamics highlight

that maintaining message stability and clarity across hierarchical levels is not merely a structural issue but also a relational and contextual challenge. Understanding how leaders manage these complexities is therefore critical for explaining how communication clarity is constructed and sustained within organizational settings.

2.2 Communication clarity: from message design to adaptive process

Communication clarity has traditionally been conceptualized as a quality of message design the extent to which messages are structured, unambiguous, and easily understood [11]. Clappitt's work on communication clarity emphasizes the importance of precise language, logical organization, and appropriate channel selection [12]. However, this sender-centric view treats clarity as a static attribute that can be engineered into messages. Recent perspectives challenge this view, suggesting that clarity is not inherent in messages but emerges through interaction between senders and receivers [13]. From this relational perspective, clarity is co-constructed through processes of interpretation, negotiation, and validation [14]. This shift recognizes that the same message may be clear to some recipients but ambiguous to others, depending on their context, prior knowledge, and relationship with the sender.

Furthermore, in dynamic organizational environments characterized by frequent strategic changes and operational adjustments, clarity must be continuously maintained

through adaptive communication practices [15]. Leaders must not only design clear initial messages but also monitor understanding, provide clarifications, and adjust their communication approaches based on feedback and changing circumstances [16]. This adaptive view of clarity aligns with sense-making theories that emphasize the ongoing process of creating and maintaining shared understanding in organizations [17].

2.3 Cross-generational leadership

The contemporary workplace encompasses multiple generations with distinct formative experiences, values, and work orientations [18]. Generation X (born 1965-1980) is often characterized as independent, pragmatic, and skeptical of authority [19]. Generation Y or Millennials (born 1981-1996) are described as collaborative, technology-savvy, and seeking meaningful work [20]. Generation Z (born 1997-2012) is noted for digital nativity, preference for visual communication, and desire for transparency [21]. While these generational profiles provide useful heuristics, research cautions against stereotyping and emphasizes within-generation diversity [22]. Moreover, empirical evidence on how generational differences manifest in actual leadership communication practices remains mixed [23]. Some studies find significant generational variations in communication preferences and styles [24], while others suggest that organizational context, individual personality, and leadership experience may be more influential than generational cohort [25].

In the context of vertical communication, the question is not whether generational differences exist, but how leaders across generations adapt their communication practices to build clarity and maintain message stability in diverse teams [26]. This requires examining actual communication behaviors rather than relying on generational stereotypes.

2.4 Theoretical framework

Path Goal Theory proposes that effective leaders clarify the path toward goal achievement by reducing ambiguity, providing direction, and removing obstacles [27].

Within the context of vertical communication, the theory suggests that leaders contribute to clarity by translating strategic objectives into actionable tasks, explaining rationales, and adjusting instructions according to subordinate capabilities and situational demands [28]. However, traditional applications of Path Goal Theory tend to emphasize a linear process of clarification. This study extends the perspective by conceptualizing clarity as a cyclical and adaptive process in which leaders continuously monitor understanding, interpret feedback, and adjust communication to maintain alignment across hierarchical levels.

Leader Member Exchange Theory focuses on the quality of dyadic relationships between leaders and subordinates, emphasizing trust, respect, and mutual obligation as foundations of effective interaction [29]. High quality leader member relationships have been associated with improved communication, stronger role clarity, and higher performance outcomes [30]. In this study, LMX provides a relational lens to understand how communication clarity is shaped not only by message content but also by relational dynamics, including informal interaction, openness to clarification, and personalized communication adjustments. By integrating these perspectives, the study examines communication clarity as both an instrumental process that supports goal achievement and a relational process shaped by interaction quality. This combined framework allows analysis of how leaders maintain clarity through both structural direction and relational engagement within complex organizational settings.

3 METHODS

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design [31]. The case study approach was chosen because it enables in-depth analysis of vertical communication practices within the specific organizational context of PT KT&G TSPM, which constitutes a bounded system [32]. This approach is particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics of interaction, meaning-making, and social practices in multigenerational work environments with specific organizational structures [33]. The single-case design is justified by the unique characteristics of the research setting: a Korean multinational

company operating in Indonesia's highly competitive tobacco industry, with a complete hierarchical leadership structure spanning multiple generations [34]. This context provides a rich setting for examining how cultural, generational, and organizational factors intersect in shaping vertical communication practices.

3.2 Research setting and participants

The research was conducted at the main branch office of PT KT&G TSPM in Bogor, Indonesia. KT&G is a Korean multinational tobacco company with significant operations in Indonesia. The Bogor office was selected because it has a complete leadership structure from Head Division to Supervisor levels, representing all three generational cohorts [35]. Participants were purposively selected to represent leadership across generations and hierarchical levels. The final sample consisted of 10 leaders: 2 from Generation X, 5 from Generation Y, and 3 from Generation Z [36]. This distribution reflects the actual generational composition of leadership at the research site. Participants held various positions including Head Division, Area Manager, and Supervisor, providing diverse perspectives on vertical communication practices across organizational levels.

3.3 Data collection

Non-participant observation was conducted during weekly meetings and routine coordination forums at the Area Marketing Office in Bogor [37]. The researcher observed patterns of vertical communication, instruction delivery, and clarification dynamics without intervening in the natural flow of interactions. Detailed field notes were taken to capture communication behaviors, interaction patterns, and contextual factors. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 10 participants using an interview guide with open-ended questions [38]. Interviews explored factors influencing vertical communication, strategies for building message clarity, perceptions of communication effectiveness, and the role of generational and cultural factors. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Document analysis included review of organizational communication materials, meeting minutes, and internal communications to provide contextual understanding and

triangulate findings from observations and interviews
 [39].<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17542968>

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, thematic approach [40]. Transcripts and field notes were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns, themes, and relationships. Initial codes were organized into broader categories reflecting key dimensions of vertical communication clarity. These categories were then analyzed in relation to the theoretical frameworks (Path-Goal Theory and LMX Theory) to develop higher-order themes explaining how clarity is constructed and maintained across generations and hierarchical levels. To enhance trustworthiness, multiple strategies were employed: prolonged engagement at the research site, triangulation of data sources (observations, interviews, documents), member checking with selected participants to validate interpretations, and reflexive journaling to acknowledge researcher positionality [41].

4 RESULTS

4.1 Clarity as adaptive translation: simplifying strategic directives

A central finding of this study is that communication clarity is not achieved through one-time message transmission but through an ongoing process of translation, simplification, and adaptation. Leaders across all generations emphasized the importance of breaking down broad strategic directives from headquarters into concrete, actionable tasks that operational teams can readily execute. One Generation Y Area Manager explained: "When directives come from the central office, they're often in the form of big targets and strategic priorities. My job is to translate that into specific daily and weekly actions for my team. I need to make it tangible what exactly they need to do, where, and by when."

This translation process involves several adaptive practices. First, leaders simplify complex strategic language into operational terminology familiar to frontline staff.

Second, they contextualize directives by explaining the rationale and connecting them to team members' existing responsibilities. Third, they adjust the level of detail based on subordinates' experience and capabilities providing more structured guidance to junior staff while allowing greater autonomy to experienced team members. Generation X leaders particularly emphasized the importance of explaining the "why" behind instructions: "I always explain the reason for changes in strategy or new directives. When people understand why we're doing something, they're more willing to adapt and less likely to resist. It also helps them make better decisions when situations change in the field." This adaptive translation process demonstrates that clarity is not an inherent property of the

original message but is actively constructed by leaders as they mediate between strategic and operational levels. The process is iterative, involving initial translation, monitoring of understanding, and subsequent adjustments based on feedback and implementation challenges.

4.2 Middle Management as information filters

A particularly significant finding is the critical role of middle management specifically Area Managers as information filters in the vertical communication chain. In the fast-paced, target-driven environment of the tobacco industry, headquarters frequently issues updates, policy changes, and new initiatives. Without filtering, this volume of information would overwhelm operational teams and lead to cognitive overload and priority confusion. Area Managers described their role as "gatekeepers" who selectively transmit, simplify, or temporarily withhold information to protect their teams' focus and mental bandwidth. One Generation Y Area Manager stated: "Not every message from headquarters needs to reach the field team immediately or in full detail. Part of my job is to assess what's truly urgent and relevant for operations versus what's more strategic or long-term. I filter and package information so my team can focus on what matters most right now." This filtering function involves several strategic decisions: determining which messages require immediate action versus those that can be communicated later; simplifying technical or policy-heavy communications into practical implications; and shielding teams from contradictory or rapidly changing directives until clarity emerges at higher levels.

Importantly, this filtering is not about withholding information arbitrarily but about managing information flow to maintain operational stability and team morale. One Generation X Head Division noted: "If we pass down every change and every discussion happening at the strategic level, the field team would be constantly confused and demotivated. Middle managers need to absorb some of that uncertainty and provide stable, clear direction to their teams." This finding highlights a dimension of vertical communication often overlooked in the literature: the protective and stabilizing function of middle management in buffering operational teams from information overload and strategic volatility. Rather than being mere conduits of information, middle managers actively shape the communication environment to maintain clarity and focus at operational levels.

4.3 Relational clarity: the role of leader-member exchange quality

The study reveals that communication clarity is deeply relational, shaped by the quality of leader-member relationships. High-quality LMX relationships, characterized by trust, mutual respect, and personal concern, create conditions for more effective clarity construction. Affective dimension: Leaders who demonstrate genuine personal concern for subordinates' well-being beyond technical work matters build trust that facilitates open communication and clarification. Subordinates reported feeling more comfortable seeking clarification and admitting confusion with leaders who show personal care. One Generation Z subordinate stated: "My supervisor doesn't just ask about work progress; he asks how I'm doing, if I'm facing any personal challenges. That makes me feel safe to tell him when I don't understand something or when I'm struggling with a task."

Mutual loyalty: Clarity is enhanced when loyalty is reciprocal rather than one-directional. Leaders who demonstrate willingness to support their teams, advocate for them with higher management, and accept critical feedback create psychological safety that enables honest communication about understanding and challenges. One Generation Y leader explained: "I tell my team that I'm here to support them, not just to monitor them. If they're confused or if my instructions aren't clear, I want to know so we can fix it together. That openness goes both ways." Professional respect:

Subordinates perceive communication as clearer when it comes from leaders who demonstrate professional competence, consistency between words and actions, and fair evaluation practices. Respect is earned through integrity in communication saying what you mean and following through on commitments. One Generation X leader noted: "Clarity isn't just about the words you use; it's about whether people trust that you mean what you say and that you'll be consistent. If your actions contradict your messages, no amount of clear language will help."

These findings demonstrate that clarity is not solely a cognitive or linguistic phenomenon but is fundamentally shaped by the relational context in which communication occurs. High-quality relationships create the trust and psychological safety necessary for subordinates to seek clarification, admit confusion, and engage in the iterative process of meaning-making that produces genuine understanding.

4.4 Generational variations in communication practices

While the study found that communication effectiveness is determined more by consistency and relational quality than by generational membership per se, some generational variations in communication practices were observed:

Generation X leaders tended to emphasize rationality and context in their communication. They frequently explained the strategic rationale behind directives and connected instructions to broader organizational goals. Their communication style was characterized by structured briefings, clear prioritization, and emphasis on understanding before execution. They also showed preference for face-to-face communication for complex or sensitive matters, supplemented by written documentation.

Generation Y leaders demonstrated a balance between structure and flexibility. They were adept at breaking down strategic targets into specific operational steps with clear metrics and timelines. They employed frequent monitoring and iterative clarification, checking understanding through multiple touchpoints. Generation Y leaders also showed comfort with multiple communication channels, using digital tools for routine updates while reserving face-to-face interactions for complex discussions and relationship-building.

Generation Z leaders, while fewer in number and at lower hierarchical levels, exhibited distinctive practices including explicit marking of message urgency and priority, use of visual aids and examples to illustrate instructions, and preference for concise, direct communication. They also demonstrated comfort with rapid channel-switching, using instant messaging for quick clarifications while following up with formal documentation.

However, subordinates' perceptions of communication effectiveness were not strongly differentiated by leader generation. Instead, subordinates emphasized consistency, availability for clarification, and alignment between messages and actions as key factors determining clarity, regardless of the leader's generational cohort. This suggests that while generations may have different communication preferences and styles, the fundamental principles of effective vertical communication consistency, transparency, and relational quality transcend generational boundaries.

The following table synthesizes the variations in vertical communication practices across generations observed in this study:

Table 1

Synthesis of Cross-Generational Vertical Communication Practices

Clarity Dimension	Generation X	Generation Y	Generation Z	Cross-Generational Synthesis
Meaning Clarity in Policy Communication	Filters and internalizes strategic messages before cascading to maintain stability.	Communicates policy context early and links it to operational impact.	Delivers messages directly and explicitly to minimize ambiguity.	Message integrity is prioritized across generations; differences lie in timing and contextual framing.
Operational Instruction Clarity	Provides structured and rule-based guidance to prevent execution errors.	Translates goals into measurable, actionable steps supported by monitoring.	Reinforces understanding through rapid digital clarification and examples.	Instructional clarity evolves from structural guidance (X) to technical translation (Y) and real-time verification (Z).
Managing Change and Direction Stability	Temporarily buffers change to assess impact before implementation.	Communicates change promptly while recalibrating priorities.	Shares changes immediately to support fast adaptation.	Stability is achieved through filtering (X), reprioritization (Y), and rapid adaptation (Z).
Validation of Understanding	Relies on formal briefings and structured reporting mechanisms.	Encourages dialogic feedback and routine evaluation.	Uses informal, fast digital check-ins for confirmation.	Validation shifts from formal control toward dialogic and digital practices.

Impact on Work Relations	Builds trust through consistency and performance orientation.	Strengthens coordination via transparency and collaborative support.	Enhances psychological safety through low-barrier communication.	Communication effectiveness depends on meaning stability rather than generational identity.
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5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Extending path-goal theory: clarity as cyclical process

This study extends Path–Goal Theory by showing that clarity in vertical communication is not a linear, one-time act of path clarification, but a cyclical and adaptive process that requires continuous translation, monitoring, and adjustment. While traditional Path–Goal Theory emphasizes the leader’s role in clarifying the path toward goal achievement through direction and obstacle removal [27], the empirical findings demonstrate that leaders repeatedly reinterpret and recalibrate messages as they move across hierarchical levels. In the case organization, strategic directives received from headquarters were often broad, rapidly changing, or delivered through multiple communication streams, requiring leaders to translate them into operationally meaningful actions before implementation.

Rather than transmitting instructions as fixed messages, leaders engaged in ongoing practices of simplification, contextualization, and verification. For example, middle managers described the need to break down strategic targets into daily operational steps based on route conditions and team capacity, while simultaneously monitoring whether subordinates fully understood the intended direction. This iterative process reflects how clarity is continuously negotiated in practice rather than established at a single moment of communication. Such findings suggest that effective path clarification involves maintaining interpretive stability amid change, particularly in fast-moving environments where priorities frequently shift. Furthermore, the findings highlight the critical role of middle managers in sustaining path clarity. Leaders at regional and area levels acted as filters who stabilized communication flow by prioritizing relevant information, delaying non-urgent directives, and simplifying strategic language to prevent confusion at the operational level. This practice indicates that path clarity is not solely about visibility of

goals but also about protecting the consistency and comprehensibility of direction across hierarchical layers. Therefore, this study extends Path–Goal Theory by emphasizing clarity maintenance as an ongoing leadership function. Practical implications include the need for leadership development programs that strengthen leaders’ abilities in iterative clarification, contextual translation, and meaning stabilization rather than focusing solely on message design.

5.2 Redefining role clarity through informal interactions

Our findings extend Role Theory by demonstrating that role clarity is not solely produced through formal job descriptions or explicit organizational expectations but is continuously shaped through informal interactions and relational dynamics within daily work processes. While classical Role Theory emphasizes clear role expectations as a mechanism to reduce ambiguity and role conflict [44], empirical evidence from this study indicates that formal documentation alone was often insufficient to ensure shared understanding at the operational level. Participants reported that clarity emerged more strongly through ongoing conversations, informal follow-ups, and routine interactions that allowed leaders to contextualize expectations based on real field conditions. Subordinates described how informal discussions with supervisors helped them interpret priorities beyond written instructions, particularly when facing situations not fully covered by formal guidelines. For example, leaders frequently clarified task priorities through quick check-ins or practical explanations related to route conditions, workload balance, or changing operational targets. These interactions allowed subordinates to test their understanding and adjust their execution without fear of being perceived as incompetent. In this context, high-quality leader– member exchange (LMX) relationships played a central role by creating psychological safety and encouraging open clarification, enabling role expectations to be negotiated rather than merely assigned. These findings suggest that role clarity should be understood as an ongoing relational accomplishment rather than a fixed outcome of formal communication. Role understanding develops through repeated interaction, where leaders continuously align expectations with operational realities and subordinate needs. Consequently, organizations aiming to strengthen role clarity should not rely solely on formal documentation but also foster relational

communication practices that encourage dialogue, informal clarification, and continuous feedback between leaders and subordinates.

5.3 The strategic function of middle management

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of middle management as strategic actors who function as information filters and meaning stabilizers within vertical communication processes. While organizational communication literature often emphasizes minimizing information distortion and maintaining message fidelity across hierarchical levels [7], the empirical findings suggest that selective filtering and adaptation by middle managers are not merely unavoidable but operationally necessary. In the case organization, leaders reported receiving multiple directives from headquarters that were sometimes overlapping, rapidly changing, or delivered through different communication channels. Direct transmission of all information to frontline teams was perceived as potentially overwhelming and likely to generate confusion regarding priorities.

As a result, middle managers actively engaged in sense-making practices by prioritizing messages, simplifying strategic language, and sequencing communication according to operational urgency. This filtering function was described to protect team focus and maintain execution stability, particularly in a target-driven environment where excessive information could reduce clarity and increase cognitive burden. Rather than acting as passive conduits, middle managers interpreted strategic intentions and translated them into actionable guidance aligned with field realities, demonstrating that clarity is constructed through managerial mediation rather than simple message transmission. These findings challenge the traditional assumption that filtering inherently threatens communication accuracy. Instead, they reposition middle managers as essential mediators who absorb ambiguity at higher organizational levels and transform it into coherent operational direction. However, this stabilizing role requires careful judgment and organizational trust. Participants emphasized that filtering must balance transparency with operational protection, ensuring that adaptation supports clarity rather than becoming information withholding. Therefore, organizations should recognize and strengthen this

role through leadership training, clear prioritization frameworks, and institutional trust that enables middle managers to exercise informed communication judgment.

5.4 Cultural dynamics: korean hierarchy meets indonesian relationality

The context of this study, a Korean multinational organization operating in Indonesia, provides important insights into how cultural dynamics shape vertical communication practices. Korean organizational culture is commonly associated with strong hierarchical structures, formal authority, and clear chains of command [49], whereas Indonesian workplace culture tends to emphasize relational harmony, interpersonal sensitivity, and indirect communication styles [50]. The findings indicate that effective vertical communication in this setting emerged not from choosing one cultural orientation over the other, but from leaders' ability to integrate hierarchical clarity and relational engagement within everyday communication practices. Empirical evidence shows that subordinates valued structured direction and clear authority when receiving strategic instructions, particularly in situations involving performance targets or policy changes. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of personal interaction, informal dialogue, and relational openness from leaders in creating psychological safety and encouraging clarification. Leaders who combined formal authority with approachable communication styles were perceived as more effective because they reduced uncertainty while maintaining trust-based relationships. This suggests that communication clarity in multinational contexts is shaped not only by message structure but also by how leaders balance cultural expectations embedded in both organizational systems and local work practices.

Interestingly, generational differences in communication practices appeared less dominant than expected. Although leaders across generations demonstrated stylistic variations, participants described shared communication norms influenced by organizational culture and cross-cultural working conditions. The strong hierarchical system, combined with relational expectations from local employees, appeared to create a hybrid communication pattern that moderated generational differences. This finding indicates that cultural and organizational contexts may play a stronger role than

generational identity in shaping how clarity is constructed and maintained in practice. These findings highlight the importance of culturally adaptive communication strategies in multinational organizations. Effective vertical communication requires leaders to navigate multiple cultural logics simultaneously by integrating structural clarity with relational sensitivity. Consequently, standardized communication models that ignore cultural context are unlikely to sustain clarity across diverse organizational environments.

6 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to organizational communication literature in several important ways. First, it reconceptualizes communication clarity from a static attribute of message design into a dynamic, adaptive, and relational process. This perspective shifts attention from the characteristics of messages alone toward the ongoing interactional processes through which clarity is negotiated, maintained, and stabilized over time. As a result, future research on communication effectiveness may benefit from examining how clarity emerges through continuous interaction rather than treating it as a fixed communication outcome.

Second, the findings extend Path Goal Theory and Role Theory by emphasizing the cyclical and iterative nature of clarity construction. Rather than viewing clarity as a one time act of path clarification or role definition, the study shows that leaders sustain clarity through repeated translation, contextual adjustment, and informal relational interaction. These findings suggest that leadership communication effectiveness relies on ongoing adaptive practices that integrate both instrumental direction and relational engagement.

Third, this study highlights the strategic role of middle management in vertical communication processes. By positioning middle managers as active mediators who filter, interpret, and stabilize meaning across hierarchical levels, the findings challenge traditional perspectives that prioritize message fidelity as the primary indicator of effective communication. Instead, the study suggests that controlled adaptation and contextual translation may function as essential mechanisms for maintaining clarity in complex

organizational environments. This perspective opens new avenues for research on middle management as sense makers and meaning stabilizers within organizational communication systems.

6.2 Practical implications

For organizational practice, this study provides several actionable implications for improving vertical communication clarity.

1. Strengthening adaptive communication capabilities. Leadership development programs should extend beyond message design and presentation skills by emphasizing adaptive communication practices. Leaders need capabilities in iterative clarification, monitoring subordinate understanding, and adjusting communication approaches in response to operational feedback and changing situational demands.
2. Supporting the filtering role of middle management. Organizations should recognize middle managers as key actors in managing information flow. Rather than expecting full and immediate transmission of all strategic messages, organizations should provide clear prioritization frameworks and institutional trust that allow middle managers to simplify and sequence information in ways that maintain operational clarity and focus.
3. Fostering high quality leader member relationships. Since clarity is constructed through relational interaction, organizations should create conditions that strengthen leader member exchange quality. Practices such as regular one to one interaction, leadership coaching focused on relational competence, and organizational cultures that balance performance expectations with interpersonal support can enhance openness and clarification behavior.
4. Balancing consistency with contextual adaptability. While consistency in communication supports stability, leaders also need flexibility to adapt communication styles to individual and situational needs. Organizations should encourage leaders to maintain clear priorities while allowing contextual adjustments that improve comprehension and engagement among team members.

5. Designing communication systems that enable iteration. Organizational communication systems should facilitate ongoing clarification rather than one way transmission. Providing multiple channels for feedback, incorporating checkpoints for understanding, and normalizing follow up clarification as part of routine communication can reduce misunderstanding and strengthen execution reliability.

6.3 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that open opportunities for future research. First, as a single case study conducted within one organizational context, the findings are context specific and may not be fully generalizable across industries, organizational structures, or cultural settings. Future studies could examine vertical communication clarity across multiple organizations to identify patterns that are context dependent as well as those that are more broadly applicable.

Second, although the qualitative approach provides rich insight into how clarity is constructed in practice, this study does not empirically test relationships between clarity practices and measurable outcomes such as performance, job satisfaction, or organizational effectiveness. Future research may employ quantitative or mixed methods designs to examine these relationships and further validate the theoretical extensions proposed in this study.

Third, the research focuses on vertical communication within a traditional hierarchical structure. As organizations increasingly adopt flatter structures, hybrid work models, and digitally mediated communication, future research should explore how communication clarity is maintained when face to face interaction is limited, and communication relies more heavily on digital platforms.

Fourth, while generational variation was examined, other dimensions of diversity such as gender, tenure, and functional background were not explored in depth. Future studies could investigate how these factors interact with generational dynamics to influence communication practices and perceptions of clarity.

Finally, this study captures communication practices within a specific period of organizational development. Longitudinal research would provide valuable insight into

how clarity construction evolves over time as leaders gain experience, organizational contexts change, and new generations enter the workforce.

7 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that communication clarity in vertical organizational communication is not a static attribute of messages but a dynamic, adaptive, and relational process. Leaders across generations construct clarity through continuous practices of translation, simplification, repetition, and responsive adjustment aligned with operational realities. Middle managers emerge as strategic actors who stabilize meaning by filtering and sequencing information, helping operational teams maintain focus while reducing overload. The quality of leader member relationships further shapes how clarity is produced and interpreted, as trust, mutual respect, and relational openness create conditions that support iterative clarification and shared understanding. Although generational differences in communication preferences exist, the findings show that communication effectiveness is influenced more strongly by consistency, transparency, relational quality, and adaptive leadership practices than by generational identity itself. Within the cross-cultural context of a Korean multinational operating in Indonesia, effective communication depends on balancing hierarchical structure with relational sensitivity. The findings extend Path Goal Theory and Role Theory by emphasizing that clarity is maintained through cyclical and relational processes rather than one time message delivery. The study also highlights the strategic role of middle management as active mediators who construct clarity through meaning stabilization across hierarchical levels. From a practical perspective, organizations should strengthen leaders' adaptive communication capabilities, support middle managers in managing information flow, foster high quality leader member relationships, and design communication systems that enable continuous clarification rather than simple transmission. As organizations face increasing complexity, generational diversity, and cross-cultural interaction, understanding how clarity is actively maintained becomes essential for sustaining coordination and execution effectiveness. This study therefore contributes both theoretical insight and practical guidance for managing vertical communication in contemporary organizational settings.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

In settings where ethics approval for non- interventional studies (e.g. surveys) is not required. This study did not involve any human or animal participants and therefore did not require ethical approval. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for conducting content analysis of media materials.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI- ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to improve the English language and avoid orthographic errors. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Nadif Rahmanda: Corresponding Author. Role: Conceptualization, Writing Original Draft Investigation.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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