

A Narrative Inquiry into Communication Professionals' Competencies in Nepal's Development Workplaces

Prashant Gnawali ¹

Abstract

Communication professionals in development organizations are regarded as the voice of the organization they represent. As such, it's important that these professionals be competent at what they do. Currently, the discourse on the competencies of Nepal-based development organizations is rich and vibrant as many research endeavors and reports cover their successes and achievements every year. However, there's little to no literature for communication professionals who 'voice' the very same development organizations. This narrative inquiry sheds light on how communication professionals self-assess their competencies. The outcome of this study's exploration led to a common narrative shared by the research participants. The narrative showed Nepal's development organization's communication professionals holding themselves to a very high competency standard and striving to meet and exceed those standards in each responsibility they fulfilled for their organizations. This strongly implies further research is vitally necessary on Nepali communication professionals.

Keywords: communication professionals, narrative inquiry, competency, development organizations

Background of the Study

Communication plays a vital and ephemeral role in our lives, touching every aspect and necessary in every way. Its importance is further thrown into relief when put in the context of communication professionals working in development organizations where the professionals are verily the 'voice' of an organization (Fuller et al., 2018). Development organizations themselves are expected to function as mobilisers of the people and further help with facilitation and advocacy as well (Tuladhar, 1991 as cited in Dhakal, 2002). Shouldering such responsibilities needs a competent communication professional to act as the voice of such organizations. On one hand, as organizations themselves are largely aware that their success chiefly depends on the quality of their human resource they have been assessing competencies of their employees using

¹ Mr. Gnawali is LEAP Project Manager at Collaborative Schools Network.

their own methods via various competency tools and frameworks for a long time now (Chouhan & Srivastava, 2014). On the other hand, beyond the quantitative frameworks and scientific research of institutional endeavors to quantify quality lies the human and their story. Stories of the professionals working in organizations are of central importance for narratives and stories of any organization (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975). Brown and Rhodes (2005) go further and explain that the reality of any organization can be found reflected in the narratives that surround the organization. This is the basis for this study's aim at uncovering the narratives of communication professionals in Nepali development organizations.

Rationale of Inquiry

Many academic and institutional publications cover the successes and competencies of Nepali development organizations actively working in various sectors. For example, the publications of NGO Federation of Nepal (2022; 2021; 2020; 2019) give a clear overview of the massive amount of works and projects that Nepali NGOs/INGOs are responsible for on a regular basis. These and many other reports show how development organizations competently manage massive amount of funding and large number of experts of various fields coming and working together (CARE International Nepal, 2005; Maiti Nepal, 2021; PHASE Nepal, 2021). However, the research literature for communication professionals residing within those very same Nepali development organizations is next to non-existent. This current inquiry adds significant value to this sector with a rich account of purposively sampled small number communication professionals' self-held narratives about their work competencies.

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What self-held narratives of competence do Nepal's development communication professionals have about themselves?
2. How do they handle the different aspects of being a competent communication professional?

Method

The study employed narrative inquiry as a research method. Webster and Mertova (2007) state that a narrative inquiry provides a researcher with a rich framework to investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories. Interviews were used as a research tool to explore the participant's stories on their

competencies as interviews can be powerful tools to understand participants and see the world from their point of view and find and share the meanings that the participants create through their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). While interviewing, I used interview guidelines to acquaint them with my study, as well as prompt information. While doing so, I asked open ended questions, such as how they ended up as a communication professional, their perceptions of the job before and after joining etc. This way the participants would get sufficient space to share their stories. I recorded all this with a recording device at the meetings. Later I transcribed the same. I recorded the conversations with prior consent of the participants and have replaced their names with pseudonyms to protect their privacy and identity.

Four communication professionals from four different NGOs/INGOs were interviewed multiple times, each successive interview applying further probing questions to capture their diverse experiences (Yin, 2011). The raw audio recordings were then transcribed first and then thematically analyzed and explored within the four elements of the Mansfield and Matthews Job Competence Model to reach a concrete conclusion on their self-held narratives of competencies. While discussing the findings, my process of uncovering the stories of my participants linked me to those same stories, with knowledge as something created through interaction between the world and the individual (Walliman, 2011).

Results

Messick (1984) states that competence is the measurement of what a person knows and can do under ideal circumstances. Wood and Power (1987) add on by explaining that a competent individual utilizes and coordinates their abilities and mental and physical resources to adapt. Finally, the Job Competence Model (Mansfield & Matthews, 1985 as cited in Mansfield, 2005) demands that competence is only verifiable when a delimited environment provides space for the individual to manages necessary tasks and deliver tangible outcomes and be ready for contingencies as well. These four components of the model thread through the study's participants' narratives, each component with its own complimentary theme, to create a clear picture of their self-held stories of competence.

Environment

When exploring the participant's narratives for links to the first component i.e., environment, two themes, nonverbal communication and listening emerged.

Non-verbal Communication

Reflecting on non-verbal communication wasn't a new thing for my participants. So, they were ready with their answers before I had even finished clarifying the question. Hem Raj pointed out that he tried his very best to be approachable and lessen the ladders of hierarchy in his office. Rijan however maintained that staying within the limits of one's position was a useful thing to do because it clarified who was responsible for what. Rijan had a bit of an interesting anecdote for how much nonverbal communication made a difference in their work.

It depends on the situation. For example, if I am visiting a remote village for some project, I do not act aloof and different. I wear simple clothes, park the vehicles provided by the office a bit far away from the village and walk to their homes. I try my best to be good natured and approachable.

Listening

The listening skills of all parties involved was of paramount importance. Listening is a critical part of the organizational communication process. The accurate perception and interpretation of messages is vital for effective organizational communication transactions to take place. We cannot communicate successfully with someone unless the message is received and understood. Building relationships, especially in a digitally driven, knowledge-based economy is a skill based on effective listening. Being a good communicator is about listening. Rijan even went as far as to say, if you are not listening then you are not communicating. Hence, my participants were very strict on themselves to be a good listener as well. Hem Raj was very strict, "I expect my communicator to be precise, accurate and punctual. I expect them to understand my level of knowledge and deal with me accordingly." Being a competent communicator is as much about listening as it is about speaking.

Task Management

The second component dealt with handling the overarching management of various technical tasks of the job from which the theme of 'average day in the life of' emerged. Here, the participants shared that their days focused on coordination to produce communication materials. This meant a lot of planning and a lot of meetings. Ayusha, one of the first participants that I fielded the question to, corrected me by saying that even an average day in the life of a communication professional wasn't average by normal standards. For example, for any other professional their day starts at nine and ends at five.

However, for a communication professional like me, my workday starts as soon as I wake up, responding to urgent emails, checking the news for any mentions of my organization or of the INGO sector. And then at the office there are multiples meetings for multiple things that need attention. And then there are all these notices and publications materials that one must approve. Then further meetings with external stakeholders where I must give presentations and explanations on various topics.

For Hem Raj, one of my senior-most participants, it seems that most of his everyday tasks revolved around planning for meetings and participating in the meetings and not much else. He pleasantly defends this by saying, “nowadays, with this bigger position, my time has become more and more valuable, for me as well as for my coworkers. Hence, I spend it only on things of the highest import and for everything else, I can trust my team.” All my participants could not stress enough on the planning part. For a competent communication professional each minute of the day needed to be planned beforehand.

Tangible Outcomes

As the participants explored the third component of delivering tangible outcomes, two themes of quality standards and technology access emerged.

Maintaining Quality

All my participants were unanimous in agreeing to importance of maintaining quality in their line of work. Furthermore, they clarified that a lot of care was taken to ensure that anything that went out of the organization met stringent quality standards and was approved by multiple tiers of professionals. Rijan showed me internal documents that outlined a very specifically written checklist for checking newsletters as his organization sent out many on a day-to-day basis. The checklist addressed everything from font sizes to logo, color themes to language proficiency level. As for Hem Raj, although he mentioned that they had checklists as well, he focused on relaying the big picture to me and his role there. “It is all about ensuring the materials meet the needs of the organization/project first. Then we look at whether the content is easily digestible by our audience or not.”

Access to technology

The second theme, access to technology was the very lifeblood of the participants’ profession. All my participants were of the view that losing access to technology would put them out of their jobs. Hem Raj stated that almost 50% of his work would vanish if

he lost access to just his cell phone for a day, leave alone the computer that contained the hundreds of documents and materials that he needed every day. Rijan speculated that maybe 10% of his work would be achievable by letter or meeting people face to face. But that was it; the rest 90% of his work would be effectively over if his access to tech like cell phones, internet and computers disappeared at once. Technology was a cornerstone of organizational activity ranging from equipment for mass production to delivery systems to digital processes. Competence in technology ranged from recording keeping to deriving data to producing and disseminating multimedia content.

Managing Contingencies

Finally, the participants explored their competencies regarding managing contingencies in their profession. The theme of crisis communication perfectly complemented this component which focuses on professionals dealing with things that go wrong or with the unexpected. My theme of crisis communication i.e., how communication professionals fulfill their jobs during crisis, perfectly addresses this component. Exploring this theme within my participant's narratives I find several common elements. The first is whenever a crisis occurs, a communication professional must literally drop anything that they might be doing then and address the crisis at hand. Sandhya says "sometimes even your day could start with a crisis. Then whatever you have planned for the day has to be set aside, and you will have to put your whole time and energy into resolving that crisis." Ayusha summed it up perfectly

You must be on standby, ready for anything. There are things like operational risk, media risk and the first department to react to such external risks is always the department that faces and engages with the public.

Crisis could be of different natures. Sometimes it could be as simple as a small error in a media report but sometimes it could be big as the whole organization being accused of corruption. Rijan recounts the harrowing details of having to work as a communication manager when the previous organization he had been working at was accused of misappropriating funds during the earthquake relief works.

Discussion

In the first component environment, the study for competencies revolved around the participants' capacity for nonverbal communication and listening skills. The participants like Sandhya's and Rijan's narratives reveals that a communication

professional's competency doesn't rely on speaking only. It also has to do with the moments when they aren't speaking as non-verbal communication is as important as the verbal aspects of interpersonal communication (Barnum & Woliniansky, 1989). Communication professionals were only competent when they became aware of the fact that communication wasn't only about speaking, it was equally about body language, wasn't only about being a speaker but was about being an audience as well. The narratives show that the participants were fully aware about how they had to be competent about nonverbal communication and listening skills.

Next in line is the theme of 'average day in the life of' of the task management component. How exactly do they manage their day and what kind of narrative do they themselves have about it? It seems their competency is very high in this regard. All the participants had multiple narratives on their immensity of their workload and how very important it was for a communication professional to be competent about the same. For a communication professional, being competent revolved around the necessity of each minute of the day to be planned beforehand and ensuring that whatever was planned, mostly the production of communication materials, was completed by the end of the day.

The participants were very stringent when it came to maintaining quality, first theme of the third component. They agreed on its importance and clarified that a lot of care was taken to ensure that anything that was communicated via the organization to the outer public met strict quality standards and was approved by multiple levels of professionals. Communication quality has been shown to improve an organizations' outcomes (Cooper & Shumate, 2012) and organizational prestige (Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). The analysis here shows that indeed, quality control was and is a very important element for my communication professionals. The next step in analysis was on the importance/relevance of technology to the overall communication sector. A bit unsurprisingly, the participant's narrative showed that communication technologies were so intertwined with their work that almost all their work would be inaccessible if they did not have access to the proper technological tools. Hence, this shows that technology was and is innately important to communication professionals and their work. Therefore, their day-to-day activities fully revolve around and depend on communication technologies.

Finally, activities do not always go according to plan hence comes the need for contingency management. How does this aspect come into their day-to-day activities and what kind of narratives do the participants have about it? Contingency planning is an essential role for any kind of authority (Eriksson & McConnell, 2011). Well, it seems that the participants are fully aware of their role in managing planned-for as well as unplanned-

for events and, as the narrative shows, of averting and/or deescalating different crisis situations. An analysis of this narrative reveals that crisis/disaster management is a vital competency standard among communication professionals here in Nepal.

Conclusion

The day-to-day activities of a communication professional revolved around a great many things and rested largely on the planning competency of the communication professional. A communication professional with good planning skills is a competent communication professional. But then again, the participants were also aware of the larger implications of their day-to-day activities. The participants seemed to very much identify with the fact that they were just one aspect of a much larger picture and their work although important dealt with the outside world more than the inner workings of the organizations. All of them commented on the fact that as communication professionals they were required to be aware of everything that the organization was dealing with, from its projects to its image in the public. The participants tended to view themselves as a necessary mouthpiece of their organizations.

Finally, the narratives shows that communication professionals in the development sector held themselves to very high competency standards and took serious steps to meet and exceed those standards in each responsibility they fulfilled for their organization. Whether it was planning a daily meeting or working amid national crisis, communication professionals made sure that their responsibilities were fulfilled on all fronts. An exploration analysis of the technical aspects of their work, task management, contingency planning and their place in the work/job environment showed that they always fulfilled and exceeded their responsibilities on all fronts, inside and outside the organization, thus going above and beyond their competence requirements.

References

- Asian Development Bank, CARE International Nepal & Sunderji, A. (2005). *Overview of Civil Society Nepal*. Asian Development Bank <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28970/csb-nep.pdf>
- Barnum, C. & Wolniansky, N. (1989). Taking cues from body language. *Management Review*, June, 59-60. <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=-GALE%7CA7640467&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00251895&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon~e7344c8d>

- Chouhan, V.S., & Srivastava, S. (2014). Competencies and Competency Modeling — A Literature Survey. *IOSR Journal of Business and Management*, Vol. 16, pp. 14-22. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sandeep-Srivastava-3/publication/269791910_Understanding_Competencies_and_Compety_Modeling_-_A_Literature_Survey/links/57fdbea308ae6750f80665fe/Understanding-Competencies-and-Competency-Modeling-A-Literature-Survey.pdf
- Cooper, K. R., & Shumate, M. (2012). Interorganizational collaboration explored through the bona fide network perspective. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 26(4), 623–654. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318912462014>
- Eriksson, K., & McConnell, A. (2011) Contingency planning for crisis management: Recipe for success or political fantasy?. *Policy and Society*, 30(2), 89-99. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1449403511000117>
- Fuller, M., Heijne-Penninga, M., Kamans, E., van Vuuren, M., de Jong, M., & Wolfensberger, M. (2018). Identifying competence characteristics for excellent communication professionals. *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 22, pp. 233-252. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JCOM-07-2016-0051/full/html>
- Khadka, T. N. (2002). *The Role of Non-governmental Organizations in the Improvement of Livelihood in Nepal*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Tampere]. Acta Electronica Universitatis Tampereensis. <https://trepo.tuni.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/67199/951-44-5347-6.pdf?sequence=1>
- Maiti Nepal. (2021) *Annual Report 2021*. Maiti Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal. https://maitinepal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Annual-Report-2021_final-1-5.pdf
- Mansfield, B. (2005). Competence and standards. In Burke, J.W. (Ed.) *Competency Based Education and Training* (pp. 23-33). The Falmer Press. <https://www.routledge.com/Competency-Based-Education-And-Training/Burke/p/book/9781850006275>
- Mansfield, B., & Mitchell, L. (1996). *Towards a competent workforce*. Gower Publishing Ltd. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4333277-towards-a-competent-workforce>
- Messick, S. (1984). The psychology of educational measurement. *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 21(3), 215–38. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1745-3984.1984.tb01030.x>

- Mitroff, I. I., & Kilmann, R. H. (July 1975). Stories Managers Tell: A new Tool for Organizational Problem Solving. *Management Review*, 18-28. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284443124_Stories_Managers_Tell_A_New_Tool_for_Organizational_Problem_Solving
- NGO Federation of Nepal. (2019) *Status of National Implementation of SDGs in Nepal*. NGO Federation of Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal. <https://www.ngofederation.org/content/354>
- NGO Federation of Nepal. (2020) *Nepal Civil Society Perspectives on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. NGO Federation of Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal. <https://www.ngofederation.org/content/248>
- NGO Federation of Nepal. (2021) *Inclusivity, Justice, and Accountability: SDG 16 Report of Civil Society in Nepal*. NGO Federation of Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal. <https://www.ngofederation.org/content/234>
- NGO Federation of Nepal. (2022) *Proceeding Report National Civil Society Conference*. NGO Federation of Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal. <https://www.ngofederation.org/content/355>
- PHASE Nepal. (2021) *Annual Report FY-2020/21*. PHASE Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/12j0Kq900fwORyY48Rf1hG2SzziM-8Jhgg/view>
- Taylor, M., & Doerfel, M. L. (2003). Building interorganizational relationships that build nations. *Human Communication Research*, 29(2), 153–181. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2003.tb00835.x>
- Webster, L., & Mertova, P. (2007) *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An Introduction to Using Critical Event Narrative Analysis in Research on Learning and Teaching*. Routledge. https://www.academia.edu/32141448/_Webster_Mertova_Using_Narrative_Inquiry_as_a_Research_BookFi
- Wood, R., & Power, C. (1987). Aspects of the competence-performance distinction: Educational, psychological and measurement issues. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19(5), 409–424. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0022027870190503>
- Yin, R.K. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. The Guildford Place, London. <http://eli.johogo.com/Class/Qualitative%20Research.pdf>