The Role of Communication in Crisis Management in Institutions of Higher Learning in Kenya: A Case Study of the University of Nairobi

The general objective of this study was to explore the role communication plays in effective crisis management within institutions of higher learning. Many public and private institutions and or organizations are usually unprepared in handling the public relations and crisis management aspects of crises. The specific objectives of the study were to determine the role communication plays during the various stages of crisis management; to determine the factors that affect the implementation of effective communication in crisis management and to investigate what challenges affect the implementation of a crisis management plan. The study was guided by the theory of Attribution that draws from people’s personal experiences to crisis and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory that states that stake-holders perceptions are drawn from how a crisis is handled and its reputation during a particular crisis episode. The study location was the University of Nairobi. The study population was 150 people, drawn from Central Administration, and the Colleges of Humanities and Social Sciences as well as, that of Architecture and Engineering thus comprising 110 members of staff and 40 students. A survey was carried out whereby the respondents were administered with questionnaires and ten key respondents interviewed for in-depth data. Data analysis and interpretation was done using descriptive and inferential methods for the quantitative analysis and thematic analysis quantitative methods. The findings established that the roles played by communication in crisis management are awareness creation, mobilization and evacuation during crises. It also emerged that the way in which communication is relayed is vital; the way in which the message is designed and the timing in crisis aversion. The study found that there were several challenges faced by both internal and external stakeholders and some of the challenges cited had to do with how crises were communicated to the target audience as well as handled at the various stages of planning, execution and post crisis. The study concludes that it is vital for an institution to be able to anticipate crisis and seek ways of crisis aversion in a timely manner. This can effectively be done by having an established crisis management plan in place as well as a crisis management team. The study thus recommends that the institution needs to formulate guidelines that can be used to assist in crisis mitigation as well establish a good working relationship by working closely with the media in order to avoid media speculation and untruths.