

When Communication Fails: Understanding Interpersonal Dynamics in the Medkom Division of HIMAKOM UAD

Nur Asfia^{1,*}, Iman Sumarlan²

^{1,2} Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

^{1*} Email: asfiaparis@gmail.com

* Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

Effective interpersonal communication is essential to the functioning of student-led organizations, which depend on voluntary participation and strong internal cohesion. This study examines how communication failures influence interpersonal dynamics within the Media and Communication Division (Medkom) of HIMAKOM UAD, a unit responsible for managing the organization's public communication and social media presence. Despite its strategic role, Medkom experienced sustained communication breakdowns that disrupted collaboration and weakened member relationships. Using a descriptive qualitative approach supported by organizational ethnography, the research draws on complete participant observations and in-depth interviews with eight informants, including division members, HRD representatives, and HIMAKOM leadership. Findings show that communication failure in Medkom stemmed from three interrelated factors: the absence of early team bonding and shared expectations, limited leadership involvement in facilitating interaction, and misaligned perceptions of responsibility. These issues generated mistrust, interpersonal tension, and emotional withdrawal, preventing the division from developing effective group processes. As a result, productivity declined, content output became inconsistent, and member motivation weakened. The study underscores the need for intentional team-building, empathetic leadership communication, and ongoing conflict management in student organizations. It provides practical insights for strengthening interpersonal communication and enhancing organizational performance within Medkom and comparable student-based divisions.

1. Introduction

Communication is central to human social life. Through communication, individuals construct meaning, negotiate identity, and build the relational foundations that enable collective action. In student-led organizations where authority is limited and participation is voluntary, communication becomes even more essential. It does not merely facilitate the transfer of information but shapes the emotional, symbolic, and relational dimensions that sustain the organization. When communication falters, it is not only the messages that fail but also the interpersonal bonds and shared understandings that hold the group together.

The Media and Communication Division (Medkom) of HIMAKOM UAD exemplifies these dynamics. As a division responsible for maintaining the organization's public image and

digital presence, Medkom relies heavily on collaboration, shared creativity, and coordinated work. Yet beneath these functional expectations lies a network of interpersonal relationships influenced by members' assumptions, emotions, and interpretations of leadership behavior. During the 2022/2023 organizational period, Medkom encountered persistent communication challenges that revealed deeper relational vulnerabilities.

These communication failures did not arise from a single event but accumulated over time. Limited early bonding prevented members from forming relational familiarity, while uneven leadership engagement and unclear expectations created interpretive gaps in daily interactions. Members who initially joined with hopes of learning, teamwork, and creative collaboration gradually experienced misaligned assumptions, emotional strain, and recurring misunderstandings. In this context, communication failure becomes more than a technical misstep; it becomes a lived experience that shapes identity, belonging, and motivation within the group.

Scholars have long recognized that communication in organizations is both functional and deeply human.¹ argues that communication is the essential mechanism that binds individuals into cooperative systems, while² emphasizes that organizations operate as social environments whose stability depends on the quality of interaction among members. In student organizations, these interactions carry symbolic and emotional significance, as communication affirms identity, manages expectations, and reinforces members' sense of belonging. Research consistently shows that ineffective communication weakens organizational climate and diminishes engagement, trust, and participation³.

Although communication is often idealized as a pathway to understanding, human communication scholars highlight the inevitability of misunderstanding.⁴ notes that communication breakdowns frequently emerge from mismatched expectations, ambiguous relational cues, and emotional tensions rather than from linguistic inaccuracies. In youth-led organizations where members are still developing their interpersonal competencies, the risk of misinterpretation is heightened by informal structures, evolving social identities, and unequal expectations of leadership.

Group development theories further illuminate why communication matters. Tuckman's model suggests that groups progress through stages from forming to performing, but humanities-oriented scholars emphasize that these stages are fluid and relational rather than strictly linear. Groups advance only when members build shared norms, mutual trust, and emotional cohesion. Without these foundations, minor misunderstandings can escalate, conflicts remain unresolved, and members may withdraw physically or emotionally from the group⁵. Student organizations, which rely on voluntary contribution and intrinsic motivation, are particularly susceptible to such relational disruptions.

¹ Robert D. McPhee and Phillip K. Tompkins, 'Organizational Communication: Traditional Themes and New Directions', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 33.3 (1988), p. 464, doi:10.2307/2392722.

² Harry S. Dennis, Gerald M. Goldhaber, and Michael P. Yates, 'Organizational Communication Theory and Research: An Overview of Research Methods', *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 2.1 (1978), doi:10.1080/23808985.1978.11923729.

³ Sky Marsen, 'Navigating Crisis: The Role of Communication in Organizational Crisis', *International Journal of Business Communication*, 57.2 (2020), pp. 163–75, doi:10.1177/2329488419882981.

⁴ Ayan Kumar Bhowmick and Bivas Mitra, 'Listen to Me, My Neighbors or My Friend? Role of Complementary Modalities for Predicting Business Popularity in Location Based Social Networks', *Computer Communications*, 135, September 2017 (2019), pp. 53–70, doi:10.1016/j.comcom.2019.01.004.

⁵ Noor Khairin Nawwarah Khalid and Aini Maznina A. Manaf, 'Managing Organisational Change: The Role of Polyphony and Emotional Reflexivity', *Journal of Advanced Research in Business and Management Studies*, 34.1 (2024), doi:10.37934/arbms.34.1.4260.

Within this conceptual landscape, Medkom's internal challenges offer a significant case for understanding communication failure in youth-driven organizations. This study therefore examines how communication failure manifests in the daily interactions of the division, how interpersonal dynamics shift as communication deteriorates, and how these dynamics influence group cohesion, member motivation, and organizational performance. By analyzing these processes through an organizational ethnographic approach, the research aims to reveal how communication breakdowns expose emotional and structural fragilities within student groups.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of communication as a lived, interpretive experience. It demonstrates that when communication fails in student organizations, what is disrupted is not merely information flow but the relational fabric that enables young people to collaborate, create, and sustain collective identity. Through this lens, improving communication becomes not only a managerial task but an essential element of nurturing community, leadership, and meaningful participation in voluntary organizational settings.

2. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach supported by an organizational ethnographic method. Ethnography is particularly suitable for understanding communication failure because it focuses on lived experiences, everyday interactions, and the meanings individuals construct within their social environments. Rather than treating communication merely as an exchange of messages, this approach allows the researcher to interpret how members of the Medkom division make sense of their interactions, negotiate tensions, and navigate relational complexities.

2.1. Research Approach

A qualitative design was chosen to explore the subjective and interpretive dimensions of communication failure within a student organization. This approach acknowledges that organizational life is shaped by emotions, perceptions, and shared meaning-making rather than by formal structures alone. Organizational ethnography enables the researcher to trace patterns of interaction as they unfold naturally, revealing how communication successes and failures are embedded in daily practices⁶.

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted within the Media and Communication Division (Medkom) of HIMAKOM UAD during the 2022/2023 organizational period. Eight participants were involved in the research, representing different positions within the organization to provide a multidimensional view of the communication dynamics. They included: (1) The coordinator of the Medkom division, (2) Three members of Medkom, (3) The coordinator of the Human Resource Development (HRD) division, (4) One HRD member responsible for supervising Medkom, (5) The chair and vice-chair of HIMAKOM UAD. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, in accordance with ethical standards of qualitative research.

2.3. Researcher Positioning

The researcher assumed the role of a complete participant observer. This positioning allowed immersion in the organizational environment without overtly signaling the

⁶ Marianna Fotaki, Yochanan Altman, and Juliette Koning, 'Spirituality, Symbolism and Storytelling in Twentyfirst-Century Organizations: Understanding and Addressing the Crisis of Imagination', *Organization Studies*, 41.1 (2020), pp. 7–30, doi:10.1177/0170840619875782.

research process, enabling interactions to unfold naturally. In humanities-oriented ethnography, the researcher's presence is not merely an instrument of data collection but also a lens through which meaning is interpreted. The reflections, observations, and emotional responses of the researcher became part of the analytical process, contributing to a deeper understanding of the interpersonal tensions present in Medkom

2.4. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through: (1) Participant Observation. The researcher observed division interactions, meetings, conversations, and communication patterns over an extended period. Field notes were used to document verbal exchanges, nonverbal cues, mood shifts, and relational dynamics that might not appear in formal interviews. (2) In-Depth Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions of communication, and interpretations of conflict. Interviews allowed members to articulate their emotions, frustrations, expectations, and meanings they attached to organizational events. (3) Document Review. Internal messages, division guidelines, and organizational communication records were examined to contextualize interpersonal tensions within broader organizational practices.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive and interpretive approach. Field notes, interview transcripts, and internal documents were read repeatedly to identify emergent themes. Coding was conducted manually, emphasizing patterns of misunderstanding, relational tensions, expectations, and interpretations of leadership. Rather than imposing external theoretical categories, themes were allowed to emerge from participants' lived experiences. The analysis proceeded through three interpretive stages: (1) Descriptive Interpretation, capturing what happened and how participants described events. (2) Relational Interpretation, identifying how interactions, emotions, and meanings shaped communication patterns. (3) Conceptual Interpretation, linking empirical findings with broader concepts of communication failure, identity, and group cohesion. (4) This multi-layered analysis aligns with the humanities perspective, prioritizing meaning, experience, and interpretation over measurement

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study through an interpretive lens, focusing on how communication failure emerged in the Medkom division, how members made sense of these experiences, and how these patterns shaped interpersonal relationships and organizational performance⁷. Rather than treating data as isolated statements, the analysis considers the emotional, symbolic, and relational dimensions embedded in participants' narratives.

One of the most prominent findings is the absence of early-stage bonding among division members. At the beginning of the organizational period, Medkom held few internal meetings, leaving members with limited opportunities to know one another beyond their roles. Members frequently described the atmosphere as "distant," "strictly task-oriented," and lacking the warmth typically associated with student organizations.

From an organizational communication perspective, this absence of interpersonal grounding created an early vulnerability. Without shared experiences or emotional rapport, members struggled to form a sense of collective identity. Basic misunderstandings that might

⁷ Stephen W. Littlejohn, Karen A. Foss, and John G. Oetzel, *Theories of Human Communication*, Waveland Press, Inc., 11th edn (Waveland Press, Inc, 2017), doi:10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004.

otherwise be resolved through familiarity instead expanded into relational distance. In humanities terms, the division lacked the symbolic rituals and relational practices necessary to construct a shared social reality. As a result, members entered their roles as isolated individuals rather than as collaborators. This early disconnection set the stage for later communication failures, as members had no relational foundation to fall back on when tensions arose⁸.

The study found that the division coordinator's limited communication engagement contributed significantly to the breakdown of interaction. Members frequently expressed uncertainty regarding expectations, workflow, and problem-solving procedures. Some felt they were left to "figure things out on their own," while others expected more active guidance, feedback, and emotional support.

This ambiguity produced divergent interpretations of responsibility. For some members, autonomy felt like abandonment; for others, it reinforced the belief that difficulties should be managed individually. These differing interpretations created unspoken disagreements about what constituted "normal" communication within the division.

From a humanities-oriented viewpoint, leadership is not only a structural function but also a relational role. The coordinator's limited involvement was interpreted differently by members depending on their expectations, leading to emotional misalignment. Communication failure thus emerged not merely from poor instruction but from the absence of a shared interpretation of leadership behavior. The result was an interactional environment marked by silence, assumptions, and unspoken disappointment.

As communication gaps widened, misunderstandings began to accumulate⁹. Members reported feeling judged, dismissed, or misunderstood by one another. Small interpersonal frictions grew into broader relational narratives: some members interpreted others as "unreliable," "unmotivated," or "difficult," while others expressed resentment about feeling unsupported. These narratives became self-reinforcing. When a member perceived another as disengaged, they were less likely to initiate conversation or seek collaboration, reinforcing the isolation that had prompted the initial interpretation. The absence of empathetic communication created a cycle in which assumptions replaced dialogue.

In humanities scholarship, such patterns are understood as interpretive cycles situations where individuals use limited interactional cues to construct broader narratives about others¹⁰. These narratives then guide future interactions, often leading to further misunderstanding. In Medkom, these cycles led to emotional withdrawal, avoidance behaviors, and heightened sensitivity to perceived slights. Communication failure in this context became a lived emotional experience, not simply a structural deficiency.

The relational tensions within the division had tangible emotional consequences. Several members described feeling "uncomfortable," "unappreciated," or "reluctant to attend activities." Some began skipping meetings or organizational events, not out of disinterest but as a response to interpersonal discomfort. This emotional withdrawal had a cascading effect on the division's performance. With fewer members actively involved, creative output declined, deadlines were missed, and the division's social media activity became irregular. Members often

⁸ Markus Hällgren, Linda Rouleau, and Mark de Rond, 'A Matter of Life or Death: How Extreme Context Research Matters for Management and Organization Studies', *Academy of Management Annals*, 12.1 (2018), pp. 111–53, doi:10.5465/annals.2016.0017.

⁹ Kimberly Kuiper, 'Bridging the Gaps: Advancing the Communication Theory of Identity', *Communication Studies*, 74.4 (2023), doi:10.1080/10510974.2023.2201463.

¹⁰ Erika Darics, 'E-Leadership or "How to Be Boss in Instant Messaging?" The Role of Nonverbal Communication', *International Journal of Business Communication*, 57.1 (2020), pp. 3–29, doi:10.1177/2329488416685068.

interpreted these performance issues as evidence of others' lack of commitment, further intensifying misunderstanding.

From a humanities perspective, participation in a student organization is a form of belonging¹¹. When individuals experience communication failure, what erodes is not only their willingness to contribute but also their sense of membership. Motivation becomes inseparable from emotional climate, and communication failure transforms into an existential disengagement from the group.

The severity of communication breakdown eventually prompted intervention from HIMAKOM leadership. A formal warning letter (SP) was issued to inactive members, asking them to confirm their intention to remain in the organization. Interestingly, none of the members chose to withdraw from the division despite experiencing prolonged interpersonal tension. Many expressed a desire to "finish what they started" or remain because the organizational period was nearing its end. This paradox reflects a complex emotional dynamic. Although communication failure caused discomfort and withdrawal, members still felt a symbolic attachment to the organization. This attachment, however, was not strong enough to resolve interpersonal issues but strong enough to sustain minimal commitment. From an interpretive lens, this demonstrates the dual nature of organizational identity: members may feel alienated on an interpersonal level yet remain connected on an ideological or symbolic level.

According to developmental models of group effectiveness, teams progress through forming, storming, norming, performing, and maturity. Medkom, however, appeared to oscillate within the early stages. Without bonding, relational trust, or negotiated norms, the division was unable to reach collective performing. Instead, interpersonal tensions repeatedly returned to unresolved conflict points. The findings show that communication failure disrupted the psychological processes required for group cohesion¹². Members' inability to articulate concerns, express vulnerabilities, or negotiate expectations prevented the development of shared norms. The group remained structurally intact but relationally fragmented. In humanistic terms, Medkom did not fail because of poor task management but because the group lacked the communicative rituals and relational work necessary to transform individuals into a community.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that communication failure within the Medkom division of HIMAKOM UAD is not merely a technical breakdown in message transmission but a relational and symbolic phenomenon that shapes the everyday experience of organizational life. The findings demonstrate that the absence of early bonding, ambiguity in leadership communication, and misaligned expectations created a fragile interactional environment. Within this environment, misunderstandings accumulated, emotional tensions intensified, and negative interpretive cycles emerged. These dynamics weakened members' sense of belonging, reduced motivation, and disrupted the division's overall performance.

From a humanities perspective, communication failure exposes the complex interplay between identity, emotion, and relational meaning. Members' interpretations of one another were formed not only through explicit messages but also through silence, absence, and

¹¹ Mirlinda Vejseli and Ferdi Kamberi, 'The Intercultural Communication and Community Participation in Local Governance: The Case of North Macedonia and Kosovo', *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 7.3 (2021), doi:10.47305/JLIA2137072v.

¹² Sinda Ben Sedrine, Amel Bouderbala, and Hamza Nasraoui, 'Leadership Style Effect on Virtual Team Efficiency: Trust, Operational Cohesion and Media Richness Roles', *Journal of Management Development*, 40.5 (2020), pp. 365–88, doi:10.1108/JMD-10-2018-0289.

ambiguous cues. These interpretations became embedded in organizational narratives that shaped future interactions¹³. In this sense, communication failure acted as both a cause and a consequence of interpersonal disconnection. The division's difficulties illustrate how organizational effectiveness is inseparable from the emotional labor and relational work performed by its members.

The study underscores the importance of creating relational spaces in student organizations where members can negotiate expectations, express concerns, and develop shared meanings. Effective leadership in such contexts requires more than task coordination; it demands the ability to cultivate psychological safety, encourage dialogue, and mediate interpersonal tensions with empathy. Without these relational foundations, groups struggle to move beyond early developmental stages, regardless of structural intentions or formal responsibilities.

The implications of this research extend beyond Medkom. They point to broader questions about how young people learn to communicate, collaborate, and navigate power within voluntary organizational settings. Student organizations serve as training grounds for future professionals and leaders. Understanding communication failure in these environments provides insight into the challenges individuals face when bridging personal emotion, collective identity, and organizational responsibility.

Future research may expand on these findings by exploring comparative cases across multiple student divisions or by examining how digital communication practices interact with face-to-face dynamics. Further studies may also consider how cultural expectations, social identities, and emotional expression influence communication patterns among young adults in organizational contexts. Ultimately, this study contributes to the understanding that communication in student organizations is a profoundly human endeavor. When communication fails, what is at stake is not only the completion of tasks but the quality of relationships, the experience of belonging, and the formation of collective identity. Recognizing and addressing communication failure becomes essential not only for improving organizational performance but for nurturing the interpersonal competencies that shape meaningful participation in community life.

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¹³ Iman Sumarlan and others, 'Public Relations Strategies in Religious Organizations: A Qualitative Study of Muhammadiyah's Organizational Communication', *Frontiers in Communication*, 10.July (2025), pp. 1–9, doi:10.3389/fcomm.2025.1574048.

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