

IMPLEMENTATION OF VERTICAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN LEADERS AND SUBORDINATES IN BUILDING HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIPS AT THE ULIL ALBAB AMIL ZAKAT INSTITUTION

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Received: 2026-05-25; Accepted: 2026-06-01; Published: 2026-06-15

Abstract : This study investigates the implementation of vertical communication between organizational leaders and subordinates as a mechanism for building and sustaining harmonious working relationships within the Ulil Albab Amil Zakat Institution, Medan. Grounded in organizational communication theory, the research examines both downward communication (from leaders to subordinates) and upward communication (from subordinates to leaders) as complementary dimensions of an integrated communicative process. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation, the study reveals that vertical communication at the institution is characterized by openness, transparency, motivational leadership, and constructive feedback. Leaders demonstrate exemplary conduct and responsiveness to employee aspirations, while subordinates exhibit accountability and proactive participation. Minor barriers related to generational differences and perceptual divergence were identified but are effectively managed through direct dialogue. The findings affirm that harmonious organizational relationships emerge not spontaneously but through the deliberate cultivation of balanced, two-way vertical communication channels that affirm individual dignity, foster mutual trust, and align collective effort with institutional vision and mission.

Keywords: Vertical Communication; Organizational Harmony; Leadership Communication; Amil Zakat Institution; Top-Down Communication; Bottom-Up Communication

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47453/>

Introduction

Communication constitutes the foundational infrastructure upon which every organization, whether public, private, or non-profit, establishes its internal coherence and operational effectiveness. The capacity of an organization to plan, coordinate, and achieve its institutional objectives is inextricably linked to the quality of communicative processes that govern the interactions among its members. Within formal organizational structures, communication does not occur exclusively along horizontal lines among peers but flows critically in the vertical dimension between those who exercise authority and those who carry out organizational mandates. This vertical dimension of organizational communication occupies a strategic position in the governance of institutions, as it is through these channels that directives are transmitted, policies are interpreted, evaluative feedback is exchanged, and organizational cultures are constructed and sustained (Matiash, 2024). When vertical communication is effectively managed, it becomes the connective tissue that binds organizational hierarchy into a functional and harmonious whole; when it is neglected or distorted, it becomes the fracture line along which organizational conflict, disengagement, and dysfunction develop.

The critical importance of communication in workplace settings is corroborated by large-scale empirical data from international organizational surveys. The Work Relationship Index, a study involving 18,000 respondents across 14 countries and reported through TVRI News, revealed that only 28 percent of knowledge workers in Indonesia experience what may be described as healthy workplace relationships in 2025. This figure represents a decline of 16 percentage points from the preceding year, constituting the steepest decline among all countries surveyed. These statistics illuminate a broader pattern of deteriorating interpersonal and hierarchical relationships within Indonesian professional environments, underscoring the urgency of investigating the communicative conditions that either nurture or undermine organizational harmony. Communication may be understood, at its most fundamental level, as a deliberate process through which a source conveys a message to a receiver with the intention of influencing behavior, perception, or understanding within a shared social context (Yang & Lin, 2022). Within organizational life, this process acquires additional layers of complexity, power, and ethical responsibility.

Organizational communication theory provides the conceptual scaffolding for analyzing vertical communication in its dual manifestations: downward communication, which encompasses the transmission of instructions, policies, role expectations, and evaluative feedback from leaders to subordinates; and upward communication, which encompasses the conveyance of reports, suggestions, concerns, and creative contributions from subordinates to leaders (Supit, 2023). These two communicative flows serve informative, persuasive, and relational functions simultaneously. In effective organizations, the balance between downward and upward communication is not merely a structural arrangement but a relational achievement that reflects the quality of trust, respect, and mutual accountability between

organizational strata. When either direction is obstructed, the organization experiences a communicative imbalance that tends to manifest in reduced coordination, lowered morale, and diminished productivity (Erben et al., 2019).

The human relations tradition in organizational studies, originating from the landmark Hawthorne Studies conducted in the early twentieth century, established a foundational insight that retains enduring relevance: the social and psychological dimensions of the workplace exercise profound influence over employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance. These findings challenged purely mechanistic conceptions of organizational life and established the case for understanding organizations as social systems in which relational quality is as consequential for institutional outcomes as technical efficiency. Within this human relations framework, the quality of leader-subordinate relationships emerges as a critical determinant of organizational effectiveness. Effective leaders are distinguished not merely by their technical competence or positional authority but by three essential capacities: the ability to understand, guide, and develop others; the capacity to motivate individuals toward collective purpose; and the willingness to serve as behavioral role models who demonstrate the values they seek to instill (Kim et al., 2024). Leaders who embody these capacities create organizational climates characterized by engagement, trust, and harmony.

The Ulil Albab Amil Zakat Institution in Medan, Indonesia, represents a particularly significant site for investigating the dynamics of vertical organizational communication. As a non-profit institution operating within the humanitarian and Islamic philanthropy sector, Ulil Albab occupies an organizational context that differs meaningfully from the government agencies and profit-oriented corporations that have dominated prior research on vertical communication in Indonesia. Non-profit organizations in the Islamic social finance sector are governed not only by professional organizational norms but also by religious and ethical values that shape the expectations leaders and subordinates hold of one another (Karim et al., 2022). Communication within such institutions is imbued with normative weight: honesty (*amanah*), transparency (*syura*), and mutual respect are not merely organizational best practices but ethical imperatives rooted in Islamic teaching. Studying vertical communication in this context therefore offers a distinctive perspective on the intersection of organizational communication theory and Islamic institutional ethics.

Prior research on vertical communication in Indonesian organizational contexts has generated several significant findings while also leaving important questions inadequately addressed. A study by Mustofa (2022) examining vertical communication in a local government office found that a family-oriented communicative approach, implemented through both direct and mediated interaction, enhanced employee work ethic and generated a climate of mutual respect. However, the study also identified communication barriers arising from the use of mobile phone-based communication and issues related to punctuality. A separate investigation into the comparative effects of vertical and horizontal communication on employee

performance found that, while horizontal communication demonstrated a positive influence on performance outcomes, vertical communication did not exert a statistically significant effect, a finding attributed to a misalignment between actual communication practices and ideal communication norms. A third study examining vertical communication between teachers and students in educational settings found that effective top-down communication enhanced openness, collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, and conflict reduction, demonstrating the broad applicability of these communicative principles across institutional contexts.

Despite this body of literature, significant gaps remain in scholarly understanding of vertical communication dynamics within non-profit religious institutions in Indonesia. Existing studies have tended to focus either on government agencies characterized by rigid hierarchical structures or on profit-oriented corporations driven by performance metrics, neglecting the distinctive organizational logic and communicative culture of institutions like Ulil Albab that operate at the intersection of professional organizational norms and Islamic ethical values. Furthermore, previous research has often relied on quantitative methodologies that capture statistical associations between communication variables and organizational outcomes but cannot adequately illuminate the lived experiences, interpretive frameworks, and relational dynamics through which vertical communication is enacted, negotiated, and experienced by organizational participants. A qualitative investigation is therefore necessary to generate the kind of contextually grounded, humanistically informed understanding that the complexity of this phenomenon demands.

Harmonious workplace relationships, the central dependent variable of this study, do not emerge as natural or automatic products of organizational membership. They are constructed through sustained communicative effort, relational investment, and the cultivation of institutional cultures that affirm the dignity, voice, and professional development of all organizational members (Kazanskaia, 2025a). Leaders who demonstrate genuine responsiveness to the aspirations of subordinates, who provide substantive rather than perfunctory feedback, and who model the behavioral norms they seek to institutionalize create the conditions in which harmonious relationships can flourish. Conversely, leaders who confine their communicative practice to directive authority, who fail to create channels for upward communication, or who respond to subordinate feedback with indifference or defensiveness systematically undermine the relational foundations of organizational life (Sultan, 2024). The study of vertical communication at Ulil Albab thus engages a question of both theoretical and practical significance: how does the quality of communicative practice between leaders and subordinates shape the relational climate of the institution?

This study is oriented toward the following primary research objective: to analyze the implementation of vertical communication between leaders and subordinates at the Ulil Albab Amil Zakat Institution in Medan, Indonesia, and to

examine the role of this communicative practice in building and sustaining harmonious working relationships within the institution. Specifically, the study investigates the nature and characteristics of downward communication from leaders to subordinates, the quality and scope of upward communication from subordinates to leaders, and the barriers that obstruct effective vertical communication and the strategies employed to address them. By pursuing these objectives through a qualitative case study methodology, the research aims to generate findings that contribute to the theoretical understanding of vertical communication in non-profit religious organizations and that provide practical guidance for institutional leaders and communication practitioners seeking to cultivate more harmonious and effective organizational environments.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research paradigm, selected for its capacity to generate contextually rich, interpretively nuanced, and humanistically informed accounts of social phenomena as they are experienced and understood by organizational participants. Qualitative methodology is particularly well-suited to investigating communicative processes within organizations because it enables the researcher to access the interpretive frameworks, relational dynamics, and institutional cultures that shape how communication is enacted and experienced, dimensions that quantitative approaches are inherently limited in their capacity to capture (Busetto et al., 2020). The specific qualitative design adopted is a case study approach, which allows for the holistic investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life organizational context. Case study methodology is appropriate when the research seeks to understand the how and why of a social process in a particular setting, and when the boundaries between the phenomenon under investigation and its institutional context are not clearly separable (Ahmed, 2024). The Ulil Albab Amil Zakat Institution in Medan provides the bounded case within which the implementation of vertical communication is investigated.

Data collection employed three complementary techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and documentation review. Interviews were conducted with four key informants at the institution: the organizational leader (director) and three subordinates serving as department heads. This sampling strategy was designed to capture both the leadership perspective on communicative practice and the experiential accounts of subordinates who occupy different positions within the institutional hierarchy. The direct observation of organizational activities, meetings, and daily interactions provided contextual data that supplemented and enriched the interview findings. Documentation review, encompassing organizational records, internal communications, and institutional policy documents, provided additional evidentiary support for the analytical findings. Data analysis proceeded through thematic coding, which involved the systematic identification of recurring patterns, meanings, and organizational constructs across the interview transcripts and

observational field notes, enabling the construction of coherent theoretical interpretations grounded in empirical evidence from the research site (Dewi, 2022). Triangulation across these three data sources ensured the credibility and depth of the findings.

Results And Discussion

Downward Vertical Communication: From Leaders to Subordinates

The analysis of downward communication at the Ulil Albab Amil Zakat Institution reveals a communicative approach characterized by exemplary leadership, motivational guidance, and a consistent concern for employee welfare that extends beyond narrowly transactional understandings of organizational communication. Interview data gathered from the institution's director indicate that leadership communication is understood not as the exercise of unilateral directive authority but as a relational practice through which organizational values, behavioral norms, and institutional expectations are modeled and transmitted through both verbal and nonverbal channels. This understanding of leadership communication aligns closely with the findings of Rasyid et al. (2023), who argue that organizational effectiveness is substantially determined by the degree to which leaders succeed in cultivating a shared sense of collective responsibility and cooperative purpose rather than merely issuing commands.

A particularly significant dimension of downward communication at the institution is the leader's deliberate practice of behavioral modeling. Rather than relying exclusively on verbal directives to establish organizational norms, the director demonstrates discipline, punctuality, adherence to religious obligations including daily prayers and fasting, and character development through consistent personal example (Kazanskaia, 2025b). This approach to leadership communication reflects the Islamic concept of *uswah hasanah*, exemplary conduct that functions as a living embodiment of the values an organization seeks to institutionalize. Such behavioral communication carries a dimension of persuasive authority that exceeds what can be achieved through verbal instruction alone, as it demonstrates the leader's personal commitment to the standards being communicated and thereby enhances their moral credibility as a communicative source.

The institution's evaluative communication practices constitute another critical dimension of downward communication. The director conducts regular evaluations of organizational activities and program implementation, providing employees with substantive feedback, guidance, and motivational reinforcement. These evaluative interactions serve multiple communicative functions simultaneously: they function as accountability mechanisms that promote organizational transparency; they provide developmental guidance that supports employee professional growth; and they communicate the institution's expectation that organizational participation is a serious moral and professional commitment (Harmen et al., 2024). The monitoring of

attendance records is framed not as a surveillance mechanism but as a supportive practice oriented toward cultivating professionalism and sustained organizational engagement. This reframing of institutional monitoring within a relational and developmental discourse demonstrates the communicative sophistication with which the institution's leadership manages what could otherwise be experienced as controlling behavior.

The institutional provision of employee welfare facilities represents an underappreciated dimension of downward communication that carries significant relational meaning. The director's decision to extend health check-up services, internet connectivity, operational transportation, and kitchen facilities to all organizational members communicates institutional care through concrete material action rather than purely discursive means. From an organizational communication perspective, these provisions constitute what may be understood as nonverbal downward communication that addresses employees' physical well-being and operational needs, thereby signaling organizational commitment to the full humanity of its members rather than their mere functional utility (Tosto & Tcherni-Buzzeo, 2025). This approach to institutional communication resonates with the findings of Sharip et al. (2020), who identify empathetic language, broadly construed to include both verbal and material expressions of care, as a critical dimension of effective leadership communication in religious non-profit organizations.

The integration of digital communication technologies into the institution's downward communication infrastructure represents a further dimension of communicative adaptability that merits scholarly attention. While face-to-face meetings and direct evaluations remain the primary modalities of organizational interaction, the institution supplements these with flexible, technology-mediated communication through smartphones, email, Zoom, and related digital platforms (Horan et al., 2022). Work instructions, activity coordination, field reports, and administrative information are regularly transmitted through these channels, enabling continuous communication that transcends the temporal and spatial constraints of formal meetings. This integration of digital communication into organizational practice reflects a broader pattern of organizational adaptation to the communicative affordances of contemporary information technology and demonstrates the institution's commitment to maintaining responsive, accessible, and efficient communication channels. The overall effectiveness of downward communication at the institution is reflected in employee accounts indicating high levels of comprehension, positive reception, and motivational impact.

Upward Vertical Communication: From Subordinates to Leaders

Upward communication from subordinates to leaders constitutes an equally essential dimension of organizational vertical communication, functioning as the primary mechanism through which employees convey their professional contributions, experiential knowledge, and developmental needs to organizational leadership. The

quality of upward communication serves as an indicator of the degree to which downward communication has successfully created a relational climate of trust, psychological safety, and institutional belonging in which subordinates feel empowered to share their perspectives honestly and constructively. Interviews with department heads and other employees at Ulil Albab reveal a pattern of upward communication characterized by openness, initiative, and mutual respect, suggesting that the institution's leadership has successfully cultivated the relational conditions necessary for effective bottom-up communicative practice.

Employees consistently report that leadership actively solicits their ideas, suggestions, and creative contributions rather than merely expecting compliance with institutional directives. This invitation to participate in organizational discourse constitutes a communicative practice of considerable motivational significance: when subordinates experience their voices as genuinely valued rather than merely tolerated, their sense of organizational ownership, professional investment, and institutional loyalty is substantially enhanced (Hamid et al., 2025). The leadership's treatment of employees as individuals to be guided and developed rather than merely as instrumental performers of organizational functions reflects a humanistic philosophy of organizational communication that creates the psychological space necessary for authentic upward communication to occur. This finding resonates with the theoretical position articulated by Sultan (2024), who argues that the cultivation of communicative openness and relational trust by leaders is a prerequisite for the development of harmonious organizational relationships.

The motivational dimension of upward communication at Ulil Albab deserves particular analytical attention. Interview data indicate that organizational leaders consistently provide both material and non-material recognition of employee contributions, acknowledging achievements, affirming professional worth, and celebrating institutional successes in ways that reinforce employees' sense of valued membership in the organizational community. This reciprocal dimension of organizational communication, in which leadership acknowledgment of subordinate contributions generates enhanced employee commitment and productivity, reflects the relational economy of organizational life identified in the human relations tradition of organizational theory. The communicative practices through which leaders express appreciation for subordinate contributions are not incidental to organizational effectiveness but constitute a fundamental mechanism through which institutional harmony is created and sustained (Kelly & Macdonald, 2019).

The formal and informal structures through which upward communication is institutionalized at Ulil Albab reflect a deliberate organizational commitment to participatory communication culture. All organizational members are encouraged to express their opinions freely, and leadership decisions are explicitly informed by the feedback and suggestions received from subordinates, even when final authority rests with the director. This communicative arrangement embodies the principle of *syura*, consultative deliberation, which is central to Islamic organizational ethics and which

positions collective wisdom as a legitimate and valued input into institutional governance. The willingness of leadership to accept, seriously consider, and selectively incorporate subordinate feedback communicates institutional respect for the intellectual and experiential contributions of all organizational members, reinforcing the relational conditions that support sustained organizational harmony (Tampubolon & Rorong, 2023).

The broader communicative climate described by interview participants reflects an organizational environment characterized by high job satisfaction, minimal workplace pressure, and strong relational cohesion among institutional members. This finding is particularly significant in the context of the earlier-cited statistical evidence indicating widespread deterioration of workplace relationship quality in Indonesian organizations. The experience of employees at Ulil Albab thus stands in notable contrast to national trends, suggesting that the institution's deliberate investment in the quality of its vertical communication practices has generated tangible dividends in terms of organizational harmony, employee engagement, and institutional resilience. The willingness of subordinates to provide accurate and transparent reports, fulfill organizational responsibilities diligently, and engage constructively in institutional problem-solving reflects the relational culture that effective vertical communication makes possible.

Barriers to Vertical Communication and Institutional Responses

While the implementation of vertical communication at Ulil Albab is broadly characterized by effectiveness and positive organizational outcomes, the research also identified a set of communicative barriers that, if unaddressed, have the potential to obstruct the flow of organizational information and undermine relational harmony. The recognition and proactive management of these barriers by institutional leadership constitutes an important dimension of the organization's communicative effectiveness and reflects a sophisticated organizational understanding of communication as a dynamic, imperfect, and continuously managed process rather than a mechanical transfer of information.

The most significant barrier identified in the research data involves the intersection of generational differences and cultural norms of deference within the Indonesian organizational context. Younger employees, particularly those recently recruited to the institution, often experience inhibition in expressing their opinions during meetings and evaluation sessions due to deeply internalized cultural norms that associate direct speech with the senior leadership as potentially disrespectful or presumptuous. This phenomenon, which may be understood as a form of communicative self-censorship rooted in cultural hierarchy, represents a structural challenge to the achievement of genuinely open upward communication (Kelly & Macdonald, 2019). The presence of this barrier does not reflect a failure of institutional intent but rather a tension between organizational aspirations for

participatory communication and the cultural dispositions that employees bring to organizational interactions.

Institutional leadership at Ulil Albab has developed a constructive and contextually sensitive response to this barrier through the practice of individualized, face-to-face dialogue between the director and employees who exhibit communicative inhibition in group settings. This approach creates a more psychologically safe communicative environment in which younger employees can express their perspectives, concerns, and aspirations without the social pressures that accompany public discourse in hierarchically structured group contexts. The effectiveness of this personalized communicative strategy reflects the relational intelligence of institutional leadership and demonstrates that communication barriers can be managed through adaptive and empathetic communicative practice rather than through structural redesign alone (Fathurrahman & Efendi, 2025).

Perceptual divergence among organizational members represents a second category of communicative challenge identified in the research. As in any organization comprising individuals with diverse educational backgrounds, professional experiences, and cognitive frameworks, differences in how organizational situations are perceived and interpreted are an inevitable feature of institutional life. When these perceptual differences enter the communicative arena of organizational meetings and deliberative processes, they have the potential to generate misunderstanding, contestation, and interpersonal friction if not skillfully managed (Erben et al., 2019). The institution's leadership addresses this challenge by adopting a deliberate posture of attentive listening during discussions, systematically gathering input from all participants before formulating conclusions, and modeling a communicative orientation of open inquiry rather than defensive authority. This approach transforms perceptual differences from potential sources of organizational conflict into productive inputs for institutional deliberation, aligning with the findings of Sharip et al. (2020) regarding the communicative characteristics of effective leadership in religious non-profit organizations.

A third category of communicative challenge involves the management of subordinate suggestions that, while potentially valuable in the abstract, are not aligned with the institution's strategic vision and mission. The organizational response to this challenge reflects a careful balancing of participatory values with institutional coherence: employees are encouraged to provide suggestions freely, but the evaluative criteria by which suggestions are assessed are explicitly linked to the institution's organizational objectives and ethical commitments (Sharip et al., 2020). This framework communicates to employees that their contributions are valued not unconditionally but within a purposive institutional context, fostering a culture of informed and strategically grounded participation rather than unconstrained individual expression. The overall finding that communication barriers at the institution are relatively minimal and effectively managed is attributable in significant part to the organization's simple hierarchical structure, which minimizes the number of

communicative intermediaries through which messages must pass and thereby reduces the risk of message distortion that accompanies longer and more complex communication chains.

Conclusion

This investigation into the implementation of vertical communication between leaders and subordinates at the Ulil Albab Amil Zakat Institution in Medan, Indonesia, has generated findings of both theoretical and practical significance. The research demonstrates that effective vertical communication within this institutional context is characterized by a distinctive constellation of communicative practices: transparent and exemplary leadership communication that combines verbal direction with behavioral modeling; an organizational culture of openness and participatory deliberation that creates the psychological safety necessary for authentic upward communication; a system of regular evaluation and constructive feedback that maintains organizational accountability while affirming employee development; and the strategic integration of digital communication technologies that extends the reach and accessibility of institutional communication beyond the temporal and spatial constraints of formal meetings.

The harmonious organizational relationships observed at Ulil Albab do not represent a spontaneous or accidental outcome but the product of deliberate, sustained, and ethically grounded communicative investment by institutional leadership. The study's findings affirm the theoretical proposition that organizational harmony is fundamentally communicative in nature: it is constructed through the daily enactment of communicative practices that affirm human dignity, cultivate mutual trust, and align individual professional engagement with institutional purpose (Sultan, 2024; Kazanskaia, 2025a). The institution's capacity to sustain harmonious relationships despite the broader deterioration of workplace relationship quality in Indonesian organizations, as documented by the Work Relationship Index, suggests that deliberate investment in communicative culture can serve as an effective counterforce against the organizational disengagement and relational fragmentation that characterize many contemporary professional environments.

The study also makes a contribution to scholarly understanding of vertical communication in non-profit religious organizations, a context that has been underserved in prior Indonesian organizational communication research. The intersection of professional organizational communication norms and Islamic ethical values governing concepts such as amanah (trustworthiness), syura (consultation), and uswah hasanah (exemplary conduct) creates a distinctive communicative culture that enriches theoretical understanding of how institutional values shape communicative practice. Future research may productively extend this analytical framework to other amil zakat institutions and Islamic non-profit organizations in Indonesia, exploring whether the communicative patterns identified at Ulil Albab represent a broader institutional type or a context-specific achievement. Additionally, longitudinal

investigation of how vertical communication practices evolve as organizations grow in size and structural complexity would contribute valuable insights to the understanding of organizational communication dynamics in the Islamic social finance sector.

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