

# Sustaining Volunteer-Based Organizations Through Strategic Communication: Analyzing The Paradox

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## Abstract

Volunteer-based organizations rarely fail because they lack ideas; more often, they struggle because communication cannot convert intention into coordinated action. This study examines how a leader's communication style shaped the management of organizational activities and volunteer subordinates at Aksarakita Library, a community-based non-profit organization where strategic initiatives, including *pembinaan* (guidance) programs and library consultancy services, repeatedly stalled despite careful planning. Grounded in internal communication theory, communication style theory, situational leadership theory, Aristotle's rhetorical framework, and Conversational Intelligence, the research employed a qualitative descriptive design within a constructivist paradigm. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and organizational document analysis involving five purposively selected informants representing different organizational roles. Analysis followed the interactive model, while credibility was reinforced through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking. The findings reveal a persistent tension between appearance and practice. The leader projected authority through steady eye contact and confident vocal delivery, yet these strengths were undermined by unclear delegation, pressure-driven language, and episodes of passive indecision. This inconsistency blurred responsibilities, weakened administrative accountability, eroded volunteer motivation, and gradually diminished organizational engagement. The study argues that leadership communication in volunteer-based non-profit organizations extends well beyond interpersonal interaction; it serves as a strategic organizational capability that sustains coordination, trust, and institutional continuity. Strengthening structured internal communication while cultivating leadership grounded in clarity, empathy, credibility, and consistent follow-through offers a practical pathway toward more resilient and sustainable organizational performance.

**Keywords:** *leadership communication style; internal communication; non-profit organization; volunteer engagement; sustainable organization*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduce the Problem

Within contemporary organizational management, communication extends far beyond the simple exchange of information. It operates as the organization's "nervous system," sustaining its vitality while coordinating the countless interactions required for long-term survival. Much like the biological nervous system that regulates an organism's response to its surroundings, organizational communication transmits intention, aligns resources, and preserves internal balance amid changing circumstances. Leadership effectiveness, therefore, is not determined

solely by authority or formal position, but by the capacity to unite individuals around a common purpose and translate shared aspirations into collective action. This reality becomes even more pronounced in non-profit organizations such as the Aksarakita Library, where financial rewards are largely absent and volunteer commitment depends heavily on meaningful interpersonal communication. Once this communicative system begins to falter, organizational energy gradually dissipates. Planned initiatives lose momentum, member commitment weakens, and the organization struggles to sustain its intended direction.

Established in 2002 within Gereja Kristen Jawa (GKJ) Jakarta, the Aksarakita Library has long served as an important center for both educational development and spiritual enrichment. During the 2015–2017 leadership period, however, the organization experienced a noticeable decline in its ability to transform plans into concrete outcomes. Although previous leadership periods had demonstrated professional organizational management, this particular tenure revealed an increasingly wide gap between strategic planning and program implementation. Several flagship initiatives—including the pembinaan (guidance and development) program and the library consultancy service designed to support other church libraries—never progressed beyond the planning stage and remained largely inactive.

Preliminary observations, supported by initial interviews, suggested that this organizational stagnation could not be explained simply by technical or administrative shortcomings. Instead, the leader's communication emerged as a central concern. Informants consistently described the leader's use of tutur kata yang memaksa (pressuring and forceful language), accompanied by instructions that often lacked the clarity necessary for effective delegation and coordinated action. Rather than encouraging initiative, this communication pattern gradually created friction within the volunteer team and fostered an atmosphere of hesitation and disengagement.

The organizational consequences became increasingly visible over time. Interviews with Y, a church office staff member, revealed that administrative reports were repeatedly left unsubmitted to the church office. This issue extended well beyond an isolated lapse in the Secretary's responsibilities. It reflected a deeper organizational problem: the planned programs themselves had failed to materialize because communication barriers prevented members from carrying out their assigned responsibilities effectively. In other words, administrative failure represented the final symptom of a broader breakdown in leadership communication rather than its primary cause.

The significance of effective leadership communication becomes even clearer when Aksarakita's experience is compared with other organizations operating under the same ecclesiastical framework. Pre-research interviews conducted with YA and AF indicated that these organizations consistently implemented their planned work programs with considerably greater success. Their leaders were perceived as communicating through an intonation, style of delivery, and non-verbal expressions that cultivated cooperation, mutual respect, and shared ownership among members. Communication, in these contexts, functioned not as an instrument of control but as a catalyst for collaboration.

This contrast underscores a fundamental insight. Although GKJ organizations, including Aksarakita, operated under nearly identical institutional structures and ecclesiastical mandates, their organizational outcomes differed markedly. The distinguishing factor lay not in organizational design but in the way leadership communication was enacted. Within Aksarakita, the leader's communicative manner became a hambatan—a barrier that interrupted the transition from strategic planning to meaningful execution. While leaders in comparable organizations employed gestures, tone of voice, and interpersonal interactions to invite participation and reinforce collective commitment, the Aksarakita leader's forceful verbal delivery, coupled with moments of situational passivity, gradually eroded volunteer enthusiasm, weakened organizational cohesion, and ultimately stalled the realization of the library's strategic programs.

## *1.2 Synthesis of Theoretical Framework*

A recurring observation runs throughout this assessment. The principal weakness of PP Tunas is not the absence of a protective mandate, which Indonesian law amply supplies, but the

indeterminacy of the operational layer that would make that mandate enforceable. That indeterminacy cuts in two directions simultaneously, leaving children inadequately protected where regulatory standards remain vague while imposing substantial compliance burdens on electronic system operators where obligations are insufficiently defined. This pattern reappears throughout the Regulation's design and forms the central analytical theme of the present assessment.

Rather than operating independently, the theories employed in this study collectively explain the communication phenomenon observed within Aksarakita Library. Organizational theory provides the macro-level perspective by conceptualizing communication as the mechanism sustaining organizational functioning. Internal communication theory explains how information flows between leaders and members. Communication style theory identifies behavioral characteristics that influence message reception. Situational leadership explains the contextual appropriateness of leadership behavior. Aristotle's rhetorical framework evaluates persuasive communication effectiveness, while Conversational Intelligence explains how dialogue generates organizational trust and collaborative engagement.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives enables a comprehensive understanding of why organizational programs stagnated despite formal planning. The findings suggest that organizational failure resulted not from deficiencies in planning or structural design but from ineffective communication practices that disrupted trust, coordination, motivation, and collective action. Consequently, leadership communication should be understood as a multidimensional process integrating verbal behavior, relational competence, rhetorical effectiveness, and conversational quality rather than merely transmitting organizational information.

This theoretical framework is constructed based on the constructivist paradigm, which views communication as a process of meaning construction through social interaction. In the context of Aksarakita Library, leadership communication style is not interpreted as a one-way transmission process, but rather as a dynamic interaction between leader and subordinates within the organizational environment. The framework emphasizes that internal communication, verbal and non-verbal interaction, as well as organizational culture, continuously influence how subordinates interpret leadership behavior. Through this interaction process, meanings regarding leadership effectiveness, participation, trust, and organizational activities are socially constructed by organizational members.

### *1.3 Describe Relevant Scholarship*

A robust theoretical framework is indispensable for deconstructing the subjective interpersonal interactions that occur within a social unit. Without a theoretical "lens," leadership behavior remains a series of isolated incidents; with it, these behaviors form a pattern that explains organizational success or failure. This study builds upon the foundations laid by Cayadi (2016) and Sumiwi (2022), who examined leadership and interpersonal communication within ecclesiastical and non-profit settings.

The present study is grounded in the assumption that communication constitutes the primary mechanism through which organizations maintain coordination, commitment, and collective action. Rather than functioning merely as an instrument for information dissemination, communication shapes organizational reality by influencing how members interpret leadership intentions and organizational goals. Robins & Coulter (2023) argue that organizations operate as open social systems in which communication links individual behaviors to organizational objectives. Consequently, ineffective communication disrupts organizational equilibrium, weakens coordination among members, and ultimately reduces organizational effectiveness.

Within the context of Aksarakita Library, organizational communication failure was not primarily caused by structural limitations but by the leader's inability to transform organizational objectives into shared understanding. Although organizational programs had been formally planned, communication deficiencies prevented members from translating these plans into coordinated actions. This phenomenon demonstrates that communication quality functions as a determinant of organizational sustainability, particularly within volunteer-based

organizations where member commitment depends largely on interpersonal relationships rather than financial incentives.

Internal communication theory provides the principal analytical framework for understanding the interaction between leaders and organizational members. Internal communication encompasses both formal and informal exchanges that facilitate coordination, decision-making, motivation, and organizational learning. Effective internal communication requires not only accurate message transmission but also mutual understanding between leaders and followers.

Communication within organizations generally occurs through downward, upward, and horizontal channels. Downward communication involves transmitting organizational objectives, instructions, responsibilities, and performance expectations from leaders to members. Upward communication enables members to provide feedback, report organizational conditions, and communicate emerging problems. Horizontal communication supports coordination among individuals occupying similar organizational positions.

The empirical findings indicate significant weaknesses across these communication channels. Downward communication was characterized by ambiguous instructions, emotionally charged language, and inconsistent message delivery. Simultaneously, upward communication became increasingly constrained because members felt reluctant to express concerns or provide constructive feedback. The resulting communication climate discouraged collaboration and gradually reduced organizational participation. This communication breakdown illustrates that organizational effectiveness depends not solely on the transmission of information but also on the relational quality established through leader-member interactions.

Leadership communication style constitutes one of the central variables examined in this study. McKay, Davis, and Fanning (2018) classify communication styles into three primary categories: assertive, aggressive, and passive. Assertive communication is characterized by directness, clarity, mutual respect, and confidence. Leaders employing assertive communication express expectations explicitly while simultaneously respecting the rights and dignity of organizational members. Such communication promotes trust, psychological safety, and collaborative problem-solving.

Aggressive communication, in contrast, prioritizes organizational objectives while neglecting interpersonal relationships. Aggressive communicators frequently employ threatening language, excessive criticism, elevated vocal intensity, or coercive expressions that suppress participation. Although aggressive communication may generate immediate compliance, it frequently produces long-term disengagement, interpersonal conflict, and declining organizational commitment.

Passive communication represents the opposite extreme, in which leaders avoid confrontation, hesitate to communicate expectations clearly, and postpone organizational decisions. Excessive passivity often generates uncertainty because members receive insufficient guidance regarding organizational priorities.

The Aksarakita Library case demonstrates an important theoretical paradox. Although the leader frequently attempted to communicate organizational expectations, the communication process simultaneously displayed characteristics of aggressive verbal expression and passive managerial behavior. Forceful language was combined with indecisiveness regarding organizational follow-up, resulting in contradictory leadership signals. This inconsistency weakened members' confidence in leadership and contributed to declining organizational performance.

Situational Leadership Theory suggests that leadership effectiveness depends upon the leader's capacity to adapt communication behaviors according to followers' competence and commitment. Pace and Faules (2015) describe four primary leadership approaches: Telling, Selling (Promoting), Participating, and Delegating. The Telling style emphasizes task orientation through explicit instruction and close supervision. Selling combines directive behavior with supportive communication to increase member understanding and motivation.

Participating emphasizes collaborative decision-making and interpersonal relationships, while Delegating grants substantial autonomy to organizational members.

Volunteer organizations generally require leadership behaviors emphasizing participation and empowerment because members are motivated primarily through intrinsic commitment rather than formal authority. The findings suggest that the leader of Aksarakita predominantly relied upon directive communication without providing sufficient relational support. Consequently, organizational members experienced reduced psychological ownership, leading to declining participation in planned activities.

The mismatch between leadership behavior and organizational context supports the central assumption of situational leadership theory that leadership effectiveness depends not on the use of a single communication style but on the leader's ability to adapt communication strategies to followers' developmental needs.

The effectiveness of leadership communication extends beyond message content to include the credibility of the communicator, emotional engagement with followers, and logical coherence of organizational decisions. Aristotle's rhetorical framework conceptualizes these dimensions through Ethos, Pathos, and Logos (West & Turner, 2019). Ethos refers to the leader's credibility and moral character. Organizational members are more likely to accept directives when they perceive the leader as trustworthy, competent, and ethically consistent. Pathos concerns the leader's capacity to establish emotional connection with organizational members. Within volunteer organizations, emotional engagement is particularly significant because participation depends largely on intrinsic motivation rather than contractual obligation. Logos reflects the logical consistency of organizational arguments and decision-making. Leaders who communicate clear rationales for organizational activities increase members' understanding and willingness to participate.

The communication practices observed within Aksarakita reveal weaknesses across all three rhetorical dimensions. Forceful language weakened perceptions of credibility (Ethos), limited emotional connection (Pathos), and often failed to communicate coherent organizational reasoning (Logos). Consequently, communication effectiveness deteriorated despite the existence of formally established organizational objectives.

To complement classical communication theory, this research incorporates Conversational Intelligence (CI) as an interpretive framework for understanding leader-member interaction. CI emphasizes that organizational transformation occurs through conversations that build trust, psychological safety, and collaborative thinking. Traditional leadership frequently relies upon "Tell-Direct" communication patterns, where leaders emphasize instruction and control. Conversely, CI advocates an "Ask-Listen-Discover" approach in which leaders actively encourage dialogue, shared understanding, and collective problem-solving.

The empirical findings suggest that the communication practices within Aksarakita remained largely transactional rather than transformational. Interactions primarily involved unilateral instruction with limited opportunities for reciprocal dialogue. This communication pattern reduced member engagement and diminished opportunities for collaborative innovation. CI therefore provides an important extension to traditional internal communication theory by explaining how conversational quality influences organizational trust and volunteer commitment.

#### *1.4 Research Objective*

The core challenge facing the Aksarakita Library is the failure of internal communication theories to translate into effective leadership practice. The research question asks: How does the leader's communication style in the Aksarakita Library influence the management of activities and subordinates based on internal communication theory

The formal objective is to analyse the leader's communication style in daily activity management to determine why established programs was failed. By understanding these practical breakdowns, we seek to illuminate the theoretical underpinnings that govern

interpersonal interactions in non-profit social units, specifically examining the alignment of verbal and non-verbal delivery.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach within the constructivist paradigm and the socio-cultural tradition. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand how leadership communication style is socially constructed and interpreted by organizational members within the everyday context of a non-profit community library. Rather than measuring leadership effectiveness through numerical indicators, this study explored participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings concerning the leader's communication practices. Constructivism assumes that organizational realities are co-created through social interaction, while the socio-cultural tradition views communication as the process through which organizational culture, shared meanings, and collective identities are continuously produced and reproduced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Littlejohn et al., 2021).

The research was conducted at Aksarakita Library, a community-based non-profit library established to promote literacy and reading culture. The organization relies primarily on volunteer participation, making communication between leaders and members a crucial element in sustaining organizational activities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they possessed direct experience and knowledge relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). Five key informants representing different organizational roles participated in this study: the Secretary (IL), who was responsible for documenting organizational meetings, recording administrative activities, and maintaining organizational documentation; the Vice Chairperson (YY), who assisted the chairperson in coordinating organizational activities and supervising volunteers; two Management Members (YM and YS), who coordinated weekly library operations and volunteer activities; and one Library User (MU), whose experiences provided an external perspective regarding leadership communication and library services. Selecting participants from different organizational positions enabled the researcher to capture multiple perspectives while enhancing the credibility of the findings through data source triangulation.

### *2.2 Research Design*

Primary data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and non-participant observations. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to explain their experiences while allowing the researcher sufficient flexibility to probe emerging issues relevant to leadership communication (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guide covered several themes, including leadership communication style, verbal and non-verbal communication, delegation practices, decision-making processes, conflict management, member motivation, organizational climate, and the perceived impact of leadership communication on organizational performance.

Non-participant observations were conducted during organizational meetings and routine library activities to capture naturally occurring communication behaviours. Particular attention was given to verbal and non-verbal interactions, including tone of voice, eye contact, turn-taking, interaction patterns, feedback exchanges, and leader-member participation. Observation findings complemented the interview data by providing direct evidence of communication practices within the organizational setting. Secondary data were obtained from organizational documents, meeting minutes, internal reports, library activity records, and relevant scholarly literature concerning leadership communication and organizational behaviour.

### *2.3 Research Design*

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies recommended for qualitative research were employed (Denzin et al., 2023). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from organizational leaders, management members, administrative personnel, and library users. Method triangulation was achieved by integrating interview data, observations, and documentary evidence. Member checking was undertaken by confirming interview interpretations with selected participants to minimize researcher bias and improve interpretive accuracy. In addition, an audit trail documenting interview notes, observation records, coding decisions, and analytical memos was maintained throughout the research process to enhance transparency, dependability, and confirmability.

## *2.4 Data Analysis*

The collected data were analysed using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection through four iterative stages. First, data condensation involved transcribing interviews verbatim, organizing field notes, coding meaningful statements, and reducing the data into categories relevant to leadership communication. Second, the data were displayed through thematic matrices that facilitated comparison across participants and enabled the identification of recurring communication patterns. Third, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified by comparing emerging themes with observational evidence and documentary data until coherent interpretations were achieved. Throughout the analytical process, constant comparison techniques were employed to identify similarities and differences across participants' experiences.

The emerging themes were interpreted using organizational communication theory (Pace & Faules, 2015), leadership theory (Northouse, 2022), and organizational systems theory (Robins & Coulter, 2021). This analytical approach enabled the researcher to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a deeper understanding of how leadership communication shaped volunteer motivation, organizational coordination, and the sustainability of the Aksarakita Library. Because communication behaviours such as tone of voice, persuasive language, eye contact, and interpersonal interaction are context-dependent and socially interpreted, qualitative analysis provided richer explanatory power than quantitative measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **3. Result**

### *3.1 Assertive Communication Characteristics*

Observational data indicated that the leader displayed several behavioural characteristics commonly associated with an assertive communication style, including maintaining steady eye contact, speaking with consistent vocal volume, and demonstrating confidence during meetings. These behaviours projected authority and credibility. However, interview findings revealed that these assertive characteristics were not consistently accompanied by clear instructional communication or systematic delegation.

Several participants explained that meeting outcomes frequently lacked operational clarity regarding responsibilities, timelines, and expected outputs. Consequently, volunteers experienced uncertainty when implementing organizational programs. This finding supports Pace and Faules' (2015) argument that effective organizational communication requires not only confidence in delivery but also clarity, completeness, and shared understanding of work expectations.

### *3.2 Situational Aggressive Communication*

The findings further revealed episodes of aggressive communication characterized by pressuring language ("tutur kata yang memaksa"), limited openness toward differing opinions, and occasional disregard for collective decisions reached during meetings. Participants reported

that these behaviours discouraged open discussion and reduced their willingness to contribute ideas.

Rather than facilitating collaborative decision-making, communication occasionally reflected an autocratic orientation in which organizational authority became concentrated in the leader. Such communication practices reduced psychological safety among volunteers and weakened organizational commitment, consistent with Ruben and Stewart's (2019) conceptualization of ineffective interpersonal communication within organizations.

### *3.3 Situational Passive Communication*

Conversely, the leader also demonstrated passive communication tendencies in situations requiring decisive leadership. Participants described prolonged discussions that ended without clear decisions or follow-up actions. Although intended to avoid interpersonal conflict, this communication pattern generated ambiguity regarding organizational priorities.

The absence of decisive communication delayed program implementation, reduced accountability, and created uncertainty among committee members regarding their respective responsibilities. This situational passivity illustrates that leadership communication effectiveness depends not merely on avoiding conflict but on balancing participation with timely decision-making.

### *3.4 Consequences for Organizational Performance*

The coexistence of assertive, aggressive, and passive communication styles created inconsistent communication experiences throughout the organization. Rather than establishing predictable communication norms, the fluctuating leadership style contributed to organizational confusion. Three major consequences emerged from the thematic analysis.

*First*, reduced volunteer motivation. Participants expressed declining enthusiasm to initiate or complete organizational tasks because communication increasingly relied on pressure rather than encouragement and recognition. *Second*, coordination difficulties. Ambiguous delegation and inconsistent follow-up hindered cooperation among committee members, resulting in incomplete administrative reports, delayed activities, and weakened program implementation. *Third*, declining organizational engagement. Participants perceived that interpersonal relationships became less collaborative over time, reducing the collective commitment that had previously characterized Aksarakita Library's volunteer culture.

## **4. Discussion**

Viewed through the perspective of organizational communication theory (Pace & Faules, 2015), leadership effectiveness depends upon the integration of information sharing, relationship building, and coordinated action. While the leader demonstrated confidence through non-verbal communication, the absence of consistent instructional communication limited organizational effectiveness.

Similarly, leadership theory (Northouse, 2022) suggests that effective leaders adapt their communication behaviours to situational demands. In the present study, leadership communication shifted unpredictably between assertive, aggressive, and passive tendencies, preventing the development of stable communication norms required within volunteer-based organizations.

Overall, the findings suggest that leadership communication in a non-profit organization extends beyond interpersonal competence. It functions as a strategic mechanism that shapes volunteer motivation, organizational trust, collaborative culture, and the long-term sustainability of community-based initiatives. The study therefore demonstrates that effective leadership communication requires consistency between verbal messages, non-verbal behaviours, decision-making practices, and relational sensitivity.

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