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Internal crisis communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury department

By

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(324052)

A research report submitted to the School of Governance, University of the Witwatersrand, in 50% fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management (in the field of Governance & Management).

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Abstract

Never has there been a greater demand for internal communication than under COVID-19. It has spread uncertainty within organizations, reduced trust, and had a massive impact on individuals.

This research examined the internal crisis communication strategies in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury (GPT) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, looking at identifying internal crisis communication strategies implemented by the Gauteng Provincial Treasury in response to the pandemic, how employees perceive existing strategies, and their preferred communication strategies during a crisis.

The study employed an exploratory qualitative research methodology. To gain detailed insight into the internal crisis communication of the Gauteng Provincial Treasury, the researcher used semi-structured face-to-face interviews as a research instrument. First, the researcher interviewed a GPT communication manager to gain information on the internal crisis communication strategies utilized by the Department during the pandemic.

The second set of interviews consisted of 12 employees of the GPT to examine their perceptions of the internal crisis communication strategies utilized by the Department and their views on how they would like to be communicated during a crisis (COVID-19 pandemic).

The results revealed that the Gauteng Provincial Treasury implemented the Transparency strategy by providing employees with information about what had occurred and the steps taken; the department intended to lower the uncertainty brought on by the crisis and subsequently foster a sense of security among employees. However, failing to provide timely and consistent communication during the crisis negatively influenced employees' perception of that communication.

Key words: Communication, Crisis, Gauteng

Declaration

I, [Sindisiwe Nompilo Khumalo (324052)], declare that this dissertation, titled Internal crisis communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury, is my own unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Management Gov (Governance & Management) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Further, I have not submitted this write-up before for any other purpose apart from the 'Research Report (PADM7213A)'at the WITS School of Governance.

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Sindisiwe Nompilo Khumalo

July 2023

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Contents

Abstract 2
Declaration 3
Acknowledgment 4
List of abbreviations 7
List of tables 8
List of figures 9
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 10
1.1 Introduction and background 10
1.2 Problem statement 13
1.3 Purpose of the study 15
1.4 Research objectives 15
1.5 Research questions 15
1.6 Significance of the study 15
1.7 Chapters' outline 16
1.8 Conclusion 17
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 18
2.1 Introduction 18
2.2 Crisis communication 18
2.3 Internal crisis communication 19
2.4 Internal (crisis) Communication and COVID-19 22
2.5 Communication Strategies of Organizations in Crisis 25
2.5.1 A research model of internal crisis communication strategies 28
2.6 Conclusion 31
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY 33
3.1 Introduction 33
3.2 Research approach 33
3.3 Research design 33
3.4 Research data collection tools 33
3.5 Sampling Techniques and sample size 34
3.6 Pre-testing of research tools 35
3.7 Data analysis 36
3.8 Limitations of the Study 36
3.9 Ethical consideration 37
3.10 Validity and reliability 38
3.11 Chapter Conclusion 39

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS 40
4.1 Introduction 40
4.2 Profile of participants 40
4.3 Internal crisis communication at GPT during the COVID-19 pandemic (managers' response) 41
4.3.1 Internal crisis communication content 41
4.3.2 Internal crisis communication objectives 42
4.4 Internal crisis communication strategies adopted by the GPT in dealing with COVID-19- GPT (employees' perspective) 44
4.4.1 Internal crisis communication content 44
4.4.2 Internal crisis communication objectives 46
4.4.3 Internal communication strategy of the department 47
4.5 Effectiveness of the internal crisis communication strategies implemented 48
4.6 Communication channels 49
4.7 How employees prefer to be communicated 50
4.8 Suggestions for effective internal crisis communication 50
4.9 Conclusion 52
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS 54
5.1 Introduction 54
5.2 Main Findings 54
5.3 Recommendation 56
5.3.1 Policy Implications 56
5.3.2 Recommendations for further research 56
5.4 Conclusion 57
6. References 58

List of abbreviations

CC	Crisis Communication
DPSA	Department of Public Service and Administration
GPT	Gauteng Provincial Treasury
ICC	Internal Crisis Communication
SCCT	Situational Crisis Communication Theory

List of tables

Table 1 Internal crisis communication content *42*
Table 2 Internal crisis communication objectives *43*
Table 3 Internal crisis communication content *45*
Table 4 Internal crisis communication objectives *47*

List of figures

Figure 1 Internal crisis communication strategies: a multidimensional model; adopted from Internal Journal of Business Communication..... 48

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction and background

Crisis communication is the dialogue taking place in many forms between the organization and its employees concerning a crisis. In order to reduce employee uncertainty and reputational harm, organizations in crisis are expected to engage in crisis communication. Crisis communication involves gathering, processing, and delivering crisis information (Kim et al., 2019).

Researchers concur that internal stakeholders were neglected during times of crisis in the past (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Adamu & Mohamad, 2019a; Johansen et al., 2012a; Ravazzani, 2016 and Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). Adamu and Mohamad (2019) state that researchers viewed or studied organizational crises as reputational or economic problems instead of ethical or systematic problems, which means that in times of crisis, the priority for an organization would be effective communication with external stakeholders.

Recently, researchers have recognized that it is critical to make a positive impression on employees and acquire their support in times of crisis (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019). Hence the recent outcry by scholars for crisis communication research to move away from exclusively focusing on the external dimension while neglecting the most critical internal dimension, the employees (Kim et al., 2019).

As identified by Adamu and Mohamad (2019), internal crisis communication refers to how organizations clearly and effectively communicate before, during, and after a crisis. Under normal day-to-day circumstances, internal communication is essential for the proper functioning of an organization as it creates a sense of community and maintains the relationship between the organization and its employees (David, 2011). Prior research has found that effective or excellent communication contributes to an organization's relationship by providing employees with timely, helpful, clear, and accurate information. On the other hand, poor communication or the absence of communication generates adverse outcomes and a loss of trust between the organization and employees during a crisis (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019).

According to the literature, a crisis is defined as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can have a serious

impact on an organization's performance and generate a negative outcome" (Coombs & Holladay 2010: 19)

During a crisis, change, or period of transformation, internal communication becomes even more critical. Previous researchers found that crises produce uncertainty, low commitment, ambiguity, and dissatisfaction with communication for employees (Li et al., 2021). So internal communication is essential in rebuilding shared meanings and activating a new vision for the organization (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011). The organization can use internal communication to inform employees of what is needed and communicate current changes and new priorities to promote employee commitment (Tench & Yeomans, 2017).

Recognizing the critical role communication plays in times of crisis, scholars (Huang et al., 2005; Dzenan, 2017; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015a) have focused their research on identifying the most effective strategies for crisis communication. Previous research states that an organization under crisis must tell a credible story (Stephens et al., 2005). This is done by utilizing different strategies to deliver messages explaining the situation. Previous research uncovered that the choice of communication strategy affects how employees perceive the crisis and the image of the organization (Stephens et al., 2005). Thus, communication strategies are critical during a crisis as they are used to make sense of ambiguity and uncertainty experienced by employees.

Over the years, researchers have developed many effective and ineffective crisis communication strategies from their experience collecting and comparing multiple instances of organizational crises (Marsen, 2020a). Benoit (1997) developed the Image Repair Theory, which consists of five strategies organizations utilize to restore the organization's image. Coombs (1995) developed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which has since become the dominant theory in crisis communication that provides strategies for protecting organizational reputation (Kim et al., 2019). The discourse renewal theory focuses on how an organization reforms its image for the future and proposes that an organization consider its identity and social position to effectively manage a crisis (Marsen, 2020a).

However, most of these theories and research focused on external rather than internal communication (Dzenan, 2017; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015a). Mazzei and Ravazzani (2011) developed a model of different internal crisis communication strategies utilized

by organizations in crisis. Since then, only two studies, Dzenan (2017) and Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) since the writing of this research proposal have used the model to determine how organizations internally communicate in times of crisis. Mazzei and Ravazzani's (2015a) model listed five internal crisis communication strategies (transparency, cohesion, activation of behaviors, Evasion, and under-utilization) differing only in the context and objectives organizations utilise during crisis times.

Most crisis communication has focused on strategies for preserving or improving an institution's image or reputation and lowering the external public's intentions (Kim et al., 2019). The little research focused mainly on internal crisis communication has made us aware of the different communication strategies available for organizations during crises. However, little is known about how employees perceive these communication strategies and how they want to be communicated.

Thus, the central focus of this study is to examine and identify the internal crisis communication strategies used to communicate information to employees during a crisis and find out how employees perceive these strategies.

According to Ecklebe and Löffler (2021), Employee demand for internal communication and information has never been greater than it is right now due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in 2019 and has substantially impacted most organizations. It has spread uncertainty within organizations, reduced trust, and had a massive impact on individuals. Organizations have had to adapt their work processes, placing enormous demands on internal communication.

Based on the above, this research explores internal crisis communication strategies employed by the Gauteng Provincial Treasury (GPT) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically looking at identifying internal crisis communication strategies implemented by the Gauteng Provincial Treasury in response to the pandemic, how employees perceived existing strategies, and how they want to be communicated during a crisis.

This research is based on a case study within a public organization with provincial mandates of providing good governance through sound fiscal stewardship in the province. This mandate means that the GPT ensures that provincial outcomes are adequately funded and resourced by implementing key projects and initiatives. The department has had a role in the financial planning and distribution of funds to other

departments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like other departments, the department has been affected by the global COVID-19 crisis. Although COVID-19 has not been a crisis for the organization, it has brought about substantial organizational changes and has had a massive impact on its internal processes. Work practices had to change. Currently, 60% of the staff works from home while others rotate. The COVID-19 global crisis has had an unexpectedly strong impact on the department, creating and spreading uncertainty amongst employees about the future of work. It is a department with a significant role in managing the pandemic at a provincial level, and it is fascinating to study how it has handled the COVID-19 pandemic situation internally.

1.2 Problem statement

Effective Internal communication is essential during times of crisis, and never has there been a demand for it than under the current conditions in which the world finds itself. Currently, the world is facing challenging times due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has had and continues to impact the economic, political, and social well-being of the citizens of South Africa. Throughout 2020 and 2021, shops have been temporally closed nationwide, compulsory mask wear introduced, and limits on social gatherings imposed (Heide & Simonsson, 2021).

In particular, the pandemic has profoundly influenced organizations; it has transformed the world of work. Organizations have had to change their business models due to the evolving markets. Many employees lost their jobs; some became part-time workers while others worked from home (Heide & Simonsson, 2021).

Even though the pandemic has not been a crisis for all organizations, it has changed organizations' internal processes. Due to the new work processes, they have had to develop new ways of managing, leading, and communicating, such as working from home or on a rotational basis. The pandemic has generated unanticipated scenarios loaded with complexity and ambiguity, resulting in what Weick (1993) refers to as cosmology events, in which individuals suddenly sense that the universe is no longer a rational, ordered place. (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Because of the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees are left feeling stressed, fearful, and speculating on the influence the pandemic will have on their jobs (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

The researcher has observed that internal communication in the GPT seems challenging and even more so during the current COVID-19 pandemic. In the past (before COVID-19), employees raised dissatisfaction concerning internal communication processes within the Department and union meetings. Employees have voiced their frustrations about not being informed about current developments, changes, and new initiatives affecting their work.

The findings of the *Employee Satisfaction Survey Report, (2019*) conducted by the GPT and the Department of Public Service and Administration in 2019 revealed an absence of clear communication and direction by top management. They cited top management's lack of transparent information sharing regarding the Gauteng Provincial Government Structure to support this statement. Another finding is a lack of communication by managers regarding the mandate and strategic direction of the department. According to participants, the lack of communication confused managers and employees alike.

The COVID-19 global pandemic highlights communication problems faced by all organizations, but in GPT, current communication issues are made worse by older internal communication problems. In other words, COVID-19 has complicated matters that were already difficult. In a short time, the department had to find new ways of communicating, leading, and managing when employees had to work from home. COVID-19 has created uncertainty and ambiguity, raising new demands on internal communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2021). There are talks of the new "normal"; however, there is confusion as there has been no communication about what the new "normal" entails.

From a research perspective, exploring internal communication strategies during the current pandemic gives us a rare opportunity to deepen our knowledge of internal communication and extend our understanding of internal communication (Ruck & Men, 2021).

It is hoped that the study's findings will reveal to the communication practitioners how the employees view their internal communication strategies regarding the pandemic and what can be changed in their internal communication strategies not only in crises but in their normal day-to-day conditions.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to understand and examine the internal crisis communication strategies used by the Gauteng Provincial Treasury during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.4 Research objectives

- To examine the internal crisis communication strategies used by the GPT in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.
- To ascertain employees' perceptions about the internal crisis communication strategies utilized by the Department during COVID-19.
- To explore which crisis communication strategies employees prefer to be utilized during a crisis
- To gather information on suggestions to address the challenges with the existing strategies.

1.5 Research questions

The primary research question for this study is: what internal crisis communication strategies were adopted and utilized by the Gauteng Provincial Treasury during COVID-19?

The Sub-questions of the study are:

- What internal crisis communication strategies did the GPT adopt in dealing with the global COVID-19 crisis that started in 2019?
- How do employees perceive these internal communication strategies?
- How do employees want to be communicated to during a crisis?

1.6 Significance of the study

The following justify why such a study should be conducted: Firstly, this topic has not been covered in the South African context. As this study will show in the literature review, most of the research on internal communication is conducted in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Only a few studies have been conducted from an African perspective (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019). Furthermore, there are fewer published cases and analyses of internal communication among government agencies. Only a

few studies have examined crises within government departments than those in corporations.

Secondly, the demand for internal communication has recently increased due to the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Business conditions have changed drastically; these new conditions pose new challenges.

Lastly, most of the research on internal communication is based on the management perspective rather than the employee perspective. More research is required on employees' preference for internal communication strategies utilized by organizations in crisis to ensure they meet employees' needs (Ruck & Welch, 2012).

1.7 Chapters' outline

The study is presented in chapters following a logical flow. Below is an explanation of what each chapter entails:

Chapter One of the research consists of the introduction, background, problem statement, purpose, objectives, questions, and significance of the study.

Chapter Two consists of the literature review and theoretical framework supporting this study. The chapter covers the ideas, theories, methods, and other pertinent information needed to understand the role of internal crisis communication strategies in an organization.

Chapter Three is the methodology chapter. The chapter describes the research approach, design, data collection tools, and sampling techniques. The chapter further outlines the limitations and ethical considerations and details the validity and reliability of the study.

Chapter Four is the presentation and discussion of the results of the study. In this chapter, data is analyzed, presented, and discussed.

Chapter Five is the last chapter of the research report. The main findings are presented, recommendations outlined, and ends with a conclusion.

1.8 Conclusion

The chapter introduced the research study and provided the background of the study. Research questions and objectives were presented. The next chapter presents an extensive and complete review of the literature and theoretical frameworks underpinning internal crisis communication within organizations.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Looking at some of the highly published organizational crisis literature (which researchers have used as crisis context for their research), we can see that organizations that fail to communicate effectively during a crisis tend to suffer serious consequences(https://www.ou.edu).

The effective management of a crisis largely depends on crisis communication, which is made up of quick and accurate communication of the ongoing crisis by the organization to its employees (Onyinye, 2019).

Previous researchers attest to the importance of communication in crisis management, seeing as the primary responsibility of crisis managers is collecting, processing, and distributing information to different stakeholders. Communication is essential in organizations experiencing a crisis. We have seen from past studies that stakeholders need different kinds of information in every crisis phase to help them cope with the crisis (Onyinye, 2019).

The following section consists of a review of crisis communication, internal crisis communication, internal crisis communication and COVID-19 communication strategies of organizations in crisis and ends with a conclusion.

2.2 Crisis communication

Coombs and Holladay (2016) define crisis communication as the collecting, processing, and disseminating critical information essential for handling the crisis by the organization. They state that crisis communication occurs in all three phases of crisis management, before, during, and after a crisis.

Crisis communication is one field that has seen tremendous growth both in the professional and academic fields over the past decade (Coombs & Holladay, 2016).

The first trend in crisis communication research is that most research is on strategic crisis communication concerned with crisis response which is what institutions do and say after a crisis. Researchers agree that attention to crisis response is warranted because an organization's response can improve or worsen a crisis. Additionally, crisis

responses are very visible to stakeholders; therefore, stakeholders scrutinize them. In addition, scholars conquer that even though there is this sudden intense focus on the topic; a lot still needs to be known and discovered about crisis communication during a crisis response (Coombs & Holladay, 2016)

The second trend is that researchers' focus has been on the external dimension of crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Heide and Simonsson, 2015; Yeomans & Bowman, 2021). Specifically, the focus has been on the crisis response strategies applied after a crisis by an organization as a tool for restoring or protecting its image from external stakeholders (Johansen et al., 2012). Researchers concur that little is known about what goes on inside an organization in times of crisis, especially the internal crisis communication strategies that organizations apply during such times (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015a) and (Dzenan, 2017).

The last trend is that most research on crisis communication is conducted in Western countries. Manias-Muñoz et al. (2019) conducted a Delphi study of the state of crisis communication research and education through the lens of CC scholars. They found that, first, interest in CC has increased. Second, CC studies are primarily conducted in the USA and Europe and do not represent the full cultural and geographical landscape.

2.3 Internal crisis communication

For the longest time, crisis communication focused on external crisis communication, and communication during a crisis seemed to be directed at the general public (Coombs & Holladay 2010). Additionally, internal crisis communication was a tool for influencing employees rather than engaging them to attain an understanding between management and employees. According to Ruck and Men (2021), internal communication was ignored until the publication of internal crisis communication in 2010. Since then, there has been a shift toward recognizing different stakeholders, leading to the growth of internal communication studies (Dzenan, 2017).

Heideand and Simonsson (2015) define internal crisis communication as the communication between managers and employees before, during, and after a crisis about a crisis. Heide and Simonsson (2021a) state that internal crisis communication is a combination of crisis communication and change management fields. Both fields

focus on complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguous situations. In both areas, employees seek greater information and communication to make sense of the situation and take action.

Employees are the focus of internal crisis communication. Effectively communicating with employees, especially during a crisis, means creating commitment and identification with the organization and reducing uncertainty. This is essential for preventing misunderstanding, disagreement, panic, and conflict. In fact, researchers, Ecklebe and Löffler (2021b) have proven that the quality and quantity of communication impact employee engagement and trust, which is of utmost importance in times of crisis (Dzenan, 2017). Prior research found that low levels of trust are associated with ineffective communication. (Welch & Jackson, 2007).

Literature has revealed that poor communication during a crisis leads to reduced trust, lack of commitment from employees, and the spreading of rumors (David, 2011) (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015a). They state that a lack of accurate, adequate, timely, and factual information during a crisis impacts employees' trust in the organization, and the lack of trust affects their commitment to cooperate in crisis resolution. Additionally, when organizations do not provide accurate information to employees during a crisis, employees become open to rumors, which is one of the biggest threats in times of crisis (David, 2011). Further, Heide and Simonsson (2021) state that poorly handled internal crisis communication can worsen a crisis.

As previous research stated, effective internal communication becomes essential in times of crisis. According to Dahman (2008), a critical step when dealing with a crisis is effective communication, and he states that an organization in crisis should quickly open lines of communication. Researchers Mazzei and Ravazzani (2011) and Ecklebe and Löffler (2021b) have proven that an organization that shares information stands the best chance of controlling a crisis event.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

A few publications have focused on internal crisis communication. Frandsen and Johansen (2011) argued persuasively in their conceptual paper for research to focus

more on internal crisis communication and employees' needs to be separated from the needs of other stakeholders.

Internal crisis communication has received some attention in a few articles (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Heide and Simonsson (2021) state that employees are closer to the organization than any other stakeholder. Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) insist that employees are not only receivers of information but are also senders of messages when it comes to a crisis; therefore, they can act as both positive and negative ambassadors.

Johansen et al. (2012) conducted a comprehensive survey on internal crisis management and crisis communication in 450 private and public organizations in Denmark. Their goal was to discover how these organizations perceive, coordinate, plan, and carry out internal crisis management and crisis communication activities prior to, during, and after a crisis. The study discovered that many organizations have a crisis or contingency plan and that some of these plans include an internal crisis dimension. Their study respondents were individuals in charge of crisis preparedness, so the study's approach was an expert perspective rather than an employee's perspective.

During the 2008-2009 fiscal crisis, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2011) investigated the effectiveness of internal communication in Italian companies. Their research included interviews with both employees and managers, as well as a survey of internal communication managers to determine perceptions of internal communication effectiveness. The study discovered a disconnect between what organizations intended to communicate and what employees perceived. According to Heide and Simonsson (2015), Mazzei and Ravazzani's (2011) study demonstrates the importance of building trusting relationships between managers and employees long before a crisis to avoid misinterpretations and resistance that managers may encounter while implementing internal communication. The major limitation of this study is that it compares perceptions of internal communication managers and employees who are not from the same organization.

All the studies reviewed above contribute essential knowledge to the growing research on the internal communication process. They are made of a perceptual view of a crisis and a sense-making view of communication. The studies align with the social

constructionist approach, which researchers have argued is the better approach in studies of internal communication since it captures the messiness and complexities of organizational crisis and crisis communication. However, most of these qualitative studies use managers as the unit of analysis. Moreover, Heide and Simonsson (2015) believe a stronger emphasis on employee voice is still lacking.

Although there is a sudden interest in internal communication research, most research is based in Western countries. In their extensive survey of internal crisis management and crisis communication among public and private organizations in Denmark, Johansen et al. (2012b) discovered that internal crisis communication received more attention in 2011 than in 2003 among private and public companies. Furthermore, Lee and Yue (2020) found that the number of articles published has increased since 2021, but most of the articles are published in the West, with 83% published in the US and European studies. The authors recommend that future researchers examine literature from non-western contexts to get a complete picture of internal communication research.

Current research on internal communication is based on the management rather than the employee perspective. In fact, Lee and Yue's (2020) examination of published articles in public relations and other communication journals to determine the status of internal communication research found that crisis communication literature has focused almost exclusively on managers' perspectives. They further concluded that minimum attention had been given to what employees would like their organizations to communicate. Ruck and Welch (2012) argue that more research is required on employees' preference for internal communication strategies utilized by organizations in crisis to ensure they meet employees' needs. Dzenan (2017) supports this statement in his study, which examined internal communication strategies used in public and private companies; based on the result of the research, the recommendation is that future researchers take the employee approach when examining which internal communication strategies different organizations implement.

2.4 Internal (crisis) Communication and COVID-19

There is no commonly accepted definition of a crisis, and scholars have developed numerous definitions (Coombs & Hollanday, 2010). In fact, Heath, and Millar (2004) mention and examine twenty definitions in their book. Although the definitions differ,

they have many conceptual similarities (Coombs et al., 2002). The most used definition of crisis is that of Coombs (2004), who defines a crisis as the perception of an unanticipated event that threatens stakeholder expectations, can significantly negatively influence an organization's performance, and can lead to an undesirable outcome.

Currently, the world is experiencing a crisis like no other. COVID-19 is a crisis that started in 2019 and is much more complex than other crises, such as accidents, natural disasters, etc. Researchers such as Ecklebe and Löffler (2021), Ruck and Men (2021), Bojadjiev and Vaneva (2021), and Heide and Simonsson (2021), who have recently published studies on internal crisis communication during the pandemic, concur that it is a public health crisis on a social level that has brought about organizational changes, impacted organizational processes and individuals as employees.

Organizational changes, policies, and new processes have altered how people operate in many institutions. Social distancing and working-from-home regulations have forced organizations to develop innovative methods to lead, communicate, and manage (Ruck & Men, 2021). Due to working-from-home regulations, organizations have had to find creative ways to communicate with their staff. Some employees have been laid off, while others have been placed on part-time employment. (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021).

Legal regulations have changed frequently (e.g., social distancing regulations, rotational work processes, working from work, and trading hours). According to Heide and Simonsson (2021), the pandemic has involved unexpected situations that are complex and ambiguous. Employees are constantly in distress and are left to wonder how the epidemic will affect their jobs.

In their paper, Ruck & Men (2021) state that such situations are like Karl E. Weick's cosmological episodes when nothing makes sense. Naturally, workers look to their employers for guidance, comfort, and support during cosmological episodes, and internal communication becomes vital. Organizations must keep employees informed to alleviate stress, insecurity, and fear (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021).

Previous research has shown that employees experience a high level of frustration, increased perceptions of insecurity, and an increased need for information in times of

crisis. Additionally, employees can help the organization alleviate the crisis (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021).

Thus, internal communication takes on a relevant role during the COVID-19 pandemic. It must adequately inform employees of new development, enable collaborative working, and alleviate feelings of fear, uncertainty, stress, and insecurity (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021). Li et al. (2021) study about how employees cope with organizational change during the pandemic found that transparent internal communication can help reduce stress and uncertainty and foster employee organizational relationships.

Internal communication is even more critical during the current pandemic, as organizations need an engaged workforce to offer innovation and overcome the current challenges (Chon et al., 2021). Carufel (2020) reported that some US organizations are experiencing a decline in employee trust during the pandemic. Researching Italian companies, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015a) found that effective communication results in trust among employees.

Compared to previous studies, Bojadjiev and Vaneva's (2021) study on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on a company's internal communication confirmed that while communication is critical when running a business under normal circumstances, it becomes even more so during major disruptions or pandemics.

Recognizing the importance of internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars have published Journal articles that examine the internal communicative responses of organizations in crisis (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021a; Einwiller et al., 2021a;, Wu et al., 2020), Ruck & Men, 2021;, Yeomans & Bowman, 2021; and Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021). These articles demonstrate how organizations had to react quickly during great uncertainty.

Two journals most relevant to our study are that of Einwiller et al. (2021a) and Ecklebe and Löffler (2021c). Einwiller et al. (2021a) conducted a study using the social exchange theory to investigate the impact of informational and relational internal communication on cognitive and affective responses and job engagement during the COVID-19 crisis. A month after the government declared a nationwide shutdown, they conducted an online survey among Austrian workers to test their hypothesis. They found that an information communication strategy consisting of relevant, complete, timely, and factual information is essential during a crisis as it fosters employees'

acceptance of managerial decisions, leading to job engagement. Their finding also confirms the results of prior research, which found that systematical communication helps foster employee engagement and that the positive effect of transparent communication on employee-organizational relationships.

Ecklebe and Löffler (2021b) surveyed 934 employees in different organizations in Germany to determine the frequency and transparency of communication provided at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that factual information and frequency of communication are vital during the beginning of a crisis. They also found that a positive perception of internal communication during a crisis positively affects trustworthiness, commitment, and satisfaction.

Ruck and Men (2021) reviewed six articles grounded in ICC in their guest editorial (Internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic). Their special issue revealed that the focus of research in ICC during the COVID-19 pandemic has been on leadership communication, listening, sense-making, transparency, reciprocity, and benevolence. And like previous trends in crisis communication, research articles published so far on crisis communication during the pandemic are based on research in Europe and the United States.

When writing this research proposal, no articles were found based on research in Africa, particularly in South Africa.

2.5 Communication Strategies of Organizations in Crisis

As previously alluded to, past research in crisis communication has primarily focused on crisis response strategies regarding messages and timing. Researchers have focused on developing guidelines for using appropriate crisis response strategies. While crisis communication studies have focused on crisis communication strategies with the external public, proper crisis messages and timing with the internal public become more critical during a crisis (Kim et al., 2019). Crisis creates uncertainty and ambiguity, and research has confirmed that an effective communication strategy makes sense of the confusion and ambiguity created by crises (Clampitt et al., 2000). Kim et al. (2019) report that employees' information needs are extremely high during a crisis. Employees become eager to find out what is going on with their organization, and they expect adequate and timely information about the crisis from the organization.

Einwiller et al. (2021), in their study of the role of relational and informational crisis communication in Australia, grounded in social exchange theory, found a link between acceptance of managerial choices and satisfaction with factual information. When organizations provide adequate, accurate, and timely information, they create an understanding that can lead to acceptance of management decisions, especially during a crisis.

Researchers have counted on communication strategies as a way organizations can use communication to protect organizational reputation (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019). Further, existing research confirms the positive impact internal communication strategies can have on employees' job engagement under normal circumstances (e.g., Jiang & Shen, 2020) and during the organizational crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Einwiller et al., 2021).

The literature on crisis communication has shown that a sound strategy is of utmost importance for an organization to manage a crisis successfully. An internal communication strategy contains strategies that inform employees of the actions required to protect themselves from the crisis, and it also includes information that helps employees cope with the effect of the crisis (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019).

As previously stated, crisis communication is an emerging field of study that examines the communicative responses of organizations in crisis. An analysis of the literature shows that three aspects make up a picture of a crisis communication strategy. The rhetorical approach, situational factors affecting the choice of strategy, and the objectives and content of crisis communication (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2013). Mazzei and Ravazzani (2013) used all these elements in their research model of internal crisis communication strategies presented in the following section and which will be used as a frame for this study.

The rhetorical approach concentrates on what and how an organization communicates when in crisis. This approach recognizes that organizations must address the impact of a crisis even if they did not cause it. Therefore, it provides rhetorical strategies based on Benoit's Image Repair Theory, which provides five rhetorical strategies of image restoration that organizations may use in the acute, chronic phase. First, the organization can use Denial strategies to distance itself from the crisis by shifting

blame, denying the event, or scapegoating. Secondly, the organization can choose to evade responsibility by using the Evasion of responsibility strategy used by organizations seeking to limit accountability by claiming it was an accident. Thirdly, it can use Reducing Offensiveness of Event strategies to divert attention from the event toward positive aspects of the organization. Finally, it can implement corrective action strategies to emphasize behaviors and processes met to fix the problem. And lastly, Mortification strategies include accepting responsibility (Marsen, 2020b).
Furthermore, scholars that followed have put these crisis response strategies along a continuum from the most defensive (those denying or evading responsibility) to the most accommodative (those accepting responsibility and taking corrective measures (Coombs, 2015). According to Mazzei and Ravazzani (2013), the accommodative strategies are the most effective in improving the company's perception during a crisis because organizations using these strategies show concern for the victims, take responsibility, and implement corrective actions.

The strategic or context-oriented approach focuses on the crisis context or situation and is concerned with where and when it is beneficial to communicate to protect organizational reputation. The situational Crisis Theory (SCCT) introduced by Timothy Coombs falls within this approach. It is the most used theory that identifies situational factors (degree of control over the crisis, crisis history, and the organization's prior reputation) that explain the choice of crisis response strategies. The SCCT focuses on the reputational threat caused by the crisis (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015a). SCCT seeks to highlight how people perceive the crisis, their reaction to crisis response strategies, and the employee's reaction to an organization in crisis. The central aim of SCCT is crisis responsibility. Attribution of crisis responsibility significantly impacts how people perceive an organization's reputation in crisis and their behavioral responses to the organization following a crisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2016).

The above theories and approaches refer to the crisis communication strategies of an organization when communicating externally. In external crisis communication, many studies have been conducted on crisis communication strategies, crisis communication, audience perceptions, and spokesperson impact on stakeholder response to crisis communication strategies (Adamu & Mohamad, 2016). The reason

is that what and how an organization communicates during a crisis impacts the outcome of a crisis.

When we only concentrate on internal communication, the literature refers to content and objectives on which internal crisis communication strategies can be based. Extant research confirms that internal crisis communication strategy comprises two components: internal crisis communication content and internal crisis communication objectives (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015a). In fact, Dzenan (2017) states that objectives and content are crucial for defining an internal crisis communication strategy.

The internal crisis communication contents are the messages chosen by the organization for communicating during a crisis. Researchers distinguish between two message content, identification, and informative content. The information content is reassuring and explanatory messages. Identification content consists of messages that stress openness and trustworthiness; they are focused on the culture of the organization (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015a).

Internal crisis communication objectives aim to address the effects or reactions a crisis produces on an individual. Researchers say individuals can have cognitive, behavioral, or affective responses. Organizations, therefore, set communicative objectives to operate on a cognitive, behavioral, or effective level. These all depend on the type of reaction the organization wants to promote or eliminate (Ravazzani, 2016).

Mazzei and Ravazzani (2013) used all the elements above to develop the internal crisis communication strategies model presented below, which is most relevant to the current study.

2.5.1 A research model of internal crisis communication strategies

Based on previous research, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2013) developed a research model of internal crisis communication strategies which, unlike the Image restoration theory and SCC mentioned above, is specifically for the internal communication aspect of an organization under crisis.

Previous studies in internal crisis communication indicated that objectives and content are the essential elements of internal crisis communication strategies. These two elements were then used to develop the model for internal crisis communication. In the model, the objectives of internal crisis communication that operate on cognitive, affective, or behavioral levels were categorized into security, belonging, and activation of behaviors. This means that when organizations communicate during a crisis, they have three objectives. They either communicate to employees to activate specific behavior to promote commitment (the behavioral objective), belonging, or security (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2013).

On the content of internal crisis communication, the model identifies three strategies, informative, identification, and factual content. The informative content focuses on information about the organization's situation and its business. The identification content is the information spreading the organization's values, culture, and future perspective. The factual content consists of the acts and facts to survive the crisis and information about the steps taken by the organization to eliminate the crisis (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2013).

The model combined both objectives and content elements to produce five potential communication strategies, which are listed below:

2.5.1.1 Transparency strategy

This strategy combines security objectives and information content and is adopted by organizations that release information to reduce uncertainty created by information insufficiency (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015).

2.5.1.2 The cohesion strategy

This strategy combines identification content and transparent information, which seeks to create a sense of belonging amongst employees and, therefore, stronger cohesion (Dzenan, 2017).

2.5.1.3 The activation of behaviors strategy

Mazzei and Ravazzani (2013) refer to this strategy as the most complicated internal communication strategy. Here, organizations use communication to activate proactive

behaviors amongst their employees. The organization communicates facts and corrective action

2.5.1.4 The evasion strategy

Such organizations do not take responsibility or implement actions to resolve the crisis (Dzenan, 2017). The strategy is also aimed at activating behaviors but fails to describe actions or factual communication that could give credibility to the explicit messages (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015a)

2.5.1.5 The underutilization strategy

This strategy is used by organizations that do not understand the importance of internal communication. Here, an organization takes responsibility and implements corrective actions. However, these organizations do not involve employees actively and explicitly. Such an organization focuses its communication objectives only on enhancing security and belonging (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015)

Since Mazzei & Ravazzani (2015) developed the model, only two studies have utilized the model. These authors (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015) conducted a survey involving only communication managers from 61 Italian companies focusing on ICC strategies to investigate efforts to safe-guide relationships of trust with employees. The study found that Italian companies used poor internal communication strategies and had mostly adopted evasive and defensive strategies that undermine their employee's trust. The study has limitations in the sense that the results of the study are based on internal communication managers' accounts only. Additionally, the findings presented refer only to the Italian context.

Dzenan (2017) conducted a comparative study that used interviews with communication professionals from public and private companies in Sweden to find out how internal crisis communication strategies are used in private and public companies. One of the limitations of this study is that it is an inductive qualitative study, and no particular crisis was used to generate outcomes. This study is also a managerial approach to internal crisis communication. Secondly, the qualitative character of this study means that the study's findings only signal the indication of internal crisis communication in Swedish public and private companies and cannot be generalized to other departments, let alone regions.

Overall, both studies in communication strategies have been good at making us aware of the different strategies at the disposal of organizations and how they make the best choice. However, both studies fail to consider their point in the South African context. Additionally, both studies consist of a managerial approach to internal crisis communication. Researchers have studied different internal communication strategies organizations utilize and whether they lead to engagement or trust. However, no evidence suggests that these strategies are the most important ones employees expect managers to use (Ruck & Welch, 2012). The literature review reveals that little attention has been given to what employees would like their organizations to communicate in times of crisis. None has studied how employees perceive these strategies.

To fill this gap, this study investigates how employees perceive communication strategies and how they want to be communicated.

2.6 Conclusion

The literature reviewed shows that there are many facets to crisis communication. All three phases of crisis management involve some form of crisis communication, and most of the study on the topic focuses on strategic crisis communication concerned with crisis responses.

The literature reviewed reveals that researchers and organizational managers have realized the importance of communication during times of crisis. The field of study has seen growth in interest. There is an acknowledgment that internal communication during a crisis is essential and should not be overlooked for external communication. Employees are central to controlling and alleviating a crisis and are an organization's capital assets; they are both senders and receivers of information and can help organizations eliminate a crisis. Organizations must communicate with employees before, during, and after a crisis. Communication during such a time should be clear, accurate, and timely to eliminate employees' uncertainty, fear, and confusion.

Regarding crisis communication strategies, most of the existing research on crisis communication strategies addresses external audiences. Only a few studies examined specific internal communication strategies utilized by an organization during

a crisis. These few studies do well at identifying different internal communication strategies used by institutions during a crisis; however, they fail to address the following, 1) employees' perceptions of the internal communication strategies, 2) how employees would like to be communicated during a crisis.

Overall, the literature review reveals that internal crisis communication needs empirical investigation, especially regarding internal crisis communication strategies.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology used to examine the internal crisis communication strategies that the Gauteng Provincial Treasury used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chapter outlines the research approach, design, and data collection tools applied in this study. It also describes the sample size and sampling techniques used. Also mentioned are the study's limitations, ethical issues, validity, and reliability.

3.2 Research approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to attain inside information and facts about the nature of internal crisis communication in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury.

The study employed exploratory and descriptive research by exploring and describing the perceptions of employees and communication managers about the nature of internal crisis communication strategies used by the department during Covid-19.

3.3 Research design

A case study approach was chosen from the four research designs available for this study. According to Priya (2021), a case study is one of the most popular approaches in social research. It’s an empirical investigation that looks at a phenomenon in its actual setting, in which several data-gathering techniques can be employed, and most importantly, it is a research approach or design used to examine a social unit rather than a technique for gathering data. The case study approach was selected because it can provide an in-depth contextual analysis of the internal communication strategy of the GPT in a crisis.

3.4 Research data collection tools

To obtain an in-depth understanding of the internal crisis communication of the Gauteng Provincial Treasury, the researcher chose to use semi-structured interviews. Walliman (2006) distinguished three categories of interviews: structured, unstructured,

and semi-structured. A structured interview uses an interview schedule to pose questions to the participants. In unstructured interviews, there is more flexibility; the questions are open-ended and not closed. The interviewer chooses the framework, and participants are given free range with their answers. A semi-structured interview is an interview with open-ended, standardized questions divided into structured and unstructured portions.

Research on this topic has shown that semi-structured interviews are most suitable for this kind of inquiry since they allow researchers to probe further than the respondent's basic response, asking follow-up questions. The semi-structured interview is an adequate method for generating information and deep insight into the matter.

First, the researcher interviewed a communications manager to gain information on the internal crisis communication strategies utilized by the department during the pandemic.

The second set of interviews consisted of twelve employees of the GPT to examine their perceptions of the internal crisis communication strategies utilized by the department and their views on how they would like to be communicated during a crisis (COVID-19 pandemic).

The researcher used semi-structured interviews, which the researcher found most suitable for the study's research question. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to go beyond simple answers and delve deeper by posing additional questions without following the set order. The semi-structured interview also gave participants a chance to share their opinions. Since the participants were responding to similar themes, the results were compared.

3.5 Sampling Techniques and sample size

The sample was drawn from Gauteng Provincial Treasury and consisted of top, middle, line, and junior employees. According to Dzenan (2017), qualitative research aims to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon rather than to generalize to a population; the best way to do this is by employing deliberate sampling techniques. The researcher used purposeful sampling and selected the sample using her judgment of the population and the nature of the research. To gather various

viewpoints, the researcher involved employees from different directorates who represent various levels within the department.

To respond to the study's first research question, the researcher chose one top communications manager from the Gauteng Provincial Treasury who was interviewed to find out the internal crisis communication strategies utilized by the department in relation to COVID-19.

The second sample entailed top, middle, and junior staff. The researcher used purposeful sampling to acquire the sample that contains the most characteristic representation or attributes of the population.
Purposeful sampling was used to draw a sample of twelve employees from the Gauteng Provincial Treasury. The selection criteria were employees employed before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019) in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury and consisted of males and females, and the total sample was twelve respondents.

3.6 Pre-testing of research tools

According to Holtom, B., Edmondson, A. C., & Niu, D. (2020), pre-testing is when a researcher conducts a text of one or more of the research instruments to identify deficiencies. To be effective, pre-testing must be executed exactly as the actual study.

Before the research itself, the interview schedule underwent pre-testing. The objective was to identify gaps and determine any challenges participants could experience when answering the questions. The researcher conducted the pilot on GPT employees who would not be part of the actual study to test the interview instrument. Subsequently, changes were made based on the feedback from this procedure.

The pilot study revealed two problems. Firstly, some interview questions did not answer the study's primary and secondary research questions. Secondly, the difficulty experienced by participants in understanding some of the interview questions. Consequently, new interview questions were developed directly related to this study's research questions, and some were reworded to ensure everyone could understand them.

3.7 Data analysis

Data analysis is giving a massive amount of gathered data organization, order, and significance. Data management and analysis are part of the process. Creswell (2009) outlines general steps for qualitative data analysis, such as transcribing interviews, data reading, code generation, and theme interpretation. This research followed the same steps to analyze the data collected through interviews. To document the data, the researcher took notes throughout the interviews. The researcher also used a recorder during the interviews and transcribed the interview. The researcher read through the data (transcribed and interview notes) to gain an in-depth understanding.

According to Darlington and Scott (2002), analyzing qualitative data entails getting to know the data, which entails fully understanding what the data is about by immersing oneself in it. In qualitative research, data analysis may be done using various methods such as content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, thematic analysis, and grounded theory. This research utilized thematic analysis, which involved reading the collected data and looking for patterns to derive themes. According to Priya (2021), thematic analysis can be done in several ways. The one that works best for your study design will be the one you choose to utilize. This research made use of deductive thematic analysis. Data was analyzed using a set of expected themes derived from existing theory as outlined in the literature section of this research report.

Coding was done by classifying data, themes, and patterns. The participants' responses to questions about the goals and content of the internal crisis communication were grouped and positioned within the five internal communication strategies. These strategies were identified in the research model to determine which internal communication strategies the department used to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This helped determine which strategies were used by the Department. Therefore, the five internal communication strategies were used as themes for internal crisis communication strategies, and the researcher identified and grouped quotes reflecting the different themes.

3.8 Limitations of the Study

- The department's bureaucratic processes delayed data gathering.
- Interviews were conducted in English. Not all workers were fluent in English.

- Participants could withhold information that they deem to be sensitive from the researcher.
- The unavailability of chosen participants to conduct interviews caused delays in data gathering.
- This study is limited to the Gauteng Provincial Treasury, which might be that the findings cannot be generalized to other provinces' departments or Provincial Treasuries.
- It was challenging to schedule interviews with the participants because employees had to rotate between working from home and coming to the office due to COVID-19.

3.9 Ethical consideration

Human subjects are the focus of this research as the participants. Therefore, the researcher upheld the following standards to respect the participates rights and dignity:

Avoidance of harm

The respondents were fully informed about the study's potential impact, as well as its goals and objectives. They were also given the choice to stop participating in the study if they so wished. The participants' dignity was respected during the research.

Informed consent

The participants completed a permission form before taking part in the study. None of the study's subjects were forced to participate.

Deception

Participants were told the purpose of the study and that it was being conducted as part of a master's degree requirement by the researcher. Participants were informed of the study's goals and objectives. The participants were not subjected to any deceit. The participants weren't misinformed or given false information.

Coercion

The participants were not forced to participate, and their participation was entirely voluntary.

Violation of privacy

Participants' rights to privacy were guaranteed, and confidentiality was upheld. Participants received assurances that the researcher and her supervisor would be the only ones with exclusive access to the data. The researcher was granted ethical approval by the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee with the ethics clearance number WSG-2022-70.

Permission was obtained from the Head of the Department of the Gauteng Provincial Treasury to conduct the study at the department.

3.10 Validity and reliability

According to Iftikhar (2013), validity is how closely a test measures the variables it claims to measure. By creating straightforward questions and addressing the research topics, validity is attained. There must be a high response rate (Holtom et al., 2020).

To ensure validity, the researcher pre-tested the interview questions to test whether the questions were straightforward and addressed the study's research questions. Furthermore, the researcher provided a rich, detailed description of the phenomena. The researcher described participants' views of internal crisis communication and used their own words to support the findings. The researcher also focused on aspects of internal crisis communication most common to other groups and avoided asking questions that only relate to the department's context. Furthermore, participants were interviewed where they felt most comfortable at their workplace, and the information gathered and compared was the responses rather than the perceptions.

Reliable research produces precise, repeatable findings that yield the same outcomes. For a study to be considered trustworthy, the sample must be sufficiently large and accurately represent the intended audience. Additionally, information must be gathered and handled carefully and accurately.

To ensure reliability, participants included personnel from several directorates within the department who represented various levels within the department. This was done to guarantee that diverse points of view were represented. Additionally, reliability was ensured through a research design using interviews, note-taking, and coding.

3.11 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter examined the methods for gathering data, the equipment used to get the data, and the methods for analyzing the data. The participants were purposeful sampled based on the researcher’s perceptions of the population and the study's objective. To avoid having too inclusive results, both internal and external validity were considered. To guarantee the effective completion of this study, the review board was consulted before the research administration began for analysis and permission. All other ethical considerations were also considered.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

Crucial to this study is the primary research question: what internal crisis communication strategies were adopted and utilized by the GPT during COVID-19? In keeping with the primary research question, sub-questions were developed to provide information to help answer the main research question. The following section will present an expanded response to the sub-questions as findings related to the primary research question.

To document the data, the researcher took notes throughout the interviews. The researcher also used a recorder during the interviews and transcribed the interview. The researcher read through the data (transcribed and interview notes) to gain an in-depth understanding.

4.2 Profile of participants

The target population for this study was everyone employed in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury at the start of COVID-19. To establish the department's internal crisis communication strategies during COVID-19, the researcher first conducted a semi-structured interview with the department's communication manager. The manager was chosen to respond to this question because they oversee internal and external communication for the department. The researcher had planned to conduct a face-to-face interview with the manager. However, due to the managers' unavailability for a face-to-face interview, an email interview was performed instead. The communications manager had been employed in the department for 12 years, four years as a middle manager in the communication unit, and eight years as the senior communications manager.

Further, twelve participants were interviewed to determine the employees' perception of the internal communication implemented. All participants consisted of GPT employees from different units and levels within the department. Three participants were senior managers, four were middle managers, and five were in junior positions. The participants interviewed were all in the department's employment at the start of COVID-19 and had 4 to 12 years of service in the department. They were with the

department at the beginning of the pandemic and, therefore, knew the strategies implemented by the department during that time.

4.3 Internal crisis communication at GPT during the COVID-19 pandemic (managers' response)

A communications manager was interviewed to ascertain which internal communication strategy was used by the department during COVID-19. The manager's answers to questions about the goals and content of the internal crisis communication were then grouped and positioned within the five internal communication strategies identified in the research model to determine which internal communication strategies the department used in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When asked how the department communicated during COVID-19, the response was that '**the *department communicated well during COVID-19***. The manager stated that "… ***the department has a Business Continuity Plan (BCP), which is a document that is used to communicate with staff during a crisis. The BCP establishes the Business Continuity Steering Committee. This Committee comprises various units, including Communication Unit, and guides the processes and procedures used to manage the crisis. As part of that process, Communication Unit will inform the staff accordingly."***

4.3.1 Internal crisis communication content

In terms of the content of the internal communication, the manager indicated that "***all employees were informed about the crisis and what the department was doing about it***. He stated that the content was on ***providing information to employees about how to protect themselves from covid 19 in the workplace as well as at home. It was about relating key new developments about the pandemic and keeping employees updated about the number of infections in the department***.

Furthermore***, we also issued communication about key submission dates for Performance Management and development system (PMDS), how to hold MS Teams meetings, etc.*** Not only was the department able to notify staff about what it

was doing to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on operations, but communication was also directed at ensuring that normal operations continued***.***

The department also tried to provide information directly to employees through their mobile phones using WhatsApp or short messaging services (SMS). ***All communication was sent via emails, phone messages, and WhatsApp messages.***

4.3.2 Internal crisis communication objectives

When asked what the goal of the department's internal crisis communication was during the pandemic, the manager indicated that "***The well-being and safety of staff is key. So, communicating information that assisted staff to be safe and their well-being taken care-off formed a major part of the crisis communication plan during the pandemic. What was also key was the timing and speed of that information. The department had to communicate, for instance, COVID-19 infections daily when there was a need, closure of the building, and fumigation process. This is the type of information that staff appreciated a lot because it assisted them to feel that the employer was doing what was necessary to keep them safe while at the workplace***.

Table 1 depicts quotes from the manager's responses that have been grouped, reflecting themes.

Table 1 Internal crisis communication content

Themes	**Quotes reflecting themes**
Informative content	*We sent out messages to employees about what they needed to do to keep safe during COVID-19, such as social distancing and using sanitizers. We also communicated to employees where they could find sanitizers throughout the building and the processes we have implemented for social distancing.*

	We also communicated alternative ways employees could submit their work, *such as key submission dates for PMDS, how to hold MS Teams meetings, etc*. *The department had to communicate, for instance, COVID-19 infections daily when there was a need, closure of the building, and fumigation process. This type of information staff appreciated a lot because it assisted them in feeling that the employer was doing what was necessary to keep them safe while at the workplace*
Identification content	-
Factual content	-

Source: The researcher's work compiled from the collected data

From the table above, the department's internal communication consisted of sending out informative content. According to (Dzenan, 2017), informative content is about distributing information about the current situation and its impact on the organization.

In Table 2 below, the manager's responses to the department's objective were also grouped, reflecting themes:

Table 2 Internal crisis communication objectives

Themes	**Quotes reflecting themes**
Cognitive objectives	*providing information to people to keep them safe from COVID-19 infections in the workplace**.***
Affective objectives	-
Behavioral objectives	*ensuring that the normal operations of the department continue*

Source: The researcher's work compiled from the collected data

The table above shows that the department's crisis communication consisted of cognitive and behavioral objectives. Cognitive objectives are when an organization's goal is reducing uncertainty and enhancing security, while behavioral objectives are strategies to strengthen employee commitment to their roles (Dzenan, 2017).

Based on Mazzei and Ravazzani's (2015) framework, when we combine content and objectives, we come up with five potential communication strategies. Combining cognitive objectives with informative content leads us to the Transparency internal crisis communication strategy. Therefore, according to the communications manager, the department implemented the Transparency internal crisis communication strategy.

4.4 Internal crisis communication strategies adopted by the GPT in dealing with COVID-19- GPT (employees' perspective)

This question was posed to employees to ascertain the existence of internal crisis communication strategies in the GPT during a crisis. Participants' answers to questions about the goals and content of the internal crisis communication were grouped and positioned within the five internal communication strategies identified in the research model to determine which internal communication strategies the department used in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4.1 Internal crisis communication content

When asked about the content of the internal crisis communication, most participants felt the department was effective regarding the internal crisis communication content. One respondent stated that ***the department shared the necessary information as guided by the national health department***.

Ten of the participants felt that the department sent explanatory messages. A respondent stated that ***they indicated what we needed to do to ensure we were safe.***

The department sent messages explaining the current situation. Five respondents noted that ***the department shared knowledge about COVID-19***, **w*hat COVID-19 is,***

how people contract it, how to protect ourselves from it, how to minimize infecting each other, as well as communicating alternative ways in which employees could submit their work.

One participant pointed out that a "…***considerable part of the communication was mainly from a wellness perspective;"*** they were informing people about COVID-19.

Two participants felt that the information provided was more on informing employees than on initiatives to support employees. They stated that ***communication was more on reporting the number of people infected with COVID-19 rather than providing support to employees during the crisis.***

Another participant stated that "…***the communication was ineffective because it was not practical, e.g., the department sent information about how employees should implement social distancing; however, the department did not have the means to implement it."*** The employee highlighted the fact that "…there is a lack of resources from the department to implement some of the social distancing**."**

In Table 3 below, participants' responses about the content of internal crisis communication were grouped and positioned within the five internal communication strategies.

Table 3 Internal crisis communication content

Themes	**Quotes reflecting themes**
Informative content	***t****he department shared the necessary information as guided by the national health department*. *The department indicated what we needed to do to ensure we were safe.* *The department shared knowledge about COVID-19*, w*hat COVID-19 is, how people contract it, how to protect ourselves from it, how to minimize infecting each other, as well as communicating alternative ways in which employees could submit their work.*

	A considerable part of the communication by the department was from a wellness perspective.
Identification content	-
Factual content	-

Source: The researcher's work compiled from the collected data

The results demonstrate that the internal crisis communication content of the GPT consisted of sending out informative content. Informative content is about distributing information about the current situation and its impact on the organization.

Below, participants' responses (quotes) have been grouped, reflecting the internal communication strategies implemented by the department, which are the themes for internal crisis communication strategies.

4.4.2 Internal crisis communication objectives

In terms of the employee's opinion on the department's overall goal was. Most participants believed the goal was to share information, educate employees, and increase awareness. One respondent stated the goal was to "…***Inform employees of decisions that are taken or notify employees of what they need to know before visiting the department.***

Other respondents felt that the goal was awareness, ***"…. making employees aware of what is happening in the country that results in what is happening in the department.***

Other respondents felt that the goal was to educate. One respondent stated "***that the goal is to be safe and to avoid contracting COVID-19. To ensure that they had healthy stuff-if most of us were sick, it would affect our work. That we receive the message, and we can make decisions so that we are safe during COVID-19***

In Table 4 below, participants' responses about the objective of internal crisis communication were grouped and positioned within the five internal communication strategies.

Table 4 Internal crisis communication objectives

Themes	Quotes reflecting themes
Cognitive objectives	*making employees aware of what is happening in the country results in what is happening in the department.* *"' The department shared the necessary information as guided by the national health department.''* *''To Inform employees of decisions taken or notify them of what they need to know before visiting the department."* *"The goal is to be safe for us to avoid contracting COVID-19. To ensure that they had healthy stuff-to avoid getting sick, so that it does not affect our work. That we receive the message, and we can make decisions so that we are safe during COVID-19."*
Affective objectives	-
Behavioral objectives	*Inform employees of decisions taken or notify them of what they need to know before visiting the department.*

Source: The researcher's work compiled from the collected data

The results reveal that the department's crisis communication consisted of cognitive and behavioral objectives. Cognitive objectives are when an organization's goal is reducing uncertainty and enhancing security, while behavioral objectives are strategies to strengthen employee commitment to their roles (Dzenan, 2017).

4.4.3 Internal communication strategy of the department

Employees' responses state that the department's communication content was based on notifying employees about COVID-19 and how to minimize infections; information was also about informing employees about what the department is doing to mitigate

the impact of the pandemic and alternative ways employees could submit their work. According to employees, the goal of internal communication during COVID-19 was to ensure employees' safety and that work continued during the pandemic.

According to Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015), when we combine cognitive objectives with the content, we come up with five internal crisis communication strategies, as per Figure 1 below.

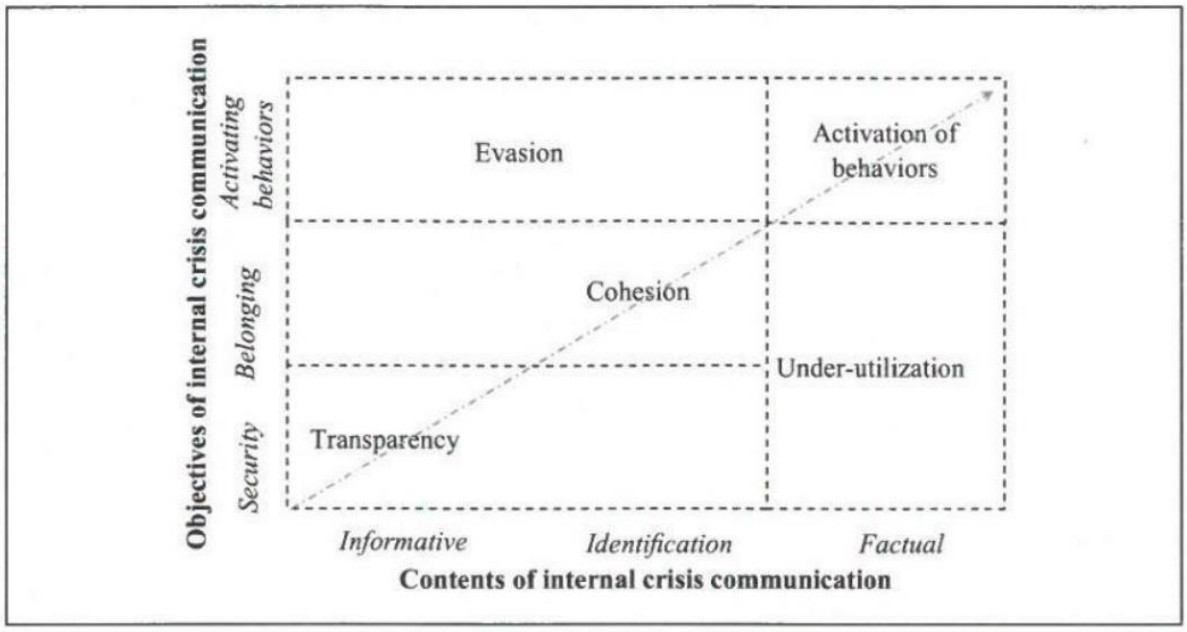


Figure 1 Internal crisis communication strategies: a multidimensional model; adopted from Internal Journal of Business Communication

Therefore, combining cognitive objectives with informative content leads us to the Transparency internal crisis communication strategy. The department employed the Transparency internal crisis communication strategy. It disseminated information about the COVID-19 pandemic to diminish the uncertainty created by the crisis and secure employees' security. This was evident in participants' statements regarding the contents and objectives of the GPT internal crisis communication strategies.

4.5 Effectiveness of the internal crisis communication strategies implemented

It is interesting to note that while the findings from the manager's responses indicate that the department communicated well during COVID-19, the employees revealed gaps in how the department communicated during COVID-19. These results demonstrate a contradiction of perceptions between the department and employees.

According to the manager, the department made every effort to protect employees during the crisis because it recognizes employees as its most important stakeholders. However, when participants were asked how the department had communicated during COVID-19, most participants stated that communication during COVID-19 was inefficient. The dissatisfaction was regarding the communication style, and most participants were dissatisfied with the frequency and timing of the communication.

The majority (ten out of 12 participants) voiced their dissatisfaction about the delayed internal communication. They felt that the department did not initiate communication right at the beginning of the crisis. One participant said, "***When we first heard about COVID-19 on the news, and it was a global crisis, the department was very quiet until the last minute. Another participant stated that communication was not dealt with as a matter of agency, leading to rumors circulating among employees."***

Participants believed that the department had communicated late, thus, creating uncertainty among employees. They stated that there was no urgency and that they would receive the information late. One participant indicated that communication was not timely***; we would pick up rumors before official communication came.***

In addition to the late communication by the department, participants were dissatisfied with the frequency of that communication. Participants felt that sometimes there was no communication from the department, and sometimes communication was not delivered fast enough. One participant stated that "…. ***when the department was quiet, it was like we were treated like a stepchild; we were not appropriately treated as valued employees."*** However, a few participants (two) stated that the department communicated very effectively during covid-19***.*** One participant said that ***"communication was effective even though sometimes information was shared late."*** He then pointed out that the **late communication by the department *was understandable because we were dealing with a major crisis that had never happened before.***

4.6 Communication channels

A total of three of the participants stated that they did not receive any internal communication relating to the crisis. Cleaners and security personnel do not have computers and laptops, so they cannot receive communication via email. One

participant pointed out that **"*We, as cleaners, do not have computers and laptops, so we could not receive communication, and we had to rely on other employees to relay the correct information.*"**

Most participants were also dissatisfied with the department's choice of using emails as the primary communication channel during the crisis. While acknowledging that the department used WhatsApp messaging at some point, they requested that it be used more frequently. Participants also stated that they preferred that the department use phone calls as an additional communication channel during a crisis as it gets the message across quicker. One participant said ***It's easy to miss emails, so a call would be better and personal, unlike an email.***

4.7 How employees prefer to be communicated

Participants were asked how they would like to be communicated during a crisis. One participant stated that "….***as soon as something is known and even when the department is still deliberating about the situation, they should still issue out communication saying that the country is currently in a pandemic and the department is presently deliberating on the matter."*** Another stated, "**Messages should come out early**. Another added that "**by communicating early, the department will avoid a situation of ambiguity and the spread of rumors amongst employees**."

Most of the participants indicated that the department should issue timely communication.

Participants also stated that during times of crisis, the department should not rely only on emails to disseminate information. They should also use instant messages and phone calls, which get the messages across to everyone faster.

Regarding the internal communication content, participants stated that they were satisfied with the content communicated by the department and would still like the department to continue sharing the content as it did in the future.

4.8 Suggestions for effective internal crisis communication

Nine out of 12 participants requested that the department issue instant communication, especially during a crisis, because it alleviates much anxiety.

Four participants suggested that the department constantly communicated even when there was nothing to share. A participant stated that ***when a department is quiet, especially when we as a country are amid a pandemic, it creates much anxiety and causes the circulation of rumors.*** This was confirmed by another participant, stating that ***even when there was nothing known about the crisis, the department should have communicated as such.***

Five participants suggested that ***the department must have a clear communication plan to communicate with employees during a crisis***. One of these participants recommended that the department use the COVID-19 crisis as a learning phase to know what is effective and not so that they will be prepared when another crisis strikes.

Participants suggested that the department utilize different communication channels during times of crisis. One participant stated that the department ***should know which communication channels are practical and utilize those.*** Most participants suggested that the department uses phone calls and instant messaging instead of emails, as emails are more effective. One participant stated that messaging should be sent directly to people's phones as people spend more time on their phones.

Most participants suggested that the department ensure that all employees are equipped with equipment/tools for receiving communication and utilize communication channels accessible to everyone.

In addition to issuing communication via emails and phone, one participant suggested that the department use direct messaging whereby someone comes and explains the situation. Another suggested that the department appoint communication champions to conduct face-to-face communication with employees and that these champions should be trained and able to answer questions. ***The people who come and communicate should be well-trained so that they can be able to answer any questions posed by employees.***

Two participants felt that the department should not communicate the same messages to all employees, and one participant stated that ***communication should be individualized***. The department should prioritize employees with different conditions, communicate other messages, and identify them early.

The findings indicate that participants suggest that the department should provide timely information and frequently communicate what is and is not known. The majority of participants' suggestions were also based on the choice of the department's communication channels, and they suggested that the department utilize channels that are available for all employees and channels that are easily accessible to all employees.

4.9 Conclusion

The chapter presented and analyzed data collected through face-to-face interviews with the employees and email semi-structured interviews with the communications manager. The results reflect the participant's knowledge and perceptions relating to the questions and objective of the study.

The results demonstrate that the manager and employees identify the Transparency strategy as the internal crisis communication strategy used by the department during COVID-19. They both identified cognitive objectives aimed at increasing employee safety and security as the department's communication goal during COVID-19. Regarding the content, participants identified informative content as being the most used by the department.

According to the manager's responses, internal crisis communication in the GPT was effectively carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, from the employee's responses, we see that the internal crisis communication implemented by the department was ineffective—great dissatisfaction related to the timing of that communication.

Concerning how participants prefer to be communicated to during a crisis, most participants were satisfied with the content communicated and the goal of the department communication during COVID-19 and indicated that the same should be done in the future. However, participants prefer that the department issue communication as soon as a crisis hits. Participants also prefer that the department use additional communication channels during times of crisis to get information across faster and to all employees.

Participants' results of their suggestion of effective internal crisis communication were mainly 1) The availability and the utilization of the most effective channels, 2) The

timing and frequency of internal communication during a crisis, and 3) communication of different messages to different groups.

This chapter presented the study's findings as gathered through individual, face-to-face, and email interviews with participants. The results are consistent with the study's goals and research questions and reflect the participants' opinions. The following chapter presents the study’s main findings, recommendations, and further research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

Never before has there been a greater need for internal communication than under the present COVID-19 conditions. COVID-19 has significantly influenced people, decreased trust, and disseminated uncertainty throughout organizations. Organizations have had to adjust their work processes, which has put tremendous pressure on internal communication.

COVID-19 has exacerbated previous internal communication issues in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury. Employees have expressed frustration with the department's lack of communication regarding changes, new projects, and initiatives. According to employees, the lack of communication caused uncertainty among staff and management.

This study examines the internal crisis communication strategies the Gauteng Provincial Treasury (GPT) employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically looking at identifying internal crisis communication strategies implemented by the Gauteng Provincial Treasury in response to the pandemic, how employees perceived existing strategies, and how they want to be communicated during a crisis. The researcher interviewed a top communication manager and employees from different units and salary levels within the department to gather their perceptions and knowledge about internal crisis communication implemented by the department. In the previous chapter, the researcher presented and discussed the results. In this chapter, the study's major findings from the interviews are discussed, as per the research questions and objectives of the study. The chapter will also discuss the recommendations and further research and end by discussing the conclusions.

5.2 Main Findings

The first research question of this study sought to examine the internal communication strategies used by the GPT in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Coombs (2015) stated that crisis communication is what an organization says and does during a crisis. First and foremost, the priority should be to protect internal stakeholders before an organizational reputation. Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) presented five internal crisis communication strategies that departments/organizations adopt in dealing with a

crisis. The findings indicate that the GPT used Transparency internal crisis communication strategy (which combines Informative content with Cognitive objectives) in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The content of internal crisis communication was focused explicitly on disseminating information about the current situation, while the objective for the communication was the reduction of uncertainty and increasing expectations, therefore enhancing a sense of security. Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) assert that the Transparency strategy ensures consistency between the content and objectives of internal communication. Meaning that the departments' content is designed to meet the specified objectives.

In this case, the findings reveal that the department believed its adopted strategy met its intended objectives- to eliminate uncertainty and enhance security. On the other hand, employees believed the department failed to reduce uncertainty and promote feelings of safety. That the department had failed to communicate at the initial stages of the pandemic. The silence on the part of the department led to uncertainty amongst employees and the circulation of rumors. Therefore, in the case of the GPT and its internal crisis communication strategy, the department disseminated the appropriate content for its intended objective (alleviating uncertainty). However, by failing to distribute the content at the start of the pandemic and frequently, it could not meet its goal.

The second research question sought to ascertain employees' perceptions about the internal crisis communication strategies utilized by the department. The implication of not sharing information on time is that it creates an impression that the department is ineffective in handling the crisis. Most participants felt that the department communicated ineffectively during COVID-19, while the department believed communication was effective. The reasons for the negative opinion by the employees could be attributed to the lack of communication by the department during the early phase of the pandemic and the frequency of that communication. It is interesting to note that communication was ineffective not because of the content but because of the timing and frequency of the communication. As the theory suggests, there is an increased demand for information during times of crisis. While employees expressed satisfaction with the content of the communication, the department failed to deliver that communication at the required time and frequency. This indicates that communication timing plays a vital role in how employees view communication. This

is also consistent with prior studies that found that effective crisis communication must be consistent, timely, and active (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011).

The third research question was posed to allow participants to suggest improvements for internal crisis communication. Participants stated that they prefer the department to issue communication immediately after the emergence of a crisis. In cases where little is known about a crisis, and the department is still deliberating, the department should still issue communication indicating such. Participants further stated that in times of crisis, they prefer that the department communicates via WhatsApp messages and phone calls; these get the message across quicker, and all employees use such devices so that everyone will receive communication.

Finally, the last question sought to gather suggestions to address challenges with existing strategies. Regarding the communication channels, participants suggested that the department should use different communication channels such as emails, phone calls, WhatsApp messages, and face-to-face delivery. Participants also indicated that the department provides all employees with communication tools. Participants also suggested that the department issues timely and consistent communication.

5.3 Recommendation

5.3.1 Policy Implications

There is a need for the department to develop an active means of engaging employees**.** They can create a database with all the employees' addresses, phone numbers, and emails to facilitate communication during a crisis.

The department should ensure that all employees are involved in implementing the department's communication strategy by providing adequate communication from the start of the crisis to the end. The involvement of employees will secure employees' trust in the department and reduce negative perceptions by employees.

5.3.2 Recommendations for further research

- Further studies need to be conducted on the effectiveness of internal crisis communication within an organization.
- Further studies should be conducted on the employee’s perception of internal communication using a quantitative method to incorporate a large sample.

- This research adopted a qualitative approach; further studies can adopt a quantitative approach in answering all the questions this study addressed.

5.4 Conclusion

This study was undertaken to examine the internal crisis communication strategies used by the GPT in the wake of COVID-19. The researcher gathered (through interviews) and interpreted experiences from employees and a communications manager concerning the nature of internal crisis communication in the GPT. This helped the researcher develop an understanding of internal communication with the department.

Crises pose a threat to an organization's basic existence. Yet, how organizations handle them—particularly in the eyes of their employees—determines that organization's fate. The Gauteng Provincial Treasury implemented the Transparency strategy, which Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) call the affirmative strategy. By providing employees with information about what had occurred, and the steps taken, the department intended to lower the uncertainty brought on by the crisis and subsequently foster a sense of security among employees. However, failing to provide timely and consistent communication during the crisis negatively influenced employees' perception of that communication.

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SEMI-STRUCTURE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE TO EXPLORE THE NATURE OF INTERNAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCIAL TREASURY DURING COVID-19

PLEASE NOTE:

PART A: Biographic Data

Please complete the section below by ticking the appropriate box with X or writing the answer in the applicable space. Please answer all the questions in this section.

1. **Age**

19	
20-29	
30-39	
40-49	
50-59	
60-65	

2. **Gender**

Female	
Male	

3. **How many years of service do you have in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury?**

   ……

4. **What is your occupation title?**

   ……
   ……

PART B

Please answer all questions.

1. **How do you understand internal crisis communication during a crisis?**

   ……

   ……

2. **How has the department communicated internally concerning the COVID-19 pandemic?**

   ……

   ……

3. **Is there a policy or aim from the department's perspective when it comes to communicating with employees during a crisis**

   ……

3. **What sort of effects does the department wish to make when communicating internally during the pandemic?**

   ……

5. **What do you perceive has been the department's overall goal?**

   ……

   ……

SEMI-STRUCTURE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE TO EXPLORE PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYEES ABOUT THE NATURE OF INTERNAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCIAL TREASURY DURING COVID-19

PLEASE NOTE:

PART A: Biographic Data

Please complete the section below by ticking the appropriate box with X or writing the answer in the applicable space. Please answer all the questions in this section.

6. **Age**

19	
20-29	
30-39	
40-49	
50-59	
60-65	

7. **Gender**

Female	
Male	

8. **How many years of service do you have in the Gauteng Provincial Treasury?**

   ……

9. **What is your occupation title?**

   ……
   ……

PART B

Please answer all questions.

10. **How do you understand internal crisis communication during a crisis?**

    ……

    ……

11. **In your view, how has the department communicated internally concerning the COVID-19 pandemic**

    ……

    ……

12. **What do you perceive has been the department's overall goal?**

    ……

    ……

13. **How do you prefer to be communicated during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please motivate your answer.**

    ……

    ……

14. **Share your suggestion on how the department can ensure effective internal crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

    ……

    ……