

# Communication in Organizations

## I. COMMUNICATION: ITS BASIC NATURE

### A. COMMUNICATION: A WORKING DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

1. Communication is the process by which a person, group, or organization (i.e., the sender) transmits some type of information (i.e., the message) to another person, group, or organization (i.e., the receiver).
2. *Encoding.* The sender's mission is to shape the idea into a form that can be sent to and understood by the receiver. This is the process of encoding--i.e., translating an idea into a form (e.g., written or spoken language) that can be recognized by a receiver.
3. *Channels of communication.* An encoded message is ready to be transmitted over one or more channels of communication, the pathways along which information travels--to reach the desired receiver. Whatever the channel the goal is to send the encoded message accurately to a desired receiver.
4. *Decoding.* Message is received, the recipient begins the process of decoding, of converting the message back into the sender's original ideas. This can involve different subprocesses, such as comprehending spoken and written words, interpreting facial expressions, and so on.
5. *Feedback.* Once a message is decoded, the receiver can transmit a new message back to the original sender. This is known as feedback, knowledge about the effect of messages on receivers. Receiving feedback allows senders to determine whether their messages have been understood properly.
6. *Noise.* There are many potential barriers to effective communication, and the name given to factors distorting the clarity of a message is noise. Noise can occur at any point in the communication process.

### B. THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

1. A key purpose of organizational communication is to direct action, to get others to behave as desired.
2. Another key function of communication in organizations is to achieve coordinated action. This function is served by the systematic sharing of information.
3. Information--whether data about a product's sales performance, directions to a customer's residence, or instructions on how to perform a task--is the core of all organizational activities.
4. There is also an interpersonal facet of organizational communication, a focus on the social relations between people.

## II. VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: SHARING MESSAGES WITH AND WITHOUT WORDS

1. A face-to-face chat with a coworker, a phone call from a supplier, an e-mail message from the boss, or a memo from company headquarters are all examples of verbal communication.
2. Nonverbal communication, the process of sharing messages without using words.

### A. TRADITIONAL VERBAL MEDIA VARY IN RICHNESS

1. Traditional verbal media are forms of communication that are not dependent on the use of computers and can be transmitted orally or in written form.
2. Verbal media can be distinguished by their capacity to convey information:

- a. Face to face discussions, are considered to be rich because they provide vast mounts of information, are highly personal in nature, and provide opportunities for immediate feedback.
- b. Less rich are non-face-to-face interactive media, such as the telephone.
- c. Lean verbal media are personal yet static media, such as memos, letters, and one-way communications sent either physically (e.g., by letter), or electronically (e.g., by fax or e-mail).
- d. The leanest verbal media are highly impersonal and static media, such as flyers and bulletins. This written information is targeted broadly; it is not aimed at one specific individual.
- e. Two types of written media deserve special mention because of their important role in organizations: newsletters, and employee handbooks.
- f. Newsletters are impersonal and aimed at a general audience. Regularly published, internal documents describing information of interest to employees regarding an array of business and non-business issues.
- g. Another important internal publication is the employee handbook, which is a document that describes, basic information about the company. It's major purposes are:
  1. To explain key aspects of the company's policies.
  2. To clarify the expectations of the company and employees toward each other.
  3. To express the company's philosophy.
  4. Handbooks are more popular today than ever before.

## B. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

1. *Email* is the most popular form of computer-mediated communication in organizations—in the U.S. and Canada 97% of workers use it daily.
  - a. It is the preferred means of communicating facts—such as information needed to coordinate between individuals and work groups.
  - b. Email has made it easier to break down barriers and share ideas. It may be difficult to get an appointment with someone—but relatively simple to send an email message.
  - c. Because it is written, email lacks the warmth and subtly of a face-to-face or telephone conversation. People try to compensate for this by using emoticons.
2. *Instant Messaging* is a variation of email that allows people who are online to share messages instantaneously without having to go through an email program. A small onscreen window is opened where a message can be typed for another to read.
  - a. It is possible to exchange notes in real time, web links and files.
  - b. Employees are using instant messaging to communicate quickly with one another, and as an inexpensive way to communicate with employees in remote locations.
3. *Video-mediated communication* are ways so simultaneously transmitting audio and video between two or more computers. It connects employees in distant locations allowing them to have “cyber-meetings.”
4. *Advanced speech recognition technology* allows companies do their jobs more effectively and inexpensively. Companies use the technology to dial telephones, allow customers to find telephone numbers, and browse the Internet.

## C. MATCHING THE MEDIUM TO THE MESSAGE

1. Communication is most effective when it uses multiple channels, such as both oral and written messages.
  - a. Oral messages get people's immediate attention, and a follow-up written portion makes the message more permanent--something that can be referred to in the future.

- b. Oral messages also allow for immediate two-way communication, whereas written messages frequently are only one-way or take too long for a response.
2. Not surprisingly, two-way communications (e.g., face-to-face discussions, telephone conversations) are more common than one-way communications (e.g., memos) in organizations.
3. A medium's effectiveness depends on how appropriate it is for the message being sent.
  - a. Oral media (e.g., telephone conversation, face-to-face meetings) are more effective than written media (e.g., notes, memos) when messages are ambiguous.
  - b. Written media, however, are more effective when messages are clear.

### III. NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: COMMUNICATION WITHOUT WORDS

#### A. STYLE OF DRESS: COMMUNICATION BY APPEARANCE

1. "Clothes make the man (or woman)." However, what our wardrobe communicates about us cannot make up for the lack of critical job skills.
2. Higher status people are less likely to dress in a casual fashion. This trend is rapidly changing, however. In fact, the style of dress today is more likely than ever to be business casual.
3. No objective evidence suggests that employees are any more or less productive in standard business attire than in more casual dress, but the trend is highly regarded by employees.

#### B. TIME: THE WAITING GAME

1. High-status individuals in many different organizations communicate the idea that their time is more valuable than others' and, therefore, that they hold higher-status positions--by making others wait to see them.
  - a. This is a very subtle yet important form of nonverbal communication.
  - b. Typically, the longer you must wait to see someone, the higher the organizational status that person has attained.

#### C. THE USE OF SPACE: WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT YOU?

1. One's organizational status is communicated by the amount of space at one's disposal.
  - a. The more space one commands, the more powerful one is likely to be in an organization.
  - b. How that space is arranged is also an indicator of status—barriers from visitors such as desks signal higher status.
2. Use of space also has symbolic value in group interactions.
  - a. The group leader sits at the head of a table.
  - b. Sometimes people who emerge as the leaders of groups tend to be ones who just happened to be sitting at the table heads.
3. Organizations communicate something about themselves by their use of space as well. Organizations as well as individuals use space to communicate certain aspects of their identities.

### IV. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

#### A. PERSONAL COMMUNICATION STYLE

1. Communication style is the consistent way that people go about communicating with others. It is learned, and can change. Some styles are more effective than others. The six styles are:
2. *The Noble*--tends to not filter what he/she is thinking; they come right out and say what's on his/her mind. They cut right to the bottom line.
3. *The Socratic*--believes in careful discussion before deciding, enjoys arguing, is not afraid of long-winded discussions, and has a penchant for details.

4. *The Reflective*--is concerned with the interpersonal aspects of communication and would sooner say nothing than say something to cause conflict.
5. *The Magistrate*--is a mix of Noble and Socratic. Magistrates tell you exactly what they think, and they make their cases in great detail. They tend to have an air of superiority about them.
6. *The Candidate*--is a mix between Socratic and Reflective. They tend to be warm and supportive while also being analytical and chatty.
7. *The Senator*--has developed both Noble style and the Reflective style but do not mix them.
8. We all have the potential to use any of these styles but tend to rely on one style more than any other.
  - a. No one style is better than another. They are simply different.
  - b. Effective communication begins by understanding your own style as well as those used by others.
  - c. Recognizing and responding to communication styles can enhance communication with one another.

#### B. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION: DO WOMEN AND MEN COMMUNICATE DIFFERENTLY?

1. Socio-linguists have found that men and women frequently miscommunicate because they have learned different ways of using the language.
2. The basic difference between women and men in communication is that men emphasize and reinforce their status when they talk, but that women downplay their status.
3. Women focus on creating positive social connections between themselves and others. Thus, whereas men tend to say "I," women tend to say "we."
4. Similarly, whereas men try to exude confidence and boast, thinking of questions as being signs of weakness, women tend to downplay their confidence--even when sure they are correct--and are not afraid to ask questions.
5. This difference in style between women and men explains why they respond differently to problems. Women tend to listen and lend social support. Men tend to offer advice.
6. Men tend to be more direct and confrontive than women.
7. The implications come to surface with the finding that people in powerful positions tend to reward people whose linguistic styles match their own.
8. The woman who politely defers to a dominant male speaker at a meeting may come across to men, at least, as being passive. But if she breaks this pattern is pushy and aggressive—and again her ideas are discounted.
9. The solution lies in accepting a broad range of communication styles.

#### C. CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATIONS

1. Part of the problem is that different words can mean different things to different people.
2. For example, Russians have difficulty understanding words such as efficiency and free market, which have no direct translation in their language.
3. Sometimes in different languages, even the same word can mean different things. In Israel, where the same Hebrew word, shalom, means "hello," "good-bye," and "peace."
4. The same may be said for cultural differences in the tone of speech used in different settings. The French have different words for formal and informal situations for example: *tu* for informal speech, and *vous* for formal speech. To confuse these two words may be tantamount to misinterpreting the nature of the social setting.

5. It is wise for foreign visitors to learn both the language and customs of using the language when in another country.

## V. FORMAL AND INFORMAL COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

1. Formal communication, or the sharing of messages regarding the official work of the organization.
2. Informal communication, or the sharing of unofficial messages, that go beyond the organization's formal activities.

### A. FORMAL COMMUNICATION: UP, DOWN, AND ACROSS THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

1. One unique feature of organizations that profoundly affects communication is their structure. Organizational structure influences communication.
2. Organizational structure refers to the formally prescribed pattern of interrelationships between the various units.
- 3.
4. An organization's structure may be described using a diagram known as an organizational chart.
  - a. Each box represents a person performing a specific job, and the diagram shows the titles of the individuals performing the various jobs as well as the formally prescribed pattern of communication between them.
  - b. These patterns are relatively fixed and defined.
5. Connecting the boxes in the organizational chart are lines of authority which show who must answer to whom.
  - a. Each person is responsible to (or answers to) the person at the next-higher level to which he or she is connected.
  - b. At the same time, each person also are responsible for (or give orders to) those who are immediately below his or her box.
  - c. The structure does not change because of personnel changes.
6. The nature and form of communication vary greatly as a function of people's relative positions within an organization.
7. *Downward communication* consists of instructions, directions, and orders, messages telling subordinates what they should be doing.
8. Feedback on past performance also typically flows in a downward direction.
9. Downward communication flows from one level to the next-lowest one, slowly trickling down to the bottom. As a message passes through the various levels it often becomes less accurate.
10. *Upward communication* is Information flowing from lower levels to higher levels within an organization (e.g., from subordinate to supervisor) is referred to as upward communication.
11. Messages tend to contain the information managers need. Types of information that flow upward include suggestions for improvement, status reports, reactions to work-related issues, and new ideas.
12. Upward communication is not simply the reverse of downward communication.
13. The difference in status between the communicating parties makes for some important distinctions.
  - a. It occurs much less frequently than downward communication.
  - b. 70 percent of assembly line workers initiated communication with their supervisors less than once a month.
  - c. Managers directed less than 15 percent of their total communication to their own superiors.

14. Perhaps even more important, upward communication often suffers from serious inaccuracies. Subordinates frequently feel they must highlight their accomplishments--and downplay their mistakes--to be looked on favorably. This reluctance to transmit bad news is referred to as the MUM effect.
15. *Horizontal communication* are messages that flow laterally (i.e., at the same organizational level) are characterized by efforts at coordination (i.e., attempts to work together).
16. Horizontal communication involves people at the same level. Therefore, it tends to be easier and friendlier.
17. Communication between peers also tends to be more casual and occurs more quickly, because fewer social barriers exist between the parties.
18. There can be problems if people in different departments feel they are competing with others for valued organizational resources.

## B. INFORMAL COMMUNICATION NETWORKS: BEHIND THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

1. Informal communication is information shared without any formally imposed obligations or restrictions.
  - a. Informal networks become very far-reaching.
  - b. Informal communication networks constitute an important avenue for information in organizations because of their reach.
  - c. If an organization's formal communication represents its skeleton, its informal communication represents its central nervous system.
2. People transmit information to those they come in contact with, thereby providing conduit, through which messages can travel.
  - a. We also tend to communicate most with those who are similar to ourselves in areas such as age and time on the job.
  - b. As a result, many informal, gender-segregated networks tend to form in organizations. Among men this has been referred to as "the old boys network."
  - c. To the extent these associations may isolate people from others in power this practice is limiting.
  - d. At the same time, however, exposure to similar others with whom people feel comfortable may provide valuable sources of information.
3. Scientific evidence shows that the more involved people are in their organization's communication networks, the more powerful and influential they become.
4. The idea that people are connected informally also explains an important organizational phenomenon--namely, turnover.
  - a. Voluntary turnover (i.e., employees freely electing to resign) occurs in a kind of snowball effect.
  - b. Patterns of voluntary turnover are not independently distributed within a work group. Instead, they result from people's influences on each other.
5. Unlike formal communication networks, informal networks are composed of individuals at different organizational levels.
6. When anyone can tell something informal to anyone else, it produces a rapid flow of information along what is commonly referred to as the grapevine, the pathways along which unofficial, informal information travels.
7. Informal information traveling along the organizational grapevine tends to reach its audience rapidly, often within hours.
8. Informal communication can cross formal organizational boundaries and because informal information tends to be communicated orally.
9. As noted earlier, oral messages are communicated faster than written ones, but they also may become increasingly inaccurate as they flow from person to person.

10. Grapevines are not necessarily bad. Informally socializing with coworkers can help to make work groups more cohesive.
  - a. Most information communicated along the grapevine is accurate as well.
  - b. 82 percent of the information communicated along one company's organizational grapevine on a single occasion was accurate.
  - c. The problem with interpreting this figure, however, is that the inaccurate portions of some messages may alter their overall meaning.
  - d. This problem of inaccuracy clearly is what gives the grapevine such a bad reputation.
11. Information transmitted that is almost totally without any basis and often is unverifiable is rumor.
  - a. Typically, rumors are based on speculation, an overactive imagination, and wishful thinking rather than on facts.
  - b. Rumors race through organizations.
  - c. They can be difficult to crush and profound in their effects.
12. Sometimes, rumors about company products can be very costly as well. For example:
  - a. A rumor about the use of worms in McDonald's hamburgers circulated in the Chicago area during the late 1970s causing sales to drop 30% in some restaurants..
  - b. In June 1993, stories appeared in the press stating that people across the United States had found syringes in cans of Pepsi-Cola.
  - c. The consumer-products giant Procter & Gamble (P&G) has been subject to consistent, nagging rumors linking it to Satanism since 1980.
13. What can be done to counter the effects of rumors?
  - a. Evidence suggests that directly refuting a rumor may not always counter its effects.
  - b. If you ever become the victim of a rumor, try to refute it immediately with indisputable facts.
  - c. If it lingers on, try directing people's attention to other, positive things they already believe about you.
  - d. Rumors may be impossible to stop, but with some effort, their effects can be managed.

#### C. COMMUNICATING INSIDE VS. OUTSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

1. All corporate communication can be distinguished by whether it is aimed at people inside the organization (e.g., fellow employees) or outside the organization (e.g., the general public).
2. Executives say different things to groups outside the company vs. inside. These findings suggest executives were attempting to present their companies in a positive light to the public (e.g., by focusing on opportunities) but were more willing to address threats internally.
3. This is the idea behind what is called strategic communication, the practice of presenting information about the company to broad, external audiences.
4. Given the importance of clearly and appropriately managing a corporate image through strategic communication, public relations firms often are hired to do this work.

### VI. IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

#### A. USE SIMPLE, CLEAR LANGUAGE

1. Using needlessly formal language may impose a serious barrier to communication.
2. Recognize that all organizations, fields, social groups, and professions have their own jargon, their own specialized language. The use of jargon is inevitable when people within the same field or social groups communicate.
3. Some degree of highly specialized language may help communication by providing an easy way for people in the same field to share complex ideas.
4. Jargon also allows professionals to identify others as people in their field, because they "speak the same language."

5. The clearest communicators also keep their language short, simple, and to the point. The K.I.S.S. principle, keep it short and simple.

#### B. BECOME AN ACTIVE, ATTENTIVE LISTENER

1. Most of us usually think of listening as a passive process, one of taking in information sending out others, but when done correctly, the process is much more active.
2. Asking questions and putting the speaker's ideas into your own words are both helpful ways of ensuring you take in all the information presented.
3. Avoiding distractions in the environment and concentrating on what the other person is saying also are very useful.
4. Avoid jumping to conclusions and evaluating their remarks. Take in completely what is being said before you respond. Being a good listener also involves making sure you are aware of others' main points.
5. Although it requires some effort, incorporating these suggestions into your own habits makes you a better listener.
6. The development of listening skills requires you to identify the individual elements of listening, the separate skills that contribute to listening effectiveness.
7. These may be clustered into the six groups of the HURIER model.
  - a. Hearing
  - b. Understanding
  - c. Remembering
  - d. Interpreting
  - e. Evaluating
  - f. Responding
8. Good listeners resist feeling hostile or defensive toward the speaker and pay careful attention.
9. Austin also advises people to be an equal opportunity listener. Pay attention not only to those with high status but also to those at any level, and make time to hear them all in a democratic fashion.
10. Research has confirmed the importance of listening as a management skill. In fact, the better listener a person is the more likely he or she is to rise rapidly up the organizational hierarchy and to perform well as a manager.

#### C. GAUGE THE FLOW OF INFORMATION: AVOIDING OVERLOAD

1. When any part of a communication network becomes bogged down with more information than it can handle, a condition of overload exists.
2. This poses a threat to organizational communication. There are steps that organizations can take to manage overload.
3. First, organizations may employ gatekeepers, people whose jobs require them to control the flow of information to potentially overloaded units. Administrative assistants are examples of those responsible for making sure busy executives are not overloaded by the demands of other people or groups.
4. Queuing, lining up incoming information so it can be managed in an orderly fashion.
5. When systems are overloaded, distortion and omission are likely to result. Messages may be changed or left out when passed from one organizational unit to the next.
6. In one study tracing the flow of downward communication in more than 100 organizations, the messages communicated downward over five levels lost approximately 80 percent of their



original information by the time they reached their destination at the lowest level of the organizational hierarchy.

7. One effective strategy is redundancy, transmitting them again--often in another form or via another channel. For example a manager may have a meeting with staff and follow it up with a memo.
8. Another practice that can help is verification, which refers to making sure that messages have been received accurately.

#### D. GIVE AND RECEIVE FEEDBACK: OPENING CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

1. To operate effectively, organizations must communicate accurately with their employees. Most employees believe the feedback between themselves and their organizations is not as good as it should be.
2. Part of the problem is the lack of available channels for upward communication and people's reluctance to use the ones that do exist.
3. Companies have successfully used 360 degree feedback systems which provide feedback from not only supervisors, but peers and customers as well.
4. Another means is the use of suggestion systems. Too often, employees' good ideas about how to improve organizational functioning fail to make their way up the organizational chart, because the people with the ideas do not know how to reach the people who can implement them.
5. Approximately 15 percent of employees use their companies' suggestion boxes, and approximately 25 percent of the suggestions they made are implemented. Typically, employees are rewarded for successful suggestions.
6. Corporate hotlines, telephone lines staffed by corporate personnel who were ready to answer employees' questions, listen to their comments, and the like. By providing personnel with easy access to information, companies benefit in several ways:
  - a. Doing so shows employees that the company cares about them.
  - b. It also encourages employees to address their concerns before these issues become more serious.
7. Because as much as 40 percent of calls are made after regular working hours or on weekends it is difficult to staff them. As a result, some organizations have outsourced their hotline services.
8. Another technique, informal meetings, known as "brown bag" and "skip level" meetings, are designed to facilitate communication between people who usually do not get together because they work at different organizational levels.
9. Brown bag meetings are informal get-togethers during breakfast or lunch--brought in from home, at which people discuss what is going on in the company. The informal nature of these meetings is designed to encourage the open sharing of ideas.
10. Skip level meetings do essentially the same thing; these are gatherings of employees with corporate superiors more than one level higher than themselves in the organizational hierarchy.
11. Finally, employee surveys can gather information about employees' attitudes and opinions regarding key areas of organizational operations.

#### E. BE A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATOR: ENHANCING RELATIONSHIPS

1. To be an effective communicator, you must practice supportive communication.
2. Supportive communication is any communication that is accurate, honest, and builds and enhances relationships instead of jeopardizing them.

3. How you act toward another influences the nature of your relationship with that person, which in turn influences the quality of communication, which in turn may influence various work-related attitudes and job performance.
4. Tactics of a supportive communicator.
  - a. *Focus on the problem, not the person.* Communication tends to be far more supportive when it focuses on the problem and possible solutions than on any one person's beliefs about the characteristics of another.
  - b. *Honestly say what you mean.* Too often, people avoid difficult matters by disguising their true feelings.
  - c. *Own your decisions.* Do not hesitate to make clear exactly what you did and how you feel.
  - d. *Use validating language.* When you do speak your mind, avoid language that arouses negative feelings about someone's self-worth.
  - e. *Keep the conversation going.* It is supportive to probe for additional information or by reflecting back what you think the speaker has.
5. One technique for keeping a conversation moving is to use conjunctive statements which are comments related to the speaker's remarks. Disjunctive statements—which are unrelated to what the speaker just said—tend to bring the conversation to a close.

#### F. USE INSPIRATIONAL COMMUNICATION TACTICS

1. Effective leaders—and effective employees—know how to inspire others when communicating with them. Here are tips:
2. *Project confidence and power with emotion-proving words:* Use words that provoke emotion such as “bonding with customers” as opposed to “being friendly.”
3. *Be credible.* Credibility is enhanced by backing up your claims with clear data.
4. *Pitch your message to the listener.* Cut through the clutter by making your message interesting, important, and special.
5. *Avoid “junk words” that dilute your message.* Drop phrases such as “like” and “you know” from your speech. Practice by using a tape recorder.
6. *Use front-loaded messages.* Come right out and say what you mean. Make your point first and use the rest of the message to illustrate it.