

Chapter 5

CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

Channel of communication refers to the way by which a message flows from the sender to the recipient. An organization has well-ordered network of channels along which communication flows. Formal communications move along the established lines or channels.

The direction of the flow of communication is described in terms of formal power and authority relationships among the members of the organization. Communication from manager to subordinate is called downward; communication from subordinate to manager is called upward; and communication between persons at the same level is called horizontal or lateral communication.

In addition to the formal channels of communication, an organization develops informal channels which satisfy various human needs of the members of the organization.

An organization has internal and external communication. Communication within the organization, among its members, is internal; communication with those outside the organization is external.

EXTERNAL

Messages that go out of the organization are outward and those that are received from outside are inward communication. Organizations have office procedures for handling external communication; both, the incoming and the outgoing messages are recorded and filed.

Outward

Messages go out of an organization to suppliers, customers, banks, insurance companies, government departments, the mass media and the general public. They may be in the form of letters, faxes, telephone calls, telegrams, reports, advertisements, press handouts, speeches, visits and so on.

The style, format and tone of the outward communication affect the organization's public image and public relations.

Inward

An organization receives letters, telegrams, fax messages, telex messages, reports and brochures, circulars, journals and magazines, telephone calls, and personal visits, from customers, other organizations, government departments and so on. These are inward communication.

INTERNAL

The flow of communication within an organization forms a complicated pattern. The flow and the directions are usually determined by the pattern of hierarchy and levels of authority as well as by the requirements of tasks.

Formal Channels

The efficiency of an organization depends on a regular flow of messages. The flow of messages needs to be organized into a well-ordered network, to ensure that communication flows easily and that executives are kept informed of what is going on.

Clerks from different departments are not supposed to exchange official papers directly; the papers move through the supervisors or section heads. A clerk can approach the manager only through his own supervisor or officer. Messages are made to move through fixed channels so that the executives concerned are kept informed of what is going on.

Messages within an organization, between managers, supervisors and workers, are varied and numerous. They move up and down the chain of authority as well as sideways between persons at the same level of authority, and among teams.

Messages which move up and down the authority line are called **vertical** communication and those which move among persons of the same level are called **horizontal** or **lateral** communication.

VERTICAL COMMUNICATION

This includes all the messages that move between subordinates and their supervisors.

Downward

Messages which go from the higher authority levels to the lower levels are downward communication. They may be written in the form of letters, notes, circulars, notices; or they may be oral, face-to-face in meetings, announcements over the public address system, and so on.

The common purposes of downward communication are to give:

- (i) instructions about a specific task;
- (ii) information about the practices and procedures followed by the organization;
- (iii) information which creates understanding of the task in relation to other tasks of the organization;
- (iv) feedback about subordinates' performance;
- (v) information about the ideology and the goals of the organization which would help them to develop a sense of belonging to the organization.

Earlier, when business companies were authoritarian, employees were only told about their task, and how to do it. Now, many organizations realize the importance of giving employees a general understanding of their task's

relevance to the organization's work; employees are also given feedback about how they are doing. Such communication makes them feel a sense of identification with the organization's goals.

Downward communication must be simple and carefully explained; persons at the lower levels of the hierarchy may not have sufficient knowledge or overall view of the organization's work; hence they need explanation. Long circulars, written in an official and legal style are not easy to follow. Instruction sheets and employee manuals should be written in a simple style.

A great deal of loss of information occurs as messages move downward. When a message is passed from a senior to a subordinate down the line of command in a chain, it passes through many levels of authority. There is delay as well as distortion of the message. Each person through whom it passes edits it, filters it, and simplifies it for the understanding and needs of the next person who is to receive it. If the chain of communication is very long, there may be much change and distortion in the message.

Loss of information as it moves downward is often caused by misinterpretation, lack of understanding, and neglect of messages by many of the members of the organization. Even if there is very active downward flow of communication, it does not mean that the information is accurate, or that it is received and understood and accepted by subordinates.

Many organizations avoid long channels to ensure that information moves directly and fast. In a rapidly changing work environment, communication must move fast to keep up the efficiency of the organization.

Communication can be passed downward in a cluster as in a meeting, so that everyone receives it at the same time in the same environment. The recipients of the information are of different levels of hierarchy. There is some opportunity to seek clarification; loss of information is avoided. With the setting up of computer networks in organizations the flow of information will be more easy.

Upward

Messages which go from subordinates to supervisors and to higher levels are upward communication. The purpose is usually to give information and submit reports. But many organizations are using the upward channel to understand the concerns of the subordinates, to encourage them to contribute ideas, and to make them feel a part of the organization.

Communication does not move upward easily. Fear and shyness often prevents subordinates from conveying messages to higher authorities. Impatience or arrogance may prevent superiors from listening to their subordinates. The resulting gap in communication can be harmful to the organization.

When messages pass upward through official channels, there is usually loss of information. At every level there is some filtering. Besides, there may be a deliberate suppression of information out of self-interest and jealousy; a supervisor may not pass upward, a good suggestion from a subordinate, or

may change it so as to get the credit for himself; a senior officer may prevent information about discontent in the department from reaching the manager because it reflects on his/her human relations skills. The resulting information gap can be harmful because the upper level of management may not find out the true state of affairs until it is too late. Therefore, cutting across the official chains of communication is sometimes necessary for the sake of speed and efficiency and for employee morale.

Good staff relations are an important asset of an organization; and one of the best aids to good relations is free upward communication. Employees who are listened to are happy and work better. Secondly, persons at any level in an organization may have good ideas and suggestions for the improvement of the organization; these ideas should be encouraged.

Organizations set up special formal and informal channels to encourage and ensure upward movement of communication. Most organizations have these channels:

- (a) Regular reporting systems exist in all organizations. There are forms for periodical reports and progress reports of different activities in the organization. These reports convey factual information to the management.
- (b) Periodical review meetings with individuals and groups are arranged systematically, and conducted in an informal style. Such meetings provide an opportunity for review of work, problems, solutions, ideas, budget allocations, etc. They give an opportunity to subordinates to talk to the superiors. Opinions, views and attitudes are conveyed upwards by this channel.
- (c) Suggestion scheme is a formal and well-organized system for making ideas move up from the lower level employees to the management and decision makers. A suggestion scheme requires elaborate set-up, committee meetings, a well-planned award system, and a good deal of time and energy. The company benefits from the ideas of people who are actually on the job, and the employees feel happy when their ideas are respected and valued.
- (d) "Open door" policy provides an informal upward channel. It gives every employee an access to higher authority. It is carried out by managers allowing free access to anyone, without prior appointment, during a fixed hour everyday, or on a fixed day of the week, and allowing any employee to approach directly. This system prevents distortion by avoiding the chain of authority. Feelings and attitudes of the staff are observed this way.
- (e) Informal gatherings, picnics or weekly tea meetings bring together all members of the organization. Some organizations call it the "Happy Hour". There is an opportunity for socializing and getting to know one another more closely. Such occasions encourage employees to overcome their shyness and talk freely about their work and their ideas and their

life. Closer relationships are built up and there is better interaction among all levels.

- (f) Standing Committees (like grievance committee, welfare committee, counselling committee) provide a channel for problems, unhappy feelings, troubles, complaints and grievances to be made known to the upper level of the organization where they can be given serious attention.
- (g) Exit interviews with employees who are leaving the organization can provide much useful information about attitudes and views of the employees.

Upward communication provides two main types of information: one is personal information about performance, views, ideas, which is vital for employee relations and morale; another is technical feedback which is necessary for the working of the organization.

HORIZONTAL OR LATERAL CHANNEL

A large amount of communication flows between persons of equal status in an organization. Horizontal communication can be oral or written.

The quantity of horizontal communication is larger at higher levels of authority; the clerks in one department may have no direct contact with the clerks in another department, but section managers and heads of departments have closer contacts, and the higher level managers have to be in constant consultation and communication with one another. Horizontal communication is more interactive than vertical communication.

Horizontal communication has several objectives.

- (i) Exchange of information about activities, processes and progress among heads of departments or other peer groups is essential for the organization's work. Some information is conveyed formally by sending copies of relevant documents like letters and reports; a good deal of information is exchanged by informal and formal meetings.
- (ii) Discussion of plans and problems, reviews of projects, and decisions require formal lateral communication in meetings. Daily routine matters may be settled by informal discussion.
- (iii) Coordination is the most important objective of horizontal communication. Department heads may meet periodically to discuss each department's contribution to the organization's goals.
- (iv) Conflict resolution is an important function of lateral communication. Members of a department or department heads meet to sort out existing or potential conflict by discussion.
- (v) Problem solving usually requires horizontal communication among all those who are concerned with the problem and affected by it. Brainstorming is often used for finding solutions.
- (vi) Advice may be asked for and given in a friendly informal way between persons of equal status.

INFORMAL CHANNEL

Grapevine

Grapevine is a secondary channel of personal, informal communication which exists in every organization in addition to the formal organized channels. It has no definite pattern or direction though it is largely horizontal. It is a complex web of oral communication flow, linking all the members of the organization in one way or the other. It may sometimes move along in a chain, passing information from person to person; and sometimes information may be passed in clusters, that is, in groups, at meal-times or just before or after working hours.

There may be more than one grapevine channel in an organization, and individuals may be on more than one grapevine. People whose places of work are close together, people who come into contact with one another in official work, people who travel to work together, or people with similar temperaments are likely to be on the same grapevine.

This informal channel carries unofficial information about the management's policies and plans, individual managers, work programs, the company's performance, and such matters related to the company. Naturally, the talk is coloured by the ideas, prejudices and feelings of the persons engaged in it. Though the stories and information circulating in the grapevine are not fully correct, and often carry added colour, it can become quite powerful and influential.

Research has shown that grapevine is not just a zigzagging, unreliable channel. It often carries more information than the formal official system of communication does; it moves much faster because it is not hindered by the delays of the official channel.

Grapevine can affect an organization's working by its influence on the opinions, beliefs and attitudes of its members. Attitudes have a direct bearing on people's willingness to work on their assigned tasks. The nature of the talk among the employees also affects their attitudes and efficiency. Excited talking and bad tempers lead to poor performance; so does excessive fun. What employees hear and say affects their relationship with the management, and this has a direct effect on productivity.

The presence of the grapevine is recognized and accepted as a part of an organization. It needs to be skilfully controlled because it can influence the efficiency of the organization. A manager who learns to listen to it can find out who are the talk-leaders and give them desirable information; this can have a beneficial effect.

There is a close relationship between the grapevine and the morale of employees; when the morale is high and employees are well-motivated, the grapevine is usually thin and slow; when the morale drops, it becomes thick and fast. Bad news and unpleasant stories cause excitement; they travel faster and are discussed more extensively than good news. A manager has to keep eyes and ears open, and encourage upward communication, to find out what the employees talk about and how they feel.