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“Brutally honest” about communication

*What do managers in a knowledge intensive organization view as important in
communication?*

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1. Introduction

Each year, companies are created and evolve in the way they are structured and organized. For example, ways of working change, roles evolve and hierarchies are sometimes reshaped. Indeed, being a manager today in a company can have different meanings and nuances. Every manager has a specific role which depends on the company he or she works for, but also on the team for which he or she is responsible. Thus, managers can choose how to manage the team and the methods that go with it, using and emphasizing more or less different notions. For example, Mintzberg (2006) has identified 10 key roles held by managers. These include the roles of liaison officer, spokesperson, information disseminator or the one of regulator. With that, it is noted that the role of the manager is very much based on the notion of communication. It is therefore on this important notion in the role of the manager that the data-analysis paper will deal. This paper is based on the financial company Nordea. Four different managers from Nordea agreed to answer questions in order to conduct the following qualitative study and to learn more about their roles as managers. The data collected from the managers during the various interviews made it possible to obtain relevant information for this paper, particularly with regard to the notion of communication within the company and how the managers worked with their employees.

The purpose of this study is to provide insights in how and why communication is used in a knowledge intensive organization. Different aspects of the functioning of managers towards their employees will therefore be discussed, especially what is important for them when it deals with the communication process. On the first hand, the paper will look at this topic in more detail by analyzing the data provided by the managers. For a more in-depth analysis of the subject, the data will be analyzed by mainly using the monologic and dialogic communication theory.

Thus, we will look at and answer the following research question:

“What do managers in a knowledge intensive organization view as important in communication?”

2. Theory

This chapter will present the theories used to analyze the data for this project. Managers can shape their messages through two different modes of communication: monologic and dialogic communication as described by Jabri et al. (2008 cited in Svenningsson & Sörgärde, 2020).

According to Jabri et al. (2008), a monologic mode of communication is one-way communication, there is not any form of interaction between the parts involved. Jabri et al. describe this type of communication as a process in which one part speaks and the other listens. Information is sent from the sender, in this case the manager, to the receiver, here the employee. Employees are not active but passive actors who just need to receive the message and agree. This is necessary because, through monologic communication, managers are only interested in achieving their goals, they shape the message and communicate with the aim to convince the receivers to accomplish their wishes. Critique of monologic communication is that it could create a false consensus. According to Svenningsson & Sörgärde (2020) when monologic communication is used employees feel alienated and do not want to contribute to the change. Therefore, a dialogic way of communication could be used to have more effective change.

Jabri et al. (2008) describe a dialogic communication as a two-way communication. Manager and employees both play the role of speaker and listener. The communication process is interactive, everyone has the possibility to express their viewpoints, so through this process different perspectives become available. Managers actually listen to the employees and their feedback, employees' interests and feelings are taken into consideration. The monologic and dialogic communication theory is the main theory used in this paper. However, the theory of storytelling also contributed to the final results and will therefore be shortly introduced (Czarniawska, 1998 cited in Svenningsson & Sörgärde, 2020).

Managers can use stories to communicate with their employees, also called storytelling. Communication through stories is an efficient way to shape messages and enable listeners to create a better understanding of it. Stories are useful means of communication because they portray the context in which actions occur, they explain what happened before, during and after (Czarniawska, 1998 cited in Svenningsson & Sörgärde, 2020).

3. Method

This qualitative research is based on interviews of managers of Nordea, a knowledge intensive financial organization. These interviews were semi-structured and took about 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with permission of the interviewees. A semi-structured interview is flexible and the interviewer can ask follow up questions (Bryman, Bell and Harley, 2018). These follow up questions resolve misunderstandings and provide a more in-depth understanding of the answers. However, because of the duration of the interviews, only four interviews were conducted.

To analyze the data, the steps of Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011) were used. This entailed breaking down the data by reading the material and looking for patterns and interesting issues. Then the data was categorized into different groups where the components had the same theme. After the categorization, the groups were labeled. This label describes the data that is in the group. These categories were reduced by selecting the data that answered the research question and contributed to the purpose of the paper. In these groups, the quotes that fitted the best to answer the research question were selected and used in this paper.

To evaluate the trustworthiness of this paper, four criteria were used. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) there are four criteria for the trustworthiness of qualitative research. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. For credibility, the structure of the interviews allowed the interviewer to ask follow up questions and therefore the data could be checked on if there were any misunderstandings. Also the interpretation of the data is checked by multiple individuals. The transferability is about whether the findings could hold in other contexts (Guba and Lincoln 1994). For this study, this is not necessarily the case. The interviews were conducted with only four participants which all work at the same company. Therefore the transferability to other contexts is limited but this does not imply the findings of this research could not be used for other contexts. Findings of this research could be the basis for new research to further explore the subject. The dependability is about checking the work of peers and if proper procedures are followed (Bryman et al, 2018). In this research, the group working on this research were four people who had access to all data and notes. Therefore, inconsistencies could be resolved and every aspect of this research could be checked. At last there is the confirmability,

which entails if the research is not influenced by personal bias (Bryman et al, 2018). To limit the influence of personal bias the four peers group checked each other on personal biases. Despite all the procedures and actions to improve the trustworthiness, limits of this research still exist. Potential improvements for further research could be conducting more interviews in various knowledge-intensive organizations.

4. Analysis

Out of the analysis of the empirical data emerged that managers mainly use communication for three purposes: to provide transparency, build relationships and engage employees.

4.1 Providing transparency

One pattern that was found during the analysis of the interviews was that managers use communication to provide transparency. Transparent communication can be described as being open and honest, thus sharing not only good but also bad information and allowing everyone to know all your motives behind the message (Hutchison, 2020). The message should be presented in a way which enables all listeners to fully understand it. Evident in all the interviews, was the fact that each manager placed value on being transparent.

“Maybe I get the reaction: ”No, I can do it my own way” and sometimes I tell my employees that you have to quite do it like this. It's quite [straight] forward, but we are [with] so many branches as you say. [...] On the top you have to be very, very clear about what you want and how you want to do it.” (Manager 3)

“But I think when you are changing something, you have to be brutally honest. Honesty always goes the longest way.” (Manager 1)

Manager 3 stresses that for executives with a position high up in the organizational hierarchy, it is important to deliver a message in a very clear way. He implies that telling people what to do is quite brutal, but still necessary. This is because in such a large organization as Nordea, there are a large number of branches and subordinates who all need to understand the

message. Manager 1 agrees that being honest is important when one is trying to implement a change. The statement by manager 3 that employees have to do things in a specific way could be seen as an order. One can therefore argue that manager 3 uses monological communication according to the theory of Jabri et al. (2008), when transferring information from a top position to other levels of the company. Giving hard facts could clarify what the manager is trying to accomplish. However, managers also think it is valuable to take on a more soft approach. This is, for example, mentioned by manager 3:

“I think that's quite important in the story telling about why it's one of the biggest things to get it successful. Why we're doing this, it's fine as it is or it was better before. So storytelling is very, very important.” (Manager 3)

Stories can be used to describe the context of a situation and give insight into people's motives and interests (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2020). Listeners can place themselves in the situation of the storyteller. This makes it easier for them to grasp not only what the teller wants to accomplish, but also why, which enables them to obtain a deeper understanding of the message. Managers can therefore use this tool to increase their transparency. Because managers can choose what to include in their stories, stories are, however, not necessarily factual and can therefore also decrease their transparency. The part ‘telling’ in storytelling could be seen as an indication that storytelling usually happens without the interference of other people. However, listeners should be able to monitor and verify if managers are not manipulating their stories. This may be one of the reasons why managers not only want to speak themselves but find it important to listen to and talk with employees.

As a manager you always have to explain the whole picture. [...] Put it in context and be transparent, honest and always ask for the opinions from the employees. What are the good things we're seeing with this change? What are your fears and what can we do about it? You have to listen to the fears. (Manager 1)

Manager 1 believes that in order to make employees understand a message, it is not sufficient for a manager to only depict the context. Instead, the manager emphasizes the importance of also discussing with subordinates. When mentioning that one needs to “ask for the opinions of employees” and “listen to the fears”, it seems that the manager thinks that one-way communication can raise questions from employees. The acts manager 1 mentions facilitate the opening of discussions, which allows employees to get all their questions answered. To

enable listeners to create a more thorough understanding, it is therefore important that managers not use monologic communication on its own but complement this with dialogic communication.

4.2 Building Relationship

Another important issue according to the interviewed managers in terms of communication is relationship building. Building strong relationships with employees allows managers to create links and a feeling of psychological safety for everyone in the company.

“I think it’s important that your employees can always come to you. You never judge them. You always work with, you never blame them.”

(Manager 1)

According to the above statement, the manager wants to be close to his employees, so that they feel no barriers between him and them. Everything must be done in a spirit of listening and consideration for the other, without judgment. In fact, people in different positions can communicate as equals with one another. This is called a two-way communication process, or “dialogic communication”. It is a question for the manager to create a relationship of “colleague to colleague”, and not of the employee feeling crushed by the superior hierarchical status of his manager. This improves the quality of work for everyone in the company.

In fact, managers 1 and 2 say:

“ Yeah. So as I said, I wanna be close to them. I think it's very important for their work and it's very important for me.” (Manager 2)

“Motivation is the key role if you want to be a coaching leader. As a branch manager you have to be pretty close to your employees and be coaching with the problems.” (Manager 1)

In the above statements, managers indicate that having a good relationship with people they work with is important for them but also for the employees themselves. Good relations between everyone therefore improve the quality of daily life and work within the company,

creating easier contact, so that people won't hesitate to share doubts, suggestions and problems encountered at work, making them more efficient. It is indeed very common to say that good communication and good relations are the keys to solving problems, so this also works in the context of business life.

It also comes to have a specific form of hierarchy. A type of leading and being a manager within a team that creates a specific atmosphere in the company more pleasant for everyone:

“And for me, since I'm the leader, it's very important for me to be close to them at that point and it's very fun for me to do that as well, I think.”

(Manager 2)

In this quote manager 2 indicates that being close to employees makes fulfilling his managerial role more fun and interesting. Having a good relationship with employees allows the manager to have a more rewarding role, rather than just having to give orders and instructions to employees. This is due to an interactive way of working, by for example being in tune with each other and taking into consideration the different opinions and ideas submitted. Furthermore, employees will naturally work better and put more effort into their work if they work with a manager with whom they feel close and with whom they get on well, rather than a cold manager who is only here to give orders and with whom the feeling does not pass at all (Tsitmideli et al., 2016). This creates a virtuous circle that is beneficial for the prosperity of the company.

It is even more beneficial for the company to have employees and managers who have good relations, as this has an impact on the organization and functioning of the company itself:

“I want them to feel free that you can make your own decisions.” (Manager 2)

“So, give the trust, always find that you're as we say in Sweden, “samma båt”, you're sitting in the same boat.” (Manager 1)

A manager who has a good relationship with his employees will naturally have the ability to get to know each person individually, their strengths and weaknesses, the way they organize themselves and the way they work.

As mentioned in the above quotes, the manager will therefore be more likely to trust

employees he/she knows and have a positive relationship with them than the other way around. Thus, if the manager has confidence in his/her employees, he/she will allow them to work more autonomously by giving them the freedom to make their own decisions. The management of the company's tasks will therefore be different from that of a manager who has no confidence in his employees, since the feelings of teamwork, autonomy and confidence will influence the decisions of the manager. Thus, with the strong cohesion between everyone, it is the aspect that everyone is finally in the same boat, regardless of the hierarchy that will further strengthen the bonds between everyone.

4.3 Engaging and motivating employees

Another aspect managers emphasized as important while talking about communication is to increase employee engagement and motivation. Communication is an essential element for motivating and engaging employees, as the Human Relation approach highlights (Svenningsson & Sörgärde, 2020).

Managers do not only send information but they also receive it. Listening to what employees have to say, listening to their suggestions makes employees feel they are active actors and useful. If employees feel like they are valued they will be more engaged.

“I think for some people it's when they do not feel involved. They think that this is a decision taken over their head, and that neither they nor the customer understands it.”

(Manager 4)

Manager 4 highlights the importance of making employees feel involved. Employees, according to this quote, need to be part of the decision making process. The manager argues that decision or communication does not have to be from the top to down.

Using monologic communication can create a negative work environment, employees do not feel like they are active subjects of the organization.

“Since there was no communication until that day, we didn't know anything [about a change]. And I think that's what they wanted us to not know. On the other hand, it was very stressful to come to work that day and to know that you have not been a part of something that's actually you were a part of. So I would say that all of us became very stressed about this situation.” (Manager 2)

Manager 2 is emphasizing the importance of communication and getting the employees aware of what is going on. In this quote communication is described as a monologic process. The top positions get the decision and they communicate them to the employees at the last moment without giving them the possibility to give any feedback. Employees are stressed about this situation, they do not feel like they are part of the organization. Lack of motivation and engagement would be a natural consequence.

Manager 2 also describes a completely different situation. Messages are shaped through a more dialogic mode of communication to make employees feel safe to say what they are thinking about the decision taken. There is an interaction between the manager and the employees.

“I think that most of the information today, we get it very early in the process. And I think it's very important because it makes both me and the employees feel like they are a part of the organization. It's not just something that gets to them that they are going to do, but it's something we are a part of and we can have thoughts about, that someone actually listens to.”

(Manager2)

In this quote Manager 2 focuses the importance on getting information about some decision with some advance. Employees are able to say whether or not they agree with what they have been told, Manager 2 thinks this is an essential element. The communication should be dialogic because in this way employees feel valued, they are listened to, they are free to voice their thoughts and they feel part of the organization. The quote highlights this is essential to get them engaged.

As a manager, using a dialogic mode of communication with your employees helps you understand better who they are and what motivates them most.

“Yeah, I think one of the key roles as a leader is that you have to realize that all the employees have something that drives them within this, very different between two individuals.[...]I think motivation is the key role if you want to be a coaching leader, I think it is expected to be as a branch manager.[...] If you [employee] want to be number one, you [manager] have to ask these people “okay, what’s the easiest way to be the best?””

(Manager 1)

According to what Manager 1 says in this quote, for a communication process to be efficient it has to be interactive, the managers have to better understand the employees’ needs and desires. All the team members are motivated by different reasons. As a manager the quote argues that you should understand what drives each member to be able to get them more motivated.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Communication is a topic all the managers emphasized during the interviews. Through the analysis of the empirical data what arises is that providing transparency, building relationships and engaging and motivating employees are the aspects of communication the managers highlighted as most important.

Different theories could be used to provide insights of the data collected. Starting with the monologic and dialogic theory of Jabri et al. (2008). The question which communication mode, monologic, dialogic or a combination of both, a manager should use depends on the goal he or she likes to achieve. It seems that the interviewed managers deem dialogic communication as the most effective mode to build relationships and engage employees. When building relationships, for example, dialogic communication is used to make employees feel safe. This two-way communication process is part of an interactive way of working, where employees feel involved in the decision making process.

For giving context and telling people what to do, monologic communication is used by a

manager to make the employees directly understand the message. The speaker wants to achieve their goals and wishes so the message is shaped to receive a passive response (Jabri et al. 2008). Manager 1 and Manager 3 communicate to their employees, in specific situations, to provide clarity. Communicating with their subordinates with a more monologic mode of communication is a way to be “brutally honest” and explain exactly what is going on or what needs to be accomplished. Stories are another tool managers use to increase their transparency. The results indicated that storytelling usually happens without an interaction of the communication process parts so it can be described as a monologic communication too. However, when the goal of a manager is to clarify a message, the results did show that using solely a monologic mode of communication is not sufficient. For the listeners to fully understand the meaning of the message, interaction between the manager and the listeners is therefore also necessary.

The use of both the communication modes is remarkable, since existing research has critique on the monologic mode of communication. Therefore, this paper addresses that both ways of communication could be used and combined in a knowledge intensive organization.

There are some limitations to highlight that occurred in this paper. It is important to note that the paper is based on interviews with only four managers all working in the same company, Nordea. When reading this paper, it is important to keep this in mind and to be careful not to make generalizations about managers and how they view communication in their work.

Transferability also needs to be taken into account. The data collected can be understood and interpreted in different ways depending on the people present during the interviews, but also depending on the readers. Depending on the interpretation of the data, which may be different for each person, the analysis may therefore take a more or less different turn. More interviews focused on the topic of communication may be conducted to achieve more consistent results. An introduction to the monologic and dialogic theory can be made to the interviewers, both managers and employees, to gain a better understanding on which occasions the two different modes are used or if they mostly use a combination.

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