

Factors Affecting Communications and the Roles of Managers

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson you will learn how power, status, purpose, and interpersonal skills affect communications in organizations. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Roles Managers Play

In Mintzberg's seminal study of managers and their jobs, he found the majority of them clustered around three core management roles (Mintzberg, 1973, p. 31):

- Interpersonal Roles
- Informational Roles
- Decisional Roles

1a. Interpersonal Roles

Managers are required to interact with a substantial number of people during a workweek. They host receptions; take clients and customers to dinner; meet with business prospects and partners; conduct hiring and performance interviews; and form alliances, friendships, and personal relationships with many others. Numerous studies have shown that such relationships are the richest source of information for managers because of their immediate and personal nature (Mintzberg, 1990, pp. 166-167).

Three of a manager's roles arise directly from formal authority and involve basic interpersonal relationships. First is the **figurehead role**. As the head of an organizational unit, every manager must perform some ceremonial duties. In Mintzberg's study, chief executives spent 12% of their contact time on ceremonial duties; 17% of their incoming mail dealt with acknowledgements and requests related to their status.

Managers are also responsible for the work of the people in their unit, and their actions in this regard are directly related to their role as a leader. The influence of managers is most clearly seen, according to Mintzberg, in the leader role. Formal authority vests them with great potential power. Leadership determines, in large part, how much power they will realize.

Popular management literature has had little to say about the liaison role until recently. This role, in which managers establish and maintain contacts outside the vertical chain of command, becomes especially important in view of the finding of virtually every study of managerial work that managers spend as much time

with peers and other people outside of their units as they do with their own subordinates. Surprisingly, they spend little time with their own superiors. In Rosemary Stewart's (1967) study, 160 British middle and top managers spent 47% of their time with peers, 41% of their time with people inside their unit, and only 12% of their time with superiors. Guest's (1956) study of U.S. manufacturing supervisors revealed similar findings.



TERM TO KNOW

Figurehead Role

A necessary role for a manager who wants to inspire people within the organization to feel connected to each other and to the institution, to support the policies and decisions made on behalf of the organization, and to work harder for the good of the institution.

1b. Informational Roles

Managers are required to gather, collate, analyze, store, and disseminate many kinds of information. In doing so, they become information resource centers, often storing huge amounts of information in their own heads, moving quickly from the role of gatherer to the role of disseminator in minutes. Although many business organizations install large, expensive management information systems to perform many of those functions, nothing can match the speed and intuitive power of a well-trained manager's brain for information processing. Not surprisingly, most managers prefer it that way.

As monitors, managers are constantly scanning the environment for information, talking with liaison contacts and subordinates, and receiving unsolicited information, much of it because of their network of personal contacts. A good portion of this information arrives in verbal form, often as gossip, hearsay, and speculation (Mintzberg, 1990, pp. 166-167).

In the disseminator role, managers pass privileged information directly to subordinates, who might otherwise have no access to it. Managers must decide not only who should receive such information, but how much of it, how often, and in what form. Increasingly, managers are being asked to decide whether subordinates, peers, customers, business partners, and others should have direct access to information 24 hours a day without having to contact the manager directly (Mintzberg, 1990, pp. 166-167).

In the spokesperson role, managers send information to people outside of their organizations: an executive makes a speech to lobby for an organizational cause, or a supervisor suggests a product modification to a supplier. Increasingly, managers are also being asked to deal with representatives of the news media, providing both factual and opinion-based responses that will be printed or broadcast to vast unseen audiences, often directly or with little editing. The risks in such circumstances are enormous, but so too are the potential rewards in terms of brand recognition, public image, and organizational visibility (Mintzberg, 1990, pp. 166-167).

1c. Decisional Roles

Ultimately, managers are charged with the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of both the organization and the stakeholders with an interest in it. Such decisions are often made under circumstances of high ambiguity and with inadequate information. Often, the other two managerial roles—interpersonal and informational—will assist a manager in making difficult decisions in which outcomes are not clear and interests are often conflicting.

In the role of entrepreneur, managers seek to improve their businesses, adapt to changing market conditions, and react to opportunities as they present themselves. Managers who take a longer-term view of their responsibilities are among the first to realize that they will need to reinvent themselves, their product and service lines, their marketing strategies, and their ways of doing business as older methods become obsolete

and competitors gain advantage.

While the entrepreneur role describes managers who initiate change, the disturbance or crisis handler role depicts managers who must involuntarily react to conditions. Crises can arise because bad managers let circumstances deteriorate or spin out of control, but just as often good managers find themselves in the midst of a crisis that they could not have anticipated but must react to just the same (Mintzberg, 1989).

The third decisional role of resource allocator involves managers making decisions about who gets what, how much, when, and why. Resources, including funding, equipment, human labor, office or production space, and even the boss's time, are all limited, and demand inevitably outstrips supply. Managers must make sensible decisions about such matters while still retaining, motivating, and developing the best of their employees.

The final decisional role is that of negotiator. Managers spend considerable amounts of time in negotiations: over budget allocations, labor and collective bargaining agreements, and other formal dispute resolutions. During a week, managers will often make dozens of decisions that are the result of brief but important negotiations between and among employees, customers and clients, suppliers, and others with whom managers must deal (Mintzberg, 1990, pp. 166-167).

2. Method of Communication

The method of communication a manager uses may vary depending on the role they are playing at any given time.

- In the interpersonal role, managers may need to convey empathy and understanding in order to maintain healthy working relationships. Or, they may express gratitude for a job well done. In the interpersonal role, the emphasis is on developing and maintaining productive human relationships.
- A manager in the informational role may use a different approach, perhaps relying more on written forms of communication to convey facts.
- In the decisional role a manager may use more direct communication methods depending on the need and urgency of decisions that must be made and acted upon.



REFLECT

1. What are the major roles that managers play in communicating with employees?
2. Why are negotiations often a component of communications by managers?



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about three core **roles managers play**, based upon Mintzberg's seminal study of managers and their jobs. You learned that **interpersonal roles**, comprising the figurehead role, the leader role, and the liaison role, arise directly from formal authority and involve basic interpersonal relationships, which are the richest source of information for managers because of their immediate and personal nature. You learned that managers are required to gather, collate, analyze, store, and disseminate many kinds of information in their **informational roles**, comprising roles such as monitor, disseminator, and spokesperson. Lastly, you learned about **decisional roles** played by managers who are charged with the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of both the organization and invested stakeholders, including the roles of entrepreneur, crisis handler, resource

allocator, and negotiator. Keep in mind that the **method of communication** a manager uses may vary depending on the role they are playing at any given time.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

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