

communication

Chapter 5: Communication

This chapter looks at why and how communication becomes a problem in larger organisations, showing that successful communication needs to use a range of channels and to flow in both directions. It identifies the key roles of line managers and supervisors, and touches on why cost savings sometimes lead to difficulties, touching on the implications of open-plan offices.

An organisation with different divisions operating on the same site has just discovered as I write that one division has been making employees redundant while another has been recruiting similar labour from the market. This expensive and image-damaging process carried on despite the presence of a central personnel department!

Organization, John Child, 1976, p. 96

Scene: Paris. Manager, with big glasses on his nose, in front of graph heading sharply downwards (speaks in English): “Big Problem!”

Observer translates into French for the benefit of his colleague: “Il dit qu’il fait confiance à l’équipe pour trouver de nouvelles opportunités dans un context morose...” (“He says he can rely on the team to find new opportunities in a discouraging situation...”)

Cartoon by Colcanopa, Le Monde newspaper (Paris), 3 July 2012, p. 10

Key message of this chapter: Communication is vital and underrated. It is also much studied, but more work is needed to get to really concrete results.

A huge amount of what is done in organisations involves communication. And this is not always for the obvious purposes of resolving disagreements, giving instructions and reporting on progress with tasks.

As organisations grow in size, they become more complex, and people in them become more specialised.

When an organisation becomes larger and more differentiated, communication links become more tenuous. The natural tendency is to communicate with others within the same department, with whom one shares common problems and experiences.

These common problems and experiences reinforce people’s identity with their own specialised department at the expense of integrating with other departments in pursuit of an

what works at work

overriding objective.

Organization, John Child, 1976, pp. 96-7

People at work focus on what is expected of them, and that is usually their own immediate outputs. Their day-to-day contacts are with their immediate colleagues, who have similar outputs expected of them. They develop a culture of looking within their teams rather than outside. This means that it is very easy for people to lose sight of the ultimate goals of the organisation, and even more of the possible contribution that people in *other* teams can make to these.

Hence the kind of problem we have all faced as a consumer, where, for example, we call up a company to place an order, and are kept for so long, running round an automated telephone system pressing buttons 1, 2 and 3, that in the end we curse, give up, and call another company instead. One imagines the IT department and the contact centre management congratulating themselves on the savings in staff costs, while all the time the sales and finance departments are puzzling over why the business results are so poor.

Sometimes structures can be set up to help overcome such problems, such as liaison committees or even dedicated liaison teams. But solutions of this sort can be costly. Worse, they tend not to work very well, as operational teams generally find it hard to see how they are related to their own priority objectives: they fail to take the point, and resent the time they spend on them.

Hence management have a key part to play in addressing this issue. They need to do so in two ways. One is by acting as channels of communication themselves¹⁵⁶. The

¹⁵⁶As was pointed out by the army engineer Henri Fayol, one of the pioneers of management theory, this follows a classic military command-and-control model under which it is only where lines of authority in a hierarchy converge that action can properly be taken to co-ordinate different tasks (Fayol H, 1916, *Administration industrielle et générale; prévoyance, organisation, commandement, coordination, controle*, Paris, H. Dunod et E. Pinat).

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other is by encouraging and monitoring direct communication between the teams involved.

Put like that, it sounds obvious. But in practice it is not so easy. In a relentless search for cost savings, middle management layers have been stripped out of organisations wholesale since 1990. Hence there is no longer the capacity there once was for managers to channel and encourage communication. Those who do try, find that their work builds rapidly into long queues, creating unacceptable delays; they do not repeat the experiment.

*Middle
mana-
gers*

Direct communication between teams is often therefore the only practical solution. But this immediately runs into the problem that the design of any organisation fosters a culture which discourages such contact. It is hard for managers to see the strength of this culture, and they often fail to devote enough of their own time and attention to overcoming it. Senior managers need to be aware that this is not some floppy HR fad: it is a real issue which deserves space in their diary and that of the supervisors in their teams. Efforts can be made to get round the problem with structural adjustment, known as “matrix management”; but this also needs a lot of time put in if it is to work properly¹⁵⁷.

A related problem is often communication between managers and their staff. It is a particular difficulty among first-line supervisors – one of the most important roles so far as motivation and performance are concerned – since often people are promoted to this level because they have good technical skills, and then find themselves expected to manage other people without any aptitude, experience or training for this different task. Themselves, they have the experience and expertise to see easily what needs to be done, and they naturally expect their teams to do the same; they may even feel it may seem patronising to explain. Hence, often, they do not communicate much.

*Super-
visors*

¹⁵⁷ Davis S M and Lawrence P R, 1977, *Matrix*, Addison-Wesley, Massachusetts.

A further problem is that even in situations where task instructions are quite fully given (as is often the case in manufacturing, in clerical functions, in hospitals and in the armed forces), it is easy to fail to take the next step and provide a full understanding of the job and how it fits in to the organisation's remit. This is sometimes because of a misguided feeling that it may tempt people to invent less successful ways of doing things for which there is already an established routine. But giving such background information is important, and not only because it enables bridges for the inevitable gaps in instructions to be improvised in a sensible way. Often, more significantly, it is a great help with loyalty and engagement, since staff who feel trusted, and treated like adults, are more likely to make an effort for their employer¹⁵⁸.

Hence managers need to be aware that they *do* have to explain. In today's complex organisations they may have to explain a lot, including the historical background to a problem, the politics of relationships with clients or other delivery partners, and presentational or publicity pitfalls.

They also need to bear in mind that different people take things in differently. Some can manage a lot of information at once, while others need it repeated several times. Some remember things they are told face to face more easily than things written down on a piece of paper, others are the other way round¹⁵⁹. You need to tailor your delivery to your audience, many times; and the more complex the message, the more often you will need to repeat it on different occasions and using different media. Checking that people understand what is wanted is also essential (always with

¹⁵⁸ Katz D and Kahn R L, *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, 1966, Wiley, London, pp. 239-243; see previous chapter.

¹⁵⁹ There is not however an effective formal way of identifying people's capacities in this area: see above on Learning Styles, in the chapter on Skills.

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tact, since people who think they might look foolish won't necessarily admit to not having taken a message in).

Another important aspect of communication to staff is feedback on performance. This also has its difficulties. Often the manager prefers to see his role as leading rather than punitive, while the managed is happy to hear praise but not blame. Hence there is a tendency for meetings reviewing performance to be put off to a point at which they become *really* difficult¹⁶⁰. It is vital that they are made routine and frequent, and among the highest priority items in the diary – yet if they get too routine they become perfunctory events with no impact. A focus on information exchange, goal review and skill improvement will take the edge off them if needed, but it is really important that if there are problems or misunderstandings they are addressed explicitly and promptly.

*Performance
monitoring
and
review*

Getting information back is critical as well. It is insufficient to give someone a task and then go away and come back expecting it to have been done. There needs to be reporting of progress so that managers know that things are on track, and systems in place to deliver this. Moreover, any manager needs to be able to listen to the emotions behind what is being said to them, not just its formal content, so that they can tune their own communications effectively and ensure that their staff are engaged with what they are doing (this is sometimes called active listening¹⁶¹).

One of the most important areas of communication is between each staff member and his or her line manager. It is firmly established that the line manager relationship is critically important to people at work. For most staff their

¹⁶⁰ Katz D & Kahn R L, *ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Rogers C R, and Farson R E, 1991, *Active Listening*: reprinted in Kolb D A, Rubin I M, and Osland J S (*edd.*), 1991, *The Organisational Behavior Reader*, pp. 187-199.

line manager is the spokesman for what the organisation wants of them, what it thinks of them, and how it values them. How their line manager behaves is a major factor in their performance, in their commitment and morale, and in whether they stay or move on. Hence line managers must be effective at communicating with their staff. Unlike senior management, they generally share a workspace, or at least a building, with their staff, which means that frequent informal communication ought to be easy enough.

First-line managers were intensively studied in the immediate post-war years, largely in the USA at the University of Michigan, though various challenges showed the promising early results to have been less conclusive than had been hoped¹⁶². But times have changed. The foremen who were studied were at that time balanced in a sensitive position between managers and a unionised, often militant workforce, and they usually worked in a noisy factory where social or subtle communication was impossible. Today's supervisors tend to be responsible for a larger number of people, and subject to more complex and demanding measurements of their outputs, yet are still expected to motivate their teams in addition to their functional roles.

Thus organisational structures can be vital in ensuring the right communication, since staff effort, courtesies and loyalties have a tendency to stop at organisational boundaries, and matrix management systems designed to overcome this seldom work well for long¹⁶³.

*Struct-
ures*

Myself, as a civil servant I moved for a while from Whitehall to the Scottish Office, and was much impressed by the integration of government policy in Scotland, which was much better than in London. Part of this was down to

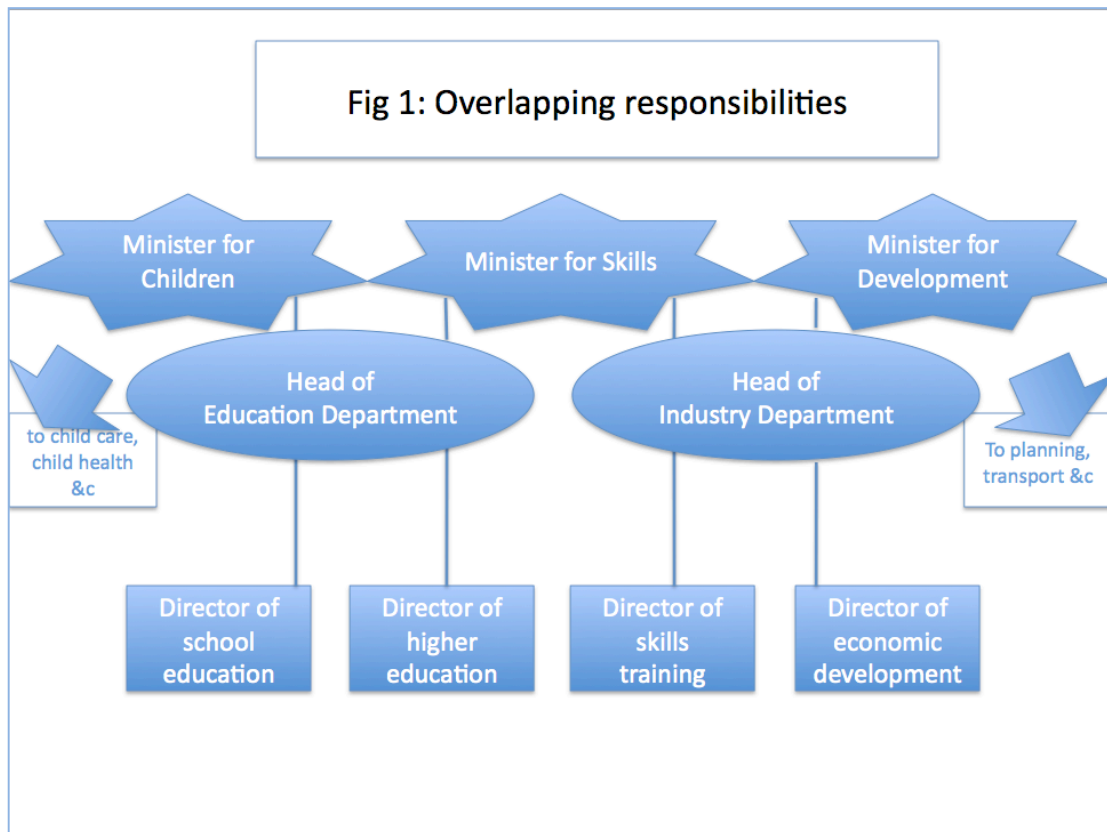
¹⁶² Rose M, 1975, *Industrial Behaviour: theoretical development since Taylor*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, pp 153, 164-167.

¹⁶³ Davis S M and Lawrence P R, 1977, *Matrix*, Addison-Wesley, Massachusetts.

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the Scottish Office being quite small and intimate, and many of the senior staff having been to the same handful of schools and universities; but it was largely, I think, due to the senior organisational structures, which were such that departmental barriers were always breached at some level, while in Whitehall they went right up to the top.

Thus the (civil servant) head of a Whitehall department would report to a (politician) Secretary of State with the same remit at a political level; while in Edinburgh the head of a department would report to two junior ministers, each of whom would have responsibility for matters within the remit of another official head of department as well (*Fig. 1*). This meant that, whether you were an official or a minister,



there was always someone who saw beyond your own horizon, and was able to put the ambitions and anxieties of your own services into proportion. It is telling that, after devolution, when a more conventional structure was put in place to massage devolved ministers' egos by giving each their own dedicated ministry, an effectiveness review found

that departmentalism was rampant. This is an example of how important organisational structure can be.

Open-
plan
offices

Office layout is important in enabling or hindering communication. Hence, in many organisations, the tendency of top management's offices to congregate together, like aristocrats' houses in earlier days clustering round the royal palace. Open plan working is one of the main recent innovations in this area. It makes informal communication a good deal easier, though it also makes it more public: subversive remarks are made less safely in open-plan than while passing in the corridor. The fierce resistance which greeted its introduction in the 1990s has now softened a bit, probably as people have better learned to use email, which covers some of the gaps which the change set up. But research does show that distraction is a much greater problem than people realise.

As a crude generalisation, routine tasks are best performed in an open-plan environment, while managerial and technical tasks are not, though circumstances do vary a good deal¹⁶⁴. However, open-plan is usually hugely cheaper than cellular offices, so in an era of tight cost control there is a judgement to be made whether to put up with some blunting of performance for the sake of the very concrete cost savings. Much may depend on how near to perfection the results need to be.

Similar issues are raised by working from home: people whose relationships with their managers are largely virtual have been found to get less effective support from them than

¹⁶⁴ Oldham G R and Brass D J, 1979, "Employee Reactions to an Open-Plan Office: A Naturally Occurring Quasi-Experiment", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol 24 no 2 Jun; Hedge A, 1982, "The Open-Plan Office: A Systematic Investigation of Employee Reactions to Their Work Environment", *Environment and Behavior*, September 1982 vol 14 no 5, pp 519-542; Maher A and von Hippel C, 2005, "Individual differences in employee reactions to open-plan offices", *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol 25, issue 2 June, pp 219-229.

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when they frequently meet face to face, and working from home also tends to be an impediment to training and development – quite apart from isolating people from the more interesting office gossip¹⁶⁵.

Extremely important though communication is, it should not be seen as the answer to all problems. There is a rationalist myth that conflict always results from poor communication, and that if communication were only improved it would go away¹⁶⁶. But, as we all really know, conflict can also result from a range of other causes, ranging from prejudice and revenge, to clashes of interests or values. And attempting to reconcile such conflicts simply with the aid of better communications will not meet with success: there are times when harder decisions need to be made. So next we look at conflict.

¹⁶⁵ Golden T and Fromen A, 2011, “Does it matter where your manager works? Comparing managerial work mode (traditional, telework, virtual) across subordinate work experiences and outcomes”, *Human Relations*, 64 (11), 1451-1475

¹⁶⁶ This myth is especially visible in some parts of the education and social services worlds, though it is by no means exclusive to the public sector: Adam Smith and Milton Friedman attached at least as much weight to rational choice in human decision-making as did Karl Marx. See Katz D and Kahn R L, 1966, *The Social Psychology of Organisations*, pp. 224 *et seqq*; cp. Newcombe T M, 1947, “Autistic hostility and social reality”, *Human Relations*, vol 1, pp. 69-86.