

INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION : SOME PERSPECTIVES

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Communication is any transfer of meaning from one person to another. The human communication processes and a knowledge of how they function are vital to organizational management.

"Communication is essentially an interpretive process. This implies that the successful business communicator-like the successful translator of languages-must not only know the languages of both the senders and the receivers, but must also have a sympathetic understanding of the backgrounds, the attitudes, and aspirations of both". Without this awareness and empathy, successful communication can only be a happy accident.

Communication involves a prediction of behaviour. To make the most accurate predictions, communicators must understand the basic principles of communication and take into account the factors which are apt to affect the perceptions of their receivers when constructing a message.

Ray Killian² acknowledges the fact that :

"Large corporations in particular because of their complex multidivisional set-up and the trend toward decentralised operations in recent years, would be helpless without their communication networks for co-operation, coordination and overall utilization of resources. Such networks may employ computer systems, teletype, telephones, visits, meetings, written messages and a variety of other means of dispersing information and influence. Efficiency and results, both for individual units and for organisation as a whole, depend on communication."

Dimensions of Communication :

Communication is inevitable. (a) It can be either *intentional* or *unintentional*. Many times we do intend to communicate certain thoughts or ideas to others and it is accomplished effectively. Many other times we may intend nothing in particular and communicate thoughts or ideas to others just the same, with no awareness on our part that a meaning has been attached to our action or inaction.

(b) There can be *verbal* and *non-verbal* communication, Verbal aspects are those aspects which employ linguistic symbols such as words and non verbal aspects are such things as facial expressions, gestures, posture, moans, screams and so on. Usually intentional communication is verbal. This is very much so in the case of inter departmental communication in order to achieve the overall objectives of the organization effectively.

(c) Another dimension of communication is the *oral* and *written* dimension.

(d) Yet another dimension of communication is the *formal-informal* dimension. Formal lines of communication may be found within the organization chart on the executive office wall. The informal, emergent lines of communication are sometimes known as *grapevines*.

(e) A final dimension of communication is the *internal-external* dimension. The external dimension of organizational communication refers to such communication roles as the public relations business of creating an

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appropriate public image, and the business of such departments as advertising, customer relations and sales. Internal communication, on the other hand, is the dimension dealing with the management of the organisation. This dimension includes such things as personnel matters, the control of the flow of information, motivation of subordinates and organizational morale.

Inter-departmental communication is essentially intentional, more so verbal, written, formal and very much internal in its dimension. It can be in the form of job instructions, job rationale—understanding the task and its relationship and importance to other organizational tasks of different functional areas, the importance of integration and co-ordination; information about procedures and practices, feedback of performance to different units to improve the operations, and indoctrination of organizational goals for efficient functioning of the different units.

The central role of communication in complex organizations :

Without communication there could be no organization. An examination of an organisation defined by some authors would reveal why communication is so central to its very existence.

Sisk (1973) defines an organisation as "a group of people found together in a formal relationship to achieve organizational goals".

Simon (1958) defines an organisation as "the complex pattern of communication and other relations between human beings".

Sells (1964) states that "organizations are behaving organisms whose behaviour is represented by the co-ordinated composite action of their members".

The key element in all of these definitions is that an organisation consists of separate parts bound together to achieve a common goal or goals. To achieve this common goal, the activities of the various parts must be co-ordinated. The co-ordinating and focusing of organizational activities toward the accomplishment of a common goal is the responsibility of manager. Since managers are those who get work done by directing the activities of others (*Koontz and O'Donnell (1972)*), the only way the manager can achieve co-ordination is through communication with others in the different units of the organisation. The effectiveness of an organization is, therefore, dependent on the effectiveness of its internal communication activities.

Communication plays the central role in all administration. Administration is communication (*Thayer, 1961*). Thus, communication is the "doing" part of management.

Communication is a means of influencing behaviour or of being influenced. It is useful to the manager only to the extent that he can use it to influence behaviour to bring about organizational goals.

Dale (1965) states that in the sense that communication is most often used, it is viewed as an essential way to motivate employees to accept management's goals and work wholeheartedly toward them. The manager's goal in communication is to influence or bring about behaviour change.

A management system is a process of people interacting to apply resources to achieve goals. Management systems designers tend to place major emphasis on hardware and software (technology), but the primary emphasis must be on the human factor. Hence communication plays a very important part in integrating individuals, groups and departments to the goals of the organization. From a *systems perspective*, the various sub-systems should

function in a harmonious way in order to achieve effectiveness and towards this, communication is the greatest integrating factor in an organization.

The organizational communication is the sum of a group of sub-systems or functional communication networks each of which is related to one or more organizational goals. There are four major communication subsystems : the regulative network, the innovative network and the informative-instructive communication network which substantially fulfill the communication required to achieve the five organizational goals, conformity, adaptiveness, morale, institutionalization and productivity.

(a) *The regulative communication network* relates to the organization goal of securing conformity to plans, to assure productivity. It is concerned with controls, orders and other forms of direction and feedback between subordinate and superiors in task related activities. Examples of regulative communication are policy statements, procedures and rules.

(b) *The innovative communication network* strives to insure the adaptiveness of the organization to varied internal and external influences and contributes to continued productivity and effectiveness. It is concerned with problem solving, adaptation to change and the strategy and implementation of new idea processing.

(c) *The integrative (maintenance) communication network* is concerned with feelings for self, associate and work, and is directly related to the organizational goal of employee morale. It is indirectly linked to institutionalization which involves acceptance of the organization by non-members such as community and governmental units.

(d) *The informative-instructive communication network* aids in securing the organizational goals of conformity, adaptiveness, morals and institutionalization and thereby works for higher levels of productivity and effectiveness.

The significance of communication to management :

The business of managing in an organisation is business of human relations. Management, is, in part atleast, a leadership-followership business. Instances of leadership involve the use of organizational structures to influence others. When people are influenced to engage in organizationally relevant behaviour, leadership has occurred. Management is a business of people communicating with other people and a business in which machines are not likely to replace effective people, no matter how automated our society becomes.

Management and communication are so closely related that they are almost synonymous. Further it is an established fact that we manage only with the consent of the managed. So a manager must constantly be persuading the individual subordinators that the goals of an organisation are desirable. Communication, therefore, is vitally necessary to an organization, not only to transmit authority, but to achieve co-operation. As such, the organizational communication system should supplement the system of authority.

A decade ago managers knew every individual and every operation in most organisations. These managers could perform most of the tasks themselves if they had to. But now, a different picture exists. The new and more complicated organizational structure of today call for vastly improved communication systems. Some of these new complications are : a) Increased organizational size and complexity, (b) Increasing organizational specialization, (c) Decentralization, (d) constant and rapid technological

progress, (e) Increasing social consciousness of industry, (f) Strengthening union-power, (g) Anti-business propaganda, (h) Enlightened and sophisticated research, (i) Tougher competition.

The changes in managerial priorities are reinforced by Berlo³ (1960), when he states :

"With the development of automation and massive industry, we have witnessed the rise of the professional "manager"; the man who reaches the top of the industrial ladder not because of what he can do with things, but because of what he can do with people-through communication.

The larger and more technical the organizational structure becomes, the greater the need for a better communication system. McCormack⁴ (1968) says that modern management faces a challenge to achieve results with large and complex organizations and that in these organizations complicated by complexity and size, clear and effective communication is a vital necessity to achieve the organization's goals.

The responsibility of communication stretches across all levels of an organisation in different functional areas with departments or sections in order to achieve the goals of an organization. A minimum goal for improving communication in many organisations would be the setting of communication objectives for its managers at all levels.

Types of Communication :

(a) *Downward Communication* involves job instructions, rationale and evaluation as well as information about organizational procedures, practices and goals. In spite of its ineffectiveness considering the fact only 20 per cent of a downward directed message ever reaches the bottom organizational level, most organizations recognise downward communication as being fundamental to their operation. Downward communication affords some obvious opportunities for mass communication such as news releases, company memos, company publication and public statements. One of the major difficulties with downward communication which is really a transmittal of desired action, is that it implies a oneway message from source to receiver. There is often no consideration given to feedback in such situations. Another specialized type of downward communication is evaluative communication from superior to subordinate. A unique feature of this type of communication is that it is itself a form of feedback, in this case to the subordinates.

(b) *Upward Communication* : Whenever there is upward communication, opportunity for feedback is provided which in turn encourages a free flow of ideas and attitudes between hierarchy levels in an organisation. Upward Communication can give higher management a great many clues as to which will be the most effective management strategies, if those higher levels will only listen. Upward communication will provide a reading on how much of a downward message actually reached its destination and how well it was received and understood. Although the important benefits accruing to an organisation with highly open channels of communication are many, the natural barriers to upward communication are also numerous. One basic barrier is the fact that communicating upward to a superior is generally a high-risk type of communication. It is usually risky because we are exposing and revealing our selves to our receivers whenever we communicate with them. Although such exposure can have positive results from a superior, it also continually increases the risk of negative results.

A general barrier to upward communication seems to be a combination function of the power of the superior as perceived by a subordinate, the subordinate hierarchical ambitions and the risk created by this situation. The simple desire to get ahead will itself cause information, especially negative information, to be highly guarded. It would not do for the person with power to promote to view the subordinate as a negative thinker. Unless a superior cultivates and promotes upward communication very carefully, the subordinate will usually prefer to withhold or dilute such bad news as failures, mistakes or divergent opinions.

Perhaps the greatest superior oriented communication barrier is to listen to a problem, promise action and then do nothing. Barriers to upward communication are also centred in the organisation itself. The very structure of a complex organisation is a barrier because this complexity and the accompanying physical distances between the hierarchial levels can make clear communication upward does occur in such situations it is likely to be distorted and/or diluted as it passes through the many levels.

The distances between organizational levels may also be power related in that they constitute separation by status, prestige and position. Another type of organizational distance is really a personality function in that, regardless of how integrated an organisation may be, people with similar interests, intelligence, values, etc. will form into clique-type informal networks and limit their outside contacts. The geographical separation brought about by decentralization also poses problems to upward communication.

According to *Planty and Machaver*⁵ the rewards of upward communication include the following :

(a) Management gets an improved picture of the work accomplishments, problems, plans, attitudes and feelings of subordinates at all levels in the various departments or sections and divisions of an organisation.

(b) Before becoming deeply involved, management spots individuals, policies, actions or assignments which are likely to cause trouble.

(c) By helping lower echelons of supervision to improve their selection of those things that are to be communicated upward, management get them to do a more systematic and useful job of reporting.

(d) By welcoming upward communication, management strengthens the only device for tapping the ideas and help of its subordinates. This gives management a better answer to its problems and cases its own responsibility.

(e) By opening the channels upward, management helps the early flow and acceptance of communications downward.

(C) *Horizontal Communication* : Ideally, formal horizontal communication channels should supplement and work well in conjunction with vertical channels. When formal vertical communication channels are not open, the informal horizontal channels are almost sure to thrive as a substitute. They take the form of grapevine which are not necessarily bad for the organisation, even though it may be hard to control. Therefore, formal horizontal channels are procedurally necessary and should be built into the system. They must be set-up between departments for purposes of planning inter network task co-ordination and general system maintenance functions such as problem solving, information sharing and conflict resolution.

Horizontal communication is essential if the sub-systems in an organisation are to function in an effective, co-ordinated manner. Communication horizontally among peers may also tend to furnish the

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emotional and social bonds which build an esprit de corps or team sort of feeling.

Horizontal communication is a very important element for inter departmental communication. In the more formal organisation, structure suggested by the early classical school of organisation theory, a subordinate in department A had great difficulty communicating even about task matters with a fellow subordinate in department B. The emphasis on structure and the pyramidal nature of the structure suggested the hierarchical complexities of side A of the pyramid all the way to the top and then back down the B side of the pyramid to subordinate B in order to communicate with him. The time being wasted and the level-to-level message distortion going on in the classically managed organisation was recognised by Fayol in 1916 (Fig. 1). Hence he proposed a bridge of horizontal communication between person A and person B which would enable them to communicate more directly (Fig. 2).

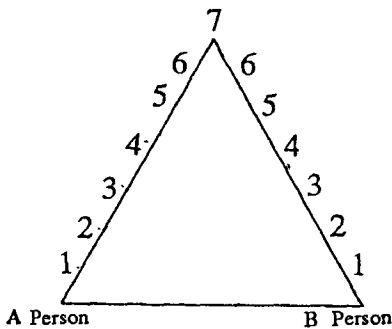


Fig. 1 : Message path of classical structured channels.

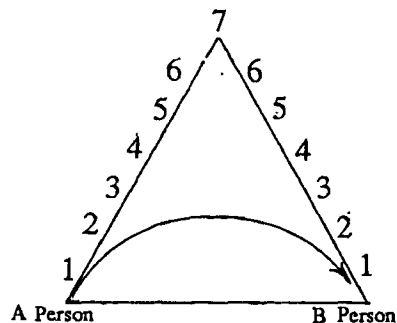


Fig. 2 : Message path following Fayols Bridge.

The only limiting factor to the use of Fayol's bridge is a loss of network control and subsequent weakening of authority and random scattering of messages throughout the system. Such random communication channels can lead to diagonal lines of communication such as direct communication between a person in department A and a person three levels higher or lower in department B. Such diagonal lines of communication are not in and of themselves bad; however, they are very difficult to control from the management point of view.

Despite the need for horizontal communication in an organisation there may be a tendency among peers not to formally communicate task related information horizontally. For instance, rivalry for recognition and promotion may cause competing subordinates to be reluctant to share information. Subordinates may also find it difficult to communicate with highly specialised people to the same level as themselves but in other technical departments. Horizontal communication can also be thwarted by a lack of motivation. If management does not encourage horizontal communication and reward it, the subordinate is apt to orient himself more toward superiors than peers.

It can be summed up that downward communication is essential for the dissemination of managerial decisions, organizational policy and operating procedure. Upward communication provides the feedback necessary for the maintenance of the system and the making of managerial decisions. Horizontal communication provides for co-ordination and system maintenance. Perhaps most important of all, each of the three directional communication flows carries

in its own way the information necessary to maintain the various departments in the systems, make policy plans and solve organizational problems.

If the communication networks are effectively managed in all directions, they can be integrated into a smoothly functioning whole which will maximise the work output of an organization.

A. Management Information System (MIS) :

It is a system that aids management in making, carrying out and controlling decisions. It is a system that aids management in performing its job.

MIS is not new; only its computerization is new. Before computers, MIS techniques existed to supply managers with the information that would permit them to plan and control operations. The computer has added one or more dimensions, such as speed, accuracy and increased volumes of data, that permit the consideration of more alternatives in a decision.

The scope and purpose of MIS is better understood if each part of the term is defined.

Management comprises the processes or activities that describe what managers do in the operation of their organisation plan, organize, initiate and control operations. They plan by setting strategies and goals and selecting the best course of action to achieve the plan. They organise the tasks necessary for the operational plan, set these tasks up into homogenous groups and assign authority delegation. They control the performance of the work by setting performance standards and avoiding deviations from standard.

Because decision making is such a fundamental pre-requisite to each of the foregoing processes, the job of an MIS becomes that of facilitating decisions necessary for planning, organizing and controlling the work and functions of the business.

Information : Data must be distinguished from information. Data are facts and figures that are not currently being used in a decision process and usually take the form of historical records that are recorded and filed without immediate intent to retrieve for decision making. Information consists of data that have been retrieved, processed or otherwise used for informative or inference purposes, argument, or as a basis for forecasting or decision making.

Systems : A system can be described simply as a set of elements joined together for a common objective. A sub-system is a part of a larger system. All systems are parts of larger systems. The organisation is the system and the parts like divisions, departments, functions, units, etc. are the sub-systems;

The concept of synergism applies to the organisation, particularly it applies to the integration of the subsystems through information interchange. When this is not taken into account, marketing, operations and finance are frequently on diverse paths and working at cross purposes. The system concept of MIS is therefore one of optimising the output of the organisation by connecting the operating subsystems through the medium of information exchange.

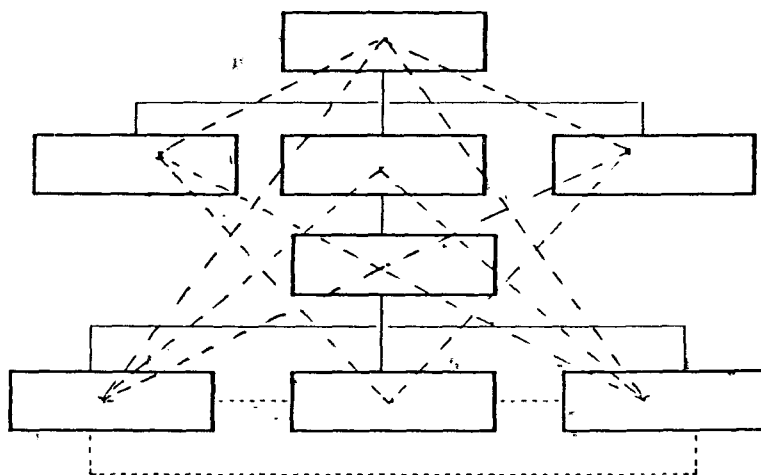
The objective of an MIS is to provide information for decision making on planning, initiating, organising and controlling the operations of the subsystems of the firm and to provide a synergistic organisation in the process.

In the past, the effectiveness of business organisation has been somewhat less than optimum because managers failed to relate the parts or

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functions of the systems to each other used to the whole. The sales function was performed with a great deal of integration with design or production; production control was frequently not co-ordinated with financial or personnel planning and the classic management information system was concerned largely with variance reporting on an historical basis and was constructed around the chart of accounts without too much regard for organizational information needs.

The basic tenet of systems theory is that every system is held together by information exchange. This is certainly true of the business system or the organizational system. Yet information systems and computers have not focussed in on this essential characteristic or need for integration. The need, and the potential for such integration through information can be demonstrated as :



classical (authority)

Systems (information)

The heavy solid line indicates classical authority relationships and the hierarchical structure of the typical organisation. The dotted lines show the same organizational structure but with the parts joined together in a system by means of information flow.

Thus the communication patterns with its types assist the interdepartmental communication strategy for the effectiveness and survival of the organizational system.

Footnotes :

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