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Communication, a managerial myth

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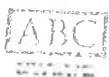
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Communication, a managerial myth

Angelos Tsaklenganos PhD attacks the myth that communication only needs the proper technique to be effective. He suggests that communication is a difficult process and that this difficulty cannot be overcome by mere technique alone; communication should be optimised so that the essential transmission of information which must take place is more effective.

Communication is one of the most widely used and least understood concepts current among managers of modern corporations. Articles on the importance of communication in management are a common sight in business periodicals and each of them purports to teach the subtle art of 'effective' communication. Communication is held to be a panacea for all managerial problems and corporations blame low production, decreasing profits, poor control and increased absenteeism on its lack.

The rise in interest in communication problems dates from the time of the telephone and the advent of Xerox reproduction. Before these conveniences, the transmission of information was a difficult and laborious process. However, now that managers can contact almost anybody by dialling a phone and can disseminate documents with ease, communication has become easy and cheap.

Easy and cheap though it may be, communication is still not effective. In the days when a letter might take weeks or months to arrive at the main office from some field agent, the communicators took some pains carefully to frame their messages and were just as careful in analysing them. The telephone and office memo changed that; communicators have become sloppy in their delivery and lazy in their analysis. The sheer volume of information which a manager must process and relay makes this unavoidable. He is constantly answering phones, initiating phone calls, returning phone calls, perusing reports, drafting memoranda — in short, spending so much time using the media of communication that the thought which must go into effective communicating is slighted.

But the fact that communication is difficult and requires thought is rarely acknowledged. When a problem arises in a corporation, the obvious scapegoat is a poor communication channel. Blaming problems on communication is an easy thing to do; communication happens between people and thus the blame for a mistake can be diffused into a nebulous communication problem

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rather than placed squarely on an individual. And the usual answer for a communication problem is more communication, so a vicious cycle is started: poor communication leads to more communication, which in turn leads to poorer communication.

Articles on communication attack the problem obliquely. Poor communication is essentially a problem of style and not substance.¹ If information fails to be transmitted between individuals it is because these individuals tend to bite their nails, shift their eyes or do any one of a hundred other things; it is never because the communication was poorly conceived or unnecessary. With this approach, communication becomes a managerial myth. The process of communication becomes a *summum bonum* which only needs the proper technique to be effective. It is the intent of this article to debunk that myth and to show (1) that communication is a difficult process and that this difficulty cannot be overcome with mere technique, and (2) that communication should be optimised so that the essential communication which must take place is more effective.

Communication can be defined as 'the act of imparting, conferring or delivering, from one to another; as in the communication of knowledge, facts, or opinions.'

This definition would seem to imply that communication is a relatively simple process, especially with electronic high-speed media which are available today. But one cannot deliver an idea the same way one delivers a package. Ideas are nebulous entities. In communication, an idea must be translated into words, delivered to the recipient and then translated by the recipient from words back to the idea. Technology has made the delivery of words easy, but the other aspects of communicating have suffered. Despite technological advances, Christopher Quartyly has noted that communication today is as bad as it was 20 years ago.²

People in communication

Thus the problems of communicating are problems within people. People are just not very good at it. They have a tendency to make snap judgments and assume that they have little to learn from someone else. This is because most people are poor listeners. They hear

what they want to hear or expect to hear rather than what is being said. This problem is a more general case of a rather subtle phenomenon: the same words mean different things to different people. Unless the communicator does an exceptionally good job of framing his ideas in words or has at his disposal a technical vocabulary which is known to the recipient, the words he uses will be at best an approximation of his meaning and the recipient will decipher the communicator's meaning in light of his own experience and ideas.

John Senger wrote: 'If we could remember that the interests, values and beliefs that people have are so ingrained as to colour their behaviour, it would be much easier to understand why they act and react the way they do. People do not see things alike and, while these differences in perception — as in opinion — may make the world go round, they can mislead us and result in the kind of misinterpretations and misunderstandings that can compound the difficulties of a manager's job.'³

Office politics and communication

It may be possible, as communication enthusiasts claim, to improve managers' abilities in expressing their ideas and listening carefully. The fact that these points are iterated and reiterated in the literature seems to indicate that very little progress has been made but, nevertheless, it may be possible. However, there is a greater stumbling block to communication which no number of seminars or training programmes will eliminate: political problems. When one manager communicates with another, the discussion is rarely confined solely to the topic at hand. The communicator is trying to gain support for what is his idea — he is in a sense selling his idea rather than merely delivering it. Similarly, the recipient may be averse to the communicator's idea merely because it is the other guy's. He may find the idea self-serving, may feel threatened because he didn't think of it himself. When two managers are in competition, one is bound to misconstrue the motives of the other. Indeed, a manager may be afraid to reveal too much of his idea for fear that it will be stolen or sabotaged before it is given a chance to prove itself.

It is important to note that these problems are not inherent in the content

of the idea. The act of communicating is merely the arena in which old grievances, ambitions and the other aspects of office politics take place. Good communication must take place in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect — an atmosphere often lacking in modern business.

This problem is compounded when the communication does not take place between people with equal status. Only rarely can a supervisor establish good communications between himself and his employees. In such situations communication often takes the aspect of edicts from on high; employees fear to speak out even when they are aware of problems which might have eluded management. After all, they have little to gain and much to lose.

In some cases, subordinates feel themselves at odds with management. There is the same air of distrust and suspicion mentioned above with regard to managers, except this time the subordinates have less power. Instead of talking about problems and possible solutions, employees will try to hide the problems they may be having or circumvent instructions which they feel are ill-advised or unpleasant. In such a situation, communication has broken down totally. Problems which are the legitimate concern of management are concealed and decisions which management has made are never properly implemented. And very often management is unaware of the exact location of the breakdown.

Bruce Harriman comments: 'Subordinates "read" their bosses better than is usually realised and bosses "read" their subordinates less well than they think.' Management then 'discovers' a communication problem and sets up seminars, meetings and training groups *ad nauseam*, thinking that this will solve the problem. The truth is that, while the organisation as a whole is interested in better communication, the individuals comprising that group are not very interested at all and subordinate communication to private career goals.

The problem of communication lines

The difficulties which we have been discussing refer to difficulties between two individuals. However, in a business, communication generally takes place over long communication channels involving many individuals. Top management will make a decision which is relayed through middle management and supervisory staff, finally to the lowest level employee. With centralised control, such long lines are inevitable but they also reduce the chance that the message will come through in any but the most garbled form. All the problems discussed here are applicable ... but multiplied. Many more people have to relay the message; at each step the idea must be interpreted, reformulated and retransmitted. By the time the decision is

ready for implementation, it is often unrecognisable.

Moreover, the communication system used by most businesses is designed to relay messages down but not up. Therefore it is very difficult for top management to discover if the decision has been understood or implemented correctly. Despite all the talk of 'feedback control loops' and the like, top management can have at best a murky idea of what is really going on in the entire company. There is just too much that has to be known and no good way for them to find out.

Information and communication

The use of computerised management information systems (MIS) is supposed to solve this problem but it creates as many problems as it solves. The computer is a wonderful tool and is indispensable for modern managers but it is not the solution to communication problems.

First, management must be able to formulate its information needs clearly. Then it must communicate these needs to the systems analysts in charge of the MIS. The analysts must translate these needs into specifics and then formulate these specifics into concrete reports. This process can break down at any step. Management often does not have a clear idea of what can be done or how much any given report will cost. The analysts do not know the needs of management and often will try to sell them packages which contain too much information. It is easy to crank out reports with a computer but it is more difficult to turn out *useful* reports. The result is too much information but too little useful information, a great deal of time, paper and clerical work and very little communication.

Information which is not used or is poorly used is bad communication. Management is burdened with too many reports, too many phone calls and too many meetings. Picking out the really useful information is a full-time job, there is little time for anything else. Management should endeavour to limit communication to that which is essential and not grab anything which is available. Formulating ideas is a difficult task, and deciphering and understanding them is even more difficult. Time and thought are needed to accomplish these tasks effectively but time and thought are not available given the volume of information which bombards the manager. Clearly, the answer is less communication, not more.

Myths about communication

A number of managerial myths have grown up around the subject of communication. These myths are:

- 1 Communication is essential for every business function.
- 2 Communication establishes control.

3 Communication provides leadership and direction.

4 Communication provides motivation.

While it is certainly true that a business must have communication in order to function, its importance is often exaggerated. Let us examine these assumptions and try to discover what merit they may have.

Is communication essential?

The first assumption, that communication is essential for every business function, is certainly true — to an extent. Clearly, if more than a single individual is working on a project, there must be some communication between individuals.

They must be co-ordinated, problems must be dealt with as they arise, an atmosphere of co-operation must be established and maintained. All of these goals require communication.

But just because communication is necessary does not justify its elevation to a pinnacle of importance. It is just as true that pencils and pens are essential to every business function, yet pencils and pens are rarely mentioned in the literature.

The more communication that is necessary in any given business function, the more poorly organised that function is. Unstructured, open-ended or ill-defined tasks require a great deal of communication. The workers and managers lack a precise notion of what is to be done at any given stage; thought and discussion become more and more necessary as the task becomes vague. Conversely, if a business function is well defined and well organised, the need for communication diminishes. Everyone knows exactly what to do, how to do it and when to do it.

Ideally, a business should need no communication between the individuals working there because everybody knows exactly what to do. This ideal is seldom reached, of course, both because of human fallibility and the nature of some tasks. But it is a goal that managers should keep in mind. Instead of trying to improve communications when a problem arises, management should consider changing the organisation of the department in which the problem originates.

As an example of the fallacy of the first assumption, consider the first companies which were set up in the New World. These London-based companies pursued business opportunities in England, Africa and the West Indies. In those days, a message from the home office sent to a branch might take weeks or months, yet these companies were quite successful. It is absurd, of course, to suggest a return to those conditions but it does show that communication is not as essential as some writers seem to think.

Does communication establish controls?

Communication is also credited with establishing control. While it is certainly true that control is impossible without communication, the converse does not necessarily follow: communication does not necessarily establish control. Indeed, communication can create a control problem.

In today's centralised corporations, top management endeavours to control every aspect of a large enterprise. This is a laudable goal but a very difficult one. As a result of this mania for control, middle management becomes flooded with communication, creating confusion and bewilderment. Too much control information clogs the channels, feedback becomes inadequate. As a result, controls proliferate (because the control is seen as inadequate). Thus, we find controls on controls and meetings to discuss meetings. The control system limps along and no one seems to understand what is wrong. The theory is fine and the methods unimpeachable; the problem lies in the fact that communication is difficult and time consuming, so that the control information does not get through the control network.

In order for a control system to work efficiently, certain criteria must be met:⁶

- 1 Communication must be clear and specific.
- 2 The feedback system must be clearly defined and work well.
- 3 The control system should be minimal.

If these criteria are not met, the result is excessive paperwork, increased overhead, low productivity and, ultimately, poor control. The minimality criterion is open to some debate: 'There are those who believe that an organisation will be more effective if lower level managers have reasonable flexibility in making decisions and developing creative approaches to problems. Others are equally firm in believing that to ensure proper control of performance and productivity, decision-making belongs in the hands of upper management. Keeping a balance between control and freedom is no easy matter.'⁷ Whatever balance management decides upon, however, the important point to understand is that an extensive control system does not necessarily mean extensive control. Management should be able to discover the key control points and realise that increased control over secondary functions may mean decreased effectiveness in the control of these key areas.

Can communication provide leadership?

The ability of communication to provide leadership is often touted. But, like other aspects of communication, the leadership it provides is only as good as

the communication. Very often the communication is very poor. Thus, the idea of leadership and direction is often instilled in middle management but the substance with which leadership works — responsibility — is too often lacking. Marion Faulkner writes: 'The first-line supervisors' role is often ill-defined and vagueness over-shadows their authority and responsibility. They are called part of the "management team" but rarely asked to participate or contribute in that role.'⁸ Thus, communication often fails to provide the leadership that it is supposed to impart because it is not true communication — there is no dialogue.

But nevertheless the manager finds himself attending endless meetings, leadership training programmes and the like. All too often, the same manager is not given the opportunity to apply what he has learned. If this is the case, the communication which is supposed to develop leaders is mere window dressing. One does not become a leader by going to school, reading books or attending seminars. One becomes a leader by leading. If top management is truly interested in developing the leadership potential of its managers, a truly comprehensive leadership programme with well defined and clear cut objectives must be initiated. The communication, although important, is secondary.

Does communication motivate?

Communication is also supposed to provide motivation. But often managements try to rely on 'gimmicks' which they dignify with the name of communication — to motivate their employees. Human beings are subtle and sophisticated creatures. They have complex needs and they are aware of those needs. Unless management understands the needs, which will differ from employee to employee, all the communication which it tries will fail.

The best way to motivate people is to create the proper atmosphere. The employee must feel that he is valued for his work and that his work is an important part of the organisational effort. This atmosphere is created day by day in the interactions of the workplace. If this atmosphere tells the employee that he is not needed and is replaceable, the communication which is supposed to motivate him will appear dishonest.

People resent being manipulated. A poorly designed motivational programme will appear to the employee to be manipulative and will therefore increase hostility rather than promote motivation. Communication alone will not motivate people, the proper climate will.

Conclusion

In order to make communication really effective, it must be necessary. Unnecessary communication merely eats up time, money and paper. Management should carefully consider

the need for communication, who the communication is to be addressed to and develop the proper medium for that communication.

Ultimately, the answer is to reduce communication to a minimum, so that the communication which must take place can be done in a thoughtful, intelligent manner. Avoid as much as possible information and communication pollution. Communication channels should be re-evaluated periodically to ensure their effectiveness and necessity. The communication channels must be kept as short as possible to minimise distortion in the transmission of information.

Communication must reflect real thought, and must be firmly rooted in reality. All too often, communication is used for propaganda; it is used to mislead or to cover up problems. Clearly, this is undesirable. Management must open up communication upward and be honest downwards. If the lower echelons of management see the communication deriving from above to be clear, understandable and honest, they will not only be able to do their jobs more effectively but they will also reciprocate with valuable and honest communication. When management tries to ensure that communication is purposeful and honest, many of the communication problems will disappear.

Many individuals assure us that improved communication is a quick fix. Instead, this communication obscures the real problems and creates new ones. True communication is difficult because of all the reasons mentioned above, thus management should consider carefully all proposals to change communication and communication channels. Indeed, communication is sufficiently difficult that other solutions should be considered first. A system which requires little communication to operate satisfactorily is a good system. A failing system can sometimes be patched together with additional communication but the organic deficiencies will remain and the problems not truly solved. □

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