DEFINING ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This paper deals with the topic of organisational communication. It discusses the various types and theoretical aspects of communication. If one raises the question "How important is it to have good communication in an organisation?" Nearly everyone will give an answer that it is vital for both the organisation and its employees. However, when it comes to the question of what can be done to improve communication in organisations, there appears to be a somewhat slight conformity. A basic unavoidable feature of complex organisations is that the people in them do not work in isolation. Therefore, group identification and role relationships, information transmission, and the process by which information required meaning, must be better understood. Another important point is the fact that organisations are goal-oriented, a phenomenon which directly influences the content and patterns of communication within them (Porter & Roberts, 1977).

Keywords: Organisational Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Communication Barriers

Introduction

There are and have been various general definitions of communication: Beattie & Ellis (2014) defines communication as the human language that is used to transmit information, whilst the World Book Dictionary (1980) defines it as "*a giving of information or news by speaking or writing*" (1980: 420). Beals & Hoijer (1953) state that communication has the main function of bolstering ideas and beliefs (1953: 548) and Hellriegel & Slocum (2002) define communication as that instrument which leaders use to direct the activities of others.

Communication is often described as the „*social glue*" that holds the organisation together (Alvesson, 2002) and „*the nervous system*" (Davis, 1953) of any organised group. Bavelas & Barrett (1951) argue that communication is the most fundamental activity in an organisation and it is

the basis of all the functions of an organisation (1951: 253). As such, organisational activities cannot be coordinated without communication among the various departments or parts of the organisation.

The Importance of Communication

It is widely understood that you cannot NOT communicate (Motley, 1990), due to the fact that communication is both verbal and non-verbal. Therefore, even silence communicates a message. Communication is arguably the most important skill a person can have since everything a person achieves at work and socially occurs through communication. Yet people still invest very little time in improving their communication skills.

Efficient communication is not only necessary, but also indispensable to success in an organisation, and it is a vital tool for achieving organisational goals (Fussell & Kreuz, 2014: 6). Communicating effectively matters because failure to keep people informed may be costly. People who don't know how to communicate, among other things may be incapable of motivating their associates. They may not only lose an enormous amount of time because of misunderstandings and imprecisions resulting from their bad communication technique, but they may also let innumerable opportunities for success pass them by. Davis (1953) comments about the bottleneck of communication, wherein the manager, in planning, organising, staffing, directing and controlling has to communicate with the group, in order to obtain effective performances. Therefore, one may assume that communication is the one way of motivating people, thus resulting in better work performance and cooperation (Fussell & Kreuz, 2014: 6).

Communication also creates understanding on what people have to do, why they have to do it, and to what extent they are achieving the objectives. According to Harvey-Jones (1988), everyone down the line in the organsiation has to understand what they are trying to achieve in line with the organisation's goals and objectives (1988: 187).

The Ability to Listen

Good communication above all means good listening. Zeno (in Godefroy & Clark, 2000) argues that *„the reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen more and talk less"* (Godefroy & Clark, 2000: 177). According to Katz & Lawyer (1987) the typical barriers to effective listening include the listener talking too much; the listener does not listen for long enough before starting to talk; or that the listener remains silent and entirely unresponsive. All these tendencies make it difficult for the other to describe his or her experience. Thus, leaders in an organisation need to be good listeners in view that a lot of their work involves eliciting information from others in order to solve problems.

The Communication Process

While the definitions of communication vary according to the theoretical frames of reference employed and the stress placed on certain aspects of total process, they all include five fundamental factors: an initiator, a recepient, a mode or vehicle, a message and an effect (Miller, 2014). Simly expressed the communication process commences when a message is conceived by a sender. It is then encoded – translated into a signal or a sequence of signals – and transmitted via a particular medium or channel to a receiver who then decodes it and interprets the message, returning a signal in some way that the message has or has not been understood (Watson Hill, 1997). In a two-way communication the process continues with the roles reversed. Noise can interrupt the communication process at any step. People must therefore understand that, for example; a conversation in the next office, a phone speaker, and the reciever's uncertainties, may all hinder the person's best attempts to communicate.

Learning to „decode"

Uri Geller, the man who became famous throughout the world by bending spoons with his psychic power, tells the following instructive story in his fascinating *„Uri Geller's Fortune Secrets"*:

„One of my friends recently went to India, and had an especially frustrating experience trying to take a taxi to the beach in Bombay. Each time he hailed a taxi and told the driver where he wanted to go, the man would move his head from side to side, left to right, in a strange gesture which my friend took to mean an emphatic ‚no!'"

What was exactly going on? Uri Geller provided the following explanation:

„The truth is, all the drivers were expressing their willingness to take on the fare, using the local body language; a side-to-side movement of the head, to express their assent. My friend's frustration, therefore, arose from an incapacity to communicate properly. He didn't understand that in Bombay, moving the head from left to right means ‚yes', while the occidental gesture of moving the head up and down, for them means ‚no'!"

The inability to decode may lead to daily problems like misunderstandings, bad decisiosn, unattained goals, hiring errors and breakdowns in negotiations. All these things invariably lead to loss of time and money. The following golden rule of communication (Godefroy & Clark, 2000) must be always kept in mind:

„What may seem obvious, clear and straightforward to you, is not necessarily so to your listener."

Forms of Communication

Several forms of communication exist, namely interpersonal communication, communication in networks and teams, organisational communication, and electronic communication.

Interpersonal communication focuses on communication among a small number of people and two important forms of interpersonal communication, oral and written, offer unique advantages and disadvantages (Fussell & Kreuz, 2014: 21). Thus, the person should weigh the pros and cons of each when choosing a medium for communication. Aydin and Rice (1992) describe how networks bring together different groups in the workplace. Thus, communication networks are recurring patterns of communication among members of a group of work team. Research has identified five basic networks for five-person groups (Griffin, 1999: 555).

These differ in terms of information flow, position of the leader, and effectiviness for different types of tasks. Leaders in an organisation might attempt to create centralised networks when group everyday jobs are easy and customised. Alternatively, these may promote decentralised groups when group tasks are difficult and nonroutine.

Organisational communication includes other forms of communication in organisations that flow among and between organisational units and groups. Each involves oral or written communication. Some forms of communication in an organisation follow vertical and horizontal linkages (Cornelissen, 2014: 30). Vertical communication usually takes place between managers and their subordinates and may involve several different levels of the organisatiion, namely 'Upward Communication' and 'Downward Communication' (Cornelissen, 2014: 30). Upward communication consists of messages from subordinates to superiors, whilst downward communication occurs when information flows down the hierarchy from superiors to subordinates. Horizontal communication involves colleagues and peers at the same level of the organisation and may involve individuals from several different orgnisational units (Cornelissen, 2014: 30). Horizontal communication is usually used to facilitate coordination since it provides the basis for cooperation. People need to communicate with each other in order to work effectively in joint efforts.

Electronic communication may have a profound effect on managerial and organisational communication. Many writers, including sholars, professionals and technical journalists, have speculated about the effects of new technologies on work life (Kiesler, 2014: 2). Some consider the electronic mail is eliminating organisational hierarchies, or at least is reducing the barriers of communication between people at differenet levels of authority in an organisation (Kiesler, 2014: 5), thus facilitates the formation of more flexible work groups, including 'virtual' work groups.

Other speculations involve the extent and the conditions under which electronic communications will foster or undermine a sense of community in the workplace and elswhere. Employees that are connected by electronic communications media, often form 'communities' that differ in substanial ways from other communities to which they may belong (Kiesler, 2014: 6). Heintz (1992) argues that the electronic science arena is a small-scale world (1992: 34), and technical journalists like Perry (1992) claimed that the use of electronic mail has eliminated the limitations of time and place, and as such, computer mediated communication technology has become the backbone of many organisations supplanting the formal hierarchical structure to achieve coordination and manager relationships within and between organisations. Therefore, one may suggest that electronic communications fill the growth and effectiveness of an organisation and its part.

Informal Communication in Organisations

Informal communication channel is another system of communication, which occurs in organisations. Common forms of informal communication include the grapevine, management by wandering around, and non-verbal communication (Griffin, 1999).

The grapevine is the major informal communication channel, and it transmits rumors (Davis, 1978: 112). Management can take steps to reduce the effect of harful romours, such as discussing them openly in public. The two most common grapevine chains in organisations are the gossip chain and the cluster chain (Davis & Newstrom, 1989). Several employees in an organisation consider the grapevine to be their primary source of information about company events, especially when they lack formal information (Kandlousi *et al*, 2010: 52). The grapevine often creates a bigger impact on employees than do messages sent over formal channels. According to Mishra (1990), information usually travels with considerable speed with this informal communication channel – the more important the information, the greater the speed (1990: 214).

Management by wandering around is an approach to communication that involves the manager literally wandering around and having spontaneous conversations with subordinates, customers and any other stakeholders of the organisation (Lorenzen, 1997). This approach may be an effective way of learning about what is happening in the organisation and what people are talking about. According to Lorenzen (1997), management by wandering around decreases bureaucracy and eliminates some of the hierarchical barriers of communication (1997: 52).

Non-verbal communication is probably the oldest area of investigation into human communication. It dates back from at least the 1800s, when teachers of acting and pantomime analysed how facial and body

movements could be used to convey emotions (The World Book Encyclopedia, Volume 4). Thus, non-verbal communication is a communication exchange that does not use words and it can frequently convey a great deal of information. It includes facial expressions, body movement, physical contact, gestures, and inflection and tone (Chira, 2014: 67; Payrato, 2009: 167). According to Chira (2014), a substantial amount of interpersonal communication also occurs through non-verbal communication. This communication channel usually supplements rather than substitutes for writing, speaking and sign language. Like language, non-verbal communication is used to express meaning, but it is particularly important in revealing feelings and attitudes, especially towards the person or persons being communicated with, and it is the main ‚patron‘ of affect in messages (Gallois & Callan, 1986).

Barriers to Communication

George Bernard Shaw said that the biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished (Kanki & Smith, 2001: 95), and perhaps several people working in medium and large sized organisations may testify to the truthfulness of the above statement. According to Riege (2005), managing the communication process necessitates recognizing the barriers to effective communication and understanding how to overcome them (2005: 31). Barriers can be identified at both the individual and organisational level. Many factors make it difficult to get messages across as intended, namely low motivation and interest, inappropriate language, defensive communication, dishonest dialogue and filtering, insufficient non-verbal communication, information overload, poor communication skills, and technological problems (Riege, 2005: 23).

Jackson (1995) puts forward the real reason behind the organisation that seems to make communication especially difficult. According to Jackson (1959), an organisation may be considered a system of overlapping and interdependent groups, which may be departments located on the same floor or a building, or they can be divisions that are geographically distant (1959: 158). People tend to communicate most frequently to those geographically closest to them, even within a small organisation. Therefore, geographical radius can thus be a barrier to communication (Jackson, 1959).

Cultural differences can also be barriers to communication. Larkey (1996) puts forward a general view that cultural differences affect intercultural encounters, usually by leading to misunderstanding or conflict, at both the individual and group level. According to Guirdham (2005), at the individual level, as different values, beliefs or worldviews are manifested in communication behaviours, and as culture creates differing expectations,

styles or patterns of speech, very often interpersonal misunderstanding and conflict may arise. On the other hand, Guirdham (2005) affirms that at the group level, intergroup processes can be triggered by an individual's non-verbal behaviour or ways of speaking which stereotypically represent a group.

Conclusion

According to Hall (1987) and as discussed in the previous sections, the more an organisation is people and idea oriented, the more important communication becomes. Therefore, organisations have to provide up-to-date information. In addition, Hall (1987) argues that the key to the communication process in organisations is to ensure that the correct people receive the correct information at the correct time. Moreover, an organisation with a positive attitude can, in no time, win the trust and commitment of its employees. This organisational attitude, in turn, is reflected by the way the organisation communicates with its employees. The strategy for organisational communication should be simple, yet effective and most importantly practical at all times. Only then will the communication process benefit both the organisation as well as its employees. After all, by mere definition, communication is a two-way process, and no party in this procedure is in any way, more or less important than the other (Shannon, 1961).

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