

UNIT 1: ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

OVERVIEW

In this unit, we discuss the communication process in modern business environments: what communication is, what form it takes, and what can cause it to go wrong—or not to occur at all. A goal of this unit is to help you categorize communication so that you can think clearly about it.

Once we understand what organizational communication is, it is important to characterize how it occurs so as to understand its complexity. Another goal of this unit is to discuss the directional nature of organizational communication, which can affect how we communicate, the media and language we choose for communication, and the extent to which we involve others in the communication process. When we think about communication as directional, we visualize a sender and a receiver of information and different kinds of sending and receiving situations.

Because of the complex nature of communication and rapid changes in the technology of communication, inhibitors often occur. A major goal of this unit is to investigate some common inhibitors to communication that occur at both the individual and group levels and to suggest ways of overcoming these inhibitors.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you should be able to:

- define organizational communication as it is used in this course to describe human interaction within modern organizations
- list and define two main categories and four subcategories of organizational communication
- draw a flowchart showing typical examples of internal and external communication
- list and describe three inhibitors to communication and how they occur

- identify three recent technological developments that have significantly affected organizational communication

DISCUSSION

We begin this unit by defining **organizational communication** as human communication—the kind of communication that occurs among people working in corporations, government agencies, universities, associations, or other formal organizations. It is important to define communication in this way because the term *communication* has taken on other meanings with the rise of technology. By acknowledging that communication is human-based and human-centered, we set the stage for understanding different types of communication and different causes of miscommunication that occur as a result of human interaction. Your success as a manager depends on your ability to understand and manage human interaction. Thinking about the different types of communication will not only help you communicate better with your employees, but it will also help you understand communication problems that occur among employees, among other managers, and among organizations and industries.

Communication can be verbal or nonverbal—or a combination of the two, in some instances. **Verbal communication** is communication that occurs through spoken or written language. It pertains both to written letters and memos and to what transpires in interviews, meetings, presentations, conference calls, technical walk-throughs, and inspections. **Nonverbal communication**, on the other hand, does not rely on written or spoken communication to convey a message. This kind of communication can occur subtly through body language; or more dramatically through sights such as posters, icons, or images; and sounds, such as sighs, yawns, or chuckles—all of which convey specific meanings.

Organizational communication can be both internal and external. **Internal communication** occurs within an organization and can be between groups and between individuals, where one group or individual sends information and the other receives it. Managers see such communication patterns emerge within departments, divisions, projects, even industries. The relationships of individuals within such groups can be characterized further as equal (peer) or unequal (as in the relationships of most managers and employees). **External communication**, or that which occurs partially outside organizations, can likewise be equal and unequal. External communication includes the kinds of communications that occur, for example, when employees present briefings, professional papers, product disclosures, or other forms of information to groups and organizations outside their primary employing organization.

Language barriers, poor communication skills, misused technology, under- and over-communication, and poorly timed communication are only a few of the inhibitors to effective communication. Contemporary business provides hundreds of examples—from employees who lack basic communication skills, to large corporations whose structure, policies, or technology make effective communication difficult. Managers can take steps to provide remedies by improving skills, policies, and work processes and procedures, and by encouraging employee awareness of good communication. Managers who are themselves poor communicators can benefit from strategies for isolating the causes of miscommunication, becoming good listeners, clearly communicating objectives and priorities, and selecting appropriate methods for communicating.

WHAT COMMUNICATION IS AND ISN'T

Not long ago, a young friend and I were watching the television campaign of a political hopeful. As the candidate appeared on-screen in front of us, we began to discuss the candidate and to assess his chances of winning the election. After comparing him to other candidates and commenting on his television appearance, I offered that the candidate's "vision" would ultimately win or lose him the election. My friend turned to me then and said, "Yes, but how does he **communicate** that vision?"

I could have given my friend many answers about how we communicate. There are also many ways in which I could have interpreted my friend's question. If I were an engineer, for example, I might have responded that the candidate's communication in this instance was occurring via satellite transmission with digitized audio transmitted over fiber optic networks. If I were a public relations specialist, I might have responded that successful communication would occur with "full saturation"—or complete conveyance of the candidate's message—to a variety of audiences by means of a variety of media: press releases, television, pamphlets, and live appearances.

The problem my friend and I encountered in trying to interpret what we meant by *communication* indicates how complicated the act of communication has become. For one thing, there were many different ways to define the word *communication*, which meant that we could not assign a single meaning to the word without some initial discussion. My friend and I were, in fact, experiencing *failed communication* until we agreed on what we meant by communication and on how we would continue to use the word in our discussions.

To proceed further in this course, we must define what we mean by *communication*. **Communication** is human interaction resulting in a transfer of meaning appropriate to a situation. In this definition, it is important to recognize that communication is both human (behavioral) and active (results in the transfer of meaning that is appropriate). Without both of these elements, our definition of communication might be misconstrued.

HOW HUMANS INTERACT TO COMMUNICATE

Studies of human behavior indicate that when people communicate, they assume various roles during the communication process. These roles and the responses of the people playing them help us categorize communication and understand it better.

When two human beings communicate about the time of day, for example, they assume roles in which one person asks for and the other person provides the time of day. Literal meaning (in most instances, the time) is conveyed from the sender of the information to the receiver. Communication, illustrated in the diagram below, is **directional** (from sender to receiver), and, because it is conveyed with words, verbal.

[Sender] -----> [Receiver]
"It is eleven thirty."

What happens, however, if the sender does not know the time of day, or if the receiver cannot understand what the sender is saying? If the sender does not know the time, he might indicate that he does not know by raising his eyebrows, shrugging his shoulders, and lifting his palms upward—a commonly accepted gesture for indicating ignorance. In this case, communication is still directional, but it is also nonverbal. Meaning is conveyed, although not to the receiver's complete satisfaction.

If the receiver cannot understand the sender when he says the time, then communication has failed, although it is still possible for us to analyze what has occurred as directional and verbal communication. Suppose the sender replies, for example, "*Il est onze heures et demi.*" If the receiver does not understand French, then no meaning is conveyed.

Alternatively, if the sender supplies an answer that the receiver can understand, but which does not answer the question, then communication has also failed, even though the foundation for new communication has been laid. This might occur if the sender were to respond to the receiver's question about the time of day by saying, "It is later than you think."

Although such a response might still be categorized as directional and verbal, it does not fulfill the criterion of being appropriate to the situation. In this case, such a response might create anxieties in the receiver if, for example, she believes that she is already late for an appointment, or if she responds to the other sinister connotations inherent in the response.

Most senders communicate information by **encoding** it so that it conveys the intended meaning to receivers. Receivers, in turn, **decode** information to access meaning. Included in the act of encoding are activities such as deciding how to deliver the communication—for example, as verbal or nonverbal, written or oral communication; choosing the appropriate words, language, or gestures; selecting an appropriate tone for spoken communication; and determining the right amount of information to convey. Included in decoding are the activities of analyzing individual words or gestures as well as analyzing the total effect of the message conveyed.

Communication is successful to the extent that encoding and decoding are successful. As we shall see in the next section, however, the essentially individualistic activities of encoding and decoding become more difficult and complicated when performed within the many-tiered universe of the organization. There, communication between individuals is colored by the organization's processes, policies, and precedents, and human interaction is influenced by the organization's hierarchy and the changeable nature of the roles played by human beings from day to day.

In organizations, the directional flow of communication can be upward and downward as well as lateral. The directional nature of communication within organizations allows for receivers of communication to assign value and weight, to prioritize communication. It allows senders to make various assumptions about the receivers and how the communication will be translated into action.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Because human organizations consist of human beings, organizational communication is essentially that which humans originate. One major difference between organizational communication and the kind that takes place between individuals outside of an organization lies in the constraints or parameters that the organization's formal hierarchy imposes. Organizations define human behavior and expectations by predefining the relationships of people within the organization. When they join an organization, employees spend time adjusting to the corporate culture—that is, the policies, procedures, and precedents of the organization. With each new

job within the organization, employees also spend time learning to play a specific role as communicator in relation to others. New employees, for example, might learn that all internal correspondence with the exception of electronic mail must be routed through their immediate supervisor as well as through the divisional vice president. All external correspondence, on the other hand, may need to be approved by a corporate editorial board.

Often the processes, policies, and precedents affecting organizational communication evolve to accommodate an ever-growing managerial structure within the organization. The size and organizational structure of a company can greatly affect both internal and external communication. In larger organizations with more tiers of management, the lines of communication between managers and employees are more complex, with employees frequently being further removed from company decision making. Managers establish rules and ways of doing things that influence communication.

In large, multinational corporations (such as Coca-Cola or IBM) and in many government agencies, employees may work within structures that include six to seven tiers of management. This results frequently in instances of equal and unequal internal communication between people of varying rank within the organization. Moreover, it requires of both managers and employees a keen sense of audience and the ability to adjust communication methods and styles.

Some employees of large organizations lose sight of the company's overall vision/strategic orientation. Thus, the need of the firm to communicate these values clearly becomes even greater if the values are to make a lasting impression. The complexity of a large company is also exacerbated in multinational companies where cultural differences, differences in work habits, and other differences make communication more difficult.

As a manager, you make communication decisions every day that are influenced by the structure of your organization and by the role you play within that structure. You participate daily in both equal and unequal communication. When you communicate with other managers, for example, the ensuing communication is usually between equals within the organization, and when you communicate to your employees, the communication is unequal. Such internal communication in the form of mandates, suggestions, objections, and information sharing is the lifeblood of most American corporations, driving the goods and services of American companies to market.

Because we live in a market-oriented economy, however, external communication between organizations is also important. In addition to the role they play in defining the climate for internal communication, corporations also help to determine how people within an organization will interact with people outside the organization. As with internal communication, this can result in both equal and unequal patterns of communication—as when junior marketing representatives demonstrate goods and services to CEOs of other companies or when personnel officers check employee references through the organizational management chain of other companies.

Problems Associated with Directional Flow and Delivery

As we have seen, the size and organizational structure of a company can greatly affect the communication within and outside the company. As organizations become larger, the lines of communication between management and employees often become more complex, with employees frequently further removed from the company's vital decision-making nexus. Although the different kinds of communication made necessary by formal organizational structure are not innately ineffective, it is true that this structure can make communication difficult, especially in large organizations or in organizations where the directional flow for communication is not clearly defined. Directional flow can result in either equal or unequal communication, but often, in large organizations, it results in both. A proposal, for example, may originate in a manufacturing department where its originators may engage in peer reviews of its content at an early stage. Later, the same proposal may be routed to other departments within the organization, and, eventually, be read by the company CEO.

Information can travel many routes within an organization, and problems can frequently arise. Some problems associated with directional flow and unequal communication result from inadequate understanding of the audience by both managers and employees within large organizations. (Some of these problems can be remedied through audience analysis, which we will discuss in unit 2.) Two persistent instances of these problems occur when managers and employees exhibit faulty levels of technicality and faulty formality.

Communication that exhibits **faulty levels of technicality** either includes too many or too few details that are appropriate to the interest level or knowledge of the receiver of the communication. Faulty technicality occurs often in upward communication, for example, when employees prepare overly technical reports for managers. **Faulty formality**, on the other hand, occurs when the directional flow of communication is downward. It affects the tone and style of

communication by obscuring the true message or importance of what is communicated by adopting an inappropriate level of formality. Managers sometimes make casual, often oral requests, and then are surprised when their requests are not acted on immediately. The cause of such miscommunication is often faulty formality (or, in this case, "faulty informality"). Verbal messages from managers to employees can be misconstrued if they appear too informal. Managers who transmit messages to employees in the hall with, "Let's try to finish up that project by the end of the week," are likely to be less effective than those who schedule work and regularly review employee milestones.

Managers can improve oral communication by assessing the situation and choosing the appropriate method of delivery. Casual directives that can be acted upon immediately and are easy to understand are the most effective for oral delivery. Directives that involve relatively long periods of time between request and delivery, or directives that are complex, are more effective when delivered in written form. Written communication is generally perceived as being more serious or formal. Many personnel-related directives are traditionally delivered in written form.

In addition to these inhibitors, cumbersome internal review processes, varying objectives, and competition among departments, physical distance, incompatible technology, and other difficulties can impede communication and the flow of information. Let's examine a specific case. Assume that you work for XYZ Corporation as a manager in the systems engineering division. You are in charge of a design department that includes six senior engineers, three midlevel engineers, two junior engineers, an engineering student/coop worker, two computer programmers, three technical writers, one graphic artist, and one secretary. Your 20-person department also employs outside contractors from time to time to help when you are designing a particularly complex piece of equipment. In addition, your department is one of 20 other departments within the corporation, including other engineering departments with structure and personnel similar to your own. Among the 20 corporate managers who manage these departments, there is much disparity in age, seniority, and reporting. You, for example, report to the chief of the systems engineering division, who in turn controls five other engineering departments and reports directly to your company's chief executive officer.

Most internal communication within each department is effective in your estimation because each department's role and processes are clearly defined within the corporate structure. In addition, like yours, most of the departments consist of seasoned professionals who understand the work and are good communicators. Communication problems arise most often, you notice, in communication tasks that span departments or, occasionally, when communication occurs with groups that are not part of your organization.

Your recent loss of an important contract to provide engineering services to the government offers a good example. Even though your engineers worked overtime to analyze the requirements and propose a credible design, the finance department had trouble assigning a dollar value to your estimated work effort, and especially in checking the proposed salary rates of the subcontractors you recommended. In addition, your engineers reported difficulties explaining the design to those writing the proposal, and the proposal was delivered a day late. As if that weren't enough, you neglected to have the manager of the research department review and approve the proposed design, and now you hear that she is highly critical of the technology you proposed.

How Communication Can Be Improved

Any one of the above-mentioned communication problems might have cost you the work that you wanted for your organization. Almost all of them might have been avoided with better understanding of communication flow within and outside your organization. First, it is important to understand the size and complexity of the communication task as it is initiated for your entire organization. In this instance, there were really two aspects of the communication task that characterized it as an organizational rather than a departmental task.

The first was scope. Because the work requested required estimates from others within your organization, the primary step in managing the request for proposal (RFP) should have been to ensure a general level of understanding. The RFP must be understood by all groups involved in assessing it, and by all groups charged with formulating any part of the response. Fostering such understanding involves communicating the requirements clearly and seeking clarification for points that are unclear.

The second was content of response. What your organization provides as the final proposal must communicate the consensus of the organization and must be logical and consistent. Gaining consensus involves seeking the approval and concurrence of your peer managers, each of whom should review and approve the final proposal before it is released. It also involves ensuring the accuracy and timeliness of what is proposed—not just your own view of an appropriate proposal.

Of course, in the case of the XYZ Corporation's loss, there might also have been room for improvement in individual communication, and in communication with other subcontracting organizations. The difficulty experienced by the finance department in getting the salary rates of the subcontractors you proposed might have been allayed with better external communication.

Did the other organization not know that you needed the rates quickly? Or perhaps there were personnel rules within their organization that made immediate access to salary information difficult. Understanding the structure of this external organization and how it interacts with your company might have helped you get what you needed more smoothly.

MANAGING INHIBITORS TO COMMUNICATION

The case of the XYZ Corporation illustrates how organizational structure and human interaction are often at odds in today's businesses. Human communication is subject to the foibles, inadequacies, and interpretations human beings impose on it, regardless of how or where the communication originates. At an individual level, inhibitors to communication are usually more easily correctable than inhibitors at an organizational level because they fall within a manager's immediate span of control. When they occur frequently or pervasively within an organization, however, even inhibitors that originate at an individual level can become organizational problems as well.

Robert and Elizabeth Swindle (1989) identify some common inhibitors to communication among employees in American businesses:

- **Language barriers**, including faulty formality, faulty technicality, and some well-known problems associated with word choice—bureaucratese, legalese, euphemisms, and poor word choice. Such barriers are evident, for example, among managers who refer to "cost of living" increases as "yearly bonuses" or who prefer "reductions in force" to "employee dismissals."
- **Faulty practices or processes** that encourage errors. Such practices might include allowing engineers to implement a system before they have written a design for it, or meeting schedules by foregoing quality checks of products.
- **Excessive subjectivity**, which can be caused by insufficient information or personal bias. Such subjectivity often appears as unsubstantiated assumptions or generalities, as in one manager's assertion that, "Most of our professional employees assume that 20 hours of overtime goes with the territory."
- **Poorly timed communication**, for example, an announcement that profit sharing is down but executive salaries have been increased.
- **Defensiveness**, often manifested among employees who relentlessly establish elaborate "paper trails" to substantiate even the smallest daily decisions.

- **Deliberate deception**, as in the renowned Morton Thiokol incident.¹
- **Physical and mental distancing**, which can occur with physical separation or through sanctioned or arbitrary differentiation of status—the executive washroom, for example.

Managers can overcome some of these inhibitors in a number of ways, many of them, quite simple. By reading and analyzing each employee report carefully, managers can detect which employees are having difficulty finding appropriate levels of formality and technicality, for example, in internal communication. Problems often go undetected (and uncorrected) simply because managers fail to read their employees' reports critically and thoroughly.

Many of these poor communication skills among employees can be greatly improved through audience analysis, which we will discuss in detail in unit 2. Technical professionals who habitually exhibit faulty levels of technicality in their writing, for example, can be counseled by knowledgeable managers in improving their audience analysis skills. For this to happen, however, managers must read their employees' communications to become aware of the existence of and nature of the problem.

These, of course, are just some of the inhibitors. Technology—especially computing technology—has given rise to new inhibitors because companies increasingly rely on electronic mail systems or computer networks as repositories or conduits for information. Electronic or E-mail has affected communication within modern organizations in a number of ways. It has made possible the quick and easy sharing of information via computer conferences or bulletin boards, where computer users receive and create responses to what others write in easily accessible forums. Electronic mail has also, unwittingly or wittingly, encouraged a certain informality in correspondence that is done over computer networks. In addition, it has added dimensions of technical skill and access to proper hardware and software as categories for consideration within the audience analysis phase of prewriting.

Fear of computers or even poor typing skills can now seriously inhibit communication within many organizations. Likewise, an overreliance on electronic communication at the expense of face-to-face interaction can squelch open communication and the free exchange of information.

¹In 1989, the Morton Thiokol Company, which manufactured parts for the U.S. Space Program, admitted to granting a "go ahead" for the Challenger Space Mission despite engineering reports indicating defective equipment. The mission resulted in the deaths of seven astronauts.

Automated retrieval of information and the use of automation tools are rapidly changing communication processes within most organizations. Automated access to information can make information more universally available more quickly than in the past. Employees who need answers to questions in automated environments can often find the information with a minimum of time and effort. Automated access to information, however, also increases the role of technical personnel in ensuring equal access to information, and it creates the need for necessary skill to access information. In addition, poor computer maintenance and insufficient disaster recovery mechanisms threaten to destroy entire information bases upon which many businesses depend for storing and accessing online procedures, reports, statistics, and even financial assets.

REFERENCE

Swindle, Robert E., and Elizabeth M. Swindle. *The Business Communicator*. 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you define the term *communication* as it is used in modern organizations? Why is it important to include the human component in any modern definition of *organizational communication*?
2. How do employees perceive oral communication from a manager? When is oral communication between employee and manager most effective?
3. How do employees perceive written communication from a manager? When is written communication between employee and manager most effective?
4. What is directional communication and how does it affect the nature of communication?
5. Explain how the level of formality that managers choose for internal communication can actually impede the message being conveyed to employees.
6. How can the size and organizational structure of a company affect communication within and outside of the company?
7. What strategies are available to managers for overcoming language barriers and poor communication skills?

8. What is one common cause of poorly timed communication, and what is the best way of overcoming it?
9. Discuss two significant ways in which electronic mail has affected internal communication.
10. How does automated access to information stored in data bases enhance and how does it inhibit organizational communication?

INTEGRATING QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important for managers to periodically redefine what is meant by *organizational communication*?
2. How are changes in the modern workplace affecting the status and nature of written communication?
3. What contributions do case studies from actual businesses who use online communication make to our understanding of how communication is changing in the workplace? Use examples from your reading or your own experience.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Keep a journal in which you collect and list the inhibitors to communication that you see occurring within your organization every day. After two weeks of observing and documenting these inhibitors, compose a plan for eliminating one of the inhibitors that you consider most destructive to your working environment.
- Draw a flowchart that depicts the organizational structure of a typical company or of your own company, showing the internal and external flow of communication.
- Study the organizational charts for your company or for a division within your company. Chart a typical route for several types of communication that originate within the company or division. For example, you might chart the route that an employee's request for a leave of absence might take, or chart the route of a memo explaining a new company or divisional policy.

SUGGESTED READING

Hiltz, S. Roxanne. *Online Communities*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1984.

Holcomb, Marya, and Judith K. Stein. *Writing for Decision Makers*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishers (Lifetime Learning Libraries), 1988.

Swindle, Robert E., and Elizabeth M. Swindle. *The Business Communicator*. 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989.

Vardaman, George T., and Patricia B. Vardaman. *Communication in Modern Organizations*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973.