

UNIT 13: INCREASING YOUR WRITING SKILLS THROUGHOUT YOUR MANAGEMENT CAREER

OVERVIEW

In this unit, we urge managers to continue to build upon and expand the ideas in this guide. We offer suggestions for improving as a writer throughout your career. We will stress the importance of using your writing to retain your personal "voice." Continued writing throughout a management career creates the habit of communication and ensures more vitality in the workplace. Another goal of this unit is to encourage managers to accept the challenge of becoming teachers and mentors, and to make a life-long commitment to sharing themselves and their ideas with their employees and peers.

In the following sections, we advise managers about how to perfect writing skills within and outside of work environments. We discuss opportunities for writing on the job, emphasizing day-to-day opportunities as well as those which might be longer term. We focus in particular on the role of managerial writing in defining the values of, and charting the course for, modern organizations: the role of the manager as corporate mentor. We address the role of the manager in an industry as well as in a particular organization. Most importantly, we emphasize the relationship between who a manager is and what he or she does, and how that manager captures, evaluates, and enriches that experience through writing.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you should be able to:

- write job descriptions that foster continued growth in writing skills
- write mission statements, statements of goals, and statements of objectives
- describe programs designed to renew interest in writing among middle and upper-level managers
- list personal and corporate advantages associated with sustained writing activities among managers

DISCUSSION

WRITING IS A SKILL TO DEVELOP

Because writing skills, like basic math skills, are expected in the workplace, many people fail to understand the importance of continuing to develop them throughout life. Managers, even though they are responsible for developing the skills of their employees, often overlook the importance of developing their own writing skills. Few people view writing as an extension of thinking; however, perfecting writing skills throughout a lifetime is, in one sense, perfecting one's ability to think logically and to express thoughts precisely and gracefully.

Day-to-Day Writing Opportunities

For most managers, the workplace provides many alternatives to (and perhaps obstacles to) writing in performing day-to-day activities. Meetings frequently take the place of written communication. Interviews or employee one-on-one sessions may replace written performance appraisals. Voicemail, dictation, conference calling, and sometimes video appearances all obviate the need for writing, even among managers who do not employ others to write for them. In some organizations, only hard and firm personnel policies or legal requirements inspire managers to write. Yet writing remains one of the best ways to ensure clarity in communication and to focus the work of large numbers of people.

Managers who write well have generally learned how to take advantage of opportunities for writing on the job. They have learned, in some cases, to defy the status quo and to continue delivering written messages that might otherwise be conveyed in some other form. Their defiance may take many forms, as in the case of one manager who never allowed a report to leave her department without personally writing or editing some section of it so that she could participate directly in all of her department's communications. In another, the CEO of a large Midwestern car company writes an annual "holiday letter" to his employees every December thanking them for their contributions, reflecting on what he has learned from them during the year, and sharing his vision of what the coming year will hold.

Other opportunities await resourceful managers as well. Managers may write job descriptions and career objectives for employees, for example, rather than use the boilerplate provided in personnel manuals. They may define the content of their own jobs as well as those of employees, and they may project the characteristics of future jobs in their organization or industry. In addition, managers may define the values, goals, mission, and objectives of their

department, division, or organization as a whole. In today's global economy, managers may use writing to share their ideas or to probe the way that others do business around the world. They may engage in written evaluations of competitors and industry peers as well as write the often-painful self-assessments of their own or their organization's performance.

Job Descriptions and Career Objectives

When managers themselves assume writing tasks that they normally do not participate in, they may begin to see improvement in the performance of employees whom they manage. This is especially true of job descriptions and career objectives, generally written in most large organizations by personnel departments who attempt to standardize the descriptions of similar jobs. In one instance, when the manager of one computer company rewrote his company's standard job description for a junior programmer, he noticed immediate improvements in the performance of most of the junior programmers assigned to him. As the following sample indicates, his rewritten job description not only identified specific tasks for junior programmers to perform, but it also used concrete language familiar to the programmers to describe their duties within the context of the project development cycle that they knew.

Company's Standard Description	Manager's Rewrite
Provide programming support to senior programmers in writing code, documenting system function and behavior, testing unit code as well as testing module-level and system-level code.	A junior programmer participates as an observer in both high- and low-level design. He or she prepares Program Design Language (PDL) for review by senior programmers; performs coding using C, PASCAL, FORTRAN, or ASSEMBLER languages; and documents completed code within code modules using plain English. In addition, a junior programmer may write sections of the Programming Functional Specifications (PFS), perform unit and component testing without supervision, and participate in system testing. In addition to programming-related duties, a junior programmer is also responsible for attending project status meetings, providing status reports, and reviewing end-user documentation written by the technical writing team.

Similar results can be achieved by rewriting career objectives, employee development plans, and other documents where a manager's in-depth understanding and perspective can assist in making standard—often too general—descriptions meaningful to employees.

Managerial Job Descriptions

Managers may also periodically rewrite their own job descriptions or career objectives—a valuable exercise for any employee, but especially for managers, the content of whose jobs may be difficult to define or quantify in measurable terms. According to Theodore Weinshall (1979), the content of managerial jobs is seldom explicit because of the variety of expectations associated with managerial performance. Managers must, in fact, be able and willing to assume many roles. Their performance is generally measured by the success of an entire project rather than through the achievement of specific milestones or the performance of specific tasks. In reality, the varied nature of managerial work makes self-assessment difficult unless an equal emphasis is placed on the philosophy of management. Managers must understand the full range of their duties, but they must also be able to determine which ones are more important than others, and which are directly affected by their, and by their organization's, values. This suggests that another opportunity for writing for managers lies in clarifying and recording personal values and organizational beliefs.

Mission, Goals, and Objectives

In recent years, growing numbers of organizations have sought to develop statements of their mission, goals, and objectives as ways of charting present and future business activities. As an outgrowth of graduate training in business and organizational psychology, such statements began to appear at the organizational level in the 1960s and have continued to the present. Often confused with one another, mission statements, statements of goals, and statements of objectives actually form a three-tiered focal point for employees and CEOs alike. Once employees understand the nature of each, they generally demonstrate adherence to them in their work. Few managers, however, take advantage of the opportunity to write such statements for themselves and their individual departments, in part, because managers themselves are often confused by them.

To write effective **mission statements**, managers must step back from the day-to-day work of individual projects and articulate an activity that is central to the existence of their department. For a postal manager, that activity might be delivering the mail; for a technical writing manager, it might be providing written documentation for all engineering functions within a specified area of an organization. Mission statements differ from goals through implied competence and immediate need. A mission statement should state something that your

department is capable of doing, and your department's existence should be integrally tied to the need for doing it.

A **goal**, on the other hand, is something that you strive for and define by means of **objectives**. A postal manager may have as a goal delivering all of the mail for which his or her department is responsible at the fastest rate of any department in the postal service. He or she may define the goal by stating specific objectives, for example, that the department will deliver all mail within six hours of its arrival and with fewer than 25 misdeliveries per thousand.

Written mission statements and statements of goals and objectives can inspire and motivate employees to improve performance and achieve managerial and organizational goals. The act of writing them can also crystallize for managers the essence of their day-to-day activities as well as the road to fulfilling their dreams.

Philosophies of Management

As with mission statements, statements of goals, and statements of objectives, managers frequently overlook the need to formally communicate their philosophies of management. "Actions speak louder than words," is a frequently heard defense against articulating the deeply held beliefs and values that underlie organizations. Numerous works such as *Positive Management Practices* by Arthur Beck and Ellis Hillmar (1982), note that successful companies are those whose executive officers and managers do take the time to develop and write about their philosophies and the values that inform them. Positive management philosophies begin with a statement of values, which Beck, Hillmar, and the American Management Association agree,

. . . will most likely determine which facts are examined with care and which are passed over lightly, which options for action are looked upon with favor from the start and which are rejected out of hand. (American Management Association report, 1982, cited in Beck and Hillmar 1986, 17)

By definition, **values** are consciously or unconsciously held views of what is "good" or "bad." Unlike morals, values are subjective, often relative, evaluations that can be influenced by preference, bias, experience, or other external factors. What an organization or individual manager values may not always be good, or even moral, but it is perceived to be beneficial and worthy of pursuit by the holder of the value.

Value statements force those who make them to articulate what they hold valuable and to act on their values and beliefs. Value statements force consistency because it is easy to check behavior against them and to see inconsistencies in values, policies, procedures, and programs. Organizational and managerial behavior can be directly attributed to the values held by organizations and managers. A coherent and consistently applied system of values constitutes a **philosophy**.

To be successful, managerial value statements must be acceptable in public as well as private domains. Although they begin as personal statements, they should eventually embrace to some extent the values of all who work with the manager. To succeed, they must be accepted by those whom the manager manages, and ultimately, by the entire organization. The first step to such acceptance is to write them down.

THE BROADER ROLE OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

What can be said of the philosophies of individual managers can also be said of those of corporations as a whole—to exert influence, the organization's philosophies need to be written and aired. Organizational theorists such as Theodore Weinshall speculate that the survival of modern organizations depends on an understanding of the written history and theoretical development of the organization, what Weinshall calls the "visible" communication of meaning and structure. As Weinshall (1979) says, "Without written communication, there could not be any formalized structure, and without formalized structures, organizations cannot grow and survive" (ibid., 141). Organizations rely on top executives and managers to record not only the day-to-day activities, but also the histories of the organization, commenting on and interpreting significant events, currents, and changes.

Where do managers find the time and tranquility to provide such written perspective? Some organizations supply incentives and formulas that help generally overworked managers make such a contribution to the collective wisdom. American Management Systems in Virginia, for example, provides sabbaticals for its management and technical leaders to encourage them to contribute to industry literature or develop new ideas and interests. IBM corporation encourages writing among all levels of employees through a point-based systems of cash awards for writing.

Many thoughtful managers create opportunities on their own or take advantage of release time to deepen their understanding of the events and decisions that have shaped their lives, to write, to teach, or to pursue community projects. Authorship incentives, visiting

lectureships with universities, and community work and development projects can provide the framework for managers and executives in making such contributions.

Too often, managers find that opportunities for personal expression in writing diminish with advancement. As they ascend the corporate ladder, their words are literally not their own. Corporate speechwriters, project leads, personnel and policy officers spend hours preparing speeches and reports for high-level managers. And for such managers, more and more, spoken mandates become the usual mode of communication.

There are many disadvantages associated with this common pattern of behavior, but, perhaps, chief among them is the loss of philosophical guidance for employees. Corporations whose chief corporate managers remain silent often flounder when important decisions must be made or during times of stress. Mid-level managers and employees must understand the corporate mission and the beliefs underlying it. As stated, few organizations succeed when the corporate mission is not expressed and reaffirmed with words that stick.

Because few managers start out as chief executive officers of their companies, it is necessary to cultivate the habit of written communication even before you have achieved high management status. Some ways to do this include keeping a journal of daily activities, observations, and ideas; documenting successful projects to upper management or through articles and press releases; rewarding employees with written acknowledgment of their contributions; and sharing and commenting on outside articles and books with employees. Such activities will not only afford personal satisfaction, but they also encourage dialogue with employees that might not ordinarily occur.

Managers who are committed to writing may add language to their current job descriptions to reinforce that commitment. Many managers in health technology fields, for example, include in their performance plans the objective of sharing recent innovations and discoveries with humanity through conference papers and seminars. Although such work usually requires extra effort of managers, the commitment to do it is important. Few other eras in human history have depended so much on the transfer of information and perspective as ours.

REFERENCES

Beck, Arthur, and Ellis Hillmar. *Positive Management Practices: Bringing Out the Best in Organizations and People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986.

Weinshall, Theodore. *Managerial Communication: Concepts, Approaches, and Techniques*. London: Academic Press, 1979.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is one compelling reason why managers should write about what they believe and what they do?
2. How can managers rewrite their own job descriptions and performance objectives to recognize the need for writing opportunities for themselves? Provide samples from managerial job descriptions and performance objectives that focus on writing.
3. Describe two ways writing can enhance a manager's career.
4. List the advantages of periodic management sabbaticals designed to provide writing opportunities.
5. How would you implement authoring incentives for managers without fear of negative employee reaction?
6. What specific strategies and programs can corporations and agencies implement to encourage managerial writing? List and describe at least three.

INTEGRATING QUESTIONS

1. Managers frequently must provide justification for decisions, expenditures, hirings, firings, and related activities. How can this justification be incorporated into written documents? Why do you think that some managers are reluctant to write about such activities and prefer to explain their decisions in face-to-face meetings with superiors?
2. Recent lawsuits have suggested that some managers and retired managers may face resistance when they attempt to write too negatively about their corporate experiences. Some corporations bar all current and former employees from engaging in writing that may be deemed critical of company policy or operations. How can managers overcome or change such sanctions? Is writing about a former employer unethical?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Form a management council in conjunction with your personnel department to identify peers who have made a significant contribution to understanding within your organization via writing. At a management assembly, recognize those contributors.
- Start an in-house bibliography of published articles by employees (managers and regular staff).
- If your organization does not have one, discuss starting an authorship incentive plan to reward writing contributors.
- Start a management newsletter or initiate a management column in an existing newsletter. Have every manager and executive contribute one piece of writing.

SUGGESTED READING

Beck, Arthur, and Ellis Hillmar. *Positive Management Practices: Bringing Out the Best in Organizations and People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986.