Internal Communications: Messaging Withing Your Company

> *I figured that if I said it enough, I would convince the world that I really was the greatest.*
>
> *Muhammad Ali*

Introduction to Sending Messages Within the Company

Whether your organization is small, large, virtual or bricks and mortar, communicating effectively with employees is vital and helps bring together employees from various departments.

When new employees join a company, they become a link in the information chain. In order to do their jobs effectively and become part of the team, they must be brought up to speed on the policies and procedures of the company as well as understand the vision of its leaders, its mission and its business objectives. This requires continued and concise messaging delivered with the support of top management.

In most of the world, employees no longer join organizations for life, and thus they may choose to give their time and energy to companies that trust their abilities and recognize their potential. This trust is built on two-way communication.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theory of organizational communication – the academic discipline that examines management and communication. In the second part of the chapter, the application of organizational communication will be discussed in terms of verbal and written messaging.

Verbal messaging will include interpersonal communication such as face-to-face interaction (in real time and place), formal and informal meetings from small departmental groups to large conferences, teleconferencing and special events. Written internal messaging will include memos, both traditional forms and the modern hybrid format widely used today, inter- and intradepartmental email, blogs, company newsletters and handbooks containing policy, procedures and codes of conduct and dress.

We'll also discuss employee morale and its relationship to job production and satisfaction, and look at protecting the company image and brand from within the organization.

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Consider this example of how employees work together to achieve a company goal. Imagine staging a corporate event for 5 000 attendees. A Dutch company hosted an event to mark the three-year anniversary of a landmark merger with a competitor. The event was demanding. Planning and execution needed the input and cooperation of many. An event-planning company contracted for a 70 000 sq. ft heated tent to be erected on the grounds of a local soccer stadium and 40 company banners to be displayed around the facility.

Although these details were important, the ultimate success of the event rested on the creativity and teamwork of employees. The marketing department compiled invitation lists, the advertising department created an event theme and others handled security and set-up.

Because of an effective internal communication programme, the last-minute illness of the major entertainer for the night was an obstacle that was manageable. Coordinators reframed the event from "great success" to "great teamwork" as employees stepped up to provide the evening's entertainment.

Organizations that cultivate the trust and loyalty of their employees thrive both in good and in troubled times.

Organizational Communication

Organizational Communication began under the auspices of the business information/business communication studies of the 1930s and came into its own in the post-war years as scholars began to study large organizations and how they communicated with their members. Researchers were concerned with the effective transmission of messages: how people received messages and how those messages were transmitted.

Early names that fostered growth in organizational communication include: Herbert Simon, who said communication is vital to the success of an organization (Simon, 1993); A. Bavelas and D. Barrett, who wrote "An experimental approach to organizational communication" (Bavelas & Barrett, 1951); Kenneth Boulding, who addressed the ethics of an organization's communication system (Boulding, 1970); and Chris Argyris, who wrote *Personality and Organization*, in which he criticizes the "management knows best" approach to employee communication (Argyris, 1957).

According to Mark Schumann, global communication practice leader at Towers Perrin Human Resources Services, "Many organizations confuse information with communication. They concentrate on disseminating facts rather than providing the context and business rationale for company decisions and actions. The 'why and how' is critical to understanding the 'what'" (Schumann, 2004).

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For more information on organizational communication read:

- *Organizational Communication in an Age of Globalization* (Cheney et al., 2003).
- *International and Multicultural Organizational Communication* (Barnett, 2005).
- *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication* (Jablin & Putnam, 2005).

Today, **organizational communication** is a mature discipline and provides much of the framework for effective management and employee communication. It includes such concepts as formal and informal communication methods, the flow of communication up, down and across all levels of employees and power structures. The "Connecting organizational communication to financial performance: 2003/2004 communication ROI study" by Watson Wyatt Worldwide reported that effective employee communication yields a 26 % total return to shareholders, effectively reducing employee turnover and creating a knowledge base reflected in customer contact (Vogt, 2004).

Dig Deeper

Organizational communication theories

Information systems. Karl Weick says each part of an organization is important for survival; no one part of the organization should consider itself more important than another (Weick, 1996).

Cultural theory. Clifford Geertz and Michael Pacanowsky focus on organizations and the shared meanings of their particular cultures contained in "stories": corporate, personal and collegial. This is an Eastern-influenced theory researched through ethnography (Geertz, 1973; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993).

Critical theory. Stanley Deetz takes a humanistic approach and believes that communication dynamically springs from reality rather than statically reflecting reality. He theorizes that an employee's involvement in the company is vital to communication success (Deetz, 1982).

Organization assimilation/socialization. Fred Jablin explains how newcomers use communication to assimilate into an organization. He asserts that individuals succeed according to how well they "fit into" the organization (Jablin & Putnam, 2005).

Workplace relationship theory. Patricia Sias explains that the amount and quality of information employees receive directly impact upon their relationships with co-workers and supervisors. This, she says, points out the importance of effective employee communication for collaboration and satisfaction (Sias, 2001).

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Internal Verbal Communication

Managers and employees are rarely satisfied with their internal communication. It is an issue that tops the list of organizational problems. Poor communication leads to misunderstood messages, wasted time and low company morale. In fact, there is no "right way" to communicate with employees. Some communication experts say that, because of the complexity of the communication process, it is easy to see why it is so difficult to communicate effectively.

In a perfect world, here's what should happen in the transactional communication model in Figure 8.1:

1. The sender must convey the message clearly with integrity and truthfulness.
2. The receiver must choose to listen and decode the message successfully.
3. The delivery mode must meet the expectations of the receiver and the needs of the message.
4. The content of a message must circumvent any noise, distraction or filter, whether it is internal and external.
5. The message must connect to the receiver in the way that the sender intended.

Let's examine the role of verbal communication in the process, by examining the following verbal channels:

- face-to-face communication
- telephone and voice mail
- meetings
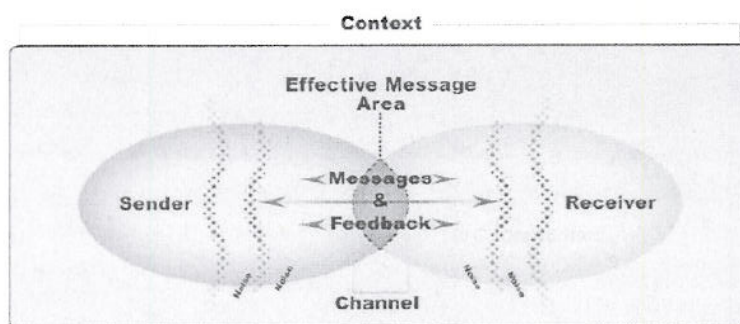- videoconferencing
- special events.

Figure 8.1 Transactional communication model.

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Greek playwright Demosthenes practised facial expressions in a mirror, and Japanese Kabuki actors don exaggerated facemasks to display various moods. The Yiddish saying, "The face tells the secret", confirms there is a story to be read in every face. Every culture assigns significance to facial expressions or lack of them.

Skills to interpret a person's face and body language effectively are dependent on the receiver's learning, experience and willingness to see new perspectives.

Face-to-face Communication

Face-to-face interaction is the most personal type of communication in which humans engage. It is also called the "richest" form of communication because it contains cues from many sources that add to the interpretation of the message exchanged by the sender and receiver.

Face-to-face communication includes an infinite amount of non-verbal messages in facial and hand gestures, body language and posture. The depth of understanding of the message is enriched by the speaker's tone, pitch and vocal quality, and the level of feedback of the listener. The experience is further enhanced by information gathered from the occasion, the time of day and the place where the communication occurs.

Much workplace communication is face to face, and therefore it is important for the facial expressions, gestures and body language of the sender to match the content and tone of the message being delivered. It would be inappropriate for a manager to greet an employee with a slap on the back, a cheery smile and a short story about the great weekend he/she had, and then deliver a reprimand for poor performance!

Sending the right messages face to face involves all facets of verbal communication.

Dig Deeper

Let's briefly explore the concept of rich media. At one end of the spectrum is face-to-face communication, the richest form of communication involving facial expressions, voice patterns, body language and word choice. At the other end of the continuum is the flyer (poster), considered a less rich communication medium. This one-dimensional announcement has few words and little contextual information. The message is terse and simple and interpretation of the message is limited.

Media run the gamut from the richest medium, face-to-face communication, to telephone conversations, emails, video messages, audio tapes, interactive websites and classified ads, down to posted notices, the least rich.