Upward Communication: Impossible Mission?

Communication is central to any manager's overall job. This article examines how organizations can improve their overall communication climate, and in particular, the upward flow of information.

Executive summary

The health of any organization depends on the successful flow of information. While stressing that communication is a two-way process, the author of this article urges managers to identify critical areas, implement new communication approaches and choose appropriate communication styles. Finally, he outlines recommendations for initiating a "loop" system within the company.

Resumen del artículo

La salud de una organización depende de un adecuado flujo de información. Partiendo de que la comunicación es un proceso de ida y vuelta, el autor anima a los directivos a promoverlo identificando las áreas críticas, aplicando nuevos enfoques de comunicación y escogiendo un estilo adecuado. Finalmente, el autor propone algunas recomendaciones para iniciar un sistema de comunicación bautizado como loop (lazo) en la empresa.

Communication: a two-way system

As far back as 1937, Chester Bernard, one of the classic commentators on business, suggested, “In an exhaustive theory of organization, communication would occupy a central place, because the structure, extensiveness, and scope of organizations are almost entirely determined by communication techniques.” Such techniques were, according to Bernard, the “nerve system” of any organization. The centrality of communication to a manager’s overall job cannot be exaggerated. Stan Seashore, one of the earliest organizational specialists, wrote that “...without communication, there could be no sustained organized social life. The health and performance of any social system, whether it be organization, community, family or other such unit, depended upon the ease and certainty of communications.”

But how can we define the subject? The term comes from the Latin “communicare”, which simply means “to make common”. So, the greater the degree of common understanding reached, the more effective the communication has been. Likewise, the term “dialogue” is often used in place of communication, but this term also implies that two parties are involved...
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in the process. The prefix “di” simply means “two”. At no stage were the terms communication and dialogue meant to be interpreted as one-way informative systems.

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Identifying the critical area

Our next point is that many organizational specialists like John Kotter, a leadership specialist at the Harvard Business School, recommend that it is imperative to identify the one area within the organization where the problem is most acute. This is the unit or area that has direct experience of the problem and it is here that solutions must be found. Peter Senge in his book, “The Dance of Change”, speaks about cases where problems are not easily identifiable. In one such case, the manager made a video of a group of disgruntled customers. He then brought the video to the unit in question, and asked the unit to generate possible solutions.

By using this top-down approach to identify the problem and setting up the mechanism, management, on the other hand, sought a bottom-up solution. John Kotter, who advocates this confrontation with facts approach, also maintains that the emotional blockage, which is normal when confronted with failure or problems, can be reduced with such a confrontation. The team or unit can then set about using its expertise to look for a solution while management looks at the organization as a whole.

Expanding the project

While concentrating on this critical unit, a new approach to organizational communications should be gradually introduced across the entire organization using the critical unit as an example. A number of years ago, Timken Corporation of America was confronted with a downturn in sales for the first time in its history. Competitors were producing cheaper and better products than theirs. The company reacted to this crisis by seeking the cooperation of all its employees in its battle
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against foreign competitors. After much trial and error, they eventually set up work groups, which met regularly in order to discuss how their particular unit could contribute and improve product and reduce costs. It resulted in a constant flow of upward information which managers used to help them develop Timken's strategy and policies.

This upward flow of technical information is known as the ‘loop’. The other part of the ‘loop’, consisted of information about the markets, sales and technical difficulties that the company faced, as well as financial news, which was presented to employees for the first time in the history of the company.

**Adopting the right communication style**

It is easy for writers to say that our communication style must be flexible and switch to each occasion. It is also easy for them to say that this occasion is determined by the situation and the amount of time available. But can a manager’s style fit all situations? Probably not, and this may explain why some managers shine in some situations, but in others they cannot cope.

For example, if a crisis situation exists, and there is little time available before creditors foreclose, the communication will have to be emotionally-charged and appeal directly to our audience’s basic emotions, such as fear and lack of security. In times of strikes, we can see this scenario being played out on our T.V. screens: employers, to save their companies, often appeal to the heads of the unions, with the threat of closure and loss of employment, in order to reach a settlement that will satisfy their company’s creditors.

In another type of situation, where a company lacks vision and its employees lack a degree of motivation, a manager may appeal to his people by way of selling them his or her vision of the future of the company. The style needed here will be different again from that mentioned above. It must be optimistic. You must reflect a warm feeling for the future and keep in mind Thomas Jefferson’s famous remark “I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.” Here, a manager depends on the perception others have of him or her, in terms of personal credibility and level of expertise. Indeed, the successful communication of this vision will depend to a great degree on personal charisma.

On the other hand, in more normal circumstances, when some time is available and the situation has more to do with structural change, managers must rely upon reason and rationality rather than his or her charisma or an appeal to emotions. These low-key situations are less emotionally
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charged than our examples above. The often-cited case of SAS Airlines is an example of slow, but programmed change inside a large service-type industry. It calls for a more phlegmatic approach based on detail rather than the extroverted style needed in the examples described above. I feel these situations would be easily recognized by most managers. Indeed, we could say that most situations would probably fall into the last category.

However, the majority of managers cannot deal effectively with all situations. There is a very real difference of style necessary for each of the three communication situations, and it is often difficult to change one’s style to suit a situation. Finally, irrespective of styles, communication is a two-way process. When this principle is ignored, no amount of ability in dealing with ‘style change’ can help in the long run.

Conclusion: back to the basics

Organizations don’t really pay much attention to communication until something happens, until something goes wrong. Dan Cohen, who co-authored “The Heart of Change” with John Kotter, says that communication and change go hand in hand. Change cannot be effectively introduced into an organization without the creation of the ‘loop’, discussed earlier in relation to the Timken Corporation.

However, today, with the introduction of e-mail, many managers are being tempted to use this channel of communication as a management tool in place of face-to-face encounters. This mode of communication has many positive features, especially in the area of spreading information. However, it has serious limitations as a communication tool inside a change situation.

One employee remarked recently in an interview that it is strange to be in constant contact with your manager by e-mail and then to be passed in the corridor sometime later without any form of recognition. No real communication has taken place but merely a transfer of information. Are these the habits that will help an organization when difficult days loom?

So what general recommendations should be followed when setting up the right climate to initiate the “loop” system within organizations? There are four such recommendations:

1. All communication regarding personal matters, policy changes and so forth should be communicated personally face-to-face with all personnel.

2. Instead of calling all the employees to the auditorium, managers should “walk around”, and spend time with their employees. Here is the opportunity to ask people about problems they face, and how they feel these problems can be solved. It becomes a source for new ideas for managers.

3. Supervisors should use employee group meetings to identify problems and possible solutions. The technical information received during these encounters, then, can flow upwards to help management plan their strategy.

4. Group success must always be celebrated in a way that reinforces its positive identification and its vital role in the organization.

As we noted at the beginning, perception is all-important in the communication process. Therefore, managers should ensure that common ground based on a common purpose always exists. It is only when employees perceive that this common ground exists and is adhered to that effective upward communication free from fear and insecurity can occur within the organization. Perhaps the best way to end is to consider Buchanan and Huczynsksi, the organizational specialists, remark: “Our communication depends, to a large extent, on how we perceive those around us, their motives and their intentions, and how we perceive or interpret the communication we receive from them.”