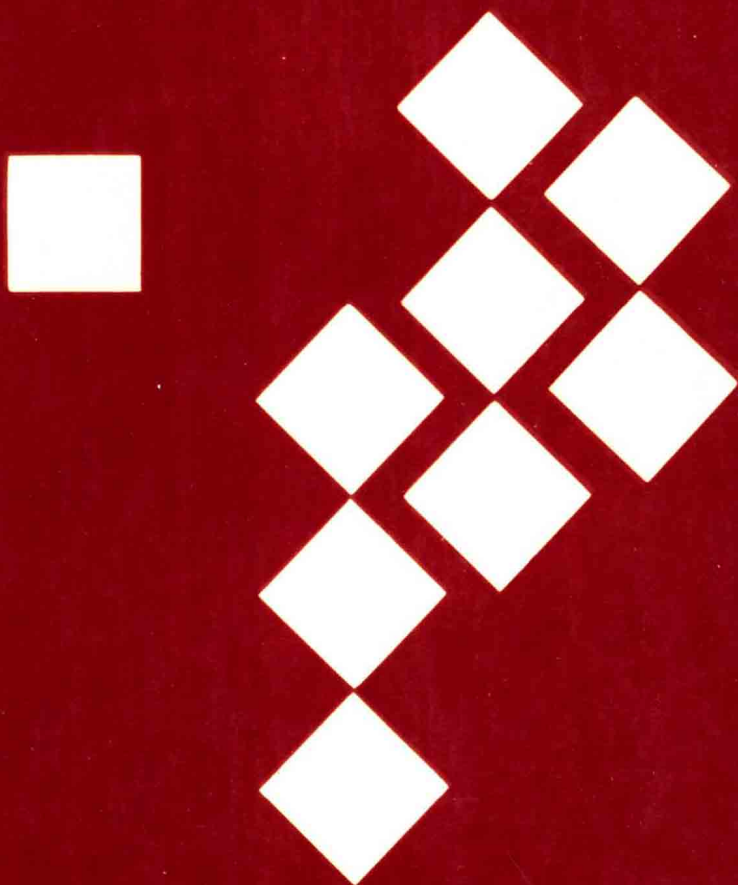


Improving Communication in the Library



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Improving Communication in the Library

by Barbara Conroy and
Barbara Schindler Jones



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The rare Arabian Oryx is believed to have inspired the myth of the unicorn. This desert antelope became virtually extinct in the early 1960s. At that time several groups of international conservationists arranged to have 9 animals sent to the Phoenix Zoo to be the nucleus of a captive breeding herd. Today the Oryx population is over 400, and herds have been returned to reserves in Israel, Jordan, and Oman.

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Preface

People everywhere struggle to improve their communication, knowing it is their lifeline to personal and professional success. Yet there is a special group of people, for whom this book is written, whose effective or ineffective communication affects ever-widening circles of other people and organizations. That group of people is librarians.

As librarians and library organizations ask for our consulting and training help, we are often told about a variety of communication problems. As we try to help solve these problems, it seems to us that librarians need to know more about *organizational* communication, and library directors need help in organizing and managing a *system* of organizational communication. Although “communication” is a frequent topic of discussion, of articles, and an occasional book, organizational communication is not included in most library school curricula, and rarely do staff development or continuing education programs include it. Consequently, little is available in library literature about organizational communication.

That is why *Improving Communication in the Library* has an organizational communication emphasis in which we look at channels and media and how messages move from unit to unit and level to level. Since interpersonal communication is obviously a part of the overall system, its important aspects are addressed as well. The main perspective we focus on is that of the library director or manager, yet the book is useful to all library staff because everyone in the organization contributes to and shares responsibility for organizational communication. When library personnel at all levels better understand how information, communication, and decision making interrelate and improve their communication skills, the library’s overall effectiveness will be greatly enhanced, to the ultimate benefit of those they serve.

Throughout the book we have used the term “library” to refer to all types of libraries: public, academic and special libraries, and media centers. The book is also applicable to the growing number of information brokers and data specialists who work for business, industrial, educational, or non-profit organizations on a consulting basis or as permanent employees.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Improving Communication in the Library has three major sections. Part I, "Organizational Communication in Libraries," introduces concepts that are used throughout the book, relating them specifically to internal and external communication in and from libraries and to the special problems of library managers. Part II, "People Working and Communicating Together," delineates specific communication skills required for interpersonal and group communication, and how they can be improved. Part III, "Communication and Change," prepares the librarian for the inevitable changes ahead, especially those brought about by our society's shift from an industrial to an information base.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the many librarians and library organizations whose concerns stimulated the writing of this book and especially those who so willingly gave ideas, insights, and suggestions. Their "real world" examples give depth and practicality to this book's content. For the first time in our experience, we do not have anyone to thank for typing the manuscript since the entire book was composed on our personal microcomputers, with the finished product transmitted directly to the publisher on disks. We find the symbolism as well as the reality of this new process particularly appropriate for a book about communicating in the information age.

*Barbara Conroy
Barbara Schindler Jones*

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Part I
Organizational
Communication in
Libraries

Introduction

Organizational communication, as we use it in Parts I and II of this book, refers to a *human information system*, as opposed to the mechanical linkages provided by telephones and computers. This human information system contains both formal and informal channels for moving messages from unit to unit and level to level; words travel up, down, and laterally throughout the entire organization. Although there is obviously some overlap with interpersonal communication, the focus of organizational communication is more on the system itself and how it works than on person-to-person communication.

Designing and maintaining organizational communication has been called management's toughest job, yet it is apt to be handled more by default than by design. Top-level managers seldom involve themselves in the communication process as such; what's more, it is a rare library manager who understands the complexity of communication or who takes a "systems approach" in developing the library's communication patterns. Some large organizations have a "Director of Communication," but this person is seldom concerned with the organization's communication system. Rather, s/he is more apt to be involved with internal communication, such as with the organization's newsletters, or with external communication, such as with public relations and press releases.

Looking at a *system* of communication, as opposed to looking at specific memos or meetings, enables us to see that organizational design and consequent communication patterns vary according to scope and mission. What works in a hospital may fail in a bank; what works in one library may fail in another. Circumstances and ever-changing situations also affect an organization's communication system over time. Flexibility and adaptability are keys to developing an effective system.

THE CASE FOR MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Letting communication within an organization “just happen” is not enough. Managers who follow a trickle-down theory (“We don’t have to tell them—they’ll find out through the grapevine”) have abandoned their responsibilities. To be effective, organizational communication needs to be planned for, designed, executed, and evaluated. It needs to be purposeful, not inadvertent.

As Swartz wrote, “The ‘information-sharing’ level in an institution is a barometer of management’s effectiveness with the staff. The cry of ‘bad communications’ comes only when the administrator is out of touch with the organization.”¹

Like water, communication will flow downhill on the path of least resistance. Planned communication, on the other hand, uses dams, channels, hydroelectric plants, as well as flood and drought control, to ensure that information gets to where it is needed and, at the same time, is diverted from places where it is not.

One of the most powerful skills the library manager can develop is the ability to communicate explicit information in the form that it is needed, at the time that it is needed, and without information overload. The manager with this skill doesn’t just send out a memo and then sit back, confident that s/he has “communicated.” This library manager checks to see if the message was read, and, if so, if it was clear, understood, believed, assimilated, accepted, and acted upon. And, if there was a problem with any of these aspects, this manager doesn’t blame the recipient or “semantics.” Instead, s/he immediately sets to work to correct and improve future transactions. Communication management is a task the manager cannot delegate.

A second equally powerful and equally important skill that a library manager needs in order to manage the library’s organizational communication is the ability to obtain, as well as transmit, accurate and timely messages. Without this skill, the manager is cut off from data that are vitally important for decision making; at best, s/he will be forced to make decisions based on second- or thirdhand information.

A key point to remember is that effective organizational communication cannot be managed only by the people at the top of the organizational chart. Everyone in the organization has a stake in seeing that all of the other staff members get the information they need to do their jobs. When a system is being managed, all employees can and should be aware of how messages are sent and received and should be constantly on the lookout for ways to improve the system.

Part I explores those key roots of basic communication theory that apply to the library world. Examples show how both internal and external communication work in a variety of library situations, as

well as their vital importance to the successful functioning of both managers and staff.

Chapter 1 lays the general groundwork for what is ahead. It highlights basic concepts and theoretical constructs for what occurs in communication generally and in organizational communication specifically.

Chapter 2 discusses the principal kinds and purposes of internal communication (messages that flow between levels, groups, and individuals within the library) and external communication (messages that flow between the library and its various publics).

Chapter 3 looks at organizational communication from a manager's perspective. Although everyone in the organization has responsibility for effective communication, managers have the overall authority for planning, managing, and evaluating all aspects of the communication that occur within or emanate from their organizations.

NOTE

1. Roderick G. Swartz, "Communications," in *Local Public Library Administration*, 2d. ed., ed. Ellen Altman (Chicago: American Library Association, 1980), p. 97.

Chapter 1

How Communication Occurs

Every living creature communicates. As human beings, we spend our lives surrounded by communication signs, signals, acts, and transactions. Messages abound. But not all messages are understood or consciously received. Not all messages are sent intentionally and many get “lost” en route. We know that most “people” problems can be traced in part or in full to poor communication, a “breakdown” in communication, or no communication at all. Human interaction succeeds or fails as a direct function of our ability to communicate. On the one hand, because every person communicates, it may seem unnecessary to define and explain the process. On the other hand, we seldom take time to wonder what actually happens when we try to transfer information, thoughts, and feelings even though giving and receiving all types of communication is such an integral (although largely subconscious) part of our lives. Our ability to communicate is so often taken for granted that we neglect to check for understanding; instead, we assume that we both understand and are understood in all instances.

Because the subject of communication is so broad and is interpreted in a variety of ways, we feel the need to select certain definitions and theoretical concepts that are particularly meaningful, in order to build a foundation for the rest of the book. It is our intention to extract the key concepts that most people could profit from understanding as well as those that apply most directly to the communication of librarians in all phases of their work. The following definitions and theories, therefore, are deliberately basic and introductory; they are not exhaustive in any sense. We hope that what is presented will stimulate the desire to learn more and motivate readers to do additional study on their own.

DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNICATION

Countless people from a variety of fields and disciplines have attempted to define communication. Some have given up after trying fruitlessly to encompass all potential variables. Others have given up when they realize that defining communication is difficult because it is not a finite product but a process. It is a dynamic, flowing, ever-changing phenomenon. Trying to understand communication is similar to trying to understand what a river is like by dipping out a bucket of water and studying it. In order to analyze or define communication, we must stop the very process that is its essence.

A broad, but useful, definition of communication as a whole is *all the procedures by which one mind affects another*.¹ Other acceptable definitions emphasize the *exchange* or *sharing* of information and the meeting of minds to achieve shared meanings that bring about *mutual understanding*.

Whenever we communicate, we deal with both content (the concept or attitude or emotion we wish to share) and process (how we try to transmit our message as well as the response we get or do not get). The person who believes that finding the right word or groups of words is the key to good communication misses the point of the importance of process. Putting the whole emphasis on content ignores two important factors—that (1) communication is an uncertain process because people make decisions that affect the outcome of any communication attempt and (2) messages may come from the outside (a speaker, a memo, or a television screen) but the meaning of those messages comes from within the person. Although messages can be transferred, meanings cannot. They are our own.

TWO MAJOR COMMUNICATION MODELS

Models are useful devices to illustrate what happens in the communication process. The two most frequently cited models are the linear and the cybernetic.

The Linear Model

Dating back to Aristotle, students of communication have used a static, linear model to describe how a message gets from its sender to its receiver. The components of the linear model that are usually identified are listed here. Each component has a vital role to play to ensure effective communication.

- Source: the individual, group, or organization that formulates a message (the encoder).

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- **Message:** the stimulus produced by a source (anything has the potential of becoming a message).
- **Channel:** the means of transporting the message from the source to the receiver.
- **Receiver:** the person who gets, interprets, and reacts to a message (the decoder).

The Cybernetic Model

Norbert Wiener² is usually credited with developing the cybernetic model, which introduced the element of communication's effect, or as we identify it today, *feedback*. What happens as a result of the message? How does the message affect both the sender and the receiver? While the linear model places heavy emphasis on message construction, the cybernetic model adds the element of an adaptive control mechanism which makes the system dynamic and interactive. Following are two examples of the control mechanism at work.

A common illustration of the cybernetic system is the relationship between a thermostat and a furnace. The thermostat's message (temperature) "tells" the furnace to start producing heat; the heat produced "tells" the thermostat to change its temperature reading. Similarly, in the communication process, feedback to the sender permits the sender to change, improve, or correct the original message.

Another illustration in human terms is demonstrated by a crying baby. At first, new parents must rely on trial and error to interpret the meaning or need expressed by the crying, but it isn't long before parents can distinguish between different kinds of cries and adapt their behavior accordingly.

TWO MAJOR COMMUNICATION THEORIES

System Theory

Ludwig von Bertalanffy³ and others designed the system theory. Among the theory's important tenets is that of *wholeness*. A system can be defined as an assemblage or combination of things or parts forming a complex or unitary whole, and the task of the systems analyst is discovering how the parts of a system are organized into the whole. Another tenet of systems theory is that of *structure*. Structure can be defined as sequences of communicative and other behaviors that are relatively constant and, to a certain extent, somewhat predictable, at least to members of the system.

When people comment that communication is the glue that holds organizations together, they are referring to system theory. System theory affirms the dynamic nature of communication. It takes into account the many organizational components and examines how they interact with one another. The key premise is that altering any single element or relationship will affect other elements and, thus, the whole.

Different disciplines have applied system theory in different ways. Communication specialists define a system as an identifiable social grouping in which individuals use communicative behaviors to form relationships and tie the group together. This definition, therefore, can encompass any group of people who live, work, or play together or who have some other reason to interact as a group. In library terms, a system can be anything from two people working together in the cataloging department to an entire network of libraries within a specific geographical area.

Information Theory

Information theory can be traced back to the study of electronic or machine-produced signals. From this background came the work of Claude E. Shannon⁴ and others and the development of a mathematical theory of communication. Their focus is on message units (whatever could be measured and programed into a machine), not on message quality or the many variables that human beings can add to the system. As McGarry points out:

One has to be clear at the outset that information theory is not a theory of information in the same sense that the term is used by the social scientist or the librarian; although there are many important comparisons which may be used, both to clarify the human communication process and the social function of librarianship.⁵

A key concept of information theory is *entropy*, which refers to randomness or unpredictability. Shannon and Weaver wrote that "information refers to knowledge that one does not have about what is coming next in a sequence of symbols."⁶ Both order and redundancy are needed to reduce uncertainty. In his book *Grammatical Man*, Jeremy Campbell uses a library analogy to clarify the concept of entropy in different systems.⁷ Campbell describes how a patron would try to find a copy of *War and Peace* in three libraries as follows: (1) in the first, each book has a unique catalog number and the book is in the fiction shelves, which are arranged in alphabetical order by the author's last name; (2) in the second, books are arranged on the shelves by the color of their bindings; and (3) in the third, the books are strewn at random on any shelf. In the first library, there is only one possible place that *War and Peace* could be arranged in relation to the other books. The order of the library provides the

borrower with information, and uncertainty is low. In the second library, if the patron knows the color of the binding is red, s/he can go to the red section. The potential book borrower has less information about the order of the system and thus, s/he has more uncertainty. In the third library, the patron knows only that the book could be anywhere in the building and, therefore, his/her uncertainty is high.

The degree to which information eliminates ambiguity or confusion or the number of alternative possibilities reduces the information's entropy. High entropy means lack of knowledge and thus, uncertainty; low entropy means knowledge about the system exists and some degree of uncertainty has been removed.

Another example of entropy would be what happens when you have made arrangements to give a visiting dignitary a tour of your library, but on the scheduled day you receive a telegram saying, "Sorry. Missed 8 a.m. flight." Now you are confused. Is the person coming later? At all? What day? What time? Should you make duplicate arrangements? Very few alternatives were eliminated by the telegram. A far better message, which would eliminate most of the alternatives, would have been, "Sorry, arriving later than planned. Please reschedule tour for 3 p.m. today."

Since information theory developed as an engineer's model or as a control system, it includes the concept of "noise" or interference, such as the rustling of papers or static on the television. It also includes the concept that *redundancy* can be used to reduce errors. In this context, redundancy means more than just saying the same thing over again. Languages provide redundancy through their rules of syntax. For example, in English a pronoun must agree with its noun in gender, number, and case. People who know this rule can deduce the gender, number, and case of a noun even if some interference garbled the message.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Whenever people gather in work or social settings, they develop interpersonal relationships that help them accomplish their objectives; they are said to have formed an organization. Organizations are primarily communication networks that vary according to the organization's size, scope, and function. Those who study organizations usually view them from one of four perspectives: (1) the classical theory, where the emphasis is on the shape of the formal organization to illustrate divisions of labor, functional differences, and spans of control; (2) the human relations model, which adds such human aspects as motivation and morale; (3) the social system or open systems school, which recognizes that all parts affect the whole and that the organization is influenced by factors outside as well as within

the system; and (4) the industrial humanism perspective, which identifies participative management as the best way for an organization to survive in times of rapid change.⁸ Although it is useful to understand these organizational perspectives, we need to remember that the distinctions between them may be rather arbitrary and there may be some overlap.

Despite the temptation to think of organizations as abstractions and to picture them as a pyramid of labeled boxes drawn on an official chart, we should focus on the fact that *organizations are people*—individual human beings linked together by communication. People, not labels or boxes, make organizations work, and they do so largely through communicating.

Why should organizational communication be a concern to a library or a library system? Because communication directly affects productivity, efficiency, morale, turnover, and public image, and because it is the primary means of accomplishing the work of the library: service to its patrons.

Networks and Systems

The arrangement or pattern of communication channels among the members of a group is known as a communication network (not to be confused with the grouping of libraries into a library network). An organization is, in its entirety, a communication network. Larger organizations are made up of many overlapping and integrating networks, which together make up the total organizational communication system.

People act as network nodes or magnetic centrals toward which messages are drawn and from which they emanate. Depending upon the individual's function, status, ability, and personality, some network nodes are more active and have a greater voice in the organization's operation than other nodes on the periphery. Traditionally, the "low one on the totem pole" may receive many messages but is permitted to initiate very few.

Communication networks in small groups can be delineated by observing the direction of message flow. In the principal patterns that are identified here (mainly through small group research), form not only follows function, but it is also reflective of leadership style.

Depending upon the size and objectives of the group, these different patterns have their places and purposes. The significance of understanding the variations is that group performance and individual satisfaction are affected by each person's centrality and access to the information necessary to do his/her job. People whose communication is restricted quickly realize that theirs is a limited position in which passively waiting for information to pass along is the expected and rewarded behavior. By contrast, people who work in an open channel network may be frustrated by the frequency and length of the