Managing Business Communications

AN APPLIED PROCESS APPROACH

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MANAGING BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

An Applied Process Approach

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PREFACE

Harold Geneen, chief executive and chairman of the board at ITT until his retirement in 1979, opens his book *Managing* with the statement that the blind application of business theories to management will fail to produce the desired results even though the theories are quite sound. Managers cannot run companies according to set formulas, charts, and theories, simply because businesses are complex and fluid entities which defy pigeonholing. According to Geneen, the good manager manages just as the good cook cooks on a wood burning stove. When the cook cannot control all the elements, such as heat, that affect his product, he keeps a careful eye on the pot and alters his methods according to the circumstances. Geneen acknowledges, however, that theory, experience, and common sense all work together to aid the cook/manager in determining what kinds of adjustments must be made to the pot.

We have used the Geneen "theory" of management in our approach to business communications in this book. As a result, we do not supply formulas for writing and speaking. Formulas assume that organizations communicate for a limited number of reasons, that all audiences have the same needs, and that communication always takes place in identical contexts or situations, assumptions that are decidedly false. Because the circumstances surrounding each communication are unique, each communication must also be unique. In short, effective communication requires thought and the careful assessment of the circumstances surrounding the communication, not the blind application of rules or formulas. The best communicators understand the ways in which language, people, and organizations work and use this knowledge to develop strategies for each communication. Like the cook, they keep their eyes on the pot and adjust their strategies to meet the current demands of the situation.

To help you develop this kind of understanding, this book focuses on the process of effective communication design rather than on the types of business communications used in business and industry. Units I and II provide an overview of communication theory drawn from studies in areas as diverse as rhetoric, speech, management, organizational behavior, and psychology. Units III and IV expand on these concepts and show how you can apply them to writing and speaking tasks in organizations. Unit III introduces you to the three major rhetorical patterns arranged in order of increasing difficulty: information or exposition, persuasion, and argument. Unit IV builds on these skills by applying them to more complex issues and more complex audiences.

Although each chapter builds on the chapters that precede it, each chapter is cross referenced for your convenience. For example, if you wish to write a complex report, you might immediately turn to Chapter 14, *Structuring Reports for Limited and Multiple Audiences.* There you will find references to Chapter 10, *Writing to Argue,* which contains additional helpful information on report writing. If your reading of the overview of the writing process in Chapter 4 sparks your interest in illustrations, you are referred to Chapter 6, *Illustrations for Information and Persuasion.* Although the book is designed to be read from Chapter 1 through Chapter 16, these cross references allow you to begin your study of the communication process from any point in the text.

Because this book focuses on the communication process, we have not attempted to break down the kinds of writing and speaking that business people use into specific types or genres. Instead we have concentrated on the purposes for which these communications are designed. We have chosen this method because many types of letters, memos, and reports, like the businesses in which they are used, defy classification. A progress report, for example, is usually an informative report, telling a supervisor what work has been completed and what work remains to be completed. In some instances, however, it can become a persuasive report if the project is running into unforeseen difficulties or is exceeding budget. It may become an argument if the writer wishes to outline the rationale behind a major conclusion or finding. In complex situations, it may embody all three elements of information, persuasion, and argument. To attempt to explain all the ways in which a progress report could be used and then to repeat the process for all the other kinds of writing and speaking tasks in business would produce a lengthy, repetitive, and unreadable book. By focusing on the communication process, the writer can analyze the needs of his or her own particular situation, purpose, and audience and design a communication to fit those immediate needs.

We realize, however, that general classification by genre can be useful

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to people new to the business world or to people who want a jumping-off place for their thinking. For that reason, we have included a handbook of the most popular types of letters, reports, and memos in Appendix C. This handbook defines types or genres of communciation both descriptively and prescriptively.

For the same reason that we have avoided classifying communication into genre, we have avoided separating oral and written communication into discrete units. Although they are different mediums, writing and speaking share the same rhetorical foundation and the same theoretical background. Moreover, many situations require that oral and written communication be used in tandem. Given these realities, it makes sense to discuss oral and written communication in tandem as well.

In this book, we consider communication—both oral and written—a complex process that takes place in a constantly changing environment. Communicators who understand the process can adapt their communication strategies to meet the needs of this changing environment. Because they can communicate more effectively, they can manage more effectively. We hope that applying the strategies outlined in this book will help you in managing your business communications.

DEDICATION

To Jim Holahan, for keeping it all in perspective.

J. B. W. B.

To Christine and John H. Baker, my parents.

R. B. W.

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CHAPTER 1

WHY STUDY BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS?

Art Buchwald wrote in his column of the boy who visited his father at his office. When asked what his father did, the boy answered, "He sends pieces of paper to other people and they send pieces of paper to him." This is a more accurate description of business than most people realize. Business moves on pieces of paper; no decision is made without ample documentation. Today, that documentation may just as easily be found on a microchip as in a file drawer, but whatever final form the material assumes, it begins as written communication. In 1979, the main plant of Corning Glass produced 22.6 million pieces of correspondence, most in the form of memos and short reports. Each of the twenty thousand people in the field for Aetna Life Insurance writes between twenty and thirty letters per week. According to the most recent estimates, businesses already store 21 trillion pieces of paper and add to that pile 911 million new pieces of paper daily. Attempts to reduce this paper work have been less than satisfactory. For example, the United States government used 616 pages to explain how it will reduce federal paper work.

Then consider how much speaking businessmen and businesswomen do—both formally and informally—in meetings, on the telephone, at the water cooler, over lunch. You can understand, then, why companies value employees who can write and speak effectively. According to the syndicated business columnist Sylvia Porter, "companies single out 'communication skills' ahead of production, financial, or marketing abilities as their most important requirement" when they screen new applicants.

TABLE 1.1 Newly Promoted Executives' Evaluation of Courses as Preparation for Careers in General Management

	Percentage of Respondents Answering	
COURSES	VERY IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT (COMBINED)
Business Communications (oral and written)	71.4	94.1
Finance	64.7	95.6
Accounting	57.9	90.4
Business Policy/Planning	47.7	86.2
Marketing	38.1	81.2
Business Economics/Public Policy	36.5	80.0
Computer/Information Systems	31.7	82.6
Business Law	20.9	47.1
Personnel/Industrial Relations	18.9	64.2
Production/Operations	16.8	60.2
International Business	10.5	52.0
Statistics	10.3	47.9
Advertising/Sales Promotion	8.6	43.2

Source: H. W. Hildebrandt and others, "An Executive Appraisal of Courses Which Best Prepare One for General Management," *The Journal of Business Communication,* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1982), 7.

The higher you move in management, the more important communication skills become. When newly promoted executives were asked to rank thirteen courses of study according to their value in preparing young people for a career in general management, more chose business communications as very important than any other course of study (see Table 1.1).

Communication skills are vital even to those people who deal primarily with numbers. For example, accountants ranked communication skills as more important than even their accounting skills.[1]

Documenting the kinds and amounts of oral communications that managers use becomes difficult because oral communication forms part of almost everything we do. Researchers estimate, however, that over 50 percent of every work day at all management levels is spent in communicating orally about job-related matters.[2] Of this time, only a small fraction is spent in formal situations where the manager speaks from prepared notes. Because writing leaves a permanent record, documenting the kinds and amounts of written communications that managers use is an easier task.

---

[1] Bette Ann Stead, "Content Analysis and Readability Formulas As Applied to the Accounting Principles Board 'Opinions,'" *The Journal of Business Communication,* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1977), 24.

[2] William Whitely, "An Exploratory Study of Managers' Reactions to Properties of Verbal Communication," *Personnel Psychology,* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1984), 41.

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