

Interpersonal Communication in Organizations

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Preface

This began as a fairly straightforward study in management information systems. Interviews and survey data were collected from 400 project engineering personnel and supervisors in a light technology plant on the media, documents, and channels of communication that influenced their decision making. Almost 85% of the influence was attributed to face-to-face interpersonal interaction with co-workers. As a consequence, our focus shifted to interpersonal information transfer. We began to see that although substance was important, the style and credibility of the sender were a key to the impact of a message on a receiver. As a consequence, we have emerged with a book addressing the issue of interpersonal communication in organizational settings.

The book is concerned in particular with verbal communication behavior of managers and the perceptions and impact of such behavior on colleagues, including subordinates, peers, and superiors. Throughout, we have attempted to draw on prior research and have developed a model that is empirically examined in a variety of organizations. The strategy for collecting data from managers and their colleagues has combined a research emphasis with a feedback approach, which has enabled key participating managers to receive feedback concerning how their colleagues view them on specific di-

mensions of communication behavior. Thus, we have attempted to link prior research findings to our own research and at the same time provide an opportunity for learning to individuals who have provided the data reported in this volume.

We hope the book will be of interest to those who design and conduct communication training and to selected managers in various organizational settings. It also should be of use to students of communication in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses.

The effort that went into this book involved support and assistance from numerous sources and individuals during the past few years. Funding for much of the initial data collection and data analysis was made possible through an Office of Naval Research Contract (N0001476-C-0912). Many individuals also assisted us in this effort. Much of the computer analysis was performed at Syracuse University by John DeMarco, Robert McGowan, and Steve Loveless. Manuscript preparation was provided by Ann Goodwin. Finally, our families also deserve recognition for their continued understanding and support.

Interpersonal Communication in Organizations

The concept of interpersonal communication is central to the study of organizations. It refers to the exchange of information, ideas, and feelings between two or more individuals within an organizational context. This process is essential for the functioning of any organization, as it enables members to coordinate their efforts, share resources, and make decisions. Interpersonal communication can occur at various levels, from individual interactions to group dynamics. It is influenced by a variety of factors, including the organizational culture, the nature of the task, and the personalities of the individuals involved. Understanding the complexities of interpersonal communication is crucial for managers and organizational scholars alike, as it provides insights into how organizations can improve their communication processes and foster a more collaborative and effective work environment.

Interpersonal communication is a dynamic process that involves the exchange of information, ideas, and feelings between two or more individuals within an organizational context. This process is essential for the functioning of any organization, as it enables members to coordinate their efforts, share resources, and make decisions. Interpersonal communication can occur at various levels, from individual interactions to group dynamics. It is influenced by a variety of factors, including the organizational culture, the nature of the task, and the personalities of the individuals involved. Understanding the complexities of interpersonal communication is crucial for managers and organizational scholars alike, as it provides insights into how organizations can improve their communication processes and foster a more collaborative and effective work environment.

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Introduction

Evil communications corrupt good manners.
—1 Corinthians, XV, 33

Good, the more
communicated, more abundant grows.
—*Paradise Lost*, Book IV, Line 71

Recognition of communication as the mediator of influence on behavior has been clear to the Gospel authors as well as to Milton. More important to us, however, is that communication is basic to organization. It links the organization's members. It mediates the inputs to the organization from the environment and the outputs from the organization to the environment (Guetzkow, 1965). In effect, it is "the very essence" of organizations (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p. 223). As Barnard (1938) suggested: "In the exhaustive theory of organization, communication would occupy a central place, because the structure, extensiveness, and scope of organization are almost entirely determined by communication techniques [p. 91]."

Despite the universal agreement concerning the importance of communication to organization, an understanding of how it actually operates within organizations remains elusive. Perhaps part of the reason is that communication is a substantive issue in a variety of

widely disparate disciplines, such as sociology, electrical engineering, linguistics, psychology, physiology, mathematics, economics, speech, marketing, and information science. Each discipline adopts its own specific focus, and develops its own terminology and technology—with relatively little attention to other disciplines (Cherry, 1967; Thayer, 1967). Hence, learning from within each discipline is not fully exploited, although some interdisciplinary efforts, such as the application of the mathematics of information theory to the social psychology of communicating within organizations, are illustrative of what may be possible.

A more fundamental problem in studying communication, however, is that it is such a pervasive feature of organizations and thus is hard to isolate as a separate phenomenon for investigation (Porter & Roberts, 1976). As a result, progress toward improving our understanding of the nature and impact of communication within organizations has been slow. The amount of research being done in the area is steadily increasing. Nevertheless, more intensive, empirically based field research is needed.

In this book we concentrate on a particularly vital area—namely, the interpersonal communication of managers—drawing from several disciplines for concepts and techniques, particularly differential psychology, social psychology, sociology, and organizational behavior. More specifically, we examine the impact of differing manager communication styles on the attitudes and behavior of colleagues at work. After reviewing previously developed models and research, we construct a general model, then show how well it describes data we have collected in industry and government agencies. In addition, conditions that promote the effectiveness of different styles of interpersonal communication behavior are considered. In doing so, implications of these results for practicing managers and consultants in their day-to-day work are examined in turn.

Importance of Interpersonal Communication

Our concern with interpersonal communication at the managerial level is based on the view that managerial communication is probably one of the most critical areas of organizational communication in general and that it is the point at which managerial behavior can

izations: controlling, equalitarian, structuring, dynamic, relinquishing, and withdrawal. This list closely parallels frequently cited dimensions of leadership behavior. (We will further examine this important issue in an empirical way in Chapter 8.)

Communication and Information Processing

As the interplay of communication and leadership behavior indicates, it is difficult at best to separate communication from its organizational context and purpose as a discrete focus of attention. Perhaps in partial response to this difficulty, some studies have begun taking a communication and information processing perspective in describing and understanding behavior in organizational contexts (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978; Nadler, 1977; Weick, 1969). Also illustrative of this perspective is the work of Rogers and Agarwala-Rogers (1976), who argue that "the behavior of individuals in organizations is best understood from a communication point of view [p. 3]."

Our approach here is sympathetic to a communication and information processing perspective, and we focus particularly on interpersonal verbal communication. Thus, we will not pay much attention to the preparation of formal written documents or to public speaking before large audiences within an organization or as a representative of an organization in the public arena. Rather, we are concerned with the more operational day-to-day communications between individual managers and their key personal communication links in the work setting (subordinates, peers, and supervisors), who form the primary, most intense network of communication ties for a focal manager in question. This is not say that other aspects of organizational communication are unimportant. However, since so much of a manager's time is spent in interpersonal verbal interaction, it seems reasonable to give this realm our primary attention. Thus, focal managers and verbal interactions in their immediate work settings, both at the dyadic (one-on-one) level and at the focal person's unit level (looking at multiple linkages between a focal person and the key colleagues who make up that person's communication net), constitute the principal focus of attention in this book.

performance. The current state of knowledge in this area, however, is relatively fragmented, especially in terms of understanding specific behaviors that characterize effective interpersonal communication and the contribution that effective interpersonal communication can make to improving individual and organizational performance. We will focus on these issues and propose a framework for understanding the impact of a manager's interpersonal communication behavior in ongoing work organizations. It is hoped that this effort will contribute toward filling some of the gap in understanding that currently exists in this aspect of organizational behavior, and will in turn contribute to the eventual development of a contingency theory of interpersonal organizational communication that would suggest appropriate communication behaviors for given work contexts. In approaching these objectives, however, we must first briefly consider some boundary and definitional issues.

Boundary Issues

One of the major difficulties in studying communication is the ambiguity of the term itself. As Thayer (1967) notes, "communication may or may not be a single phenomenon; but certainly there is no universally accepted 'concept' of communication [p. 70]." Not only is the term ambiguous and multifaceted, but from a behavioral perspective, it appears to get at the essence of most every activity in work organizations. It can either characterize ongoing processes or be viewed as the precursor to individual employee behavior. As an example of the difficulty of drawing boundaries around communication, consider the potential overlap with leadership concerns. Leadership is influence. Influence requires effective communication. Leadership requires effective communication. Despite these connections, there is a surprising dearth of field or laboratory research on the linkages between leadership and communication behavior. Little has been done to describe the specific ways that particular communication styles relate to particular differences in leadership styles, even though, conceptually, various leadership styles have frequently been defined in terms of communication behaviors. Thus, Wofford, Gerloff, and Cummins (1977) suggest six basic styles of communication relevant to organ-

explain and predict organizational behavior is indeed in a state of infancy.

Nevertheless, it is still instructive to briefly consider what we can draw from organization theory to understand communication in organizations. Four categories of organization theory can be distinguished: classical theory; neoclassical, human relations approach; behavioral decision theory; and open systems theory.

CLASSICAL THEORY

Classical organization theory focused primarily on the structure, the division of work, and work units in organizations. Representative of one strand of classical theory was the effort of Taylor (1911), who was especially concerned with “scientific” ways of organizing work so that workers could carry out their assigned responsibilities more efficiently. Management’s role was to establish efficient procedures and regulations that would specify exactly what and how workers were to do their jobs. Rigid adherence to such “scientifically” developed procedures was seen as the key to higher production. Hence, people became extensions of the machinery and technology around them, and the intent was to make them as efficient as possible in working with that machinery. From this point of view, organizational communication might best be seen in terms of a formalized system for relaying messages (commands, instructions, etc.) in a *downward* direction from manager to subordinate with no concern for upward feedback.

A second strand of classical organization theory, led by Fayol (1949), Weber (1947), Mooney and Reiley (1939), and Gulick and Urwick (1937), focused on issues of departmentalization—looking at how to structure the total organization formally into departmental units and subunits to get the job done effectively. Thus, whereas Taylor’s work was directed more at the individual worker level and the physiological determinants of worker efficiency, this second strand, sometimes labeled administrative management theory, paid more attention to the problem of allocating and grouping task activities into work units that in turn could be structurally linked to each other through formalized chains of command. Of primary concern from this perspective was the division of labor, the scalar principle, functional processes, structure, and span of control. To the extent communication was dealt with by these theorists, it was in terms of flowing in the formalized channels that exist in the formal structure of the organization. Emphasis was given to downward communication to deal with issues of authority,