



MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION

BRIDGING
THEORY AND
PRACTICE

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CHARLES E. BECK

MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION

Bridging Theory and Practice

Charles E. Beck

Associate Professor

University of Colorado at Denver

Consultant in Management and Communication

CBI: Communication for Business and Industry



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Preface

Investigations into major disasters often reach findings that include “a failure of communication.” Yes, airline crashes or the Challenger explosion include elements of technological problems, but the underlying fault often lies with “communication,” and especially communication from executives and managers. Although these disasters are the exception rather than the rule, they do highlight the significant role of managerial communication in our society. And by extension, they highlight the need for managers at all levels to improve their communication abilities.

This text emphasizes the extremely close connection between communication and the traditional functions of management. In particular, communication is essential in fulfilling any of the management functions. Additionally, the text recognizes that human communication is complex. We may look for simple answers that will give instant improvement, but the simple answer will not meet the needs. Human communication is not a simple machine process (sender, message, channel, and receiver). Rather, human communication includes many subjective elements, such as assumptions, multiple intentions, views of audience, and differing interpretations by many people. Managers who understand that complexity have a greater likelihood of success.

Improving communication involves learning how it works, then refining skills. This book assumes some basic college-level experience in writing, but it goes beyond the basics so that managers can deliver effective and efficient communication to meet the needs of a specific situation. Learning basic models of communication gives a framework that can work in any situation, and learning efficiency in presenting information will improve the skills.

But for managers, the text goes further. It starts by recognizing that communication is not the message sent but the message received. We have no control over the message received. The “communication breakdown” may come from different interpretations of the same information. And people with different interpretations may not feel comfortable asking for clarification (“Am I the only one who doesn’t get it? I don’t want to look stupid!”). To find out what people understand, managers need to promote open communication. Some “communication breakdowns” come from a defensive climate. Managers may not even realize that their behavior results in closed rather than open communication, and a published *Open Door Policy* will not correct the problem. By understanding their role in the communication climate, managers can prevent the communication breakdown.

Part I of the text describes how communication works, with the first chapter presenting principles of managerial communication that govern the entire text. Chapter 2, dealing with the meanings of words, explains how people determine the meanings that they perceive. As the most theoretical chapter, chapter 3 describes the models of

communication—the Rhetorical Process Model and the Transactional Model—that form the basic frame for the remaining chapters. Although prior students have at first disliked the models in their search for something more simple, they quickly learned how useful the models become.

Part II of the text discusses the basic communication skills in listening, public speaking, writing, and networking. The discussion of listening includes elements of psychology that we use in interpreting information, and the discussion of networks includes how physical space communicates.

Part III moves the discussion into management and leadership, with an extensive discussion of communication climate. Without open communication, managers face a major obstacle both in fulfilling their primary functions and in preventing major disasters—those breakdowns of communication.

Part IV addresses specific types of communication that managers need in motivating people, helping teams function, conducting meetings, and managing conflict.

Part V, the final section, discusses special topics in management communication, including ethics; organizational change for total quality; and relating to the wider community. Communication specialists can help managers in their jobs, especially as downsizing requires people with greater flexibility. The epilogue summarizes the text through the ten principles that originally appeared in the first chapter. The cases permit students to examine complex issues in organizations from a communication perspective.

The appendices provide extended treatment of formats for business communication and editing. Appendix B gives managers alternatives in explaining information—since managers deal with subordinates, supervisors, customers, and suppliers, they need flexibility in explaining issues to diverse audiences. For those interested in greater background theory, Appendix E outlines a more comprehensive model for communication, elaborating the individual, organizational, and societal levels of the model.

In developing this text, I recognize the role of my colleagues over the years who have supported this effort, especially the computer graphics support provided by Christopher Barajas. In addition, I recognize the investment of my family and my wife Betty in supporting this research and writing effort over the years. But I especially recognize the inputs of my students over the years, who helped me rethink my approach to managerial communication. Through numerous workshops in college classrooms and in corporate training sessions, students have applied the techniques to improve their communication ability. With their feedback, I have refined the techniques.

Managers who seek improvement, as well as those who know they are good communicators, can become more effective and efficient. By becoming better communicators, they will also become better managers.

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CHAPTER

1

COMMUNICATION FORMS
THE LIFELINE OF A SYSTEM

SCENARIO

Don Stevens pulls out a memo pad from the top drawer of his desk, ready to jot a quick note to Regina Ignes, one of his new programmers. Don is senior project manager in computer applications for a small but growing software firm. New as a manager, Don wants to keep an informal tone in dealing with his employees. So rather than use company letterhead, Don uses his own notes: a picture of a desk with the legend From the Desk of Don Stevens. On the memo pad, Don writes the following message:



From the Desk of

Don Stevens

Regina,

The next project review is scheduled for Wednesday at 10 A.M.; I think we're in good shape. See you then.

Don

Later that day, Regina Ignes sees the memo in her in basket. She's been waiting to learn the date of the review, so she's relieved to have enough time to prepare. Yet something about the memo catches her attention. Regina was hired directly out of college based on her prior training and the innovative programming methods she used during a corporate internship. A bright and perceptive employee with a sense of humor, Regina sits down to jot a reply to her supervisor:

Dear Desk,

Thanks for the info on the meeting.

Regina

Though she wrote the short reply, Regina never sent it. As a new employee with a sense of humor, she wasn't sure of the political reality. So she put the "real" reply in her drawer and wrote a more conventional note to Don.

This brief interaction actually reveals some important communication concepts:

- Organizations use various communication methods to achieve their goals.
- Communication involves more than the words used in a text.
- Communication is the message *perceived* rather than the message *sent*.
- The sender is often unaware of the *real* message as interpreted by the receiver.
- Managers contribute toward the climate that underlies the variety of communication patterns within an organization.

Issues such as these prompt our analysis of managerial communication, but the From the Desk scenario merely gives us a start. We begin by examining the principles of managerial communication—a set of axioms that underlie the communication process and that govern this text. Then we consider the first principle of managerial communication, organizations as systems, and how this principle relates to management. Finally, the chapter ends by examining Principle 7, communication as the life-line of an organization.

BASIC PRINCIPLES UNDERLIE MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION

Table 1-1 lists the principles that underlie our discussion. In addition to their managerial application, many principles also apply to communication between two individuals in any setting. Everyone communicates from within multiple organizations: family, community, professional associations, religious groups, place of employment, social clubs, volunteer organizations, client with a business, and customer in a store. By understanding how communication functions in an organization, people can become more effective in every organization in which they participate.

Although general principles of communication apply to everyone, the last three issues in Table 1-1 narrow the focus to communication climate. Managers play a more significant role in determining the climate for communication than do other members of the organization. Because managers exert a significant influence, this book focuses on the manager as it discusses the nature of communication. If managers can build on these principles, item 10 in Table 1-1 will result in improved efficiency and effectiveness within organizations. The Don Stevenses of the world will have not only good intentions but also adequate methods for conveying those intentions.

TABLE 1-1 Principles of Managerial Communication

1. Organizations are systems; changes or movements in one part of the system have a ripple effect throughout the system.
2. Communication refers to the message *perceived* rather than to the message *sent* in an organization.
3. People in organizations **cannot NOT communicate**. Even silence communicates organizational attitudes.
4. Communication is a rhetorical process involving status, assumptions, intention, audience, genre, process, product, interpretation, and feedback.
5. Communication is a transactional process involving an exchange of ideas, information, feelings, attitudes, or impressions; the impact of the transaction depends on the sphere of significance that it affects: tactical, strategic, and integral.
6. Communication is a multilevel process involving distinct individuals, the organization, and the wider society.
7. Communication forms the lifeline of an organization, conveying directions, expectations, processes, products, and attitudes.
8. The underlying communication climate in an organization—whether between individuals or between the individual and the organization (i.e., the manager)—fosters either supportive or defensive communication.
9. Supportive communication is open to individuals, fostering growth of both the individual and the organization. Defensive communication is closed, appearing as a threat to individuals and reducing organizational effectiveness.
10. Managers and supervisors have a significant influence on the communication climate within their organizations. By understanding the communication process and its underlying climate, managers can promote effective communication and enhance organizational effectiveness.

A resumption of the scenario described above will help us focus on the first principle: organizations as systems.

On Wednesday at 10 A.M., Regina Ignes entered the meeting room for the project review, confident that all was on track. With plenty of lead time, she was certain that the review would go well and that she wouldn't be blindsided as happened on a previous occasion when she learned of the review meeting at the last minute. After receiving the note From the Desk of Don Stevens, she reviewed her portion of the program, double-checked the computer code, and ran a preliminary test of her part of the broader project. For good measure, she had a copy of the sample run in her briefcase.

Beth Boykin, the information manager, arrived to conduct the review. As Beth asked the four programmers the status up through the third month of the schedule, Regina felt proud and comfortable—she was the only programmer reporting 100% on track. However, her comfort level didn't last all that long. Tom Schwartz from customer relations presented a list of configuration changes from the clients. Until two of the other programmers completed their portions of the changes, Regina wouldn't know exactly how the new configuration would affect her program. In addition, by the time she would finally get their portions, she would be about a week behind in her own tasks. The neat pile of preliminary test reports tucked into her briefcase was apparently a waste

of time, irrelevant in light of the configuration changes and the delay resulting from the other programmers.

A rather discouraged Regina left the meeting. The advance notice and her own preparations produced the same results as no preparation for a hastily called review meeting.

Despite her abilities as a highly efficient programmer, Regina suffers from a common limitation—she does not have total control of a self-contained job position. She is one member of a larger operation where her performance affects others and where their work affects hers. As Principle 1 states,

Organizations are systems; changes or movements in one part of the system have a ripple effect throughout the system.

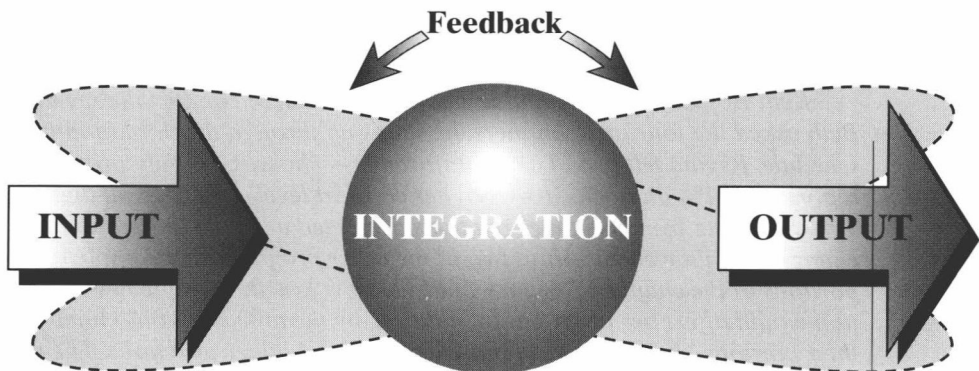
Fulfilling many of her responsibilities depends on the work of people entirely beyond her control. Such is life in a system, where the way each part works (or doesn't work) affects other elements in the system. In the following section, we briefly examine organizations as systems and identify the systems elements. We conclude by examining communication as the lifeline of an organizational system.

ORGANIZATIONS ARE SYSTEMS

A system is the integration of inputs with various processes to produce an output. Although this general description most frequently applies to mechanical processes, it also applies to organizations: small or large, public or private, for profit, or not for profit. Consequently, a systems perspective provides a framework for examining how an organization works. Figure 1-1 contains a simplified model of a basic system.

In Figure 1-1, the flow moves left to right, from input, through integration, to output. From the output, feedback flows back into the system, both as part of integration and as new input. Feedback often occurs as constant and instantaneous, not just a linear response at the end of a process. With feedback, the system can then adapt. For example, a mechanical thermostat will adjust a furnace to turn on based on a low tem-

FIGURE 1-1 The Basic System



perature recording; likewise, people in a conversation may recognize the effect of their words, decisions, and actions, consequently changing their behavior.

Input in the systems model is a singular term but includes many factors: the language and culture of the participants; the roles of individuals, along with their background knowledge and abilities; the structure of the organization; the organization's raw materials and equipment; and the norms and laws of the society.

Integration blends people, organizational structure, technology, and communication patterns. The specific aspects of integration depend on the organization's type, size, complexity, technological level of its equipment, and expertise of its members. The personalities of participants, particularly the managers, affect the integration, as does technology and the training of those who use that technology. In service industries, the attitudes of the participants greatly affect the output—or more precisely, attitudes affect the client and user perceptions of that output.

The *output* phase of this system includes both goods and services. Output ranges from physical products that meet users' needs to cognitive products such as knowledge and information. Economically, output reflects the production of goods and services called the gross domestic product. Although the physical product is tangible and quantifiable, of greatest significance is the cognitive or interpretative product. As Principle 2 states,

Communication refers to the message *perceived* rather than to the message *sent* in an organization.

What the user perceives may have little relationship to the intentions of the initiator. In fact, the producer in a system may not realize that a recipient has a different impression of the output product; and a receiver's propensity to prejudge or misinterpret lies beyond the control of the sending communicator. For example, Coca-Cola's introduction of *New Coke* in the mid-1980s was intended to produce positive reactions among customers; however, the actual customer response soon produced such an outcry that original Coke reappeared as *Coke Classic* while *New Coke* fizzled.

As mentioned above, *feedback* is central to the systems perspective. For management, feedback permits managers to adjust the system based on new information. Feedback may be instantaneous or long term. Conversational feedback occurs immediately, whereas feedback on a written product may come soon after a completed draft. For finished products, feedback may occur months or years later, after product testing, marketing, distribution, and sales when users send back comment sheets. Feedback for a company may be near term (*X* amount of sales this week) or long term (gaining 8 percent in market share over 3 years). Feedback may even be available but ignored. The multiple lines for feedback indicate the variety involved.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS HAVE MANY LEVELS

Building on general systems theory, we can now focus on the elements of organizations as communication systems. Figure 1-2 begins to expand the basic model, adding some details that apply to organizations.

The single input and output now divides into three components: society, organization, and individual. At the widest level, society includes the particular language, laws,