

Communication



Overview

The head of the cataloging department has scheduled a performance review for a beginning cataloger later today. The new cataloger has an unacceptably high error rate, and the department head is contemplating how she can convey the need to improve to the new employee without discouraging him. In the same library, the librarians in the instruction department are discussing the best way to alert faculty and students about a comprehensive new user instruction program that is being implemented next semester. They are especially concerned about the large number of distance-education students and wonder how they can most effectively inform these off-campus users. In the library's administrative suite, the director has just received news from the university president that the library's budget will be cut next year by another 5 percent as a result of a legislative budget reduction. She is concerned about the best way to convey this message to the library's employees, especially to those who have been worried that they might be laid off their jobs if there were another budget cut.

Each of these librarians is confronting a need to communicate information in the most effective manner possible. Although some managerial functions such as budgeting and planning are done only periodically, every manager (and every employee) engages in communication on a daily basis. If there are problems in communication, inevitably there are problems within the organization.

This chapter will provide an overview of organizational communication, looking first at communication as a function within an organization. Types

of communication and ways to promote effective communication will then be discussed. The chapter will close with an overview of conflict and how it can be managed.

Communication is a key ingredient in effective leadership. Since 1938, when Chester Barnard identified the main task of an executive as that of communication, it has been commonly accepted that communication is a critical skill for any manager. Barnard viewed communication as the means by which people in an organization are linked together in order to achieve a central purpose.¹ Most managers spend a large part of their time communicating with other people; some estimates of the percentage of time a manager spends in communication range as high as 95 percent. In his study of managerial behavior, Henry Mintzberg found that most managerial time was spent in verbal communication, on the telephone, and in meetings.²

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

Communication in organizations is more varied today than ever before because so many new communication options are available. Electronic mail, voice mail, cell phones, PDAs, instant messaging, and teleconferencing provide new channels of communication for organizations to use both internally and externally. New forms of communication such as blogging are becoming more and more popular.³ These methods have helped minimize the effects of time and distance, which slow down the communication process. In knowledge organizations, such as libraries and information centers, communication is the lifeblood of the organization. Employees in such organizations are constantly involved in the absorption and dissemination of information and ideas. In fact, sometimes people working in information agencies feel that there is so much communication available through so many channels that it leads to information overload and confusion. Many employees receive more information than they can assimilate and are unable to filter the less important so they can concentrate on what really matters. In addition, with the growing popularity of cell phones and PDAs, some employees are rarely out of range of organizational communication, and there is no longer a clear dividing line between professional and personal communication.

A MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

At first glance, it appears that communication should be simple. We all communicate every day, and we all have been doing it since we learned to talk (actually before we learned to talk). But what at first glance seems simple is actually quite complex. It is a process composed of many factors. A number of models of the communication process have been developed to help explicate it. Although these models vary, they typically include the following components:

- **A source.** This is the sender of the message. The source has some thought, need, or information to communicate.

- **A message.** The source has to encode the message in some form that can be understood by both sender and receiver.
- **The channel.** The channel is the link between the source and the receiver. The message is transmitted over the channel. A channel can take many forms. For instance, a telephone is an example of a channel that can be used to link the source and the receiver.
- **The receiver.** The receiver is the recipient of the message. The receiver has to decode the message for it to be understood.
- **Noise.** Noise is anything that hinders communication. Noise may occur in the source, the message, the channel, or the receiver. For instance, if the receiver cannot understand the message, noise has occurred. This could be because the message contained ambiguous phrases, because there was static on the channel, or because the message was in a language not understood by the receiver. Even the simplest communication is filled with opportunities for noise to occur.
- **Feedback.** After the receiver receives and decodes the message, the receiver can become a source and provide feedback by encoding and sending a message through some channel back to the original source. Feedback is a response to the original message. Feedback is always useful because it allows the original source to know if the message was properly encoded, transmitted, decoded, and understood. It is this feedback loop that is the difference between one-way and two-way communication. One-way communication is almost never as effective as two-way communication because the sender has no way of knowing if the message was received and understood.



Try This!

Remember the telephone game you used to play when you were a child? One person begins with a message and whispers it to the next person until the message has gone around the entire room. Usually, the message that is heard by the last person bears little resemblance to what the first person said. Besides being fun, this activity demonstrates how easily information can become garbled by indirect communication and noise. Try the traditional telephone game with a group, and then try it with a variation. Each person who receives the message is allowed to check with the person transmitting it to be sure they understood correctly. How much more accurate was the second message than the first?

To illustrate this model, imagine a library director wanting to let a department head know about an important meeting. The library director would be the source of the communication. When the library director provided information about the meeting in the form of an e-mail announcement, the e-mail would be the message. The channel employed for the communication would be the library's e-mail system. The receiver is the department head who receives the message and reads

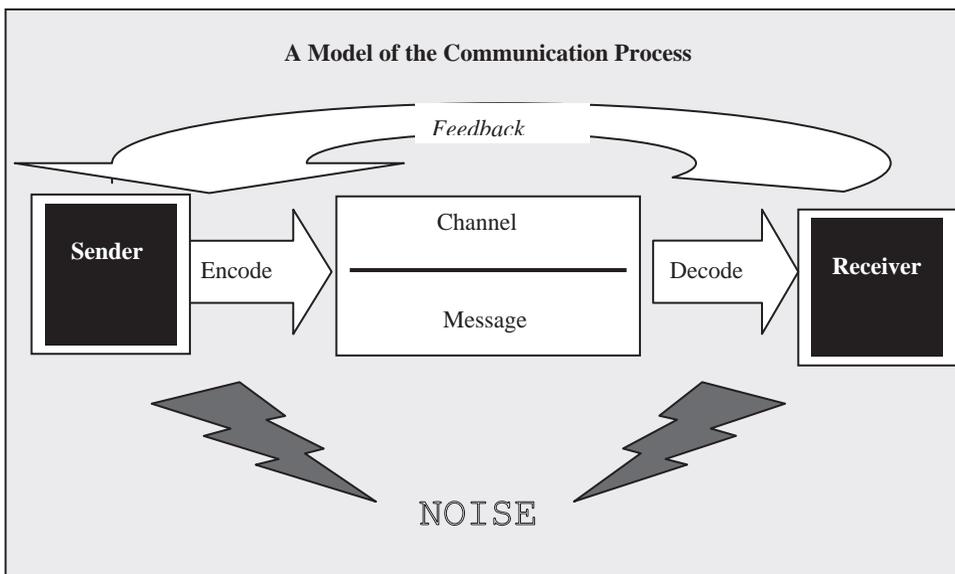
it. If the e-mail system crashes or if the e-mail message goes into the department head's spam filter, that would be noise. The feedback would be the response the department head sends the library director about the meeting. The elements in this simple communication model are illustrated in figure 16.1.

Communication exists in many forms and in many settings. Often, we think of communication primarily in terms of personal communication. However, every organization must have some way to bind its disparate parts if it is to achieve its goals and purposes. Communication provides cohesiveness and direction. As Alex Bavelas and Dermot Barrett state, "It is entirely possible to view an organization as an elaborate system for gathering, evaluating, recombining, and disseminating information.... Communication is not a secondary or derived aspect of an organization—a 'helper' of the other and presumably more basic functions. Rather, it is the essence of organized activity and the basic process out of which all other functions derive."⁴ Communication is so important that Peter Drucker has argued that organizations should not be built around hierarchies but around communication.⁵ Communication is the process that makes it possible to unify organizational activity.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Organizational communication has been defined by Gerald Goldhaber as "the process of creating and exchanging messages within a network of interdependent relationships to cope with environmental uncertainty."⁶ All organizational communication shares certain characteristics. It occurs within a complex, open system that is influenced by and influences its environment; it involves messages and their flow, purpose, direction, and media; and it involves people and their attitudes, feelings, relationships, and skills.⁷

Figure 16.1—A Model of the Communication Process





What Do You Think?

Communication problems are very common in all organizations. It is sometimes said that if we could only communicate better within organizations all our problems would disappear. Do you agree with this statement?

Managers never should assume that all workers will understand the messages communicated. This is especially important to remember as the workforce becomes more diversified. Studies have shown that various ethnic groups and that men and women have different styles of communication. Deborah Tannen studied gender differences in communication and found that men's and women's styles vary greatly. She attributes this to different values assimilated by young girls and boys. Males are taught to prize status, independence, and individual power, but females are taught to value connection, interdependence, and the power of community. These differing values lead men and women to communicate in different ways. The resulting differences in the communication styles of men and women can cause misunderstanding in the workplace.⁸

Different ethnic groups also have different styles of communication. For example, in some cultures, it is considered rude to maintain eye contact with someone while they are speaking. Some cultures encourage interruption. Every communication practice is based on certain cultural rules, and as our workplaces become more diversified, managers need to understand the cultural differences that may affect communication flows. Just because two people share a common language does not mean that they can communicate easily. These differences are often more than linguistic and instead are frequently sociopolitical-attitudinal in nature. Everyone should try to be aware of the cultural biases that may impede his or her communication and interactions with others.⁹

Another barrier that sometimes gets in the way of communication is the use of jargon. Jargon is the specialized language that is developed by individuals in groups, and each profession tends to have its own jargon. That is certainly true of librarianship. Think of all the acronyms and technical terms that are associated with the LIS profession. AACR2, ACRL, ARL, ALA, AASL, ASIS&T, ASCII, ALCS, abstracts, acquisitions, accessions, and authority control are just a few of the ones that begin with the letter *a*. Even within the profession, not every individual understands all of these terms, and when librarians begin to communicate with nonlibrarians, it is not surprising that the nonlibrarians are often completely befuddled. Using the language of the communication model presented earlier, it is easy for anyone who understands the jargon to encode it in a message, but it is much more difficult for receivers to decode if they are not familiar with the jargon. Because jargon has the potential of creating noise, it should be avoided unless it is absolutely certain that the receiver will understand it.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Communication can be classified in three general categories: written, oral, and nonverbal. Each of these types of communication plays a specific role in

organizational communication, and each has certain associated advantages and disadvantages.

Written Communication

Formal channels of command often require written communication. Managers write memos, e-mail messages, letters, reports, directives, and policies. Written communication provides a lasting record and ensures uniformity in matters like policy, but this type of communication often is flawed. Some of these communications may be poorly written, may not fully explain the action desired, or may not completely define the scope of the problem. Employees may be left with ambiguous instructions. Words used in this type of communication are frequently unclear and ill defined, and written communication allows no opportunity for immediate feedback and clarification. Hence, it may take a long time to know if the message has been received and understood.

Many organizations have tried to improve their written communication, especially their communication with customers. Organizations are urged to scrutinize their written communication to “see if they have value-added components and eliminated fillers and gobbledygook that dilute our purpose and waste the recipient’s time.”¹⁰ Electronic mail is a new type of written communication that has become “as common as the sticky note in organizations around the world.”¹¹ Trillions of e-mail messages are sent each year (with recent statistics showing that more than two-thirds of them are spam messages).¹² Organizations of every sort are connecting people to networks that permit the sending of e-mail both internally and externally. E-mail in organizations presents a special set of opportunities and problems. Although e-mail is considered written communication, it is generally not viewed as being as formal as a paper copy of a letter or a memorandum. It is very convenient for the sender, it speeds the delivery of information, and it can be relatively inexpensive in providing wide distribution of messages for little cost.

E-mail presents its own set of communication difficulties, however. It has grown as a method of communication faster than have rules governing its use. There are well-established codes of manners concerning face-to-face or telephone communication. No such niceties exist in the e-mail world where it is “frighteningly easy to get into conflicts and misunderstandings with people” because of the “generally hasty, ill-considered, and uncrafted nature of electronic communication.”¹³ There have been many attempts to codify appropriate Web etiquette (or netiquette, as it is often called). A good source for information on how to avoid offending others with e-mail can be found at the Netiquette Home Page (<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/>).



What Would You Do?

You are a first-line supervisor and it is time for your annual performance appraisal. One issue you would like to address with your boss is your need for timely information. Twice in the last month

you failed to appear at crucial meetings because your boss did not communicate the date and time with you. Then just two weeks ago, your boss neglected to give you a copy of the new vacation/sick leave policy that you were to discuss with your staff in the weekly meeting. You are finding it increasingly difficult to act as a supervisor when you are kept in the dark about the basic policies you are expected to implement.

When you receive your written evaluation, you are astounded to see that your boss has awarded you “Superior” ratings in every category except one. You have been rated as only average in “Effectiveness with Others”—a matter that concerns you because you pride yourself on your ability to get along with others. When you ask your boss for more clarification on this rating, you receive the reply that recently many of the people you supervise have been complaining to your boss saying that you failed to pass on crucial information. Several of your subordinates were especially upset last week when they found out they had filled out their vacation leave requests incorrectly. They stated that you had failed to fulfill your supervisory duty by communicating the new policy to them.

How would you handle this situation?

Users are often surprised to learn that e-mail is not necessarily private or completely destroyed when they press the delete key. Just as organizations usually have policies relating to the use of telephones, fax machines, and mail, there should be policies in place concerning the appropriate use of e-mail and corporate practices toward its retention and preservation.¹⁴ And as with all such policies, these should be shared with employees.

Oral Communication

Oral communication, conducted through individuals or groups, usually is considered to be the richest communication medium, but it also has problems. Not all oral messages are clearly stated. There remains the problem of the ambiguous or misunderstood word. But in oral communication there is opportunity for feedback through which clarification can be accomplished. Face-to-face oral communication also provides an opportunity for nonverbal communication to help amplify a message. Oral communication often is the best way to resolve conflict situations. On the other hand, oral communication can be time consuming, especially when many people need to be told individually about something. And unlike written communication, oral statements are not preserved.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is any type of communication that is not spoken or written. Nonverbal communication often consists of various types of body language, such as facial cues, hand or arm gestures, or posture. Nonverbal

370 Leading

cues also are provided by things such as dress and the positioning of furniture in an office. Nonverbal communication can provide many clues to an observer; as the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Some examples of nonverbal communication include:

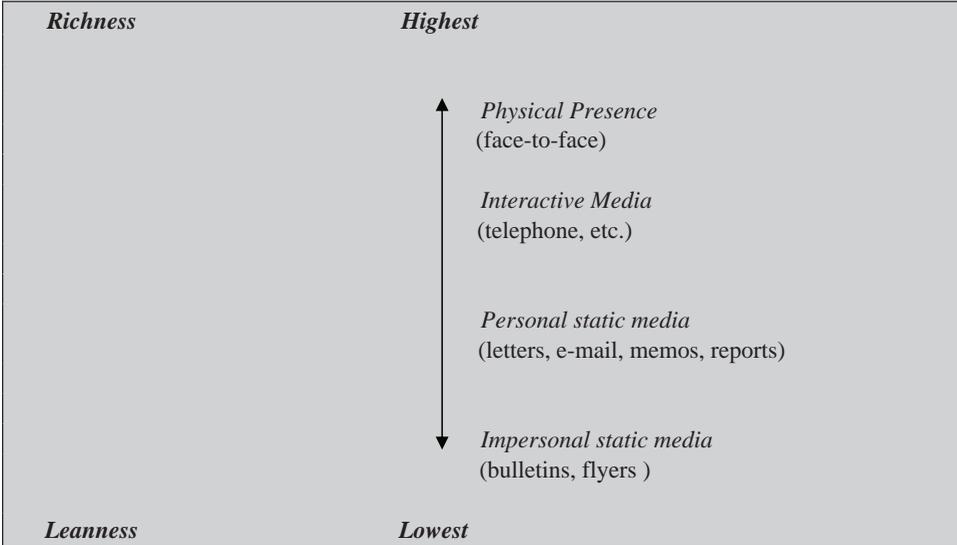
- Avoiding eye contact.
- A steady stare.
- Crossing your arms in front of your chest.
- Sighing.
- Biting your lips.
- Rubbing the back of your head or neck.¹⁵

Nonverbal communication can contradict, supplement, substitute for, or complement verbal communication. A manager must be especially careful that nonverbal signals do not contradict verbal ones. For instance, consider a supervisor who claims to have an open-door policy and who encourages employees to come to him to discuss any problems that they may encounter. Imagine the nonverbal message that is sent if when an employee enters the supervisor's office to discuss a problem, he or she finds that the supervisor continues to work, does not look up, and fails to establish any type of eye contact with that employee. The supervisor's verbal invitation to feel free to come in to discuss problems is contradicted by the powerful nonverbal message encountered when the employee accepts the invitation. Nonverbal behavior, although sometimes overlooked, is vital to the process of communication. Anytime people communicate using non-face-to-face methods such as fax or e-mail, they do not have the benefit of nonverbal communication, and hence misunderstandings sometime occur.

Different types of communication have different advantages and disadvantages. The truly good communicator knows to pick the right communication channel or medium with which to communicate. Different media vary in degree of richness; information richness is defined as the information-carrying capacity of an item of data. A rich medium is one that conveys a great deal of information, whereas a lean medium is one that conveys the bare minimum.¹⁶ Figure 16.2 shows a classification of different types of communication media according to their richness. Face-to-face communication is the richest in terms of information conveyed because it relies on multiple channels (e.g., words, body language, facial gestures) to reinforce the message. In addition, face-to-face communication provides an opportunity for immediate feedback.

According to Robert Lengel and Richard Daft, the most important thing for managers to remember in terms of matching media richness to communication needs is to use richer media for nonroutine messages and to use leaner media for routine, simple messages.¹⁷ Complex, highly important messages should be communicated by information-rich media to be sure that the issues are clearly understood, but it is a waste of time to use information-rich media to convey routine messages. For instance, a supervisor would never want to tell an individual through an e-mail message that he or she was being disciplined, but an e-mail would be perfectly appropriate method to tell a subordinate the dates of a trip out of town.

Figure 16.2—A Classification of Types of Media According to Their Communication Richness



COMMUNICATION FLOWS

Within an organization, communication flows in three directions: down, up, and horizontally. Each of these types of communication will be discussed in the following sections.

Downward Communication

Downward communication, or communication that flows from superiors to subordinates, is the most common type of communication within the organization. The five most common types of downward communication are specific job directives or job instruction; information designed to produce understanding of the task and the relationship to other organizational tasks, or job rationale; information about organizational procedures and practices; feedback to the subordinate about performance; and information of an ideological character to inculcate a sense of mission, or indoctrination of goals.¹⁸

Although employees expect to receive communication from managers, problems often are associated with downward communication in an organization. The first is that organizations rely too heavily on written methods, such as manuals, booklets, e-mail messages, and newsletters to diffuse downward communication, even when personal contact and face-to-face communication might be more effective. Second, many organizations suffer from message overload. Because of the ease of sending messages via e-mail and by photocopied documents, some employees are overburdened with memos, bulletins, letters, announcements, and policy statements. Many employees who are inundated with too many messages respond by not reading any of the communications at all. Communication also can be hampered by poor timing.

Managers should consider the timing of any communication to be sure it is advantageous for both management and employees. Finally, there is always the problem of filtering of information. Because downward communication usually goes through several layers in an organization, messages may be changed, shortened, or lengthened, and some employees may not receive a message at all. For these reasons, downward communication in many organizations is relatively inefficient.¹⁹

Upward Communication

Upward communication consists of messages that flow from subordinates to superiors. Most of these messages ask questions, provide feedback, or make suggestions. An organization that is inhospitable to upward communication inhibits such communication, despite the fact that upward communication is essential to an organization's effectiveness. Even in organizations that pride themselves on their open-door policy, it is not uncommon to find employees who are afraid to take information to their superiors, especially when that information concerns problems or bad news. Employees are more likely to send upward messages that enhance their own status or credibility and are much less likely to send up messages that make them look bad.



What Do You Think?

In many organizations, employees are hesitant to be completely truthful in their communications with their supervisors. Often they do not want to pass along bad news or point out shortcomings. It is the rare organization that is so attuned to its employees and so trusted by them that employees feel comfortable in openly communicating both good and bad news. How can organizations create the type of environment that allows them to get the kind of unfiltered and complete information that is essential for their operations?

Davis points out that it takes a certain amount of courage for workers, especially lower-level workers, to approach their supervisors. "A manager often does not realize how great the upward communication barrier can be especially for blue-collar workers."²⁰ A manager has status and prestige, often talks and dresses differently from lower-status workers, and has more practice in communication skills. The worker is further impeded because he or she is usually not familiar with the work or the responsibilities of the manager. For that reason, there is often little upward communication in an organization unless the manager encourages it.²¹ Managers who want to benefit from the flow of upward communication should be sensitive to the barriers that can be placed in the way of such communications. If managers want to remove some of the barriers, they must be sympathetic listeners and make a practice of encouraging informal contacts with workers. Some methods commonly used to achieve upward communication include grievance procedures, suggestion

systems, focus groups, hotlines, group meetings, opinion surveys, and informal meetings between the manager and workers. In addition, managers should remember that the same sort of filtering and misinterpreting that is found in downward communication is also prevalent in upward communication.



Role-Play a Situation

You are the director of communication at a large public library. You return from your break to find a note on your desk from the library director stating that you should come to the director's office as soon as possible to discuss this year's rewrite of the brochure describing the employee benefits available from the library.

You dread this discussion. The last time you undertook this task, your painstaking arrangements with the printer were countermanded by your boss, who decided at the last minute on doing a revision of your carefully researched and creatively presented brochure. The resulting brochure was a disaster—late, inaccurate, and ugly. To top it all off, your name was on it as editor.

Find a partner. One of you role-play the disgruntled director of communications and the other the library director. Then reverse the roles.

Horizontal Communication

Horizontal communication is the lateral or diagonal exchange of information within an organization; it typically fulfills the following purposes: task coordination, problem solving, information sharing, and conflict resolution. In today's flatter, team-based organizations, horizontal communication is more important than it ever was in the past. This type of communication may occur within or across departments.

Several factors tend to limit horizontal communication within organizations. Information is not always shared in competitive organizations because the employee who possesses the information wants to retain a competitive advantage over others. Specialization also impedes horizontal communication. Most organizations are subdivided into specialized subunits, and members of these subunits may want to further their own subunit's goals rather than communicate with other managers on the same level in order to advance company goals. In addition, excessive specialization may make it difficult for members of one subunit to speak the language of another; even if they were willing to exchange information, they might find it difficult to bridge the horizontal communications gap. Finally, horizontal communication often does not take place because managers have not encouraged frequent horizontal communication nor have they rewarded those who engage in such practices.

Because horizontal communication does not follow the chain of command, precautions must be taken to prevent potential problems. This type of communication should rest on the understanding that these relationships will be

encouraged when they are appropriate, subordinates will refrain from making commitments beyond their authority, and subordinates will keep superiors informed of important interdepartmental activities. Although horizontal communication may create some difficulties, it is essential in most organizations to respond to the needs of a complex and dynamic environment. As organizations grow more dependent on a team approach to work, the importance of lateral communication increases.

Much horizontal flow of information takes place in meetings. Some employees spend a great deal of their time in meetings; often these meetings are frustrating and ineffective because they are poorly planned and conceived. Managers at all levels should try to develop the skills and understanding about how to make meetings successful.²²

CHANGING FLOWS OF COMMUNICATION

There is some indication that new channels of communication, such as e-mail, may be changing the flow of communication within the organization. As John Seely Brown stated, "Email plays quite a different role than it did five years ago. Email has started to erode hierarchical differences. It keeps you more aware of the edge of what's happening in your company. You can sense the heartbeat of the organization when you skim the messages. It's like reading body language."²³

Because it is more informal than a letter and less threatening than face-to-face conversation, some workers send electronic mail not only to workers on their own level but upward in the organization, to immediate supervisors and to managers even higher up in the organizational structure. Some employees are using e-mail messages or Web sites to raise complaints publicly against organizations and their practices.²⁴ As Robert Zmud has stated, "Traditionally, an organization member's zone of influence has been limited by a number of constraints, most of which reflect task design, authority relationships, and physical, geographic, and temporal boundaries. New information technologies are relaxing many, if not most, of these constraints."²⁵ Just as the telephone revolutionized organizational communication, the new communication media will bring vast changes to how employees within organizations communicate with each other and the outside world. There is evidence that effective communication through computer-mediated channels may be a unique skill that needs to be developed and that "even experienced email users will not necessarily be able to communicate richly with a new partner, or about a new topic, or within a new organizational context, without first developing these unique knowledge bases."²⁶ More research needs to be done to discover how new communication media such as e-mail, instant messaging, voice mail, cell phones, and teleconferencing are affecting organizational communication.

Virtual Communication

In today's modern organization, many managers have to communicate with individuals who are not physically present. This type of communication has

become more prevalent in the past few years as the number of telecommuting employees has increased and as more workers are working as parts of virtual teams. A recent report found that 25 percent of U.S. workers work outside of the office at least eight hours a week.²⁷ Communicating with remote workers is a difficult task. Workers who are not on-site are not able to take advantage of communication transmitted through informal chats and body language. Communication with these workers is essential if they are to succeed. Managers need to pay special attention to communication with this type of employees, giving them clear guidance about the expectations for their work and how they will be assessed. It is important for managers to find ways to be accessible to these off-site workers and to communicate with them according to their preferred preferences. Remote work is still uncharted territory for most managers and organizations, but as the number of virtual workers increase, managers will need to become more knowledgeable about how best to communicate with workers who are not physically present on the work site.²⁸

INFORMAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Most of what has been discussed so far concerns the formal communication channels within an organization. These are the message channels that follow the official path directed by the organizational hierarchy. But every organization also has an informal communication system. Two of the most common of these are the grapevine and the activity often referred to as “managing by walking around.” Although informal channels are neither as predictable nor as neatly designed as those of the formal communication structure, they are remarkably efficient at moving information.

The Grapevine

Every organization has an informal communication network commonly termed the *grapevine*. The grapevine “moves upward, downward, and diagonally, within and without chains of command, between workers and managers, and even within and without a company.”²⁹ Studies of the grapevine have shown that this means of communication is fairly accurate, with more than 75 percent of the messages being transmitted correctly.³⁰ In addition, the grapevine is usually much faster at moving information than are formal channels. However, nearly all of the information within the grapevine is undocumented and thus is open to change and interpretation as it moves through the network.

Although the grapevine sometimes can cause trouble, this informal communication channel is endemic in all organizations. Managers are not able to destroy it because it serves an essential human need for information. Given the existence of the grapevine, a manager’s task is to make it contribute to the accomplishment of the organization’s objectives. Managers can do this by using it, either personally or through trusted staff members. It can be very useful in supplementing formal channels. A manager who wants to relay information can feed the grapevine accurate information, which will be transmitted quickly throughout the organization. In addition, managers should be aware

of the messages that circulate on it in order to be able to intercept and correct misleading rumors that could damage morale.

The grapevine can be curtailed somewhat by clear, concise, timely, and complete communication through formal communication channels. Rumors often arise because workers are anxious about some situation about which they have received little or no information. Fewer rumors would circulate on the grapevine if managers would provide sufficient information about issues of interest and concern to workers.



What Would You Do?

“What do we do now?” wondered Ann, Lee, and Thomas. It had been two months since the meeting with their supervisor, Phyllis, and nothing had changed: Communication was poor, morale was low, and defenses were up. Even the student assistants were beginning to notice the tension between their supervisors and Phyllis. Although Ann, Thomas, and Lee each had noticed the lack of communication from Phyllis because they worked in different departments, they did not have the opportunity to compare notes. And then David, the circulation supervisor, was fired, suddenly and abruptly. When Ann reported to work that afternoon, David’s desk was cleared and he was gone. Ann sought out Phyllis for confirmation. Phyllis acknowledged David’s being fired, gave no additional information, but told Ann that because there was a job freeze, David’s position could not be filled until and unless the freeze was lifted, and that until that happened, it would be up to Ann to “work things out.” Ann, Thomas, and Lee began to share observations, and what they realized was that David’s firing was merely an extreme example of what had been taking place since Phyllis had arrived. There had been no memos, no staff meetings, and no briefings in spite of the fact that plans for a library expansion were underway, the job freeze had affected library hours and staff, and that personnel were generally confused and becoming frustrated.

What is the problem here? If you were an employee in this library, what would you do? (For the rest of this case study, see <http://www.lu.com/management>.)

Managing by Walking Around

Another good way for managers to supplement information received from formal channels of communication is for the managers to get out of their offices, walk around the organization, and spend some time with employees. This means of ensuring informal communication is usually referred to as *managing by walking around*, or MBWA. Just as managers should be aware of

what is being circulated on the grapevine, they also should be aware of what is going on in parts of the organization away from their offices.

Managers need to make themselves visible and to spend time getting a general feel for what is going on throughout the organization. The best managers spend a part of their time visiting employees in their work locations. Whether it is walking through the catalog department, visiting the mail room, or talking to shelvers as they do their job, a manager finds out things about the library that he or she would never know without emerging from the office on a periodic basis. Most workers are flattered when top administrators come to their work area and speak with them. It makes them feel significant. As Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones have written, "Followers will give their hearts and souls to authority figures who say, 'You really matter,' no matter how small the followers' contributions may be."³¹ The most highly regarded managers are those who are able to communicate to their employees that they are interested in them and in what they are doing. MBWA is a proven way to allow managers and workers to communicate on an informal basis, and because it is done on the employee's turf instead of in the manager's office, it provides a different dimension to organizational communication.

In summary, both formal and informal communication is critical to organizations. Managers should pay close attention to the communication within an organization in an attempt to make it as open and free from distortion as possible. Managers always should be trying to improve their communication skills. Twenty tips for good communication can be seen in table 16.1.

CONFLICT

One of the common results of poor communication is conflict. Conflict situations often arise from problems in communication. One person may misunderstand another. Someone may have said something that he or she really did not mean to say. Or someone may have missed a message that was supposed to be sent. Communication or miscommunication often leads to conflict. Then once conflict exists, people cease to talk to one another, which exacerbates the conflict. Good communication skills are an important part of preventing and resolving conflicts.

Some managers will do almost anything to try to avoid conflicts within the units they manage. Some even feel that the mere existence of conflict is a reflection of their ability to manage. This is not so. Conflict is not bad in itself, and it may result in either positive or negative outcomes. Although uncontrolled conflict can be detrimental to an organization and its employees, properly managed conflict often can be helpful.

Managers who feel that they spend a great deal of time trying to resolve conflict situations are probably correct. One study showed that managers reported spending up to 20 percent of their time dealing with conflict and its impact.³² Another study showed that 42 percent of a manager's time is spent on reaching agreement with others after conflicts occur.³³

Conflict usually is characterized as being interpersonal or intergroup. Interpersonal conflict, conflict between two people, is often the result of

TABLE 16.1 Twenty Ways to Communicate with Your Employees

1. Include affected employees in goal setting.
2. Give frequent and meaningful recognition for a job well done.
3. Interact with employees on an informal basis.
4. Go to employees' work areas. Meet them on their own turf.
5. Ask for workers' opinions and listen with an open mind. Try to understand their points of view.
6. Share nonconfidential information with employees and ask for their input.
7. Offset demoralizing actions and events by emphasizing what went well, and use the experience as a learning opportunity.
8. Listen 80% of the time and talk 20%.
9. Ask employees what rumors they have heard, and address them.
10. Get into the trenches with employees. Look for opportunities to understand employees' jobs better.
11. Give information to employees after management meetings.
12. Ask employees, "Have I made our vision, mission, and goals clear and understandable?"
13. Ask employees, "What can I do to help you with your job, and what am I doing that gets in your way?"
14. Ask employees, "What is making our clients/customers the most and/or the least satisfied?"
15. Praise in public and give feedback in private.
16. Find something to like about each staff member with whom you work.
17. Actively make a point of speaking to all employees whom you see in a day.
18. Build bridges with people with whom you are uncomfortable.
19. Set goals each month on ways to accomplish "Managing by Walking Around."
20. Occasionally have lunch with staff members. Use this as an opportunity to build trust.

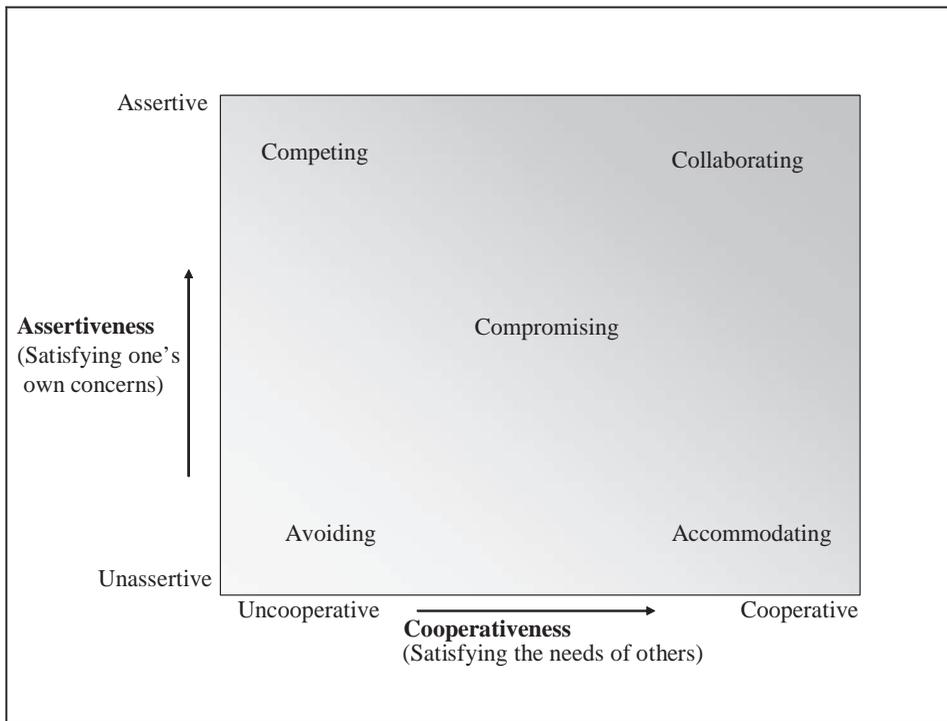
Source: Adapted from Robin Reid, "A Checklist for Managers" (1999), <http://www.improve.org/mbwa.html>.

incompatible personalities or different values or points of view. Intergroup conflict, conflict between groups of employees, can be caused by a number of factors within organizations and often arises as a result of competition over scarce resources. Both interpersonal and intergroup conflicts often are heightened by poor communication.

People react to conflict situations in different ways. Research has identified five primary styles of handling conflict: avoiding, compromising, competing, accommodating, and collaborating. Avoiders try to prevent conflict; usually they suppress their feelings and withdraw from conflict situations. Compromisers try to seek a solution that satisfies both parties; they are willing to split differences down the middle. Competitors seek to dominate and impose their viewpoints. Accommodators almost always give in to opposition and acquiesce to the demands of others. Collaborators try to work to find a mutually satisfactory outcome for all parties.³⁴ These approaches are affected by how assertive and how cooperative individuals are. These different styles are illustrated in figure 16.3; although the figure shows five discrete positions, it is possible for an individual's orientation on conflict to fall anywhere on the diagram.

Of the five styles, the collaborative one is generally considered best because it leads to a result that is usually described as a win-win outcome. This type of outcome occurs when all parties perceive that they have emerged from the conflict in a better position than before. For instance, if two employees were in conflict about the scheduling of weekend and evening hours, it is possible that you might end up with a win-win situation if you discovered that one really did not mind working weekend hours, and the other really did not mind working

Figure 16.3—Five Styles of Handling Conflict



Source: Kenneth W. Thomas, "Conflict and Conflict Management," in *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, ed. Marvin D. Dunnette (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976), 889–936.

evenings, and thus you were able to arrange their schedules to conform with their preferences. Although win-win solutions are not possible in all cases, managers who are skilled as negotiators often are able to deal effectively with conflict by arriving at solutions that make all parties feel that they have come out ahead.

Results of Conflict

Organizational conflict can have both negative and positive effects. The more negative effects are usually thought of first. Working in an environment with a great deal of conflict can lead to stress and divert employees' attention from the work that has to be done. The morale of employees often suffers, as well as their motivation to perform well. In cases of extreme conflict, workers have been known to disparage or even sabotage the work of others. Conflict between departments can cause groups to close ranks and hamper cooperation. Unmanaged and unresolved conflict is a destructive force. It can destroy relationships, decrease productivity and quality of work, break down communication, and make people feel at odds with others in the group or organization.

On the other hand, sometimes conflict plays a useful role. Conflict can bring previously hidden problems to light so that solutions may be sought. Conflict is considered essential to innovation. If everyone thinks the same thing, changes will not occur. Innovation "takes place when different ideas, perceptions, and ways of processing and judging information collide."³⁵ At Microsoft, one of the most innovative U.S. corporations, the former chief executive officer, Bill Gates, advocated a management style called "armed truce" because employees were encouraged to challenge everyone, including Gates. Conflict was at the heart of every decision in a company "constantly at war with not only outsiders but also with itself."³⁶ Properly managed conflict can be energizing. When individuals debate opposing ideas and positions in a calm and reasonable fashion, this type of conflict may:

- prevent stagnation;
- stimulate interest and curiosity;
- encourage the examination and exploration of problems;
- lead to the solving of problems and the making of decisions;
- facilitate personal growth and development;
- promote group identity and cohesion;
- help relieve tensions;
- provide the basis for change;
- encourage interpersonal communication, better understanding, and critical self-reflection;
- strengthen personal relationships;
- promote the exploration and awareness of feelings, needs, and opinions of other people.³⁷

In summary, conflict is an inevitable part of working in organizations. Whenever people are put together in an organization, they become interdependent,

and thus grounds for competition and conflict arise. The ability to discuss topics openly is a strength in any organization. It is far healthier for individuals to be able to debate, to present opposing viewpoints, and to invite freewheeling conversation on any topic than to keep opinions bottled up inside. Conflicts that are suppressed typically reemerge.

However, there some people think that we have become too contentious and have begun to argue for the sake of argument.³⁸ In our culture, people have been conditioned to compete and to achieve, and the cultures that develop within organizations tend to exaggerate this trait. Deborah Tannen has termed this an *argument culture*, which she describes as one that urges us to approach the world—and the people in it—in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done. The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople who express the most extreme, polarized views and present them as “both sides”; the best way to settle disputes is litigation that pits one party against another; the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; the best way to show you are really thinking is to criticize.³⁹ Unfortunately this type of opposition does not lead to truth because usually an issue is not composed of two opposing views but is multifaceted.⁴⁰



What Would You Do?

You are steaming. Your supervisor, Mrs. Romley, has just asked you to be in charge of the circulation desk this Saturday night. AGAIN. You were on duty last Saturday night and the one three weeks ago. The library policy is that each worker is responsible for one Saturday night a month, but as far as you are concerned, that policy is just a myth. You are assigned to work at least two and often three Saturday nights each month. Other workers always seem to have things that conflict with working on Saturday—spouses who will be out of town, elderly parents who need help with something, or a child’s piano recital or football game. You know that Mrs. Romley is trying to make the department “family friendly,” but you feel as though you are being asked to do more than your fair share because you are the only full-time employee who is not married with young children. Should you go ahead and accept this week’s schedule or try to set up a time to talk with Mrs. Romley? If so, what would you say?

Managers need to find a way to strike the right balance between too much conflict and not enough. In other words, they have to find a way to manage conflict so that the organization will reap its benefits and avoid its negative aspects.

Managing Conflict

How can conflict be managed? The first step is for managers to realize that a certain amount of conflict is inevitable within any organization. The worst

thing managers at any level can do is to try to suppress conflict. It is much better to bring it out, to open the lines of communication, and to try to come to a mutually beneficial solution. Even if a win-win solution cannot be achieved, employees will be better satisfied if conflicts are recognized and solutions are sought in a supportive manner.

The second step is to try to deal with the conflict before it escalates. Conflicts typically escalate in three ways:

1. **Expansion of interests.** The conflict goes from a relatively simple one focused on a few issues to one with a larger number of areas of disagreements. Such escalation can be very destructive and makes the conflict far harder to resolve.
2. **Involvement of self-esteem or self-image.** Suddenly the conflict switches from one that is issue oriented to one that is personal. People become defensive and try to save face.
3. **Creation of a new reality.** The final form of escalation occurs when the conflict itself begins to create its own reality. Participants base their choices on only the immediate conflict situation. Winning the conflict takes on a symbolic importance that transcends everything else. Individuals begin to focus wholly on their incentives to compete rather than on their incentives to cooperate.⁴¹

The third step is to try to resolve a conflict in a way that allows the participants to feel positive about the outcome. The best result will be if the manager can help the parties to the conflict emerge with a win-win solution.

Conflict management is a necessary managerial skill. Inevitably, managers will be called in to act as the third party in management of a great number of conflict situations. Managers get better at handling conflict with experience. Understanding conflict and its impact on others increases a manager's ability to make interventions. Managers learn from smaller conflict situations how to deal with larger ones, and they learn from their successes as well as their failures. Managers may fear conflict but always should be ready to manage the conflicts rather than having the conflict control them or the situation. Some practical tips for managing conflicts may be seen in table 16.2.

CONCLUSION

Communication has been described as the glue that holds an organization together.

Managers spend the majority of their time engaging in communication of various types. Unless managers learn to communicate successfully, they will not be successful in carrying out the other managerial functions of planning, organizing, staffing, leading, and controlling. Communication skills are essential, and the improvement of these skills in both managers and other employees should be made a priority because without communication no organization can function effectively.

TABLE 16.2 Some Practical Tips for Managing Conflicts

• Don't let conflict situations go on. Take care of conflict as soon as possible.
• Avoid power struggles in which someone has to win and someone has to lose.
• Show concern for both the problem and the individuals involved.
• Beware of projecting your own beliefs and standards onto others because this often leads to misperceptions about the motivations for others' actions.
• Listen more than you talk; don't be dogmatic or argumentative.
• Avoid exaggerating the problem
• Restrain your emotions; becoming angry or upset usually adds to the problem.
• Realize that learning to manage conflict is an investment in a better organization.

Source: Adapted from Lucile Wilson, *People Skills for Library Managers: A Common Sense Guide for Beginners* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1996), 72-73.

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