

Opening address

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Abstract

Organisational communication evolves around the forming of relationships between people who strive to achieve a common goal. To be successful, effective communication is a necessity in the modern organisation. Three factors that are closely linked to the effectiveness of organisational communication are discussed. Firstly, internal and external changes in the organisation can have an effect on the communication between management and worker. Secondly, the impact of communication and performance on productivity is highlighted. Thirdly, it was emphasized that the industrial training needs in South Africa demand effective communication.

I have always believed in the importance of communication, and was particularly pleased when a Department was opened at our University (Fort Hare) where, besides the normal demands for good communication, we work and talk to one another in a multi-cultural environment. Good communication is important, not only for pragmatic reasons, but because in communicating properly one recognises the *humanity* of the hearer. I think and have often said that for too long we in South Africa have made the mistake of seeing past one another instead of looking one another in the eye and addressing one another. Such communication must be a two-way experience, not simply from a pre-established position of prejudice but with frankness and openness. I also think that *what* you communicate is as important as *how* you communicate — that you give something of yourself in the effort of making contact with another person or persons. Therefore *honesty* in communication is of the essence in satisfactory communication, and this is inescapably linked with *moral courage*: to speak not only to flatter or to gain some end, or to indoctrinate or have propaganda, but to give of yourself and to receive from the other person. As a theologian I believe in the depth of our human nature — a communication originates in God and God who is Personal and who treats us as persons by communicating with us in His word. To use words is of the essence of being person.

John Baird, an expert in the field of *organisational communication*, once said: "Most members of organisations, I suspect, learn about organisational communication the hard way. They are unemployed

because of it, fired because of it, and often unhappy because of it. They make mistakes because of it, have conflicts because of it, and occasionally fail because of it. We must communicate if our organisations are to exist at all" (Baird, 1977, p. XI).

Communication includes every human activity in the organisation. Since it is living *people* who communicate with each other, it is natural to expect that differences may occur from time to time in an organisation. The ways in which these problems may be approached and handled, constitute the theme for this year's Congress.

The phenomenon of organisational communication has received extensive attention during the past two decades from business leaders and researchers alike. It has become not only a popular subject for discussion at conferences, but research has shown that it can contribute towards solutions to some of the perturbing problems of modern society, such as labour relations. It is, therefore, necessary to look at some factors that influence organisational communication, such as the changing organisation, productivity and training.

The changing organisation

From the viewpoint of organisational communication an organisation may be defined as "a structured system of relationships that coordinates the efforts of a group of people toward the achievement of specific objectives". (Koehler, et al, 1976 : 3). It is in the realm of the structured systems of relationships that organisations, whether public or private, are continuously subjected to change. Internally new developments, such as the introduction of computers, help to revolutionise the flow of information throughout the organisation and have proved to be an indispensable tool in the decision-making process. On the external level significant changes in the community and the eventual emergence of new social needs, values and attitudes have a great influence on the modern organisation (Farace, et al : 1977).

In order to exist and to fulfil its objectives it is of the utmost importance for any organisation to maintain its internal and external equilibrium. A state of permanent imbalance and tension may not only be disastrous to the organisation itself but could pose a threat to the stability and advancement of the community. Private organisations are more vulnerable to changes in their environments than public organisations. The responsibility of management and workers alike is to use effective communication to bring about changes that prove to be desirable as painlessly as possible.

The demands and needs of the community can contribute substantially to changes in an organisation. More and more organisations in developed countries have changed from the production of material goods to information processing, as the community has become more sophisticated and as the need for information in almost every sphere of

life has increased. A recent study in the United States revealed that half of that country's economy was devoted to the so-called "information sector", rather than to the production of goods. Fewer people are today responsible for the satisfaction of the material welfare of a larger population than two decades ago. There are indications that this tendency is also present in the South African economy. Obviously, with our large semi-skilled work force this could have serious implications for the quality of life of all in our part of the world.

These changes in the nature of an organisation will make new demands on the communication of that organisation. Farace (1977 : 74) has emphasised something that has become a commonplace experience: "Increasingly in recent years — and clearly in most projections of the future — the complexity and nature of organisations are undergoing radical changes. Organisational environments are becoming more and more complex, creating greater uncertainty for any given organisation and raising the need for appropriate communication mechanisms to process the messages that will reduce this uncertainty."

We know that large organisations have encountered increasing problems with regard to control, co-ordination and the interdependence of their various parts. To combat these problems such organisations require more and better communication, and need to make optimal use of technology, mechanisation and computerisation. A crucial factor in any organisation is the availability of information of the right kind. Communication in the organisation boils down to the basic questions:

- What is known in the organisation?
- Who knows it?

To shed more light on this ever present problem some researchers in the United States have applied the so-called Communication Audit, developed for the International Communication Association, to a number of organisations. I will mention some of their findings briefly.

- Most employees neither receive, nor have the opportunity to impart, much information within their organisations. Their primary needs in this regard include, first, more information about personal, job-related matters, and then, information about organisational decision-making, and a greater opportunity to voice complaints and evaluate superiors. In general, most employees want to receive information more than they want to originate and despatch it.
- The best sources of information are those closest to employees, and the worst are those farthest away. The greatest needs appear to be for more job-related information from immediate superiors and more organisation-related information from top management.
- Information received through impersonal channels (e.g. circulars, letters, house journals, etc.) appears adequate, but there is a need for more information through face-to-face channels, particularly involving top management.

- Although satisfied with their current progress, most employees are not too optimistic about their future within their organisations. While they may be satisfied with their jobs and close relationships, they are not satisfied with their chances of advancement, or their chance of contributing to change in their organisations. This dissatisfaction may be due more to communication-related problems — lack of feedback, reward and appraisal systems, involvement in decision-making — than to such things as pay or other material incentives (Goldhaber, et al : 1978).

To sum up: without effective communication, both internally and outwardly, the modern organisation will not be able to bring about the necessary changes to withstand the numerous threats to its existence.

Productivity

The slow increase or even decline in the rate of productivity in recent years has been a source of anxiety for both industrialised and developing countries. The United States, the richest country in the world, is presently suffering a decline in productivity. During the period from the end of the Second World War until 1967 the rate in productivity increased by nearly 3% a year. From 1967, however, it rose by only 1,6% a year, and it started to move downwards from 1978. It has been estimated by one authority that the difference in the pre- and post-1967 growth rate has cost the average American family more than \$4 000 per year (Downs and Hain : 1982).

The productivity rate in South Africa is a major cause for concern, especially amongst those responsible for long-term economic planning. In the field of labour the South African rate is far below that of most industrialised countries. Indeed, it is so low and the growth rate so tardy that it is difficult to see how a satisfactory living standard for all can be achieved.

Productivity is directly related to the level of effective communication in an organisation. The impact of such communication on productivity can be determined by measuring the performance of members in the organisation. There is a close relationship between performance and communication, and experts regard it as axiomatic that more effective communication will result in better productivity. Likert, for instance, has shown that an improvement in leadership and organisational climate variables can positively improve motivation, team work and the functioning of working groups (Downs and Hain : 1982).

Of course, differences within organisations can affect productivity in many ways, because organisations do not all operate in exactly the same way. For example, service and industrial organisations differ in their nature, focus, and functions. This accordingly implies differences in their communication networks. Organisations are, furthermore, not all at the same stage of development. Every organisation goes through

different stages of development. As each stage matures, problems arise, the correction of which leads to a new stage. Different productivity problems and productivity strategies are appropriate at the different stages of growth. Without appropriate and effective communication between all the members of the organisation there will be virtually no growth, and a decline in productivity is inevitable.

Training

It is a truism to say that training has become one of the vitally important spheres of industrial life in South Africa. To form some idea of the training situation in Southern Africa, one can look at the training requirements recently compiled by the National Committee for Manpower 2000. Approximately 2,7 million economically active people will be required to undertake some form of pre-entry and/or initial training over the period 1979 — 1987. To refer only to the needs of Black workers, a large proportion of the potential work force will require pre-entry training under the handicap of a lack of a sufficient basic education, technical experience and previous exposure to an industrial working environment. Initial training will be required in order to equip all entrants for standard performance in their new occupational roles.

The training situation can change dramatically when one takes into account the fact that a large proportion of the present labour force needs to be retrained from time to time, i.e. development training. As a result of the accelerated development of the industrial society it is essential that professional employees, managers, foremen, and supervisors undergo, at least twice every decade, meaningful development training. According to authorities, the total number of people who need such training every year is approximately 620 000. Some fifty-five per cent of this number will require initial training and some forty-five per cent will need development training (Groenewald : 1981).

For an effective training programme, a high degree of skilful communication is indispensable. Communication is not only necessary for training people in specific skills and job categories; it is also essential for a better understanding of the goals of an organisation, and of peoples' needs, attitudes and expectations. Communication of the right kind will also play a crucial role in the improvement of labour relations in multicultural organisations in Southern Africa. It is not surprising that Meister and Reinsch (1978 : 235) have said: "Training in communication has become a significant concern for industry."

Good human relations are essential for a healthy organisation. Such relationships are built on two-way communication and this is only possible where the organisation's communication system permits the free flow of ideas. Not that communication in itself will give all the answers and solve the problems. There can be communication which has a deceitful and therefore a destructive content and then communi-

cation can be destructive. But where communication, for all the differences of the parties, is based on *goodwil and integrity and truth*, it will be the vehicle of understanding and health to the organisation and the community.

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