The role of the personnel practitioner in the identification and handling of communication problems in organisations

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Abstract

The scope of the personnel practitioners' role has, over the past decade, grown from the traditional activities of inter alia, manpower recruitment, selection and training to include organisational diagnoses and maintaining and improving organisational effectiveness and the quality of work life of employees.

The complex organisation in which the practitioner has to fulfil these roles, consists of differentiated but interdependent sub-systems linked by resource and information flows. Information can be described as the bloodstream of an organisation and communication channels as the arterial system.

To fulfil his role the personnel practitioner has to have means and instruments to gather information on all relevant aspects of organisation and its sub-systems.

In this paper the important role of information in organisational functioning and behaviour is described, as well as ways to gather information systematically and how the personnel practioner can use this information to maintain and improve organisational effectiveness and the quality of work life of employees.

In our modern world people spend the greater part of their waking hours in formal organisations. In the study of human behaviour in organisations, the interaction between the individual and the total organisational systems has been largely ignored until the late 1960's. Illustrated in terms of the model of organisational functioning as depicted in figure 1, the personnel practitioner's role has been limited to the individual-task interaction area. Over the past decade his role has expanded from the traditional activities of inter alia, manpower recruitment, selection and training of specific jobs, to the inclusion of functions related to the individual-group processes interaction area (e.g. the influence of group membership on individual behaviour), the individual-managerial leadership relationship (e.g. the influence of management practices on individual behaviour) and the relationship between the total organisational environment and the individual worker.

The role of the modern personnel practitioner may, therefore, be described as directed towards improving individual and organisational effectiveness and the quality of work life of employees. In his endeavours to reach these goals the awareness of the importance of information flow and communication in organisational behaviour has grown to such an extent that it is regarded as a crucial factor in the understanding of organisational behaviour.

Figure 1
Model of organisational functioning

Feedback
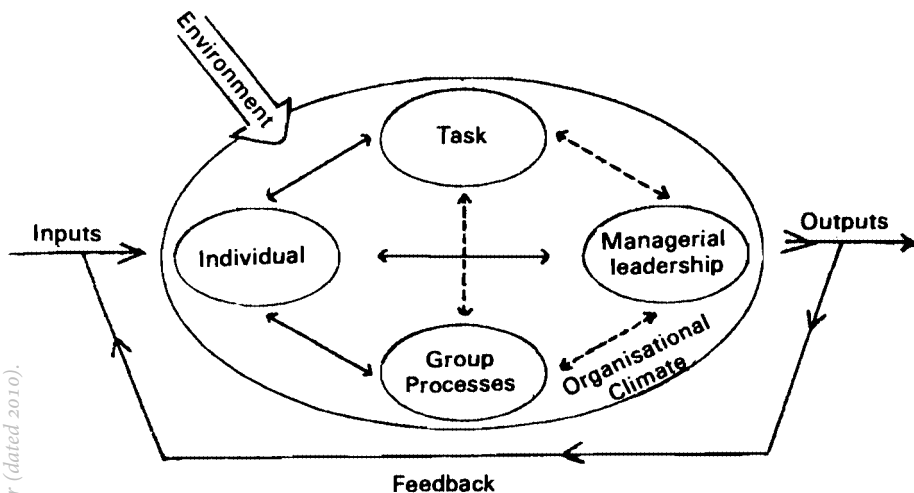
In this paper the importance of information in organisational behaviour and functioning from the personnel practitioner's point of view is briefly discussed. A case-study, based on practical experience, is later presented to indicate how communication problems in organisations can be identified and solved as part of wider organisation development effort.

The importance of information in organisational functioning

The complex organisation in which the practitioner has to fulfil his/her role can be defined as follows: "An organisation is the planned co-ordination of the activities of a number of people for the achievement of some common, explicit purpose or goal, through devision of labor and function, and through a hierarchy of authority and responsibility" (Schein 1980 : 15).

As illustrated in figure 1, an organisation consists of differentiated but interdependent sub-systems. The sub-systems are linked by resource and information flows. Individual and organisational behaviour can be understood and described on the basis of information which the

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individual member receives and transmits. Nadler (1977 : 5) describes the importance of information in organisational behaviour by pointing out that people are constantly searching for information on the basis on which they can make decisions, correct errors, base their actions and confirm their beliefs. People are thus information processors, obtaining information and making decisions about behaviour. Similarly, organisations are also information processing systems. Organisations gather and process environmental information as well as information about internal functioning. Organisational structures perform the function of getting information from one person to another and from one group to another group. Information is thus a key factor in the understanding of behaviour in organisations.

The communication of information is also an important determinant of the organsational climate of an organisation. Katz & Kahn (1978 : 50) define organisational climate as follows: "Organisational climate reflects also the history of internal and external struggles, the types of people the organisation attracts, its work processes and physical layout the modes of communication, and the exercise of authority within the system. Just as a society has a cultural heritage, so social organisations possesses distinctive patterns of collective feeling and beliefs passed along to new group members."

Organisational climate refers to the psychological conditions in which an individual or work group works and to the individual employee's positive or negative experience of this work environment. Organsational climate results from the practices, policies and management philisophies of senior management and how this is communicated to and perceived by employees.

Owing to the important influence of information on the behaviour of both individuals and organisations, information is a powerful tool to use for changing and improving organisational behaviour and the quality of the working life of individual employees.

To fulfil the new role expectations, as already outlined, the personnel practitioner has to have means and instruments to (systematically and scientifically) gather information about all relevant aspects of organisational functioning in order to understand the characteristics and behaviour of the organisation, its members and sub-systems. The practitioner must also have techniques to use this information to reach the stated goals of improved effectiveness and improved quality of working life.

The utilization of information to change organisations

The key to effective communication in an organisation is to be found in the development and maintenance of evaluation and control processes for existing communication patterns and procedures. The improvement of organisational communication, and by means of this, organisational

effectiveness, can be achieved through a structured program of diagnosis and information feedback.

Organisational change by means of information gathering and use, has received much attention in industrial psychological research, practice and literature during the past ten years. The methods are known as *data-based techniques* or as *survey guided organisation development.* These approaches to organisational change and development have been succesfully applied in industrial and commercial organisations (Bowers, 1973; Brown in Pasmore, 1976; Soat, 1979; Alpin & Thompson, 1974). Specifically they consist of activities performed by a change agent or facilitator and involve the *collection, analysis* and *feedback* of information in the context of an organisational development effort. The steps of the program are the following:

● Systematic collection of information

The diagnosis of the present functioning of the organisation and its members form the basis of this approach. Diagnostic information is collected through one or more of the following techniques: questionnaires specifically designed and developed for this purpose, interviews, observation of behaviour, examination of company records, or even by means of so-called *unobtrusive measures.*

● Analysis of the information

The facilitator, in conjunction with well trained personnel practitioners, will analyse and interpret the information. Questionnaire information is usually analysed by computor, and the results are prepared in table and graph format which can be easily interpretated by members of the organisation.

● Information feedback

The facilitator will feed the information back to organisation members to enable them to use the information to reach specific goals. A popular and succesful approach (Bowers, 1976 and Mann, 1961) is to identify all the functional work groups in the organisation, and feed the information of each work group back to that specific group. In this way information feedback is started at the top of the organsation, and in what is known as the "waterfall design" information of each work group, is fed back to it. This feedback design is illustrated in figure 2.

Apart from feeding information back to each separate work group in the organisation, graphs and tables are usually also prepared for separate departments, divisions and for the company as a whole.

The information feedback processes can be done during "feedback meetings". These meetings are structured in a way that enable members of the work group to understand the information, identify their

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Figure 2

Work groups forming an organisation, and feedback design
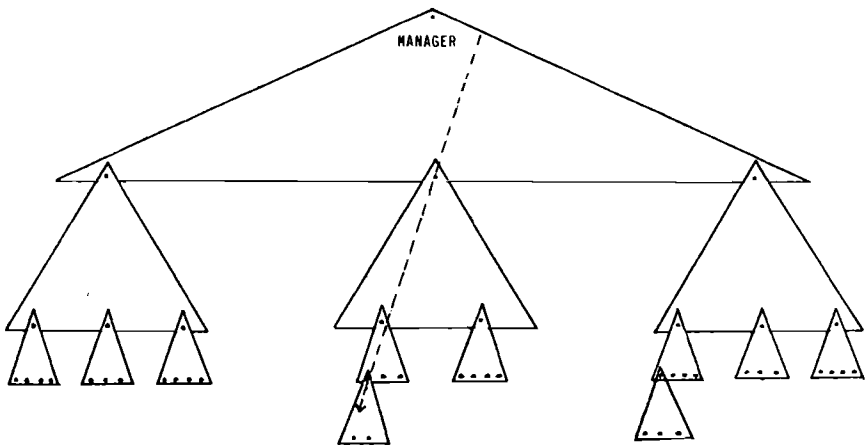
particular strengths and weaknesses, prioritice their problems, select a particular problem to work on during the feedback meeting, develop solutions to the problem, and decide on action steps to implement the selected solutions. Usually a particular work group has a number of feedback meetings to discuss all their identified problems, in the way described above. At the beginning of each meeting progress in implementing action steps is evaluated.

After a year or eighteen months following the first diagnosis a follow-up diagnosis is done. The follow-up diagnosis enables all interested parties to see what improvements and changes have been achieved, and at the same time serves as the first step for a next cycle of data analysis, and feedback meetings.

The process, of which some of the features have been described above, has been used successfully in many countries including South Africa (Alpin & Thompson, 1974; Bower, 1973; Chase, 1968; Franklin, 1979; Nadler & Pecorella, 1975; Pasmore, 1976 and Soat, 1979).

The following represents a list of a few of the changes achieved through survey guided feedback in South Africa over the past five years:

- Improvement of individual worker's identification with the organisation
- Clearer definition and understanding of authority limits
- Introduction of career planning schemes
- Improvement of office accommodation
- Redesign of conditions of employment
- Introduction of alternative work schedules (e.g. flexitime)

- Introduction of job rotation
- Improvements in factory and office layouts
- Effective use of problem solving and confrontation meetings
- More delegation of authority
- Job enlargement and job enrichment
- Training of personnel in finance, interpersonal skills, organisational pay procedures and policy
- Restructuring of major devivisions of total organisations
- Improvement of communication within work groups and between departments and divisions (Coetsee, 1980).

To round off this discussion on how the personnel practitioner can use information in the identification and handling of communication problems in organisations, a case from an actual survey guided organisation development programme in a South African life insurance company, which started during March 1982, will be described.

Case-study

Background

A life insurance company with head office in one of our major cities and branch offices in cities and towns in all four provinces, decided to embark on an encompassing organisation development programme. One of the features of this programme was an overall organisational diagnosis of the company, major head office divisions, all the branch offices and specific work groups. It was decided to feed the diagnostic information on specific work groups back to them during feedback meetings, and that an outside facilitator, who was contracted to lead the project, would write a comprehensive diagnostic report with recommendations to top management. The programme consisted of various phases, including training of inside facilitators to facilitate feedback meetings, training of work group leaders in the understanding of the feedback information and how to conduct feedback meetings, as well as the three steps discussed under *The information feedback meeting of the top management team.*

The diagnostic survey

Because of the number of people employed in this organisation, it was decided to limit the diagnosis or information gathering phase to a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire used — *Organisation Diagnostic Questionnaire (ODQ)* — was developed to diagnose organisational functioning through member perceptions and is based on models of organisational behaviour and scientific research. This questionnaire has been used in various South African companies, and in the teaching, and other professions.

The questionnaire information was analysed by means of a standard computor programme, specifically developed for this purpose, and statistical tables and graphs of the information for each work group,

separate divisions, branch offices and the company as a whole were prepared. An example of a table and graph is included in appendices 1 and 2. The table and graph contain the 33 subfactors measured by the ODQ, divided into five main factors, namely organisational climate (of which communication flow is a subfactor), work group processes, task characteristics, supervisory leadership and satisfaction outputs. On the table the mean score (on a five point scale) of the work group and the statistical variance is indicated for each factor. The mean score is also used in the graph presentation.

The information feedback meeting of the top management team

Feedback meetings for work groups in the organisation were started in June 1982. For the purpose of this case study we shall limit our discussion to the first feedback meeting of the top executive team, which was held during July 1982. The actual diagnostic information of this group is included in appendix 1 and 2, while appendix 3 contains the minutes of this feedback meeting.

Based on the diagnostic table and graph, ten problems listed in column (1) of the minutes of the feedback meeting (appendix 3) were identified. In column 2 it is indicated that on the group decided to concentrate firstly on the weakness labelled organisational goal clarity and secondly on work group goal clarity (factor 6). The group defined organisational goal clarity in general terms and in specific terms (column 3). These definitions point out that the problem was not only one of clarity of goals, but also one of communication of goals throughout the company.

In column 4 are listed the solutions to these problems, at which the top management team arrived by means of a "brain storming" session during the feedback meeting. Column (5) indicates that the group was of the opinion that solution 4 — the establishment of a corporate communications management function — was the most feasible. In column (6) this solution is operationalized in terms of an action plan.

The last column contains information on decision regarding a review date, date of next meeting, problems to be discussed at next meeting, etc.

It should also be mentioned that the factor communication flow was identified as a weakness throughout this company, its divisions and branch offices. In his diagnostic report, the facilitator emphasized that this was a problem that should receive further attention.

The significance of this case study

From the outside faciliator's point of view the value of this approach to organisation developmet as illustrated in this specific case, is the following:

- Strenghts and weaknesses of the organisation as a whole, divisions, branch offices and work groups were identified in a systematic way.

- The top executive group was able to address a very important organisational problem, i.e. goal clarity, and by defining this problem as a problem of communication it was able to identify the cause of the problem. They also arrived at a solution which will probably have a positive effect not only on communication in the organisation, but on organisational functioning in general.

- The outcome of this case study — the decision to investigate the possibility to start a corporate management function of communications — indicates appreciation of the very important role of communication and information in organisational functioning.

- This case study also proves that the personnel practitioner can make an important contribution to the improvement of organisational effectiveness when using a broader, modern approach in organisational diagnosis and organisational improvement.

In conclusion it should be mentioned that experience with the technique described here indicates that one of its strengths is the ability to identify communication problems in an organisation. It has also proved to be a valuable way of bringing the importance of improved communication to the attention of top management. The feedback process used in the approach seems to be not only a powerful way to improve communication, but has a positive effect on group, individual and organisational performance.

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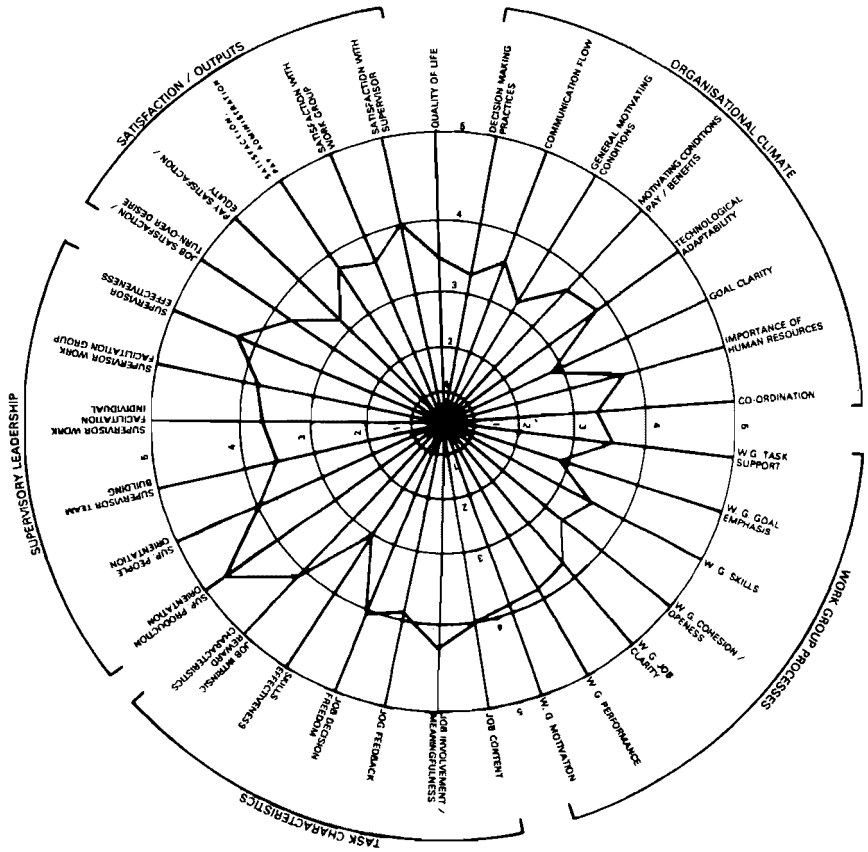
Appendix I

G R O U P I

	FACTOR	MEAN	STANDDEV
ORGANISATIONAL CLIMATE	1.1 Decision making practices	3.333	0.617
	1.2 Communication flow	3.542	0.303
	1.3 General motivating conditions	3.143	0.338
	1.4 Motivating conditions pay/benefits	3.571	0.447
	1.5 Technological adaptability	3.714	0.700
	1.6 Goal Clarity	2.857	0.753
	1.7 Importance of human resources	3.500	0.401
	1.8 Co-ordination	3.333	0.563
WORK GROUP PROCESSES	2.1 Work group task support	3.429	0.776
	2.2 Work group goal emphasis	2.857	0.789
	2.3 Work group skills	3.571	0.678
	2.4 Work group cohesion/openness	3.268	0.226
	2.5 Work group job clarity	3.714	0.647
	2.6 Work group performance	3.857	0.440
	2.7 Work group motivation	3.893	0.226
TASK CHARACTERISTICS	3.1 Job content	4.041	0.321
	3.2 Job involvement/meaningfulness	4.327	0.312
	3.3 Job feedback	3.905	0.387
	3.4 Job decision freedom	4.071	0.578
	3.5 Skills effectiveness	3.048	0.318
	3.6 Job intrinsic reward characteristics	4.190	0.530
SUPERVISORY LEADERSHIP	4.1 Supervisor production orientation	4.714	0.452
	4.2 Supervisor people orientation	3.881	0.353
	4.3 Supervisor team building	3.500	0.267
	4.4 Supervisor work facilitation: individual	3.643	0.875
	4.5 Supervisor work facilitation: Group	3.857	0.530
	4.6 Supervisor effectiveness	4.190	0.338
SATISFACTION OUTPUT	5.1 Job satisfaction turn-over desire	3.681	0.400
	5.2 Pay satisfaction equity	3.182	0.451
	5.3 Satisfaction: pay administration	3.857	0.940
	5.4 Satisfaction with work group	3.643	0.182
	5.5 Satisfaction with supervisor	4.000	0.535
	6 Quality of life	3.541	0.352

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Appendix 2

DEPARTMENT/SECTION: ....

WORK GROUP: ....

GROUP LEADER: ....

LEGEND

Appendix 3

Minutes of feedback meeting

Work Group number: 1

Meeting attended by: Top Management Group

Group leader:

Facilitator:

(1) Problems Identified		(2) Order to be dis- cussed	(4) Solutions of problem	(6) Solutions Accepted	(5) Action Plans (Including what, who is responsi- ble where and when)
1. Decision making practices	(1.1)	3	1. MD to make important announcements		Decide to form a project team
2. General motivating conditions	(1.3)	9	2. Written publication of company's objectives		consisting of the MD, Director of
3. Motivational conditions pay/benefits	(1.4)	6	3. Monthly publication of goals reached, against goals set		Personnel and Public Relations
4. Organisational Goal Clarity	(1.6)	2	4. Use of intercom system for important announcements		Officer to do an indepth study re-
5. Co-ordination	(1.8)	7	5. Establish corporate communications management as	}	garding solutions no 5 and to make
			a separate management function	}	recommendations regarding the
6. Work group Goal Clarity	(2.2)	1	6. Establish communication requirements		establishment of this position and
7. Skills effectiveness	(3.5)	8	7. Utilize notice boards effectively		its functioning. As the problem is
8. Supervisor production orientation	(4.1) }		8. Personnel to be asked for suggestions to improve		so complex it should be investiga-
	}	4	communication		ted scientifically. The project team
9. Supervisor people orientation	(4.2) }		9. Encourage "discussion groups" down the line		may co-op professional expertise
10. Pay satisfaction in equity	(5.2)	5	10. Infiltrate grapevine communications		and advice

(3) Definition of problem (general

    defenition)

Organisational goals not clearly defined and a lack of communication of goals, e.g.

Marketing goals: Are clear to top management but they are not communicated effectively to lower levels

Cost goals: A lack of sophisticated cost goals, cost controls and productivity criteria

Investments goals are extremely vague — not clearly defined

Service goals: Clear goals non-existent

Specific definition: Structured communication of marketing goals on a formal continuous basis is lacking in this organisation

(7) **Review date:** 3rd week in August 1982

(8) **Date next meeting:** 3rd week in August 1982

(9) **Problem to be discussed next meeting:**
    Supervisor production and people orientation

(10) **Copies of these minutes to be sent to:**
    Personnel Department

(11) **Date of dispatch of copies of minutes:**
    28th July 1982

(12) **Signature of Group Leader:**