The application of research in organisational communication

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Abstract

As with most other forms of communication, the most pressing problems of organisational communication can be localised within the limits of the two basic human communication prerequisites of anticipation and feedback : establishing the identity and nature of your receiver(s) as a basis for message formulation, and establishing the receiver reaction (in its broadest sense) on the message as a basis for continued communication. This paper proposes a number of basic research applications as possible solutions to these problems.

As recently as six years ago, Bernstein (1976) observed that organisational communication was a discipline in search of a domain. This remark was probably made in reference to the large number of rather diverse behaviour and social scientists involved in organisational communication research. On the other hand, as Richetto (1977) concluded, Bernstein's observation might have suggested that perhaps we have been so intent on integrating methodologies from these various sources that we have failed to articulate theoretical frameworks within which to employ our tools.

Richetto (1977) went on to compare organisational communication with a teary-eyed little girl in party dress who appeared to be all dressed up with no place to go.

Let us for one moment take this analogy one step further : If we assume that in the preceding years organisational communication has eventually arrived at the party, she is, at least from the viewpoint of practitioners, still no more than a wallflower. To put it in another way : While organisational communication has been considerably enlightened over the past decade through added research results and theoretical contributions, practitioners working in the real world of organisational communication have been given very little which can be applied on a practical day to day basis.

The purpose of the present paper is to identify the most pressing problems of organisational communication from the practitioner's

viewpoint, and to propose a number of very basic research applications as possible solutions to these problems. With this purpose in mind, I would like to devote some attention to each of the following subjects:

- The nature of organisational communication.
- The problems of anticipation and feedback.
- The general nature of research.
- Applications of research in organisational communication.

The nature of organisational communication

As a pre-requisite for any discussion of organisational communication, it is first of all necessary to distinguish it from all other forms of communication. So, at the risk of being repetitive, let us once again look at a very general model of the communication process.

Figure 1

A model of communication
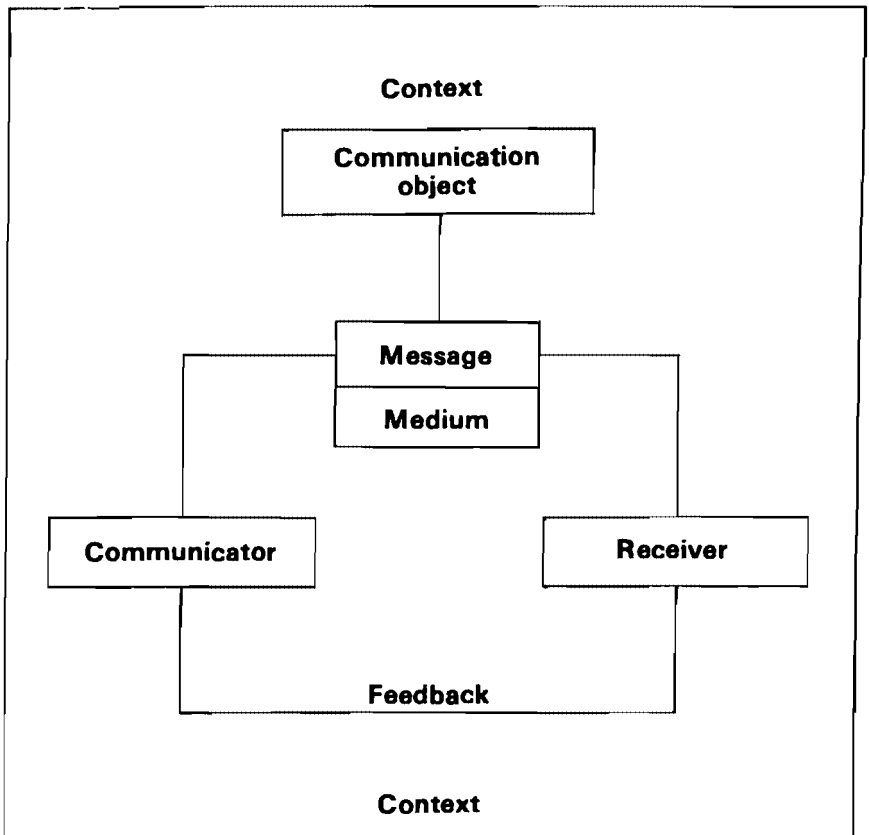
All forms of communication are universally described in terms of the following nominal components : a communicator who formulates a message about one or more communication objects, and then sends this message in a medium or media to a proconceived receiver or receivers, and in most cases expects some form of feedback from the receivers. Naturally, for each specific form of communication these universal components will be nominally different from all other forms of communication. So, for instance, in journalism, the communicator is the editor or journalist, while in advertising the communicator is formed by the agency as a whole, or the copywriter and/or artist. Thus, to describe organisational communication as a specific form of communication, it is necessary to describe the specific nature and functions of its components, as well as the relationships between these components.

It might be useful at this point to refer to a general model of organisational communication.

Figure 2

A model of organisational communication
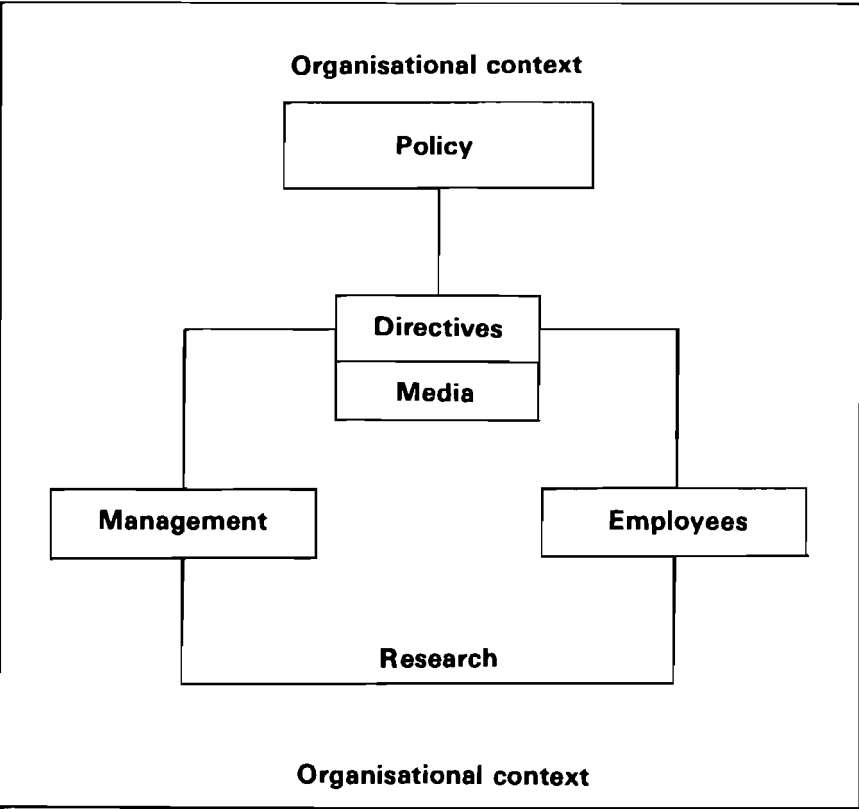
The two main components of organisational communication, viz. communicator and receivers, are identified as management on the one hand and workers on the other hand. Messages usually consist of directives about past, present or future company policy. These can be conveyed in a number of different ways, varying according to organisational structure and size. Examples are the relay of messages through informal discussions, highly structured meetings, printed circulars, company instruction manuals, and the increasingly popular in-house magazines.

The receivers in organisational communication, which will also depend on organisation structure and size, can include individuals or groups ranging from the top hierarchy, such as directors or departmental heads, down to the lowest rank in the organisation. It can also be directed to selected groups or departments only, or to the organisation's total labour force.

Finally, feedback occurs when the pre-selected receivers react to the information send to them by the communicator.

The problems of anticipation and feedback

Communication can generally be defined as an intentional attempt between a communicator and at least one receiver to share meaning. In the context of a process, communication is manifested as a situation where the participating parties interactively formulate and exchange messages about the communication object or objects. In this sense the concept of communicator and receiver, as well as those of message and feedback must be seen as interchangeable. In other words, person B may be regarded as a receiver while person A is talking, but becomes a communicator as soon as he reacts to persons A's message. Similarly, B's feedback to A's message can be seen as a message in itself, and so on. This concept of communication is probably best illustrated by Wenburg & Wilmot's (1973) infinite model of communication. The underlying notion of such an approach is that communication is bi-directional and interactive, rather than uni-directional and reactive.

While this approach is probably inherently true on face value, two important specifications of the position are necessary. Firstly it should be noted that the more institutionalised the communication becomes, the less interchangable are the roles of communicator and receiver. Thus, while it may be quite arbitrary to distinguish between communicator and receiver in interpersonal communication, the act of communicating, that is, formulating and transmitting message, can hardly be seen as equally participated in by the communicator and the receivers in the case of mass communication. This principle also applies in the case of organisational communication. The fact is that in most organisations, even those where institutionalised channels for upward and downward communication are provided, feedback is to a great extent delayed or almost non-existent.

It should, however, be clear from the nature of organisational communication, that some form of feedback is essential for the functioning of any organisation. If feedback was seen only in the strict sense of a voluntary or spontaneous reaction to the message, there would be very little feedback in organisational communication.

This problem can be specified even further. Experience has shown that upward communication channels in an organisation are very seldom used to convey either worker satisfaction or initial worker dissatisfaction. The result is that management only learns about causes of dissatisfaction when it is too late to negotiate or to adapt policy. Thus, instead of having a satisfied labour force, organisations find themselves having to cope with a high staff-turnover or, in extreme cases, with the threat of strike action.

To solve this problem, the communicator in organisational communication has to extract, by way of speaking, the feedback from his receivers. What is really needed, in most cases, is a technique for the measurement of employee opinions and attitudes about organisational policy on a regular and continuous basis. This type of "evoked", in contrast to "spontaneous", feedback can only be attained through the implementation of basic research methods.

A second important point which should be emphasised, and which is seldom explicated in discussions of the communication process, is that communication is anticipatory in nature. This idea has been expressed in different forms by a number of scholars. It simply means that in formulating his message, the communicator makes certain anticipatory assumptions about the probable nature and pre-dispositions of the receiver, and the receiver's probable attitude toward the communication object. For example, the editorial members of a newspaper are affected by their assumptions as to the purposes of the reader who will eventually consume the paper. Their concept of what the reader wants, affects what they report, what they interpret, and what they encode.

This basic principle of anticipation can with considerable advantage be implemented in organisational communication. If it is applied effectively, basic anticipatory research in an organsation will provide management with a very sound base on which to formulate future policy directions. As was the case with feedback, anticipation can be attained through the application of basic research methods. To explain this fully, it is necessary to take a look at the general meaning and nature of research.

The general nature of research

There are basically three essential elements of research namely constructs, hypotheses and observations. These three elements are generally identified by most of the authors on metatheoretical questions, such as Marx (1963), Deutch and Krauss (1965), Miller and

Nicholson (1976) and Hawes (1975), although the latter presented a more refined description of the terms than the other authors.

Constructs can be described as specialised concepts which refer to relationships among the constitutive variables of a phenomenon. For example, product, message and media can be considered as constructs of the phenomenon of advertising. A hypothesis can loosely be defined as an anticipatory verbal conjecture or surmise that states a relationship among variables. Observation, in a scientific sense, involves the purposeful perception of the relationships among variables with a view to test stated hypothesis.

Marx (1963) presented the idea that each of these three salient elements of research can be moved along a continuum from usage in practical affairs to scientific usage. The three continua are presented in figure 3.

Figure 3
Elements of research
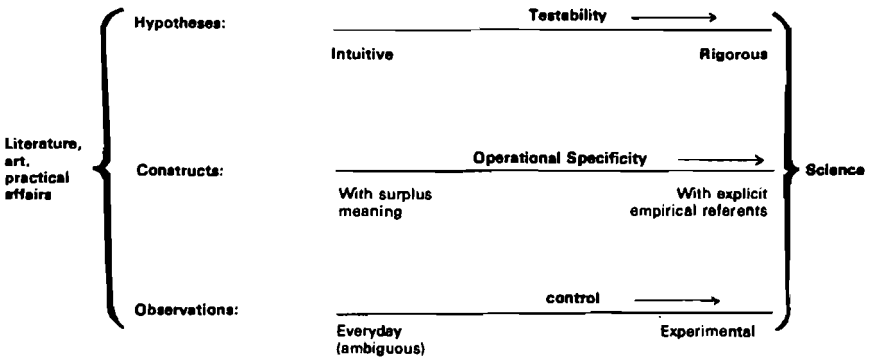
Hypothesis

According to Marx (1963) any hypothesis can be localised on a continuum between "intuitive" and "rigorous". These two extremes refer to the testability of the hypothesis. Testability is an absolute essential characteristic of any scientifically useful hypothesis.

The "intuitive-rigorous" continuum for testability of an hypothesis refers to the extent to which adequte empirical or observational tests can be performed. Adequacy, according to Marx (1963), consists primarily of satisfactory logical relationships between hypothesis and data, and reasonable control of variables in the observations. Thus science operates on the basis of a continuous interplay of observation and hypothesis.

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Construct

Marx (1963) placed the element of construct on a continuum of operational specificness, with extremes of surplus meaning and explicit meaning. He regarded operational specificity — the clearly stated relationship of the construct to its empirical basis — as the most important characteristic of construct formation. Concepts with "surplus meaning" may be tolerated in the early, pre-scientific development of a field, but they must be replaced by constructs more closely tied to the empirical operations for effective research.

Observation

As far as observation is concerned, control of variables is held to be essential characteristic of science, differentiating it from non-scientific procedures. Although every-day-life observations may often constitute the groundwork for the origin of scientific problems and for preliminary conceptual and theoretical formulations, a certain degree of control of variables must be developed if science is to advance. Control in this sense refers to a reduction in the ambiguity with which variations in the dependent variables may be assigned to the influence of the independent variables.

Applications of research in organisational communication

It was stated earlier that anticipation and feedback presented the most important problems in organisation communication. In the same argument it was explained that the growing complexity of organisational communication caused the roles of communicator and receiver to become less interchangable, which subsequently made communication uni-directional and reactive rather than bi-directional and interactive.

Referring to these same problems in the context of advertising as communication, Fletcher and Bowers (1979) described research as a substitute for the face to face contact that once characterised the relationship between the shopkeeper or the craftsman and their customers. In those days the merchant had direct contact with a small public and could relatively easily gauge consumer wants, needs and attitudes. If he made a decision on the basis of the knowledge thus acquired and found it to be inappropriate, he could readily change his policy.

In this era, which Fletcher and Bowers (1979) called the days of cottage industry, the distance from producer to consumer was often short, psychologically as well as geographically.

Although these remarks were made in reference to advertising, the same problems prevail in the case of organisational communication. Granted the fact that even in many organisations it is still possible, in terms of organisational size and structure, to have regular face to face

communication, most organisations have become too complex to allow a regular and continuous free flow of information. The application of research has been proposed as a possible solution to these problems, and in the preceding section the general nature and basic elements of research were identified.

On the first reactions of most organisational communication practitioners to the proposals that they themselves should conduct research, would probably be apprehension or even dismissal of the idea. Can it really be expected from them to become involved in what seems, on face value, the highly specialised field of research? To alleviate such fears, it should be pointed out that provision was made for the basic elements of research, i.e. hypotheses construct and observations, to be manifested and utilised in science as well as practical affairs. I am convinced that even if it is applied relatively "unscientific", a number of basic research techniques can be of immense value to organisational communication practitioners. Before identifying some of these techniques, it might be useful to establish where such research would probably be localised within the dimensions of scientific conduct.

If the research needs related to communication problems within organisations are viewed within the framework provided in figure 3, the elements of research, it can be said that most of the hypotheses or assumptions in this context will probably be concerned with past, present and future opinions, attitudes and reactions of employees towards managerial or organisational policy. For instance, management must be of necessity always be concerned with employees' feelings about the prevailing policy dispensation. Likewise it is desirable, if not imperative, to probe for probable reactions before finally formulating and implementing new policy. All assumptions made by management as to the nature and content of such existing and/or probable attitudes and reactions, can from the viewpoint of the basic elements of research in fact be described as hypotheses. As far as testability of such hypotheses is determined by the way in which they are expressed, ranging between the extremes of intuitive and rigorous, it might be suspected that, in the initial stages of an intra-organisational research programme, the hypotheses would tend to be more intuitive in nature. However, as the research programme becomes more structured and gets implemented on a regular basis, the hypotheses would probably become more rigorous.

In the context of organisational communication, constructs would refer to verbal descriptions of employee opinions, attitudes and reactions, as well as the observable and measurable indicators of such opinions, attitudes and reactions. If, for example, management makes the assumption that a part of their workforce is actively supporting present policy, and that another section is merely showing temporarily compliance which might lead to active resistance, it should be possible to

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identify what can be regarded as indications of active support, compliance, and active resistance. Such indicators of the three forms of behaviour should also be measurable, or at least be comparable, so that the extent of support, compliance and resistance can be established. As was the case with hypotheses initial constructs in an on-going research programme might have a fair amount of surplus meaning, which will become more and more explicit with recurrent use.

The third element of research, i.e. observations, refers to the research techniques or approaches that are chosen to solve specific problems, as well as the way in which techniques are applied. Before identifying a number of research techniques that can be applied in organisational communication, it should once again be stated that the degree of control maintained, would not only vary according to the different forms of observation, but also with the increasing familiarity with which the observer is able to apply these techniques.

The following are a number of research techniques that can be applied comfortably and quite beneficially in organisational communication: individual interviews, group interviews, surveys and experimental research.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews with representative members or clearly identified opinion leaders of the labour force can provide useful cues and guidelines for evaluation and formulation of policy. Comparisons of interviews with members of different levels in the hierarchy of the labour force can provide a very sound basis for rationalised or differentiated implementations of policy. The success of such individual interviews will of course depend largely on the openess between parties, and the willingness of interviewed individuals to express their opinions and feelings freely and without reservation.

Group Interviews

The appliction of group interviews to involve persons representative of different groups, provides unique opportunities to relate, compare and evaluate different lines of thought or opinion of various interest groups. This can enable management to formulate policy in such a way that it would provide in the widest possible range of needs and expectations prevailing in the organisation.

Surveys

The use of questionnaires or personal interviews creates the possibility of getting feedback on a very wide basis and can even be applied to involve an organisation's total labour force. Such questionnaires can be highly structured or leave room for free verbalisation of opinions depending on the use of such techniques as coded questions, open-ended questions, and rating scales.

Experimental Research

It is possible to implement alternative policy directions for trial periods within the context of an experimental design. Even with a lesser degree of control such experimental comparisons can provide management with infallible guidelines on policy decisions, saving the organisation precious time, money and manpower which might have been wasted with the implementation of undesirable policies.

Having identified a number of research techniques that could be applied in organisational communication, it is quite obvious to anticipate the final jackpot question which will come to the minds of practitioners : What about statistical processing of research results?

Realising the evergrowing complexity and specialisation of statistical analysis techniques and methods, it should once again be pointed out that the dimensions of research make provision for applications ranging from strictly scientific facts to everyday affairs. It was also stated earlier that applications of research by organisational practitioners would probably tend to the extreme of everyday use on all three dimensions of research, including consequent statistical comparisons. It can even be said that relatively subjective conclusions and decisions based on even the most unsophisticated applications of research, could still be more valid than subjective policy formulations based on guess work in the dark. It should also be clear that not all of the research techniques identified can or should necessarily be quantified. In fact, with the growing credence ascribed to qualitative research within academic circles during the last two years, there is no reason for practitioners to be over-concerned with the problems of statistics.

To summarise: It can be said unconditionally that research can provide the organisational communication practitioner with an invaluable tool and a very wise investment towards the prosperous future of his or her organisation. One last word of caution though : Research is meant to test the validity of assumptions, and not to prove the correctness thereof. Or to put it in the words of an old cliché among researchers : The one way in which research should not be used, is the way in which a drunk uses a lamp post — for support rather than illumination.

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