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Organisational phenomena which influence communication and effectiveness

A. B. Boshoff
University of Pretoria

Abstract

An overview is given of the traditional or classical views of organisations and organisational functioning. Empirical findings about how organisations really function are presented. It is shown that the organisational model created by the traditional views about organisations is largely an idealisation. The communication problems which develop in organisations are examined in the light of the empirical findings about organisational functioning. A few guidelines for the improvement of communication are presented in the light of the material covered in the paper.

Barriers to effective communication in organisations

In a probably simplified form communication can be seen as a process which starts with a communicator who encodes his ideas into a set of symbols and thus creates a message. The communicator then uses a medium as a carrier of his message. When the message arrives at the receiver it is decoded, involving interpretation. Some deliberate or non-deliberate feedback forms the last stage of the communication process. It can readily be seen that "noise", disturbing the communication, can enter into the process.

Using this model of the process of communication we can identify several barriers, originating in the participants and the process. These barriers are identified as :

(a) Frame of reference

Different individuals interpret the same communication differently depending on their previous experience. Encoding and decoding are carried out by communicator and receiver according to their respective previous experiences.

(b) Selective listening

Receivers tend to block out or to distort information contained in a message especially when the contents of message is in conflict with their own beliefs. Communicators may do likewise with feedback which results from their messages.

(c) Value judgments

The receiver puts a certain value on a message. This value is determined by factors like the receiver's opinion of the communicator and his role, power, his previous experiences with the communicator and the anticipated meaning of the message. The communicator can do the same both in sending his message and receiving feedback from the receiver of the original message.

(d) Source credibility

Participants in the communication process attach a certain level of credibility to the source of a message i.e. they ascribe a certain level of trust, confidence and faith to the words and actions of the other party. Communication suffers according to the degree to which ascribed levels of trust, etc. differ from optimal levels.

(e) Semantic problems

Different interpretations of the same words can distort communication. Technical terms, especially new technical terms are, for example, often misunderstood or understood partially only.

(f) Filtering

Communication is often selective, i.e. the communicator transmits only part of what he knows.

(g) Time pressures

Communicators often do not transmit information at all or transmit only partially due to lack of time. Reception can, in these circumstances, obviously be only partial.

(h) Communication overload

Too much information makes it impossible for an individual to choose the correct information to which to react or to transmit.

The preceding simplistic overview of barriers to effective communication makes one wonder what the underlying reasons for the existence of these barriers are. It is hypothesized that an examination of organisational phenomena may provide some of the answers.

Organisational phenomena

Several writers have in the past decades described the functioning of organisations. Two completely different views, here broadly depicted as the Classical or Traditional view, and the Modern view, came into being. A separate look at these two views about organisations may be fruitful for the purposes of the present description.

(a) Classical (Traditional) view of organisations

This view of organisations is seen, for instance, in the work of Fayol (1949), Gulick and Urwick (1937) and Mooney (1947). These writers saw an organisation, more specifically a business organisation, as :

- *a completely logical entitiy which is*
- *completely orientated towards maximization of efficiency and effectiveness,*
- *with a main, almost exclusive goal to make profits and*
- *therefore, characteristically, takes risks to exploit maximally opportunities in the environment and is*
- *managed by a wise group of managers with clear ideas about objectives and strategies for the organisation while*
- *a clear, almost absolute distinction exists between "management" and "workers" with*
- *management being solely responsible for the success or failure of the organisation.*

This view and this set of assumptions about an organisation are closely allied to the bureaucratic model of organisations. Fayol, for instance, states that "principles", applicable to all organisations could be laid down. These principles seem to be partially founded on the bureaucratic model of organisations as described by Weber (1947).

The traditional view of organisations presents us with a picture which leaves little doubt that communication should be effective and complete as long as everybody adheres to the principles laid down. It seems as if the findings of some modern writers on organisations, which to a great extent still function bureaucratically, are not in agreement with this view.

(b) Modern views of organisations

It is not the purpose of the present paper to present a review of modern literature on management/or organisations. A *capita selecta* of the views of recent writers will, for our present purpose, be sufficient.

1. Cyert & March (1963)

When they embarked upon their study of organisations they had expectations and assumptions about the way organisations function which were related to, by and large, the same as that of the Classical School. Their empirical findings seemed to disagree with these early assumptions.

Their findings refer to the characteristics of organisational functioning and can be summarised as follows :

(a) Quasi-resolution of conflict

- *Organisations seldom have a single, consistent goal*

- *Decisions taken by the same organisation, seen over time, often differ radically from each other*
- *Decisions taken in different parts of the organisation are often in conflict*
- *Conflicts are (inadequately) "resolved" by*
    - *Functional specialisation and delineation of tasks to different parts of the organisation*
    - *Sequential attention to objectives to avoid or eliminate conflicts*
    - *"Aspiration level" objectives instead of "optimal level" objectives*

(b) Avoidance of uncertainty and risk

- *"negotiated environment" is striven for*
- *Short-term decision-making is preferred to long-term decision making, as binding long-term decisions make risk-taking necessary.*

(c) Problematic research for solutions to problems

- *Simple models of causation are used until a more complex model is needed to solve problems*
- *Research activities have as their objective the solving of the present problem, not the development of long-term strategies to prevent the problem from recurring*
- *Research is carried out in the "vicinity" of the immediate problem*
- *Only presently acceptable problems for current valid alternatives are investigated*

(d) Organisations do learn to adapt their decision-making processes

- *but these adaptations tend to be slower than optimal*
- *and are only undertaken when the organisation is forced to adapt.*

From the work of Cyert & March (1963) and that of Simon (1957) flowed the idea of "bounded rationality" i.e. that organisations do not strive for, or achieve, full rationality in their decision-making activities but strive for and reach only "satisficing" (as against "optimising") levels.

2. J.D. Thompson (1967)

Thompson postulated that organisations saw uncertainty as their most important problem. To combat uncertainty and especially to protect their "technical core" against change organisations tend to use what Thompson called "buffering mechanisms." One such a buffering mechanism is the formation of coalitions in the organisa-

tion. The purpose of coalition formation is to protect the members of the coalition from change and uncertainty. In this process a dominant coalition, i.e. a coalition with the most power in the organisation, comes into being. The greatest stability is achieved when the objectives of the dominant coalition are not opposed by other coalitions. Change and uncertainty will, however, be introduced into the organisation when the composition of the dominant coalition changes, when the objectives of the dominant coalition are changed or when a new dominant coalition, with new objectives, is formed.

Thompson further postulates that in some cases an "inner circle" develops in the dominant coalition. This "inner circle", composed of only some members of the dominant coalition, then takes decisions for the dominant coalition and, therefore, for the organisation.

These hypotheses of how an organisation functions seems to be of some value, especially when seen in the context of the role of the "informal organisation" as described by Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939). The implications for specific communications in an organisation will be taken up in the last part of this paper.

3. **Argyris** (1957; 1962; 1964)

Some of the most negative views on how organisations tend to function came from Argyris (1957; 1962; 1964). In several publications he argues forcefully that bureaucratic type organisations functioned according to values which are in opposition to the growth and development of individuals in those organisations. The result is that people who spend a great deal of their lives in organisations do not develop to their full potential.

Argyris argues that wide-spread worker apathy and counter-productive activities are the results of this conflict between the individual and his employing organisation.

Some corroborating evidence for the views expressed by Argyris can be found in the results of empirical studies on the values of American managers. Guth and Tagiuri (1965), England (1967) and Lick and Oliver (1974) all seem to have found a consistent pattern of managers being "high" on pragmatic values i.e. economic, theoretical and political values, while being "low" on religious, aesthetic and social values. It seems if this may offer some part of the explanation why organisations tend to manage people in terms of essentially Theory X (McGregor, 1960) assumptions and thereby diminishing the possibilities of growth and development of these employees.

4. **Bennis** (1965)

Bennis felt that the great majority of organisations still functioned according to the bureaucratic model. After an analysis of the way in

which bureaucratic organisations tend to function Bennis summarized several deficiencies of this kind of organisation :

- *Personal growth of employees and the development of mature personalities are not adequately allowed for*
- *Confirmity and "group think" are developed and fostered*
- *The "informal organisation" and the emergent and anticipated problems associated with this phenomenon are not adequately taken into account*
- *Control and authority systems are "hopelessly outdated"*
- *Judicial processes are inadequate*
- *Conflict handling and resolution mechanisms are poorly developed*
- *Distortion and thwarting of communication and innovative ideas take place because of hierarchial divisions*
- *Mistrust and fear of reprisals prevent the full utilization of human resources from taking place*
- *Professional people, "knowledge workers" and the scientific information and technology they bring to the organisation, are poorly absorbed*
- *People are modified to become dull, grey, conditioned "organisation men"*

5. **Likert** (1967)

In studying organisational effectiveness the author came to the conclusion that three kinds of variables i.e. causal, intervening and end-result variables should be taken into account when the effectiveness of a manager and/or organisation is to be measured.

The relationships among these variables are depicted in the following figure :

Figure 1

Relationship between causal, intervening and output variables (Likert 1967), pp 47 - 77)

Casual variables ⟶	Intervening variables ⟶	Output variables
Leadership Strategies, abilities and styles	Commitment to objectives	Output
Management's decisions	Motivation and morale of members	Costs
Organisational	Skills in Leadership	Earnings
Organisational Philosophy, Objectives	Communications	
Policies and Structure	Conflict resolution	Turnover
	Decision-making	
Technology, etc.	Problem-solving	Profits, market share

Likert observes that the relationships should be seen in terms of time. He states that a change in causal variables will be reflected by a change in end-result-variables after a time lag of three to five years. Managers typically have a shorter time perspective and therefore tend to concentrate on intervening and end-result-variables, neglecting causal variables. The longer term result inevitably is that the organisation is less than optimally effective.

6. **Mintzberg** (1973; 1979)

In his earlier work Mintzberg studied managerial work. He came to the conclusion that managers had to play a large number of roles classified as *Inter-personal* (figurehead, leader, liaison roles), *Informational* (monitor, disseminator, spokesman roles), *Decisional* (entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator and negotiator roles). The author indicated that communication was a central function of a manager — the way in which he carried out most of the work entailed in these roles. In the same book Mintzberg (1973; 1979) wrote about the characteristics of managerial work, and distinguished the following characteristics.

- *Much work at an unrelenting pace*
- *Activity characterized by brevity, variety and fragmentation*
- *Preference for live action i.e. attention to issues that are current, specific, well-defined rather than abstract and long term*
- *Attraction to the (quick) communication media (verbal) instead of slower media, i.e. written media*
- *The manager is the main, sometimes only, link between his organisation and a network of contacts*
- *The managerial job is a blend of rights and duties – he is pushed by his job but can also exert leadership*

It seems, in summary, as if managers are conditioned by their jobs. Managers, therefore, at least after a while, prefer to work in the way described rather than in a slower, more deliberate, planned way. Short term decision-making is preferred to long-term planning.

In this regard Zaleznik's work (1977) may throw further light on the situation of the manager Zaleznek (1977) distinguishes between "managers" and "leaders". Managers are seen as the conservers of the status quo and as reacting to their environments. Leaders are depicted as active change agents, unhappy with the present situation. It seems, the author claims, as if organisations tend to breed "managers" while modern organisations actually need more "leaders". If Mintzberg's (1977) ideas about the demands made on managers are correct, it seems reasonable to expect that managers will have difficulty to behave constantly like "leaders". They are probably in most cases already so overwhelmed (overloaded) by the demands of their jobs that long term

planning (requiring reflection, systematic analysis and weighing up of information, etc.) becomes an almost impossible demand and a vicious circle is created.

In his later work Mintzberg (1979) studied organisation structures. He identified five main organsational structures : the *simple structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisional structure* and the *adhocracy*. Mintzberg (1979) came to the conclusion, however, that all these structures were made up of five components. These components are identified as the *Strategic apex,* the *middle line, operating core, technostructure* and the *support structure*. Each of these parts of the organisation increases its influence in a different way. The strategic apex gathers power by means of centralization of decisions while the operating core becomes more influential by becoming more professional. The middle line of the organisation tries to balkanize. The support structure influences the other parts of the organisation through co-operation and participation and the technostructure gets its power through standardization of the work in other parts of the organisation. That this creates a great deal of conflict and different expectations seems obvious.

Consequences of organisational phenomena

Based on the description of organisational functioning given by the authors cited above the following generalizations are made :

1. Organisations are, contrary to the classic view, places of great complexity with a lack of consistency. That this can lead to different frames of reference and semantic problems is evident. Organisations tend to try to lessen uncertainty and in this process become less able to adapt optimally to their rapidly changing environments (Cyert & March, Thompson).
2. There is a great potential for inter-group conflict (Mintzberg, 1979; Thompson, 1967; Cyert & March, 1963). The development of intergroup conflicts follows a predictable pattern (Schein, 1980) which includes behaviours like selective listening, negative judgments of other people, low credibility of communication and filtering of information.
3. Organisations are often inhospitable environments for individuals who are often in conflict with the organisation and its value systems (England, 1967; Argyris, 1957; Bennis, 1966). Different frames of reference can in this way be created.
4. Great personal demands are made on managers who often suffer from information and role overload and have, under great pressure, too little time to communicate properly (Mintzberg, 1973; Cyert & March 1963).
5. In organisations greater emphasis tends to be placed on quick short-

term results than on long-term planning and attention to causal variables (Likert, 1967; Mintzberg, 1973), resulting in great time pressure on people in the organisation.

6. Organisations inherently have a status hierarchy created by the bureaucratic model according to which they mostly function (Argyris, 1957; Bennis, 1966; Likert, 1967; Fayol, 1949). This leads to status differences which can be source of poor communication.

Conclusion

In this paper some barriers to communication have been described. Some of the wide literature on how organisations and managers in them function, was then used to describe organisational phenomena. Finally, some speculations are offered as the underlying reasons for poor communication in organisations.

It can be said that some writers tend to study communication and defects in the process by giving attention to interpersonal processes only (see for instance Rogers and Roethlisberger, 1952; Hall, 1973; Baird & Wieting, 1979). This is not regarded as a wrong or unfruitful approach. From the present analysis the tentative conclusion is drawn that the study of organisational phenomena from a more macro perspective can also make a useful contribution to

- *our understanding of the reasons and development of communication barriers and,*
- *the design of ways in which underlying reasons for poor communication can be eliminated and whereby communication can be improved.*

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