

COMMUNICATION DOWN, UP, ACROSS

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Success of an organization or business firm is directly related to the effectiveness of its internal information flow. As the management process becomes increasingly more complex, alert executives are giving added attention to internal communication. Communication can best be studied and improved when it is viewed in relation to its path-flow, DOWN, UP, ACROSS.

Communication DOWN

The actuating or directing function of management is performed by information, instructions and orders flowing downward in an organization. Downward-flowing information sets activities in motion, prepares employees for impending changes, and explains policies, procedures and rules. Specifically, good downward information will:

- discourage misinformation,
- lessen fear and suspicion,
- cause a feeling of being well-informed,
- reduce grievances, and
- develop an "esprit de corps."

What should be communicated to employees other than normal instructions and orders?

- Anything they might think someone in authority is trying to keep from them.
- All that they will find out sooner or later. If for some reason they cannot be told the entire story, executives can say, "Changes are in the offing," or "We are telling all we can at this time—more will be released as soon as possible."

¹"Management Review," American Management Association, September, 1972.

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- Anything which will affect either their status or work.

Techniques for improving communication downward:

Use the supervisory line for instructions. Never short-circuit intermediate supervisors when orders or assignments are involved. Messages passed down the supervisory line should be worded to leave the least possible room for interpretation. Also, any information of a personal nature to an employee should be passed down the supervisory line.

For general information, use as many direct communication methods as possible, so that employees receive unfiltered information. Some direct methods are bulletin boards, house organs, general meetings and mailouts with pay checks. Remember, any message that goes through someone else stands the chance of being filtered or interpreted by that person's own frame of reference.

Communication UP

Control in an organization is exercised through communication flowing upward. Changes in plans, organization, policies and procedures spring from this flow. The effectiveness of downward-flowing communication can best be judged by what flows up.

Some false assumptions executives commonly make about their employees:¹

- "My subordinate supervisors really know what I want."
- "They really care whether I get it."
- "They have the tools to produce it."
- "The means by which they report results are reliable."

Certain types of information flow upward easily in an organization. These types are:

- That which the executive will hear anyway, possibly from the "wrong" person who might think he will gain by tipping the executive off!
- Things that make the subordinate look good. No subordinate wishes to have his superiors learn anything which might be discreditable to him. Much filtering takes place.
- Information which the subordinate thinks will please the superior. He soon learns what a superior likes to hear. Many subordinates feel they do not want to be the bearer of bad news. They may, therefore, in good faith, shield the superior from negative information.

Actions which can improve communication upward:

- Don't harbor the false assumptions listed above.
- Evaluate information coming up the line in accordance with the "easy-flow criteria."
- Require information on a regular basis that can be both qualitatively and quantitatively related to definite objectives and goals of the organization.
- Be a good listener. This is an art.
- Involve employees in the planning stages of all possible activities.
- Institute and administer a meaningful employee performance evaluation system.
- Conduct in-service training for subordinate supervisors on the subject of communication. This publication might help with lesson plans.

Communication ACROSS

Coordination of activities within an organization is only as effective as the ACROSS communication that takes place. Some of the same problems encountered in DOWN and UP communication are found in ACROSS communication, but they are usually not as prevalent. Those who have the most problems in achieving good lateral communication and coordination within an organization are those who rely completely on the cooperation of others.

Cooperation is very important, but since it is a function of individual whims and feelings it can be erratic. More than cooperation is needed in a well-run organization.

Ways of achieving good lateral communication by structuring for it:

- Use procedures which require the specific involvement of key people in accomplishing an activity. Don't leave it to the "cooperative spirits" of individuals.
- Design the organization so that individuals requiring the most communicative interchange will functionally be together.
- Develop layout to make message-sending and message-receiving easy between individuals. Physical proximity of key individuals has been found to be one of the major factors affecting lateral communications in an organization.
- Conduct well-run staff meetings.
- Delegate decision-making to the lowest possible level in the organization.

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