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A systems approach to an into organizational communication within the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia : An action research study

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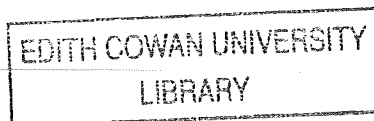
**A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO AN INVESTIGATION INTO
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE FIRE AND
EMERGENCY SERVICES AUTHORITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA:
AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY**

**Ellen Jones
Bachelor of Arts (Public Relations)**

**This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor
of Communications Honours**

**Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries
Edith Cowan University**

December, 2005



USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

Research suggests that a rapidly changing environment due to advancing technology, globalization, expanding world markets, changing populations is resulting in the need for a change to workplace practices. Emerging issues due to an aging population and the anticipated shrinkage of the workforce with the retirement of the baby boomers is indicating the need for the development of new skills. Through a real-life case study, this thesis looks into the aspects of organizational life that impact on effective communication. Through an action research approach implications are drawn from a systems theory view of communication. Action research and systems thinking enables the researcher to analyse real problems and draw conclusions, at the same time, from informed theoretical considerations.

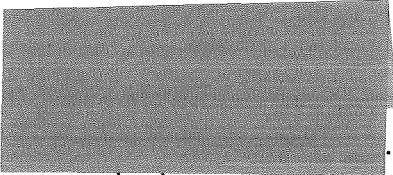
A key finding of the research was the viewpoint from participants that appeared to suggest that adherence to an explicit chain of command through a strong hierarchical structure was a solution to organizational communication problems, despite the push for flatter organizational structures in recent management literature. The study suggests a strategic pathway to organizational communication that focuses on improving information flow and improved communication skills. The researcher believes that increased efforts to improve information flow and the communication skills of staff through organizational development interventions will be key to managing change and the emerging issues of this millennium.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education.
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I commenced my honours degree as a pathway to a PhD. Although I must be careful to keep in mind that this is just an honours thesis and unfair to liken it to the work and commitment required to complete a PhD, I take this opportunity to describe my journey because it was certainly eventful and at one stage I wondered if I would be able to complete it.

Less than half way into my journey I was diagnosed with breast cancer—a life altering disease that had the potential to cheat me of completing my work. Thankfully however, it was not the end of my world but after the initial shock gave me the renewed impetus to see my honours degree to completion.

As to a PhD ... if I make the grade ... who knows? Cancer certainly puts you in touch with your own mortality and it may be time to re-evaluate or a reason to push through with renewed force and determination to complete a PhD. I certainly have enjoyed my learning journey and will always have a textbook on 'communication' in my hand and be 'on the hunt' for new material.

There are many people I would like to thank for their patience and encouragement during my journey, particularly during my illness or 'brush with cancer'. Firstly my supervisor at Edith Cowan University, Dr Mark Balnaves. Secondly, but in no specific order, academic staff who imparted valuable knowledge to me throughout the course: Dr Lelia Green, Dr Jan Herrington, Dr Mardie O'Sullivan and Mr Kevin Smith.

Kevin Smith was an inspiration and instrumental in getting me started on my research. I am particularly thankful to him for his guidance and the resources he made available to me.

There are many people from the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia including the Corporate Executive Team who authorised the study and those whose identity shall remain anonymous. To those that will remain anonymous I offer thanks and gratitude and hopefully have represented you properly in the transcripts contained in this thesis.

Lastly, but by no means least, my family, especially my husband Bruce—without whose support and encouragement throughout my ‘personal’ and educational journey I would not have been able to complete this work. I am sure I must have driven him crazy at times when all I could talk about was my research. However, he did not show any resistance ... just enthusiasm, encouragement and loving support. To Bruce, I thank you.

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS THESIS

Acronym	Description
BFS	Bush Fire Service
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CET	Corporate Executive Team
DFSC	Director Fire Services Country
DFSM	Director Fire Services Metropolitan
DM	District Manager
DO	District Officer
DSO	District Support Officer
EMT	Executive Management Team
ED	Executive Director
EDFS	Executive Director Fire Services
FESA	Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia
FIRS	Fire Incident Reporting System
FTE	Full time equivalent
HS	Human Services
IT	Information Technology
LG	Local Government
OMP	Operational Management Program
OMS	Operations Management System
SAI	Standard Administrative Instruction
SEP	Skills Enhancement Program
SO	Station Officer
SOI	Standard Operating Instruction
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Thank God, communication isn't a disease, because we know so little about it. (Marsteller, as cited in Newsom et al, 2004).

I first became interested in organizational communication through completion of a degree in public relations. Subsequent work in public relations before advancement to the field of corporate planning, policy development, and the strategic management of large-scale corporate events further fuelled by interest. Through my study and real-life organizational experiences, I have found that people frequently pay lip-service to the value of communication, or at least acknowledge the value of effective communication but appear to fail miserably in commitment, or attempts, if any, to improve it. Perhaps, however, my summation is too harsh because in some cases management genuinely do have a desire to improve communication particularly when problems arise, but don't know how to go about it—a factor succinctly described in the quote above. I recognise also that it is all too easy to blame organizational ills on poor communication when other factors are at play.

However, I believe that efforts to improve communication should be ongoing and the literature and research certainly reinforces this view. In fact, I continuously marvel at the amount of literature on the subject of organizational communication and am excited by any new material I can lay my hands on, devouring the concepts and ideas proposed. I am particularly interested in those that prescribe an innovative approach rather than the traditional approach which revolves around the 'company newsletter' and methods which only constitute one way communication. In fact the more I learn and read I shudder at how much I did not know at the beginning of my research. My thesis while throwing light on the factors of organizational life that impact on communication today hopefully will not only contribute to the body of knowledge of organizational communication,

but also to the advancement of internal communication practices in organizations that I may belong to in the future.

Purpose of the Study

Corporate leaders spend almost 80 percent of their day communicating, so it isn't surprising that leadership performance is closely related to their communication skills (McShane and Glinow, 2000, p. 232).

In the past, many studies pointed to areas where communication is crucial to the effectiveness and success of an organization. However, the individual's ability to communicate is rarely singled out for specific attention because it is assumed that most people know how to communicate. It is generally taken for granted that people learned how to communicate in their early years of life and that this ability does not require re-examination in later life (White, 1997).

In addition, as Martin (1999) pointed out, the new management principles and styles that have emerged over the last century, as well as a departure from the hierarchical style of organizations to flattened organizational management structures, means the old style model of communication moving up and down the organization is no longer considered sufficient.

According to Baskin et al (1997) the bottleneck or breakdown in the communication process usually occurs at the middle of the corporate hierarchy, at middle management and first-line supervisor levels. However, innovations in technology now enable us to communicate more quickly and efficiently than ever before (Hunt, 1996). Despite the variety and ease of communication media in today's business environment, a major challenge for managers to keep up with the rate of technology by developing the skills required to use the new communication tools but at the same time not neglecting the personal communication skills required in building effective working relationships with employees and key stakeholders.

The purpose of this study is to help understand the barriers to effective communication within an organizational context. While defining 'effective' is itself problematic, there are clearly basic human issues in communication that come to mind. Orsini (2000) reports that employee satisfaction surveys seldom

report satisfaction with the quality of communication in an organization. It is considered that research that clarifies this lack of satisfaction and changing management communication styles is a contribution to organizational communication modelling.

Adapting to change is a strategic management function that should not rest solely with the leaders of an organization. It is a function of all managers. Communication is an essential ingredient in making this happen (Potter, 1999, as seen in Wann).

The case study of my research, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia (FESA), provided a good example of an organization that had undergone major change in the last five years, and continues to do so. The focus of my study involved the Fire Services, an operational division of FESA. The division had just been through a restructure, at the time of the research. The restructure resulted in a new generation of managers being elevated to positions where it was recognised that they would need support to cope with the transition from first line managers to middle management. I proposed that an effective communication system would be key to addressing these needs and ensuring success in this critical time of change.

In 2004 my proposal was presented to FESA Corporate Executive in response to an organizational need identified by the acting Chief Executive Officer (A/CEO) at that time. The A/CEO recognised a need to investigate internal communication as a means to improved communication. The possibility of commissioned research through another university was explored on behalf of the A/CEO. However, it was decided to pursue the research through the utilization of existing in-house capabilities. As Manager Development for the Fire Services Division I had the capacity to undertake the research and also the added incentive of presenting my proposal - prepared many months prior - to a busy Corporate Executive Team (CET) in response to evolving organizational conditions. Consequently, to meet both organizational and individual needs a pilot of a phased organizational wide internal communication research project was proposed and endorsed by FESA CET. The research was conducted within FESA Fire Services Division in late 2004 with the intention of identifying strategies to address findings at the conclusion of the research.

My research approach follows an interpretative qualitative professional case study action research orientation. As O'Brien pointed out, action research is known by many other names, including participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning, and contextual action research. However, all these approaches have one core theme - learning by doing. This research approach provides a twin purpose, contributing to social science and, at the same time, attempting to solve problems in a real-world situation. It is often applied by practitioners who want to improve understanding of their practice. It provides a holistic approach to problem-solving, allowing for several different research methods to be used including: keeping a research journal, document collection and analysis, participant observation recordings, questionnaire surveys, structured and unstructured interviews and case studies (O'Brien, 2001).

While it may be considered that as an employee of the organization I may be too close to the situation, I believe that being an employee provided many advantages. For example, while my method of analysis was principally qualitative, using direct quotes of what participants said, I was able to provide an ethnographic perspective of the setting, being acutely aware of the culture and hierarchical arrangement of the organization.

However, equally to my advantage was the fact that the research was part of my honours thesis and therefore had external oversight, at a supervision and at an ethics level. In methodological terms this provides a check against a too subjective reading of phenomena in cases of participant observation and action research.

Research Questions

The overall research question is:

Understanding the barriers to effective communication within an organizational context.

Sub Questions

1. Why is communication a critical issue in today's organization?
2. What is the relationship between effective organizational communication and employee motivation?
3. What are the different types of communication required in today's organization?
4. What strategies lead to good internal communication?

Sub questions 3 and 4 were applied to a specific case study of an organization which by the very nature of its structure and tradition demonstrates a hierarchical style of organization, using traditional terms such as chain of command and rank structure. Qualitative research was designed to document the type of communication used within the organization. It was deemed that this data would be critical to analysing the effectiveness of internal communication in the organization and the communication skills required of managers in order to recommend strategies to improve communication.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 provides an overview of my learning journey, the purpose of the research and specific research questions. Chapters 2 and 3 provide an account of the literature review. Chapter 2 introduces the literature of organizational communication, touching on the significance of a modified systems theoretical approach to the study. Chapter 3 considers systems theory in more depth as a way of understanding organizational communication processes. Chapter 4 looks at the methodology, focusing on research design, the procedure and techniques used to gather data from the target population, and analysis of the data. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study and the key issues that impact on communication. While the underlying purpose of the research was to help understand the barriers to effective communication in a hierarchical organization, the design of the research was influenced by preliminary findings from research conducted at executive management level which indicated specific areas of investigation. Organizational communication was examined from within these contexts and the research findings are therefore grouped accordingly in the following categories: the Dissemination of Information; Change communication; and Professional development. Chapter 6 brings the findings of the research to a

conclusion. This chapter discusses all elements of the thesis, relating it to identified needs in a changing environment in the supersystem of the unit of analysis.

Summary

This chapter established the context of the research and defined the research questions. It provided a background to the author, and the author's interests. It outlined the purpose of the study, identifying the unit of analysis and the methodology chosen, principally qualitative research in a state government agency on internal communication with a particular emphasise on the middle management level group. While it is crucial to select an appropriate methodology, it was deemed that an action research approach to a real-life case study through a systems view of communication was well suited to this research project because it provided a way of creating greater understanding of systems theory, meeting both an organization's and individual's needs, and hopefully contributing to the body of knowledge of organizational communication.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Organizational Communication

A large and varied literature exists on organizational communication. It has been studied as a discipline since the middle of the last century (Harris, 2002). Organizational communication and its associated research, is of particular interest to theorists of management, communication, public relations, organizational behaviour and human resources. While much of the research has focused on the impact of change and new communication technologies, writers across all the disciplines support the fact that the communication needs of organizations are changing rapidly due to environmental factors such as world events, globalisation, technology, downsizing, mergers, acquisitions, and diversity.

In the past, the chain of command in hierarchical organizations did not require employees to be highly skilled communicators. All that people thought was required was the dissemination of information from one level to another. Today, however, employees outside the communications function are expected to understand and demonstrate responsibilities and communication roles inbuilt in their positions and are increasingly becoming responsible for communication outcomes (Fleisher, 1999).

Amongst 'Ten Best Forecasts' for 2005 and beyond published by the World Future Society – an association that evaluates alternative futures – two forecasts regarding 'work trends' identified 'skills for the future' which arguably are reliant on a person's ability to communicate. For instance:

Skills for tomorrow. Employers will place more emphasis on skills that cannot be automated, such as caring, judgement, intuition, ethics, inspiration, friendliness, and imagination ...

Skills for right now. Among the skills that will help keep workers marketable are self-motivation, time management, strong oral and written communication, relationship building, salesmanship, problem solving, information evaluation, and leadership (<http://www.wfs.org/prnd.04.htm>).

After some twenty years of corporate layoffs, downsizing and mergers due to a changing economy commentators argue that the world of organizations is changing; employee discontent around the world is on the rise; employee publics are changing so rapidly the traditional forms of communication are inadequate; and that the challenge of building good relationships with employees has never been greater (Guth and Marsh, 2003; Harris, 2002; Miller, 2003). These factors impact on communication effectiveness and bring new communication challenges for managers in today's organization.

Leitch & Neilson (2001) advocated that to improve the communication function in an organizational environment stronger links need to be developed between the disciplines of organizational communication and public relations. Through this study, I will attempt to build on that argument. A theory-based approach to the study will help explain and provide insight into organizational communication processes and the public relations function. In addition systems theory, which is common to both organizational communication and public relations, will provide a conceptual framework for understanding the structures and processes of organizations and the public relations function (Spicer, 1997).

Smith (1991) advocated that the employee communication function is an important link between management and employees and that communication managers should be aggressive in promoting healthy two way communication practices. An interesting analogy provided by the author to support these claims also supports the systems theory concept, for example:

The management organization and communication are like the cardiovascular system of the human body. The management organization is the prime top-to-bottom link with employees. It represents the network of arteries which holds the corporate body together. And communication is the lifeblood which draws its informational strength from various sources, recasts it into digestible forms and transmits the revitalized materials to every part of the corporate body.

If the power from the heart isn't strong enough to drive energies to every extremity, they will cease to function and become dead weight on the total

corporate body. And if there's no flow back to the heart of the organization, the body will atrophy and die. (p. 231)

Metaphors equally descriptive that support systems theory include:

- communication is the lifeblood of the organization;
- communication is the thread that ties the systems together;
- communication is the binding agent that cements all relationships;
- communication is the organization's embalming fluid (Goldhaber, 1993).

Systems thinking was applied to the study from both a philosophical and practical perspective as a means of examining organizational communication in a way that helps understanding of the whole rather than seeing events as independent unrelated events. Systems theory concepts help conceptualise the relationship between parts and wholes and create understanding of how they are related (Baskin, Aronoff, & Lattimore, 1997).

Environmental Change – Implications for Communication

According to Harris (2002) organizations are changing today at a rate unheard of, or even envisaged, a few years ago—whether these changes are a consequence of world events, the digital age or changes in the world economy they present factors that have significant implications on communication behaviour and processes.

World Events

The terrorist attacks in the US, worldwide anthrax incidents, war in Iraq, bombings in Indonesia, Spain and London, and increased terrorism across all nations since September 11, 2001, has undoubtedly impacted industry, the economy and society, worldwide. These events have not only resulted in new measures related to security but industries being forced to change the way they operate and conduct business.

As public relations scholar Fall (2004) pointed out, while there was evidence of immediate reactive communication in response to the terrorist attacks, communication planning was also strategic in its nature:

The 11th September terrorist attacks posed a challenge for even the most finely tuned strategists. Regardless of how solid a communication plan may have been up until that point, this tragedy forced managers to 'reprogramme' their programmes. Life as one knew it, whether in the boardroom or in the living room had changed. Managers were forced to react proactively – yet sensitively – to a situation that no one had ever encountered before ... There were no handbooks, no blueprints, no 'how-to' manuals to refer to when dealing with a crisis of such magnitude. Managers immediately employed strategic thinking and effective communication skills, in combination with their humanity, to handle this tragedy. (p. 239)

Fall's (2004) investigation into the communication strategies being employed within the tourism industry in the US to help revitalise the industry since the terrorist attacks, pointed to the fact that crisis situations demand communication programs to be strategically revamped. Fall (2004) concluded that in the aftermath of a crisis 'hard-sell' advertising campaigns are not persuasive, and that in order to react proactively to a crisis, communication programs should be revised and refined constantly.

As Harris (2002) noted, "The catastrophic events of September 11, 2001 ... provide previously unimaginable support for the impact of change on organizations" (p. 5). Industries and predictions regarding their future courses of action were forced to change. For instance the airlines and related travel industries, suffering significant financial losses, struggling to survive, had no option but to lay off hundreds of employees. The photographic industry also suffered huge financial losses in the third quarter of 2001 due to the drop in leisure travel. As Harris (2002) pointed out, "... these events provide unquestionable support for the importance of considering the interdependence of systems" (p. 5) ... a viewpoint of systems thinking which is pertinent to this study and will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Technology

The rapid expansion in the performance of the computer in the last twenty-five years and new communication technologies have unquestionably enhanced

information resources and increased the capacity of everyone in an organization to connect with others. Harris (2002) argued that the 1990s witnessed major growth in electronic communication that could be compared to a revolution as great as the industrial revolution in the 19th century.

The growth of technology has seen changes and lower costs in the transfer of information. Voice mail, email, faxes, memos, teleconferences, videoconferences and large-scale presentations and seminars are common methods of communication in today's organization. The need to spend time dictating letters, waiting for phone calls, and sending correspondence by mail has reduced. Everyone potentially receives the same message at the same time. However, it can be argued that despite these benefits, employees are, in fact, receiving more information than they can possibly process. To add to this, all communication seems urgent because of the speed of its delivery. This means that valuable time is spent by employees trying to distinguish what is important. Arguably, it can be said that the employee's ability to communicate has not, in fact, kept up with the rate of technology (Hunt, 1996).

Globalization

Nonetheless, technology has radically changed the way organizations do business today. For example, new technologies have seen the emergence of the virtual organization. The virtual organization is an exciting and popular concept that utilizes existing resources, both physical and human, from participating organizations to create new capabilities and competencies that capture the required skills, infrastructure, business processes and resources needed to take advantage of globalisation and changing business environments. Since components of the virtual organization are geographically dispersed, communication and coordination across the different time zones, different locations, different cultures, and different languages, present interesting challenges (McKay and Marshall, 2000). And as the authors also pointed out, different mental models and perspectives amongst involved parties which can contribute to communication breakdowns.

Growing decentralisation is forcing multinational organizations to put in place communication processes to manage global issues. Trends in regionalisation and the decentralization of services so that there is greater interaction with the

community brings with it increased demands on employees to perform communication functions that would normally be the sole responsibility of an organization's public affairs department. The relationships between the organization and its stakeholders and the management of stakeholders expectations are some of the communication functions now expected of managers in today's organization (Fleisher, 1999).

According to Harris (2002) changes in the world economy from a manufacturing to service, and technology based industries, have impacted on organizational communication, and the individual, and necessitated the use of different organizational communication processes and distribution systems.

Diversity

Trends in diversity have necessitated the need for enhanced communication skills in today's organizations (Hunt, 1996). As Harris (2002) pointed out, "Race and ethnicity, gender, age, physical abilities, sexual orientation, social and economic class, access to education, and other dimensions represent ongoing and significant areas of change." Many organizations are, in fact, already working on ways to take advantage of the benefits of a diverse workforce (Miller, 2003). People with different social, economic and political orientations communicate differently and respond differently to the same message. This adds to the increased and changing demands in communication (Hunt, 1996).

Dealing with people from diverse countries and cultures who have different modes of operation requires that our language is simple and that clear terms are used so that what we are trying to say is understood by the receiver (Hunt, 1996). Words and accents are easily misunderstood and voice intonation and nonverbal communication have different meanings across cultures and are often specific to a particular culture. There are also differences in the way men and women communicate. For example, men are more likely to engage in 'report talk' in conversations whereas women more often engage in relationship building 'rapport talk' (McShane and VonGlinow, 2000). Members of different cultures, religion, gender, age, and world views, demand communication skills that demonstrate sensitivity and awareness of the obstacles to effective communication.

Changing populations

Similar challenges have resulted from changing populations, and changing employment patterns and trends. According to Miller (2003) the challenges facing management and employees today in culturally diverse organizations are only beginning to be realised. Changing demographics in western industrialized countries have seen changes in populations because of the rapid growth of the world's population in non-Western nations (Guth & Marsh, 2003).

For example, in the United States the population is changing dramatically and by 2000 immigrants made up the largest percentage of the population (Newsom, Turk & Kruckberg, 2004). By 2050 it is estimated that the US population will be made up of 24 per cent Hispanic, 15 percent African American and 15 percent Asian (Bryan, 1999, cited in Miller, 2003).

European countries also show similar trends with the influx of migrants from East European countries as a result of the downfall of communist regimes, as well as employees and migrant workers crossing European borders because of the expansion of the European Union (Wilson, 1998).

According to statistics from the Australian Government more than six million people from overseas have migrated to Australia since 1945. The 2001 Census showed that the population of Australia was about 19 million and that over 200 languages were spoken – the most common of these being English, Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin. In 2002, statistics revealed that twenty five per cent of the Australian workforce consisted of workers born overseas and that fifteen per cent came from non-English speaking countries (“Productive Diversity: Australia’s Competitive Advantage”, 2004).

Miller (2003) suggested that the organizations of today and tomorrow will be populated by men and women from a diverse range of ethnic groups. Consequently, a diverse workforce means that managers must demonstrate equity, fairness and consistency in dealing with staff needs, and must be able to demonstrate competency in cross-cultural communication.

Aging Workforce

Changing demographics worldwide also indicate an increasing aging workforce. According to Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru

Goward, the necessity to retain an aging workforce and women in the workforce has become a key economic issue for sustainability and survival for Australia. And there is a growing urgency for the government, at a federal and state level, to introduce strategies to encourage women into the workforce (“Women in workforce,” 2004). In the UK the demographic profile of the working population is also changing, for example, more women of varied ages are working, more people are likely to be working beyond retirement, and the workforce is more culturally diverse (L. Harris and C Forster, 2004).

Organizational Change - Downsizing/Mergers/Acquisitions

Organizational change is the ‘way’ organizations adapt to their environment. There can be no doubt that economic, political and technological factors are transforming the workplace and forcing organizations to change (Miller, 2003). As Miller (2003) suggested, the political and cultural systems of an organization are made up of thinking and feeling human beings who can affect the change process. It would be wise therefore for leaders to consider the impact of change on the organizational communication processes. For instance, an organization undergoing change faces the need for additional communication to convey the intention of the change, particularly to employees affected by it. Times of change can mean a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity particularly to employees who are attempting to succeed in their career positions.

Guth and Marsh (2003) suggested that the challenge of building good relationships with employees has never been greater because employee discontent around the world is on the rise. Employees, often disillusioned, discouraged or disenchanted with their re-structured, flattened organization, will not tolerate rational explanations devoid of personal commitment. They demand dialogue and answers to tough questions.

Reactions to organizational change

Changes may occur at the macro level where the impact is huge and life-altering. For instance, when an organization merges with another, involving redundancies, job redefinitions and major shifts to the organizational mission and vision (Miller, 2003). Change may involve a restructure because the existing organizational structure is no longer suitable for current organizational needs (Goldhaber, 1993). Sometimes the change may be considered large but

manageable involving the adoption of a new system, such as, 'total quality management', or it may involve minor changes to systems and processes (Miller, 2003). However large or small the change, and whether it is planned or unplanned, the consideration given to communication in the change process can impact how employees might react to, and influence change (Miller, 2003). Current management literature supports the view that communication should be considered as the highest priority and first strategy for any organizational change (McShane & Von Glinow).

Education and Communication

The four functions of management: planning, leading, organising, and controlling are referred to widely in management literature. However, increasingly over the past decade, communication has been included as the fifth management function (Fall, 2004).

It can be said from the literature reviewed and direct observation that communication skills are too often taken for granted. It is presumed that from an early age people know how to communicate. This misperception is hardly surprising considering the traditional approaches to education where it is evident that communication is not treated as a key skill.

Management Oriented Education

The typical Master of Business Administration (MBA) program does not offer communication as one of the foundation units, but rather includes it as part of a unit and relies on students developing communication skills through group work (White, 1997). White & Mazur (1995) also support this view and claimed that management education and training cover communication through organization or group behaviour. The authors suggested that it is simply treated as a matter of teaching the standard presentation, writing and listening skills. They believe that communication requires much more, including imagination, emotional content, commitment and a willingness to listen and respond to others. The authors argued that management education and training needs to find new ways of training and of adapting existing programs such as the MBA program to meet increasing needs.

Public Relations Oriented Education

Wright (1995) claimed that most university-based public relations education programs do not treat internal communication as a key function either by delivering it as a separate unit or series of courses, but rather delivering it as part of a unit and usually in the form of one or two hours of lectures.

Research on the communication executive as a major public relations role, revealed that despite public relations scholars and practitioners claim to be interested in employee communication, the majority of public relations practice and research for decades has focused on external communication. To compound this, employee communications tasks are normally carried out by junior members of staff who provide the technician-related roles to public relations departments in the form of writing the company newsletter (Wright, 1995).

Investment in Employee Communication

Yet, many authors would agree with the argument that an organization's most important relationships are those relationships with its employees at all levels (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994). Employees represent an organization's greatest resource (Cutlip et al., 1994). Most of the literature supports this view and commentators agree on the value of good communication within the organization and for employees. They see it as a means to achieving a shared vision of the organization's goals (Farmer, Slater, & Wright, 1998). According to Baskin et al (1997) the negative impact of poor communication is immeasurable. Inefficiency can mean waste, high costs, low morale, absenteeism, strikes, high turnover, and accidents. While lack of communication can reduce organizational performance it can also contribute to a negative corporate culture (Kazoleas & Wright, 2001).

Nonetheless, although management at the upper level of the hierarchy recognise the critical importance of communication they are often unclear about the most effective way to achieve communication effectiveness at the lower hierarchal levels of the organization (Spillan, Mino, & Rowles, 2002). In fact, a critical function of a communication professional is often to convince management to give priority to building effective communication and to support those efforts with the necessary staffing and funding required (Kazoleas & Wright, 2001).

Smith (1991) suggested that employee communication is a legitimate and necessary management function in all types of organizations and it should rate on a par with labour relations, news relations personnel and other key staff functions. The author argued that the employee communication function should be supported by top management through legitimate policies and guidelines. The author claimed that the person responsible for the function, for example, the employee communication director, must have access to high-level company information and be required to counsel management on matters of interest to employees who require communication. The author pointed out that: “Without strong management support—by rules and by example—the function will wither and die” (p. 230).

Motivation and Communication

Organizations need resources and particularly people to fulfil their mission. Employee publics therefore constitute strategic publics for the organization because they have a stake, or interest, in the organization and can influence the organization's ability to achieve its goals (Guth & Marsh, 2003). One of the most important functions of organizational communication is to create trust and motivate employees to take action (Hunt 1996). Organizational leaders care about motivation because of its potential to improve employee work performance (Harris, 2002).

Managing a diverse workforce presents specific challenges in relation to motivating a group whose ages extend over a range of generations. It requires a sound understanding of employees' needs, desires and aspirations. In other words, an understanding of what motivates them.

The different generations that make up the workforce include the traditionalists, baby boomers, generation X, and more recently generation Y. They each have different values, work ethics, levels of education and expectations, which makes the task of communicating with them and motivating them complex.

Tymson (1998) describes the traditionalists as people with strong values who still have a major influence on the structure, values and ethics of business. They were born in the 1930s to 1945 and represent approximately 10 per cent of the workforce today. They have a strong work ethic and it was not uncommon for

many of them to stay with one organization for their whole working life. The baby boomers, born from 1946 to the 1960s, grew up in prosperous times when jobs were plentiful and major change was taking place. Additionally, equal rights and equal pay for women, and the introduction of the 1984 Sex Discrimination Act in Australia and 1986 Affirmative Action Act, saw the traditional role models being challenged and many women began working in the workforce, full time.

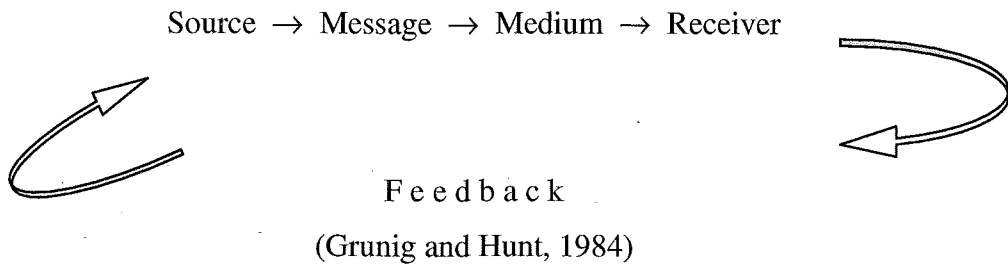
Generation X, the children of the baby boomers, born in the 1970s, account for 20 per cent of the workforce. People from this generation are highly educated, computer and Internet literate, and are known for their independence. Generation X employees are developing a new leadership style which is more team orientated and less formal (Tymson, 1998). Dwan (2004) pointed out that generation X respond well to challenges and new learning opportunities, prefer specific feedback and like to be trusted to get on and do the job their way.

Generation Y, born between 1982 and 2000, are achievement orientated, well educated and talented. They have high expectations and like to be acknowledged for their ideas and input. They enjoy humour and fun in the workplace and like to work with friends. MacKay (2004) described this rising generation of young people as having an almost unquenchable need for social contact. Having grown up in times of rapid social, cultural and economic change their natural tendency is to share and support each other. Their constant use of mobile phones and computers is as a way of maintaining that continuous contact with each other.

Managing employees across these different age groups presents challenges because misunderstanding and communication breakdowns can so easily occur. Dwan (2004) suggested that managers of the baby boomer generation need a management style that encourages and makes the most of the talents of the younger generations. Conversely, generation X and generation Y managers need to develop a management style that acknowledges and respects the experience and abilities of the older generations in the workforce. An understanding of what motivates employees across this diverse range of ages and how to communicate with them is crucial, particularly as they each have a major impact on the way organizations are run today.

Barriers to Communication

The term communication originated from the Latin word *communis* which means (to make) common. A variety of definitions and sophisticated models have been developed over time to explain the communications process, however, a simple model provided by (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984) described the following elements to the process: source; message; medium; receiver; and feedback.



In this model the arrows go from left to right, except for the returning feedback arrow. This suggests that communication is something the source does to the receiver. Although, the model is simple in design, it is not comprehensive enough to reflect the whole picture because of forces that can affect the process such as psychological, social, structural and ideological barriers (Guth & Marsh, 2003). McShane and VonGlinow (2000) described models that consider complexities and other forces such as 'noise'.

Noise

'Noise' includes psychological, social and structural barriers that can interfere with the sender's intended message. The sender and receiver will not have a genuine comprehension and understanding of the message if any part of the communication process is distorted or broken (McShane & Von Glinow, 2000). Noise does not have to be heard to hinder communication, it can be of a physical, emotional or indefinable form. In fact, a person's state of mind can hinder communication (Guth & Marsh, 2003). The message can be misinterpreted, if the perceptions of the sender and receiver are not aligned. Language differences, jargon, information overload, and filtering negative information as it goes up through the hierarchy, are many of the barriers to effective communication in an organizational environment (McShane & Von Glinow, 2000).

Complexities

Harris (2002) suggested that the process of communication is complex and the dynamics not easy to explain. From an organizational context of ongoing activities and relationships, all behaviour is potentially communicative. Communication is constant and has no necessary beginning or end because we are sending and receiving at the same time. In other words everyone in the transaction can be affected at the same time. It can be said that communication does not have an opposite, because body language, silence, tone of voice, all have effects. Communication does not only occur therefore when it is planned, conscious or successful (Windahl, Signitzer, & Olson, 1992). One cannot not communicate. However, this does not mean that everything that happens is communication. It must be meaningful to one party. As Harris (2002) pointed out, this helps explain the reason for an innocent action resulting in a negative response.

Organizational Climate

Leaders recognise the importance of communication in empowering employees and gaining their commitment, particularly in times of change. However, organizational policies and management structures can affect the communication climate of an organization. Effective communication is dependent on a positive organizational climate based on trust, openness and honesty. Only when trust is present can real communication occur (Baskin et al., 1997).

Organizational Dynamics

Organizational dynamics can hinder effective communication. Structural and ideological barriers at different levels of the management hierarchy make it difficult for employees to communicate freely (Putnis & Petelin, 1999). Management philosophy and approach can influence organizational communication negatively. According to Harris (2002) theories such as Henri Fayol's Theory of Classical Management, Max Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy and Frederick Taylor's Theory of Scientific Management are evident in many organizations today. Miller (2003) examined the management functions advocated by these theories and discusses their weaknesses in terms of how they affect the communication processes within these organizations.

Organizational Structure

Organizational Structure is another influencing factor on the effectiveness of communication. Large organizations are likely to place emphasis on bureaucratic and mechanistic ways of making decisions (McElreath, 1993). Mechanistic structures have a narrow span of control, a tall hierarchy of people, many rules and procedures, limited decision making at lower levels, and the flow of communication is vertical (McShane and Von Glinow 2000).

White and Mazur (1995) believe that communication should be a two-way process and is of more value to those organizations which are flexible in their structure and less hierarchical. Nevertheless, classical structures are necessary in situations where an individual could cause harm by making an un-informed decision and in work that is highly repetitive and routine. Downward communication is vital to the effective functioning of this type of organization. However, the process itself is ineffective because information is filtered as it is passed downward through the hierarchy. Upward communication is also ineffective because management is in control of the process and the barriers can include risk, distortion, and a reluctance on the part of the employee to communicate upward (Harris, 2002). Structural changes involving additional layers to an organization's structure also have communication implications that need to be considered.

Communication Flow

There are a number of directions in which communication can flow in an organization. In a mechanistic style of organization, supported by the classical management theorists, the most important route for communication is downward along the chain of organizational hierarchy, from managers to employees. However, horizontal communication and free-flowing communication is likely to occur at the higher levels of the organization where the tasks revolve around planning and coordination. Harris's (2002) discussion on the direction of communication flow, communication channels and communication style within the classical management style of organization is of particular relevance to this study.

Summary

When we talk about 'communication' we are not, as the discussion above suggests, talking about 'commonsense'. There are a variety of factors that influence how people communicate, in the broader contexts (social and cultural) and in the narrower contexts (specific actions within organization such as flow and style). Factors such as organizational politics and the exclusion of employees in the communication process are variables that will be discussed in Chapter 3. In Chapter 3 I will also look more closely at the systems theory language and concepts and its relevance to this study.

CHAPTER 3

Literature Review

Systems Theory as a Way of Understanding Organizational Communication

As one can conclude from the preceding discussion, there are many factors that influence organizational communication. To study communicative activities in isolation therefore would serve little purpose. The holistic approach of General Systems Theory will be applied here as a heuristic to the research because it does not take a person, or an event alone and look at that in isolation. It focuses on the relationship between people, and between people and environments. It looks at the transactional nature of communication. It sees communication as an unending process and highlights the mutual causality, that is, cause and effect among the interdependent parts of the system (Windahl et al., 1992).

Research and Systems Theory

In the applied social sciences, general systems theory, helps explain and predict organizational behaviour (McElreath, 1993). It has been used as a model to examine the complex nature of organizations and to help describe the development, structure and maintenance of human organizations (Kreps, 1990). Walton (1969) cited in Grunig et al (1995) supported this view and argued that the dynamics of the organization is best understood by examining its system of communication because it is indicative of the total behaviour of the organization.

Many organizational communication theories have been based on systems theory concepts because they help to analyse the complexities of organizational interdependencies and help gain greater understanding of the communication process between the organization and the groups that have a stake in its actions (Miller, 2003). Systems theory provides a way to look at the overall communication system and organizational effectiveness with its interrelated

subparts and subsystems which affect the entire system (L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Researchers have used systems theory because it highlights the concepts of exchange, feedback and interdependence which are fundamental to communication theory (Miller, 2003).

Systems concepts have also been used as a basis to building a theoretical understanding of public relations by many scholars of public relations (Pavlik, 1987). Pearson (1990) suggested that in the last decade systems theory was beginning to play an important role in public relations and that public relations textbooks were beginning to cover the systems theory perspective, nevertheless some were lacking in this area.

Public Relations Practices

Leitch & Neilson (2001) described three types of organizational public relations: intersystem organization relations; intraorganizational relations; and organization public relations. Intersystem organization relations refers to the type of public relations practiced between an organization such as a corporation and a government department. Intraorganizational relations focuses on the internal public relations of an organization and organization-public relations refers to relations between organizations and all other publics (Leitch & Neilson, 2001).

All three types of public relations practices are relevant to this investigation because of the nature of the case study, that is, internal communication and the communication process in a government agency—an organization that provides services to the community on a statewide basis. Systems theory was applied to the study to help explain how an organization can develop and grow and how the subsystems of organizational communication and public relations function can blend together to meet increased communication needs. As Grunig and Hunt (1984) pointed out, the public relations role of an organization was to support the organization's subsystems by helping them to communicate with the other subsystems within the organization.

Founders of Systems Theory

The founder of systems theory biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy argued that while general systems theory was ideally suited to the fields of biology and engineering, it was also applicable to all levels of science. He argued that it could

be applied to the study of a single cell and to society itself (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Organizational theorists Katz and Kahn demonstrated the first and most successful application of the theory to the study of organizational processes. Thereafter the view of most organizational theorists progressed from the traditionalist view of organizations as self-contained and self-sufficient machines to a more contemporary view where organizations were viewed as complex organisms that need to interact with their environment in order to survive (Miller, 2003).

Evolution of the theory in recent years has seen a new area of systems theorizing emerging, based on physics and cosmology, that encompasses chaos theory, complexity theory and self-organising systems theory. The author suggested that this "new science" systems theory provides new ways of thinking about organizations and that not all systems should be seen as linear, striving towards equilibrium, but that new science systems are complex and adaptive in which order can emerge from disorder and small changes can result in major effects (Miller, 2003).

Concepts Applicable to the Study

Organizational communication

Organizational communication can be viewed from two perspectives: communication as a process and organizations as systems that are interrelated and interdependent. Organizations are formed to accomplish some type of purpose and are understood as system based entities (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). This means that they are made up of systems and subsystems of behaviour that are interrelated, interdependent and interacting rather than static structures. Systems thinking represents the organization as a complex set of interacting interdependent components that adapts to environmental conditions (Harris, 2002). Components include individual members of the organization, structural and functional groups, organizational technologies and equipment. All components are dependent on one another and any change in one affects the other. Also supporting this view was Grunig and Hunt (1984) who stated that each subsystem not only affects other subsystems but the whole organization as well.

Public Relations Function

Much research and the development of theory by scholars in the field of public relations has been influenced by systems theory. In fact, modern definitions of public relations stem from a systems theory perspective (Spicer, 1997). Pavlik (1987) claimed that a public relations paradigm, based on general systems theory, had emerged from the work of eminent scholars who conducted research in efforts to build a theoretical understanding of public relations. Windahl et al (1992) argued that no other form of planned communication fits better into systems theory than public relations.

The word 'public' in public relations originated from the Latin phrase *poplicus* or *populus*. The term public means "the people". Today, it generally refers to common access or matters of mutual interest and concern which means, in other words, a collection of individuals who emerge and organise in response to a problem (Leitch & Neilson, 2001).

Guth & Marsh (2003) described a public as any group who has a common interest in a particular situation. The authors argued that the word stakeholder and public are often used interchangeably, however they do not have the same meaning. Some publics may have no association with the organization whatsoever, whereas a stakeholder has a stake, or interest, in an organization, or issue involving the organization. This means that all stakeholder groups are publics, however not all publics are stakeholders (Guth & Marsh, 2003). It also means that employees are critical stakeholders and publics to the organization because their support is crucial to the achievement of the organization's mission and strategic objectives.

Systems Terminology

Open Versus Closed Systems

The literature on systems theory refers to open and closed systems. Open systems interact with, and adapt to changes in the environment (Pavlik, 1987). A closed system on the other hand has no interaction with its environment. Katz and Kahn (1966) argued that:

...the study of organizations should include the study of organization-environment relations. We must examine the way in which an organization is tied to other structures, not only those that furnish economic inputs and support but also structure that can provide political influence and societal legitimation. The open-system emphasis on such relationships implies an interest in properties of the environment itself. Its turbulence or placidity, for example, limits the kinds of relationships that an organization can form with systems in the environment and indicates also the kinds of relationships that an organization will require to assure its own survival. (p. 31)

As Pavlik (1987) pointed out, public relations theorists have mostly been influenced by the open systems concept. Heath (1990) suggested that when information systems can flow in and out of the systems organization freely, the information will allow the systems to adapt to one another and achieve systems goals. A systems perspective provides direction on the adjustments that must be made for an open system to adapt to its environment in order to survive. It highlights the role communication plays in coordinating efforts between the organization and its environment and among the functional components of the organization (Kreps, 1990), the subsystems of the organization.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) argued that organizational theorists believe the public relations function provides a 'boundary' role whereby it helps organizational subsystems to communicate across the boundaries of the organization to external publics. Spicer (1997) confirmed this view by claiming that organizational public relations practitioners should be fulfilling the boundary spanning role where communication is required in the organization's wider environment. The author argued that the boundary spanning concept was derived from open systems theory and claimed that from a public relations perspective, an examination of the organization/environment communication process should be based on knowledge of, perceptions about, history with, and expectations of the various stakeholders in that environment. The author concluded that the typical day of the public relations practitioner should be linking the organization with its larger environment through: media relations; community relations; investor relations; issues management; and marketing communications.

Cybernetics

Cybernetics, the language of systems theory, is the study of a goal-oriented organization that adapts to a changing environment in order to achieve its goals. Shockley-Zalabak (1994) suggested that a systems approach provides a way of exploring how people, technologies and environments integrate to influence behaviour in a goal-oriented organization. Fall (2004) argued that communication programs need to adapt to the needs of changing organizational goals and environmental demands.

From a systems perspective the process of “change is viewed as part of a cybernetic process in which positive and negative feedback are used to enhance the accomplishment of organizational goals” (Miller, 2003, p. 219).

Open systems are goal orientated and are made up of various subsystems. Organizations achieve their goals through interaction with the environment. The mission and purpose of the organization is what drives the organization and controls the behaviour of the system (Pavlik, 1987). An effective organization manages this exchange through the public relations function which helps organizational units work together to adapt to a changing environment (Spicer, 1997).

Grunig (1979) explained that the main objective of system public relations is to manage and neutralise opposition to the achievement of organizational objectives (Grunig 1979, seen in Roth). Nonetheless, as Heath (1990) noted, a systems approach must involve ongoing evaluation of the turbulent changes in the environment and their effects because a free and open exchange of information can miss the dynamics of goal setting, strategic planning and managed adjustments.

Homeostasis

“The public relations functions seek to maintain a degree of homeostasis between events and forces in the environment and organization” (Spicer, 1997). An open system strives for balance or homeostasis. One of the principles of systems theory is that the parts of a system tend to achieve balance (Heath, 1990). Leitch & Neilson (2001) argued that public relations is about the many different ways in which publics interact with different types of organizations, on an unequal

terrain of competing discourses and access to power and resources. The authors suggested that the relations between a system organization and its public are not only about communicating to achieve objectives, but about altering and adapting to the nature and composition of the publics themselves. In other words it is about balance. A system's survival depends on balance. It is essential therefore for a communications planner to be aware that it will be necessary to adapt to the various systems the planner effects and is affected by (Windahl et al., 1992).

Maintaining balance between an organization and its publics is one of the main functions of public relations (Pavlik, 1987). Spicer (1997) argued that the public relations function revolves around the interaction and relationships between an organization and its environment and that it will continue to strive to align the organization with elements in its environment.

Achieving balance involves the use of feedback from organizational publics and stakeholders in the wider organizational environment. The public relations literature widely supports the view that symmetrical communication provides the right fit for systems theory (Grunig, 1984; Spicer, 1997; Pavlik, 1987) and model to achieve that balance. In fact, Spicer (1997) argued that systems theory led Grunig and Hunt (1984) to differentiation between two models of public relations, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical.

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical communication is the most evolved and sophisticated model of public relations. The characteristic of this model is balance between an organization and its publics. Its goal is mutual understanding and it uses research to monitor attitudes and beliefs in order to establish the level of mutual understanding between an organization and its publics (Pavlik, 1987). The communication model diagram described on p. 19 of this literature review describes the two-way asymmetric model of public relations which constitutes scientific persuasion (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It uses research to increase the persuasiveness of its communication efforts (Pavlik, 1987). (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) suggested that the theories of symmetrical internal communication are beneficial to organizations dealing with significant change. Heath (1990) suggested that the two way model of communication is superior because it is not manipulative and allows for information and influence to flow freely between the organization and its stakeholders.

Systems processes

As Miller (2003) explained, systems are characterised by input-throughput-output processes. 'Input' is information from the environment. The system then works on this input and transforms it in some way, which is 'throughput' and then the system returns the information, which is then known as 'output'. Two kinds of processes describe these operations: the process of exchange and feedback. Input through to output requires a process of exchange with the environment outside the system. Feedback is critical to throughput because it is the information that helps the interdependent components of the system function (Miller, 2003). One can conclude from this that systems theory forces the researcher to focus on the relationship and exchange of energy between the organization and its environment.

Practical Application of Systems Theory

Whilst there is much theorizing on systems theory throughout the public relations literature, a gap exists, evident by public relations textbooks, on the practical application of the theory to specific case studies. Methodological approaches to investigating organizational communication from a systems theory perspective identified by organizational communication theorist Miller (2003) include network analysis, modelling techniques, and case analysis. Network analysis considers the relationships among components of the system, in this case, people, and maps those relationships to examine the communication relationships that have occurred through the organizational system. Modelling techniques use sophisticated statistical methods to model patterns of communicative behaviour and events in an organization. Case analysis through observation, interviews, questionnaires, and archives, provides the researcher with an understanding of how and why the system develops and behaves as it does (Miller, 2003).

Critiques of systems theory

Spicer (1997) suggested that a better understanding of what systems theory directs us to examine was needed. The author suggested that while critiques of systems theory highlight areas in which the theory is most useful they also draw attention to those areas in which some other framework needs to be applied. Systems theory does not explain how communication works in helping to bring

about changes in perceptions or understandings which is an important function of public relations.

The author also claimed that critiques of the systems oriented model of public relations argue that even the idealistic two-way symmetrical model of public relations, promoted by systems theory, ignores or does not adequately address issues of organizational power. The author suggested that maintaining homeostasis between an organization and its environment demonstrates an organization centred approach and fulfilling the need of the organization as a priority over the needs of the entire system structure.

Summary

While the application of systems theory to the study will help conceptualise the complexity of interaction between organizational components and create understanding of the linkages and the way in which processes are interconnected between an organization and its environment, it is questionable whether it can take into account incidents of organizational power where an organization can refuse to engage a stakeholder group. It is also questionable whether it can address organizational dynamics and complexities such as organizational politics, or managerial bias, where the exclusion of some employee groups can occur (Spicer, 1997). To build on the findings from the research therefore, further investigation into how employees process and accept information would be of value to the study. Diffusion theory would be a good starting point because it would create understanding of the influencing factors of interpersonal and group networks and their relationship to communication flow in an organizational environment (Guth & Marsh, 2003).

In sum, the literature review confirms a need to develop theory that can be applied to an organizational setting in order to evaluate the communication processes and practices of an organization. It also confirms a need for further research to help identify how the disciplines of public relations and organizational communication can collectively better support the increasing communication needs of an organization and its employees, as well as address other gaps identified by the research.

Chapters 2 and 3 provided an account of the literature review. Chapter 2 explored the history of organizational communication and examined the impact of environmental change on communication. It attempted to integrate the two disciplines of organizational communication and public relations. It looked at management and public relations education, motivational theories, and the barriers to effective communication. Chapter 3 introduced systems theory as a way of studying an organization's communication systems and processes. It examined theories based on systems concepts including open systems theory, and explained the concepts of cybernetics and homeostasis. It described the research techniques used in the application of systems thinking to an organization's communication system and discussed the implications of organizational power and politics to this process. The next chapter will look at the methodology approach to the research.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

At the outset of this research project, I proposed two outcomes: basic research designed to test and refine theory; and applied research designed to improve communication in a specific organizational environment.

Literature Review

A comprehensive review of the existing literature was conducted to examine theory and investigate the barriers to effective communication within an organizational context.

This investigation of the literature also focused on answering the following research sub questions:

- Why is communication a critical issue in today's organization?
- What is the relationship between effective organizational communication and employee motivation?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research techniques were used to address the following sub questions:

- What are the different types of communication processes required in today's organization?
- What strategies lead to good internal communication?

Qualitative research methods included:

- Individual interviews
- Focus group discussions
- Observational research

Target Population

The target population of the research included the executive and employees at senior and middle management levels at a State government agency—a subsystem of the larger system of the Western Australian Government.

Case Study

The Fire Services Division, a subsystem of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia, was the unit of analysis of my research.

The establishment of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority in Western Australia (FESA) in 1999 brought together two Western Australian fire services (the Fire and Rescue Service and the Bush Fire Service), the State Emergency Service, Volunteer Marine Rescue Services, Emergency Management Services and Unexploded Ordnance Services. The organization employs around 1,100 full time and part time staff and supports approximately 24,500 volunteers. The Fire Services Division, the focus of this study, comprises approximately 854 staff and 19,000 volunteers.

Procedure

The literature review, interviews and observational research assisted in identifying issues to be explored further in the focus group discussions.

Discussions and individual interviews were conducted with the organization's executive and Fire Services senior management to investigate communication issues and establish management's perception of communication within the division. One on one interviews were conducted with the following personnel:

- Fire Services staff at executive management team (EMT) level (2)
- Fire Services staff at superintendent level (1)
- FESA corporate staff at middle management level (2)

Focus groups with personnel of similar employment levels comprising four to six participants were conducted at the four Metropolitan regional directorates and included:

- FESA Fire Services managers and community fire managers (18)

Focus group sessions took approximately 120 mins each. Discussions were audio taped and transcribed for analysis. A discussion guide, based on the literature review and the organization's corporate executive team (CET) direction, was developed as a framework for the focus group discussions. While the approach to promoting discussion was flexible, the framework provided a consistent direction to all discussions.

Anonymity

To protect the anonymity of personnel, confidentiality of responses was assured to all participants. Interviewees and focus group participants are therefore not identified in any part of the research. Participants were also free to withdraw at anytime, if they felt concerned with any aspects of the study.

Case Analytic Approach

Amongst several research techniques appropriate for action research and the exploration of systems explanations and reasoning of organizational functioning is the case analysis approach because it provides a means for understanding the complex nature of organizational communication processes. As Miller (2003) noted,

A case analytic approach suggests that the richest understanding of organizational systems can be obtained by closely observing specific organizations grappling with specific issues. By collecting a variety of data through observation, interviews, questionnaires and archives, the analyst can come to a more finely grained understanding of how and why an organization system develops and behaves as it does (p. 90).

As O'Brien (2001) pointed out action research is chosen in a situation where change must take place holistically. The case study of this research represents a real-life situation which involves people, requires flexibility and a

systematic analysis of the problem to ensure that recommended interventions following the research are based on informed theoretical considerations.

Limitations of Case Study

The main limitation to the study was that it was largely conducted in one division only, and although the Fire Services Division is by far the largest division of FESA generalisations to the whole agency cannot necessarily be drawn.

However, the application of a systems theory perspective to the organizational wide study means looking at the overall communication system and organizational effectiveness with its interrelated subparts and subsystems which affect the entire system. The main assumption being that studying communicative activities in isolation is limiting because communication is an unending process and organizations are a complex collection of interacting subsystems. It is difficult therefore to make a change in one subsystem without that change affecting other subsystems (Cherrington, 1989).

Summary

This chapter presented a rationale for the methodology chosen to address the research question. It began by stating the anticipated outcomes from an academic viewpoint and then defined the design of the research and the methods chosen to address the research and research sub-questions.

The chapter identified the target population and provided a background to the case study chosen. It described the procedures used, the analytical approach taken and outlined the limitations of the case study. The next chapter will present the findings of the research, based on analysis of the data.

CHAPTER 5

Findings

“It is all over the place”

The quote above from a senior manager exemplifies issues in the flow of information and interference with that flow. The interviews and focus groups yielded rich data on the nature of communication within FESA. The following sections of this chapter are categorised as: Dissemination of Information; Change Communication; and Professional Development. Each section commences with discussion on communication theory to help explain what is happening in communication and the aspects of organizational life that affect the communication process within the division.

A sample of extracts of specific quotes from focus groups and the issues raised by participants provide a lens through which to view key communication issues and the factors critical to a continued understanding of organizational communication at FESA¹. The comments from participants exemplify the issues that emerged and provide an insight into how qualitative accounts can interact with a modified systems approach to organizational communication.

¹All participants of the focus group discussions have been quoted in this thesis. As noted in the methodology, all the participants were in the ranks of Fire Services manager or community fire manager and specific identification at that level could lead to personal identification. The verbatim statements, however, do contribute to the thematic analysis and show patterns among participants.

Section One - Dissemination of Information

“Do you think there is a problem with communication at FESA?” A basic first question, but a necessary one in order to avoid preconceived assumptions and validate the reason for conducting the research in the first place.

The general response from participants to this question, to some extent, was positive. However, the variety of responses reveals different perceptions of the concept of communication. Is communication considered, simply, as the dissemination of information—one way flow of information—or is it an event that occurs between a source and a receiver—two way communication?

An effective communicator understands the appropriate communication media to use in a given situation. For instance, media richness involves face to face communication and the telephone, whereas leaner media includes written communication and email. To be effective these considerations are important because the methods of communication should match the message, or the 'routineness' of the message, otherwise communication failures can occur (Forbes and Hiemstra, 1999).

The tools of two-way communication range from simple, informal techniques to sophisticated, scientific methods. Advanced practices include two-way asymmetrical communication and two-way symmetrical communication (Dozier et al, 1995).

A survey commissioned by the organization in 1999 through Hides Consulting identified the need for improvement in the dissemination of information; but, did not specify how it should be improved. For instance, are there problems with timeliness, quality of content or quantity?

A comment from a Fire Services Manager helps explain what is, in fact, occurring: “From a Fire and Rescue point of view. I personally think the communication is quite good. I don’t think we have any problems there...”. This viewpoint that communication [at the fire station level] is good was expanded on however by the participant to explain that he believed they were, in fact, getting too much information, resulting in information overload and people missing out

on key messages. It is possible to further conclude from the following direct quotes that 'today' the 'dissemination of information' is resulting in information overload.

Do you think there is a problem with communication at FESA?

"Yes. Definitely. I don't know whether you will just find it is perhaps not just a problem of non-communication, but more a problem of perhaps sometimes it is too much. We get the same thing a dozen times and we have to read every one of those. Even with emails we are getting a reduplication of stuff. We are getting information to read on the email, then it is getting faxed out to us and being put out as notices."

"Well I think we do have problems with communication ... whether it is in the manner in which it is communicated or more to the point if it's not communicated is what I reserve my judgement on. I think there are a lot of issues that are held in a close circle, if you like, that if they were released earlier or advised earlier, we could stop a lot of the misconceptions that are occurring out there."

"We get mixed communication. The messages we get at times are confusing and I have got to say that at times I have been left to my side thinking what direction do they want us to go in and what don't they want us to go in, particularly with our relationships with local government".

"I don't know whether we really do have a strategic intent in some areas and if we do have a strategic intent, I don't know whether it is really getting down. If you are talking about the physical aspects of communication, there is plenty of that. There is plenty of emails floating around, there is plenty of websites that we can go on to, our intranets, and all that. So I think that they are all very good communication tools and I think we are doing it reasonably well from a communication tools point of view, but it is the content of the communication."

"... the goal post keeps changing and that is why...we will go down one direction and the goalpost changes and sometimes that is not communicated back. So that is where we get confused. We seem to be all reactive not proactive"

"... I am not blaming all this towards FESA either by the way. There is a lot of outside influences from government policy and that is state and federal government policy to our stakeholders that influence the change in direction or the lack of direction."

"From a Fire and Rescue point of view, I personally think the communication is quite good. I don't think we have any problems there. I think at times we suffer from information overload. I think sometimes if anything we are getting too much information coming down and possibly stuff that's really 'nice to know' and not need to know stuff. And I think it is one of the traps if you try to pour so much information through an organization, you have got to be careful that people aren't missing the key stuff and taking on board less important stuff."

"...and that's what is happening...we don't know how to filter it...and particularly at this level you see it drastically, I mean you know I can get six emails on the same issue."

"...FESA is only a young organization and we have taken huge steps in a relatively short period of time and we are still feeling our way on that and while I have been critical in some areas, I still say that I think that we have done better than most organizations."

“I think that because one of our strategic corporate values is to have open and honest communication, it is considered that we have an obligation to pass the information on to as many people as we can so that everybody is aware of it.”

“We need to make sure because people are always complaining that we never got told about it, but the reality for middle management, particularly at our level, is that we are getting it bombarded at us and it slows us down so much in our work, from the point of view that I was away for a week and got 70 or so emails. Only 15 needed action, the others were just cc’s. And then it is hard for the Directors as well to know what is being sent direct to us. So there needs to be some sort of a way... a system of coordinating how much information is being sent by other people apart from where it originated from...”

“So it is quite messy and I think it needs to be addressed. Some days we spend a couple of hours each day just looking at emails and probably there is only about 10 or 15 mins worth of work in that email system.”

“So quite often you are getting information by fax; individual letters sometimes; it is being passed on by the directors; from the originator; and on ‘What’s New’. So you could have five or six ways different sources of the same information.”

“I think it is ok to promulgate as much as you like, but it has got to be specifically promulgated instead of hit and miss.”

From the comments above it can be seen that some of the main issues of concern across all groups include information overload, a lack of a systematic and coordinated approach across the organization and a lack of feedback—factors which one can reasonably conclude are impacting on effective communication.

Information overload

It was clear from the study that regional staff feel overwhelmed by the flood of emails they receive daily—a factor which they believe is impinging on their capacity to complete their work. The amount of information being received; the different channels being used to disseminate the ‘same message’; and lack of specific targeting were the main problems identified across all groups. Apparently the same information is being duplicated through email, fax, notices, letters, immediate supervisor, intranet, the ‘What’s new’ page, and so on. It was suggested by some participants that this tendency to broadcast messages widely may have emanated from the FESA Value to ‘Have open and honest two way communication’, which some suggested engenders the belief that everyone needs to know and a factor which, in some cases, is contributing to the overuse of the ‘cc’ facility on emails rather than considered and specific targeting.

A lack of a systematic and coordinated approach

A lack of coordination across the organization's divisions [subsystems] was also evident from some of the comments. For example, an observation from one participant, suggested a need for better coordination in, and between, divisions. "...there needs to be some sort of a way ... a system of coordinating how much information is being sent by other people apart from where it originated from..." Regional staff are frequently unaware of information that has been disseminated to local government in their districts from functional directorates within the organization. To ensure that all energies and effort are pushing in the same direction, a need for better coordination in, and between, divisions, was apparent.

Lack of feedback

A lack of feedback from a strategic level and a perception that the organization is reactive rather than proactive was also raised. The perception is that "...the goal post keeps changing...". Yet participants acknowledge that there are outside influences from the three tiers of government [the supersystem] that contribute to this. Comments indicate that while information flows reasonably freely vertically, from the top down, an effective feedback system from the bottom up to facilitate two way communication is lacking. As Goldhaber (1993) argued feedback is a key element which creates the cyclic effect of the systems model, hence significant to this study.

The issues identified above suggest that the system is out of balance. According to Goldhaber (1993): "... all parts of an organization are interdependent or interlocking because all parts within the system, called subsystems, affect and are affected by each other" (p. 47). Therefore, the issues identified are parts of the system that affect the whole and one can conclude do not exist in isolation without impacting on something else. When an organization is viewed through systems theory the concepts of feedback, balance, input, transformation, output and interdependence (Goldhaber, 1993)—a model with important components similar to Grunig's (1984) model that describe the behaviour of the system. Effective functioning of an organization means that the systems and subsystems are in equilibrium. Applying the systems model to these communication issues to maintain equilibrium amongst the interpenetrating

systems to manage information overload, ensure greater integration between subsystems, and to improve feedback systems as a first step, one might suggest, would have a positive impact on organizational functioning and communication effectiveness.

Communications Hierarchy

As evident from the previous discussion, the process of communication is complex and dynamics not easy to understand. An organization's hierarchical structure, communication flow and organizational dynamics are some of the complexities that can hinder the communication process.

Research on the functions of communication reveal that understanding the type of communication used and hierarchical arrangement within an organization is critical to analyzing the effectiveness of the organization because the hierarchical structure often results in communications failures. The hierarchical arrangement can cause organizations to suffer from:

- isolated departments;
- members focusing primarily on their specific area of expertise;
- poor coordination of activities; and
- limited lateral communication among functional departments and employees (Spillan et al, 2002)

The hierarchical communication arrangement characteristic of government departments is vertical–top down (Spillan et al, 2002; Harris, 2002). However, when this view was put forward to promote discussion surprising responses were provided. For example:

The model of communication at FESA is top down. Two-way symmetrical communication is the ideal. What do you see as the obstacles to achieving the ideal at FESA?

“It is all over the place. Some of it's top down, some of it is sideways. I am not criticising anyone. I know what they are trying to achieve.”

“...a lot of it is top driven. But at the same time I believe that we seem to drive it up as well. I suppose the stuff we get down we have to act on. The problem I have with the two way communication is that the stuff that we push up we sometimes get no idea whether it has been accepted or what the hierarchy are going to do with it, whether it be a problem or it be a suggestion that's generated from our level. And I think a lot of times too, I think a lot of the information we

are asked to generate back, I think is this 'feel good' stuff. The purpose is not really genuine I don't think."

"You do your business plan. So every year we do another business plan and then we have got to communicate our key outcomes of that business plan. But there does not seem to be any feedback from what we have achieved with our key outcomes, either at a FESA level, divisional level or regional level."

"...and cross ways communication, as you know my role is with local government predominately, and I think they are getting sick of me. We seem to be pushing a lot of information to local government and brigades and at times, as much and all as we wear criticism from those people, you cop it at both ends. They are either not getting enough or [we] are giving them too much."

"The email system was supposed to be about quick information whereas we tend to use the email system now as a total way of communicating. And when important and significant decisions are made on emails there is no record of them being kept on a file system and they are kept on the person's personal log-in."

"It is definitely not top down because it tends to ... in some degrees ... be top down, but in other aspects it goes from the bottom to the top, bypassing everything in between, which is not right but that tends to still occur."

"Well I am a new person on the block, but taking up a new position that is being developed, I find that there is a lack of communication from the people at the top that form these positions as to the responsibilities...."

"I don't think it is defined enough as to who should talk to who. Should it be human resources communicating to you. It is just shot gunned down there. You find out through circulars. It is just not done correctly. And the way HS is going to be merged shortly it may make it worse..."

"FESA is very reactive because we are under public scrutiny. The top needs information straight away.....so they short cut....then you should notify your supervisor and director."

"The shift system is a particular situation maybe you need to bombard them, but from SO above, the system is not working. I have heard some of the SOs saying we can't be bothered reading half this stuff because it is duplicated. So then you get the mentality that I am not going to even worry about it, because it will get to me anyway ... from the DOs [District Officers] ...cause that is what is required. They know it will get to them eventually. I am not saying that they are all like that."

"It used to be more streamlined through the hierarchy set up. I think senior management may see it as hard to have an open and honest communication system within a hierarchical structure, and I think they probably worry about it, but from our point of view that is the way it needs to be done so that we are actually getting the stuff we need to action."

"That is what I find frustrating....you get so much stuff 'for information only'...that you don't need to action. But it is coming to you anyway on your email system...but it all takes time. If you read through every bit of information that comes out you would never get any work done."

"Maybe we should put the responsibility back on to managers...don't know what you can do at station level....but I can't see why everything can't be posted on the intranet and we should have to access it and sign offgo in as the position holder and accept responsibility for accessing

it...with an acceptance thing on every document. That would put onus back on us and they could still check to see if we were reading it or not by having a report there to say who has accessed and accepted it. Because that is what management is about. We are responsible enough to access the information we need to do our job and if it is all there you can go back to it rather than picking up circulars and stuff which have been regenerated so many times. Then if there is stuff that is specifically for me or my patch that needs my input ...well that's fine. But if it is general, I can't see why it can't be done that way. And say to the managers that it is part of your job description."

"...at a meeting recently, out of 21 people 17 were acting. The communication gets broken down quite a lot because you are talking to someone who has only been there less than a week and only there for a few months."

"...because so many people are acting. People aren't comfortable in their own position to say really what they believe or they may not have the experience. Or they'll say ... well I am acting in this position, I don't think this is right but I will go along with"

"We understand that FESA Fire Services has had the biggest restructure it has ever gone through with the metro breaking into four directorates. And putting all our people in capability development, professional standards, means that all those people ... and you know how big they are ... they have all come from here [regions]. So we have so many newly created positions and people are acting everywhere including the directors and the common theory is that it makes communication and two way communication problems culminate. And I would say if you come back in two weeks time you may not be talking to the same people."

As some of the quotes above indicate there is support for a strong hierarchical structure and adherence to an explicit chain of command. This was a surprising outcome considering the push for flatter organizational structures by management consultants today, despite the fact that in reality the more common management model and internal communication system in highly structured organizations follow machine theory and human relations theory (Grunig, 1984; Goldhaber, 1993).

Katz and Kahn (as seen in Grunig) used the term 'machine' to help describe the management approaches that originate from the industrial age in the first half of the twentieth century. The human relations movement followed the classical management approach, or machine approach, when it was realised that machine theory was not enough to control an organization and keep employees satisfied and productive at the same time. Both management approaches constitute asymmetrical communication practices designed to control subordinates. Grunig (1984) describes a highly structured organization as "... a centralized, constrained system in which communication is used to give orders, secure "cooperation" and express appreciation for the contributions of employees."

The flow of communication in a machine managed organization is downward through orders, directives and commands—the chain of command. Upward communication has little success because generally employees will only communicate upwards to make themselves look good and biased in what they communicate—in most cases only information that they believe management want to hear (Grunig, 1984).

According to Goldhaber (1993) when an organization is studied from the perspective of systems theory, or viewed as a social system, questions related to structural and human variables take on a new importance. The author explains that functional and human issues affect the system and therefore cannot be ignored. In light of that, while one can conclude from the extract of quotes that a lack of defined systems and uncertainty of communication roles are factors which impact on organizational communication, from a systems theory perspective one might also wonder: Are these issues isolated incidents or interrelated and are they a consequence of organizational structure? According to Goldhaber (1993) the structure most suitable for an organization's current needs is that which allows for important information to flow freely without overloading relevant decision makers.

Comments pertaining to these issues include: "I don't think it is defined enough as to who should talk to who ...", and "It used to be more streamlined through the hierarchy set up. I think senior management may see it as hard to have an open and honest communication system within a hierarchical structure, and I think they probably worry about it ...".

Uncertainty of communication roles was also evident, for example: "We seem to be pushing a lot of information to local government and brigades and at times, as much and all as we wear criticism from those people, you cop it at both ends."

There is also a perception that the high number of people in acting positions is impacting on effective communication, for example: "... at a meeting recently, out of 21 people 17 were acting. The communication gets broken down quite a lot because you are talking to someone who has only been there less than a week and only there for a few months."

While it was evident from some of these comments that a hierarchical structure was preferred at the middle management level as a solution to some of these issues, it may not necessarily be the case at different levels in the organization, particularly upper levels of management. According to Grunig (1984): "... few people enjoy working in a machine." For example, a highly structured organization does not work well for professional and specialized employees. It is more suited to the less educated, less specialised and non-professional workers who will be more satisfied and productive. Notwithstanding that however in this instance adherence to the hierarchical structure and chain of command within a highly structured organization is seen by participants as means to overcoming information load and the crisscross communication and duplication of information that occurs.

Channels of Communication

Discussion on the channels of communication, the primary sources of information received, and how rapidly information was being disseminated highlighted issues with communication systems and processes and an uncoordinated approach across the FESA divisions which impact on internal communication. For example:

What are the primary sources of information received?

"Each agency [directorate] has a specific function ...and they say you need to do this ... and well next you know you have got 58 different people asking you to this and do that. So, it comes from everywhere."

"At the end of the day every department you have got in this organization has got to feed off something and at the end of the day they feed off the roots of this organization which is us [Regions]. So the more departments and the more jobs you give at the top end - the information that they require comes from us. And the more they ask of from us the less we can do"

"Probably our immediate supervisor."

"... you only get what we send you because not many people know that you are there. But for the managers ... who have been here a long time...every part of FESA sends you stuff. We want you to this, gosh. Community Safety - we want you to this. We want you to provide a nomination. Volunteer Development says I want you to do that. Capability Development says I want you to

this, I want you to do that and it cc's the directors ... the other [branches], Training Academy, Capability and Development, Media and Public Affairs, and community safety are all telling us you will do this, you will do that."

"What I find with volunteers is that they like face to face ... but I always back it up with a letter or email anyway."

"... I suppose where I have been caught out is when the other divisions write to the local governments within my area and I am not aware of it and that's happening a lot more of late too"

"Community Safety will push stuff out ... something to local government who in turn then will ring me up and I haven't a clue what it is about."

How rapidly is information being disseminated? How does information flow through the shift system?

"Well IT is flowing out, but it doesn't help that station officers have various degrees of typing skills and qualifications. We have hand written ones ... they can all do their FIRS [Fire Incident Reporting System], but then there are a lot of them ... some of them ... that say they are not computer literate."

"So we get faxes, we get mail, we get email, but they are not all doing emails. And again if a shift is on a Friday/Saturday and you missed them on the Friday and they are on Saturday and Sunday for the next week and the week after they are on Sunday and Monday ... so it means you can only get them at night time."

"But if we are talking about BFS well that is different?"

"The same deal, that is not a problem. The biggest hassle we have is the unrealistic timelines. ... [In Perth] the timelines are tight, but the blokes ... in the country get exactly the same timelines and you know with 33 shires to look after instead of three - 10 times the amount of contacts that have got to be made in the same time. So there is no real planning as to realistic time limits when they set their timelines to communicate down. That doesn't help the flow of information to the point where the guys say ... 'unrealistic forget it' ... and they don't do it, which doesn't help the organization and if they do do it, they do it in a short cut way, just to meet what is required and really it doesn't mean anything at the end of the day if our stats are all wrong or made up, or whatever it is ... the timelines are wrong."

"Others, like the [branch name deleted] are looking at their own publication that they have been using and they have run surveys on official documents. I don't know whether you read it."

"It is sent by email."

“Yes, it is sent by email but if you are snowed under they don’t get read, that much I do know from being in the country and you can tell by a lot of the replies they get on their surveys when they do them how miniscule the amount of the people is that actually reads those. Those questions that they actually ask. They need to be on file because they are an official document and they need to be filed and they need to be signed off properly.”

Lack of coordination was clearly evident by the responses to questions related to the channels of communication and primary sources of information received. While this was covered largely in earlier discussion, further investigation into the flow of information indicated a lack of organizational understanding of appropriate timeframes for reporting and feedback, particularly from country regional staff, as well as an increased uncertainty of managerial roles and expectations in communication.

Considering that the research appears to identify that a need exists for better coordination in, and between, the organization’s divisions [subsystems], one might suggest communication mechanisms, such as, a liaison role whereby someone is appointed to act as liaison officer between divisions or an integrating manager whereby the manager has the authority to ensure that liaison takes place.

Impact of New Technologies

Advancements in communication technologies, coupled with the myth that more communication is always better, have lead to a glut of redundant (or even worse, conflicting or inaccurate) messages being sent to internal and external audiences. Fewer gatekeepers exist, and individual departments each spawn their own programs with little coordination. This leads to audience confusion, a lack of credibility of sources and programs, and at the bottom line, a reduction in organizational performance where audiences spend most of their work days trying to deal with meetings, memos, and media (Gayeski, D, 1994).

While the above quote was written in 1994 new technologies since that time have significantly increased the volume of information and the flow of that information throughout the organization. New technologies also mean that the methods of communication have changed which raises the question: Do our methods of communication match the message?

To add to this, all communication seems urgent because of the speed of its delivery. This means we spend valuable time trying to distinguish what is

important. The social effects of the new communication tools also pose perplexing issues, such as, can technology take the place of face to face communication? How does this impact on commitment? Are human relationships falling by the wayside? And are we compromising the sense of belonging that is so crucial to effective teams. Managers need to guard against becoming so reliant on technology that they neglect the interpersonal skills crucial in building relationships. Little wonder experts argue that we are receiving more information that we can possibly process and that our ability to communicate has not kept up with the rate of technology (Hunt, 1996).

How do you think email impacts on communication practices in the organization—positive or negative?

“It is a good communication method, but it is tended to be used for everything in preference to using the systems that we are actually supposed to be using.”

“It’s over used. But you see there is an expectation because it is the major tool of communicating, and the mobile phone. There is an expectation that you are there. And coming from the country ... the [executive management], or Director, or someone, writes to you and wants an answer straight away but you are on the road for five days, so you might not get that email for seven days. And you come back in seven days and get 300 emails. You have to this... you have to talk to this person. There is an expectation that people are there getting emails straight away. But operationally, well if it is something urgent and you need an answer, you have got to use the phone or not put cc’s on [emails]. It is about thinking through.”

“If it is an item that has got to go on file, then it’s got to go on file. Sending an email is not how you get it on file. It has got to be put on through the system and that file has got to be sent and it has got to be documented. If they haven’t left enough time for that to occur that is really not our problem, but it gives them an out by putting it on the email So they fire it off to how many people they fill in the cc slot and realistically it should have been circulated on the file. ... And how many people need to see this stuff, I wonder. I mean if every single officer sends in a reply we would get a reply on reasons when it is direction is what we really need.”

“Negative. If it is used correctly it is a great tool, but we are not using it correctly. Senior management have to trust lower management, and if they are not performing and promulgating information to the people we should be accountable. I get tired of being lumped in with everyone. If I am not performing they should come to me directly.”

“And that is true for the whole organization if there is a little minority...then everybody is. It should be specific to the individual.”

“Since I was away on leave, I now have 101 emails sitting that I have to do something with...take some form of action.”

“The Metro resourcing Plan ...I must have been involved with it 20 or 30 times. In the end I stopped reading it.”

“Three and a half hours to go through 70 odd emails and that is with just reading the icon that gives a brief outline of each.”

Do you access the ‘What’s New’ page on the FESA Intranet?

“Well you can some job opportunities don’t get advertised on ‘What’s New’, some go through ‘people and positions’ and others go to ‘What’s New’.”

“I can’t say I go on to the ‘What’s New’ page everyday, I really don’t get time for that. I’ll go on to it once in a while.”

“The key issue I have about official documents and decisions and policies ... SOPs and SOIs and SAIs that are electronically sent, and on the intranet - do we know – other than it being followed up – are all SOIs printed out and read out to staff and are they on their file. Do we know that?”

“Well if you read ... I don’t know how long ago it was but when the SOPs and SOIs came out, all SOs were responsible for ensuring that all SOPs and SOIs were signed off by every shift and every person, but it is a big job.”

“At a station level ... I don’t know whether it has been done formally ... if there was a formal protocol in place where the station officer came on shift and he had to check his diary, and probably check the occurrence book, check the intranet and ‘What’s New’ and he would have to check the operations part of the intranet because that gives you all updates of your SOPs and everything. Once you have done those five things, and your emails, then you have covered all the different roles that the station officer needs to do as far as information goes. He would sign all of those off and then you have covered yourself.”

“ ... there is FIRS as well.”

“Ah that is just part of his role I am just talking about the information that comes in.”

“But as a communications process - a lot of station officers have a backlog from FIRS as well, you know.”

How can we improve Email? What are the benefits/drawbacks? What about abuse or misuse of email? What about a filtering system?

“There are a lot of ways you can set up your email system.”

“Some are set up, but only a few, and not everyone knows about it. There are 41 management positions. It’s not hard to set up.”

“I do mine through the DSO, so if she got something as it came in and it was just asking a numbers based question on the region. I would see it and she would just get the file out and send it off.”

“... so instead of [he] doing his bit and I doing my bit and all grabbing the file at different times to get all the numbers together, one person gets the file and answers it and sends it off from the region, so it is a region answer not an individual’s answer, which is maybe what they do, or do not want, but it is really what they need. That use to work, but the trouble is with that is that it puts work on the support officer, so if you have a support officer looking after maybe six – well that is too many. You need one and a half FTEs to do that ... and you can’t do that. So the thought comes back to - are we setting it up properly?”

What about when you are on leave? How can we overcome the amount of email messages when away on leave?

“For a short interval, you are not replaced. When someone is replacing another, it can take six weeks before their email is set up. No four months. Sometimes people are asked to hand over their passwords which is a no, no. A mailbox for the position should be set up, as well as individual passwords. It makes it easier for other divisions to copy in the position holder. I still get stuff concerning my previous position/district, however I am no longer in that position.”

“It is best to have your own phone, because there are some issues when you are on leave that you need to be involved in. I know some people say you shouldn’t be, but the reality is if you are not involved you will come back to a huge mess.”

“You have got to put your ‘out of office’ message on your email system. A lot of people don’t do that.”

“You get things ranging from your vehicle report to this, that, or the other, that goes to the last bloke that was in the job and it is about a month down the road before you get it. I have actually taken it up with the workshops, for instance, don’t send your communication to Fred Smith, send it to the Fire Services Manager position.”

“I agree with what you are saying again, the available officer should be the position holder not the individual. Apart from anything else you scroll the list down looking for an individual’s name...you’ve got no chance ...but if you go to DM Curtin ... you will get who is doing the job.”

“FESA IT should set these up ... the basis of it...it might mean three hours setting it up so you can go through it and you have got no names whatsoever. It has got FESA CEO, EDFS, DFSM, DFSC, it got all the names [position titles] in it.”

“We have set it up ... that substantive managers have their own business cards. ... so with all the relieving that is going on...it has the position on there. So all he has to do is write his name on it, and that’s his card. So that is communicating a bit better. You can’t say for three weeks– go and make up [name deleted] business cards. It [this card] has got all the details on it with a dotted line so all you have to do is write your name on it.”

According to Miller (2003) communication technology from a systems perspective is viewed as a means to link the subsystems of an organization together and to link the organizational to its environment. However, specific attention should be given to the impact of new technologies on communication networks and the impact and unintentional effects of such technology on people and the organization.

As identified in earlier quotes, advancing technology has not only resulted in participants feeling overwhelmed by the ever-increasing emails they receive daily, but has also created a situation where there is a danger of people missing out on key messages because of the amount of mediums being used to channel the same information. As Goldhaber (1993) notes, “Communication is essential to an organization. Information is vital to effective communication” (p. 6). However, the author argues that the advances in technological communications are not always positive in terms of successful interpersonal communication. To add to this, the capacity of new technologies to churn out more and more information—more than people can possibly handle—means that as a coping strategy people have to tune-out from the voluminous amount of information they receive in order to survive. As Goldhaber (1993) pointed out, quality communication between people involves maximum input from the body, voice and environment.

Some of the unintended effects of technology identified in the quotes above also include issues associated with keeping an official record of documents. From the research it would appear that significant decisions are being made and conveyed through email, only. Accordingly, records of these decisions are saved on the computer system within the confines of an employee’s personal ‘log-in’

rather than on an official organizational file, thereby highlighting problems associated with keeping official records up to date, a factor which is particularly pertinent in a situation where a large percentage of employees are in acting positions for short periods of time which can contribute to inconsistency and uncertainty of information to support decision making. This would suggest a need for clarification on organizational policy regarding the use of email and associated problems such as the updating of official records. Discussion revolved around the benefits and drawbacks of email, FESA websites and strategies to cope with emails and voice mail when managers are away on leave.

Section Two - Change Communication

Organizational change requires consideration of its impact on organizational communication processes. Economic, political and technological factors are transforming the workplace and forcing organizations to change (Miller, 2003). An organization undergoing change faces the need for additional communication to convey the intention of the change, particularly to employees affected by it who are attempting to succeed in their career positions (Forbes and Hiemstra, 1999).

Times of change can mean a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity which can have an adverse effect on motivation. In fact, the challenge of building good relationships with employees has never been greater because employee discontent around the world is on the rise (Guth and Marsh, 2003). Employees, often disillusioned, discouraged or disenchanted with their re-structured, flattened organization, will not tolerate rational explanations devoid of personal commitment. They demand dialogue and answers to tough questions (Hunt, 1996).

The importance of communication in gaining employees' commitment is crucial in times of change. Adapting to change and understanding how to communicate/inform employees about organizational change should not rest solely with the leaders of an organization. It is a function of all managers.

Worldwide studies across all industries indicate that employees most preferred means of receiving information about change is from their supervisor (T J Larkin, et al, 1995). The behaviours of managers therefore can make or break the change initiative, and communication is an essential ingredient in making this happen.

In fact, management across all levels and industries are increasingly being required to develop the skills necessary to lead successful change initiatives. One of the key attributes for leading change is communication and the ability to open up channels of two-way communication in order to obtain constructive input to

ensure that the change process is implemented successfully, and operates more smoothly as it progresses (Galpin, 1995).

Discussion on how information about change is communicated and whether it is communicated effectively and in a timely manner, revealed contrasting viewpoints, for example:

Do you believe change in the organization is communicated effectively? Is it timely? How do you believe it can be improved? In the past how have you received information about change: has it been face to face, or through memos.

“Once a decision is made it should be disseminated.”

“Tell us what it going on. We are all part of the same organization, so we should know what is happening, roughly. When it comes out as no change, no change, or it is all top secret meetings and they are not telling us what is going on and then the rumours start and there are rumours floating around every week on something....so then at the end of the day you don’t know what is really going on and then suddenly ...”

“The two things that are happening....the metro resourcing plan ... a 10 year plan ... we are heading down that line and the metro restructure was a clearly communicated plan. We all worked on that [metro resourcing plan]. The ED [Executive Director] and then the directors worked on it and then we came and had team meetings and put in our ideas and the ideas were used...”

“The communication of FTE positions is woeful because they run the advert and hold the interviews at some thirteen or fifteen weeks after that, before people find out what is going on”

“Talking about the restructure and those positions, my personal opinion is that the way it has been divided to manage the workload is fine, but get the people the FTEs before you start because all you do ...once you start doing things ad hoc ...what you have done is just disrupted everything ...all down the line. We were in a meeting last week, or the week before, out of 21 people who were in the room 14 were in acting positions. That is unacceptable. Two thirds of your people in mid to upper management levels were in acting positions. How can you get any continuity or consistency when you do that type of thing.”

As a manager, how do you believe people at the shop floor (firefighters) are getting information about change. Who are they most likely to believe?

“It is initiated through managers, but one of the problems you have with shift work is that...the manager might hold a meeting on a Monday morning and between Monday and Friday there are three shift changes and by the time he gets time to go to that third shift ...they have already heard through Chinese whispers and what you’ve got to do then when he finally ... actually talks to them is allay their fears, distil the untruths and start again. So the first one or two shifts he will probably

get away with it but by the time it gets to the third shift he is on the back foot cause he has got to start from the negative side to the positive. Delay is the problem’.

“I think sometimes the managers do get used a little bit. I think sometimes they are expected to go and sell things and I am not absolutely sure that should be their role particularly when it relates to things like the .. EBA [Enterprise Bargaining Agreement] which is probably a classic example. Basically they are encouraged to go there and sell the EBA and really I don’t think at the manager’s level we should probably do that because the danger is that if things turn bad, the manager will lose all his credibility which he really must maintain with his troops because if he hasn’t got that, he hasn’t respect and if he hasn’t got that he can’t drive the machine. I think there is a danger in doing that. I think he should be able to go out there and give the management side of it with no problem at all but they shouldn’t then have to try and sell it. I think it could be a mistake. It has been tried but I think it did backfire.”

“I think at the end of it they will see that the managers shouldn’t have done it. Shouldn’t have gone in there and tried to sell it. They should give the facts ...’

From a systems perspective, change is viewed as a cybernetic process in which feedback, both positive and negative, are used to enhance achievement of the organization’s strategic goals. However, in a machine managed organization, change is carefully controlled by management due to a need to control the behaviours of employees (Miller, 2003).

The research appears to suggest that there is a certain amount of uncertainty of communication roles and organizational expectations in relation to change initiatives at FESA, for example: “... I think sometimes they are expected to go and sell things and I am not absolutely sure that should be their role ...”

Responses to whether communication about change was effective and timely revealed the perception at middle management level that there was a serious lack of communication regarding change especially in relation to new positions in terms of career moves and announcement of appointments. A senior manager provided an example of change communication in which he believed was effective, the Fire Services division restructure. However, this opinion was from an employee who was very close to the situation and, in the main, responsible for conveying the restructure to staff.

The Grapevine

Experts agree that the grapevine is an inevitable part of organizational life because informal networks are a natural consequence of people interacting.

Research indicates that at least 70 percent of all organizational communication occurs at the grapevine level and that employees use the grapevine as a communication source more than any other vehicle (Crampton, et al, 1998).

The grapevine is a factor of organizational life that cannot be eliminated, although the desire may be to do so. Nothing can stop it from operating. Information moves more quickly on the grapevine than through formal channels of communication. It is often a rapid conveyor of information, but unfortunately can, and does, distort information (Zaremba, A. 1989).

In addition to the grapevine and informal networks, FESA Fire Services has additional challenges due to the strong communication networks established by interest groups such as the union and volunteer associations who are able to spread their viewpoints quickly. The following extracts provide

As a manager, do you believe that you can affect the grapevine?

“Basically knowing the grapevine is so strong it can be an instrument.”

“If you think something is good idea from your point of view and you try to push a particular program that you like. You know full well that if you give it to the right people you don't have to write a letter.”

“It has been a firm belief from firefighters on the floor for many years now that most of the things that come out of headquarters actually come from the grapevine.”

“But it can be a very bad thing because I know that Bill is very conscious of getting information out very quickly because he knows the grapevine is so strong if the wrong information gets filtered through there is a lot of damage done before we can back it up with the right information.”

“It is unbelievable how local government, and I am talking at CEO level, hear the rumour mill within FESA. It is unbelievable and they have their own conclusions too...”

“... [it's] common knowledge within the local government arena that FESA is not making timely announcements on positions. We are losing our credibility over it, particularly with local governments that we have these memorandums of understandings with.”

“I guess the key to it again is consistency being so that they all get the same story so that Chinese whispers are not allowed to grow and distort.”

“It flows on...the station officers are key. They are key people in the change process and implementing change not only at stations ... but the DMs or the Directors, whatever, but they have to be given the reason why – given the overview from the Director or CEO, or whatever, and then given the reasons why we need to help or whatever. And if the DMs aren’t positive when they come and sellI’ve seen over the years some issues where they have either been positive or negative over issues, or don’t want to sell it ...I think it’s interpretation which is a challenge because of industrial ground. But if the DMs aren’t positive and believe in the change...their attitude will be picked up by the station officers. And if they don’t believe it, nothing will happen. It is a whole domino effect. If the DMs don’t believe in it, and the station officers, it flows on and you can see it. It flows on if they are not positive – the whole thing will collapse.”

“That is extremely important, especially when you are dealing with the volunteer greater structure, FRS and Bush Fire, especially Bush Fire because it is political. All the CFOs out there are darn cocky because they are all highly educated private school people. Most of them have million dollar operations on their farming properties, and they are pretty clear thinkers and accountable. And they all know their local pollicie. So you have got to give the information to them and the reasons why and get them to agree. The other thing about doing it that way is, of course, if you are off track too far, or as to whether you are actually on a winner or not, they’ll tell you.”

“Personally no I don’t use the grapevine. But you find that with a lot of stations when you go there they’ve got information from the grapevine and if it sounds like it is going to affect them they want to know whether it is true or false or if you’ve heard anything about it or whatever. Then you have got to go away and actually do some research and find out whether it is true.”

“We get that a bit when letters are sent out to local government and volunteers we get phone calls questioning why this is happening and we haven’t in the region even seen the letter... ”

According to Grunig (1984) highly structured organizations and machine management discourage horizontal communication, desiring to avoid the unscheduled communication that spreads through the grapevine. While structure provides stability, enabling the organization to achieve its objectives in an orderly manner, structure also creates an intriguing communication paradox. The cumbersome and perplexing size of some structures can result in slowing the communication flow, causing communication blockages and distortion as the information filters through the system (Goldhaber, 1993), a factor that provides a perfect breeding ground for rumours and distortions of information to fester and spread, particularly during times of change.

Discussion on factors associated with grapevine activity revealed a good level of understanding of grapevine characteristics, causes and outcomes, at middle management level. As the quotes reveal, managers frequently have to

rectify information that has already been received through the grapevine, until the formal channels catch up. This highlights the importance of two way methods of communication, ie verbal and face to face. The importance of upskilling managers and clarifying their role in the communication process is also vital to ensuring effective communication.

Well developed communication skills are essential at middle management level when dealing with stakeholders and presenting or defending difficult or sensitive issues. A proactive communication policy to manage the grapevine and developing managers to be better communicators therefore should be considered a key strategic priority for FESA.

Section Three - Professional Development

Communication Skills

“...communication is the absolute cornerstone to everything you do...”

An important function of communication is to inspire and motivate staff. Harris (2002) claims that communication and motivation are the two skills ranked highest above traditional organization issues in ‘needs analyses’ to determine the direction of training and development. Communication is generally ranked as first followed by motivation.

Employees demand more dialogue from management. The ability to negotiate and collaborate through dialogue are interpersonal processes necessary in teamwork, building relationships and networking (Hunt, 1996).

Even so, communication skills are often taken for granted. It is presumed that from an early age people know how to communicate. This is not helped by the fact that in the past, the chain of command in hierarchical organizations did not require employees to be highly skilled communicators. All that was required was the dissemination of information from one level to another (Hunt, 1996).

In addition, trends in regionalisation so that there is greater interaction with the community, brings with it increased demands on employees to perform communication functions and the management of stakeholder relationships and stakeholder expectations that would normally be the responsibility of an organization's public affairs department (Fleisher, 1999).

Yet, up until now, the traditional approaches to education has not treated communication as a key skill. For example, the typical Master of Business Administration (MBA) program does not offer communication as one of the foundation units, but rather includes it as part of a unit and relies on students developing communication skills through group work (White, 1997).

Experts agree that management education and training need to find new ways of training and of adapting existing programs such as the MBA program to meet increasing needs. Courses to develop students' skills in communication including interpersonal, conflict resolution, negotiation and listening have been suggested (White & Mazur, 1995).

Professional Development Framework

The Fire Services goals in 'quality people services' include the implementation of professional development initiatives. While professional development provides opportunities for individuals, it can also act as a vehicle for change in helping an organization achieve its goals (Mole, 2000). This research provides the opportunity to adopt a systematic and structured approach to a framework that considers organizational, job and individual needs, and evaluates outcomes as a means to improved communication.

Development focuses on the organization and future organizational activities, whereas training focuses on the employee's present job and education on the employee's future job and formal management qualifications (Mole, 2000). These distinctions are made to help keep in context the aim of the project which is to improve organizational communication and consequently the skills necessary to achieve this without encroaching on other functional areas within FESA.

Collecting data in this category was designed primarily to gain insight into the perceived gaps in skills. This involved discussion on what managers are required to do to do their jobs effectively and the issues they face in middle management positions that impact on communication.

Research methodology

Discussion on how the organization can support middle management to fulfil their role looked at communication needs and the information most important to employees, as well as the perceived gaps in skills that impact on communication.

Participants were led through a series of topic areas, designed to determine what managers were required to do to do their jobs effectively and the relationship of those roles to effective communication. Topic areas covered included technology, operations, administration, the media, relationship building, issues

management, consultation processes, conflict resolution, team building, and diversity.

How can the organization support you [middle management] to fulfil your role. What are you required to do? What are the communication roles you are required to carry out? What are the skills needs?

“When acting up – there is no upskilling of computer skills. In fact it takes several weeks before he can even get computer access to do the job. It takes two weeks to actually get in to do the job ...to access the computer...it takes one to two weeks to access your computer and basic knowledge. It is an access problem because the computer system is structured to individual profiles.

“There will always be last minute things and no one worries about it. It is when it should have been planned better.”

“I think the weakness [computer skills] is not from SO to DO. It is actually from senior officer to SO. Our firefighters need to be trained and we need to have common systems and we have to trust people with the system. Eg: DOs in Perth Fire Station don't have the same access as DOs in the regions because they are considered firefighters. And firefighters don't get the same access as a L2 in head office. You can't even right click on to the mouse, even. They don't have the same access to email. You haven't got the level of consistency. So how can you expect people to learn and train themselves up and grow into these new positions. Not all training is in a course, a lot of it is experiential. So if you learn at the fire station you can evolve to the next level, very naturally. But if you have totally different systems for firefighters on fire stations then you do for other officers and then they get thrust into these new roles ...”

“If there's not someone who is on station that's very clever at them [computers], you are behind the eight ball ... and that's when a lot of people say ... if you can't show me how to use it then I am not going to use it.”

Suggestions from participants on how to upskill firefighters

“Well I think there is a lot we can do. I think we could sell our old computers to the fires and encourage them to become a bit more computer literate.”

“SOs need to be individually trained.”

“If I take you back to something historic when we actually introduced it. In 1993 every station officer and some volunteers were given basic computer training in a windows environment.”

“Which was 11 years ago....and the technology was quite basic in those days compared to what you have today ... it is quite different.”

“There are courses available that can be organised through ... the Training Centre. I have gone on some of these. But you have got to be prepared to do it in your own time and some will say I am not going to do it because I am not getting paid overtime. But if we said that it is a skill that you can use outside the job as well.”

“But we treat it as an add on skill whereas it is a key skill for the organization to function. Kids at school are getting taught things that we were never taught about computers. I believe that we have these wonderful things like SEP training and things like that and we are targeting things that operationally we are doing those things most of the time anyway, whereas there are skills like these which are organizational needs which are not being targeted. ... There are many organizations like LG ... who have a whole room full of 20-30 computers where those employed ... as part of their course training is to go to a computer course to see what level they are at to train them up.”

“That was actually intent of the training centre. One of the rooms was to be set aside for computer training.”

“I think it should be part of the training programs and a good time to do it would be winter time...and say that every SO and OMP qualified firefighter, and all the ones above who want to go, should have to do a basic course.”

“A good example with OMP is that we put a whole heap of stuff about incident management when all the guys already know that.”

“Incident management is more about command and control. That is important...we have to put out fires and manage incidents but in the end for the organization to function everything revolves around the use of computers.”

“I like the way we are going cause if we treat this communication as a crux ...it doesn't matter whether it is incident, fire ground, to comms centre, to email, through to a PIA, communication is the absolute cornerstone to everything you do. Now it strikes me that you have been presented with a concept and to try and add some value not right across the board but certainly to cover certain aspects of our needs for communication and that's that technological component and I agree with you that it should be done in our SEP training. The same as things like introduction to emergency risk management. All SO s should be doing that and that should be done through SEP. And there is no reason why you can't separate SOs from firefighters...”

“But we did that three years ago...”

“We have a roving group of SOs ... five of them not attached to a station....and those SO s were taken off line...”

“Yes ... so it can be done.”

“It is an important issue. I guarantee if it was an operational thing that came out tomorrow ... and we had to do it ... we would all be forced to do it.”

“Note the passion here too. Note the time spent on this subject ... because it is seen as appropriate. And I think that is often hard to define what is really an important issue with those things ... but this is obviously seen as necessary ... and it’s getting from your senior firefighter rather than just a SO to the regional management positions.”

“A recent example for me ... although I don’t wish to criticise ... was a memo that said we should use the OMS system to record information at incident, from a senior management position. It showed no understanding of the system whatsoever. It shows how bad we are at communicating our own systems....cause you can’t communicate out on the field from a laptop unless you have got a way of sending back information. You can’t access it out on the field anyway because it takes too long and [it] times out ...”

“We accumulate a huge amount of information but we can’t disseminate it to people at the fire ground.”

“I think incident management communication is an issue all on its own. It is the most difficult task ... to face at anytime ... and that is getting good timely information to and from and that includes internal and external ...”

“It is a subset. We haven’t acknowledged as an organization that communication is the most important process in doing our job as a manager.”

“I think we just have and that’s the point and from a research point of view that incident management communications because of its ... the serious nature of it particularly the potential for injury”

“I think if you do this ... if you train the people ... all this other stuff goes away because targeted communication becomes part of what you do ... so it all comes back down to number one we haven’t realised how important the issue is....”

“I believe that the SEP stuff ... I have looked over what had been done over the last five years and it was really interesting to see that you repeated half the stuff ... yet there has been no computer training apart from what you talked about”

“I have just discovered what OMS can do ... I am using it a lot more than I did ... and it has taken me two years to get to that stage ... cause no one sat down with me and showed me how to use it. I picked up a book that the DSOs get when they start ... so why don’t we get one of those as managers. You go through it ... it is a step by step how to use OMS ... and it is great. But you have got to train the people to use the tools.”

“... I would say SOs wouldn't even know what you are talking about with OMS.”

Other Issues

Other organizational communication processes were also raised including issues management, conflict resolution, team building, media, diversity management, building relationships and supporting staff.

“Training in specific areas is probably very important especially if you want to go up through the ranks and do these sorts of jobs ... I know in the modular system they do touch on communication and I have done it with the old certificate of fire engineering. It touched on communication but very briefly and no real formal training.”

“I don't think there is any training you can give an officer when sending him out to the field, saying I want you to manage change in this field. You can send them to a change management course. You can send them to conflict resolution courses and all that which they need to do and they need to do management courses too because they have to understand how management is going to operate so that it gives them a bit of background when they go to this sort of thing, but once they turn up to implement something like that ...the only thing they are going to be able to use at the end of the day is what has gone before. They have got to pretty much see how people have operated in a given area to see how you are going to make it work. But we have got to have a good rapport with the people we are dealing with. You can't send a stranger and say do this. Here is a procedures manual that allows you to do it ...cause it doesn't work that way. So you have got to develop a rapport. They have got to be mentored by people within their own department which has been done before and say that this is how you implement this in a certain way.”

“... but if you start like in this office ... there is no introduction to this, its basically here is the computer...and it doesn't work....and here is a mobile phone to put your number on and there is a vehicle parked there and it has got no fuel in it, it is all yours.....see you later. But establishing the rapport and stuff....I mean I have got the ability to be a liaison. I have got that from my previous job. But anybody not coming from that liaison type field if you were coming off station for instance first up and dumped into that ...that could be very interesting, especially dealing with local government straight off as a station officer.”

“... straight into a position. Say stuck up at Northam. He would struggle like hell until he got shown what to do ...”

“... it's like when we did the restructure, decentralisation, the district managers did an induction ... a five day induction...”

“... but the OMP doesn't include nowadays what use to be the station officer course...”

“Yes. That's right. Parts of it have been taken out. That's a problem.”

“... and that’s across the board within FESA not just from Fire Services”

“... I could go and do the DM job for four weeks and survive adequately with no problem at all. But the poor district manager would come back from four weeks holiday ... the paper work. The fact is, it is quite easy to hide around the job for four weeks.”

“... You need people that are going to do the job. A person that can do the job and also have the attitude to do the job.”

“... the person relieving my job can’t do anything in the accounts area. So all the accounts while I am on leave are sitting there ... when I come back, it’s a nightmare ...”

“It’s a little different with the community fire managers because of the Local Government Act. We are working with local government, so they have to know the Local Government Act and have to be authorised by local government to do things like accounts and all that. I personally believe because we are getting so many of these community fire managers in the metro area, FESA should be really having one community fire manager as a reliever permanent ...”.

“... and you could actually have them gazetted for each local government...he will walk straight in knowing the politics ...”

“The danger is, probably not so much with community fire manager but certainly with the Fire Services manager, the fact that FESA sees itself as an organization that will make paths for people to promote into. If you take that away by having substantive people doing the relieving, the danger being is that you have got no one actually being trained up behind them. At the moment a lot of the station officers are doing these jobs right across the metro area therefore are getting experience in the jobs so that they can be promoted up. So if you don’t do that the danger is that you would have one substantive guy that knows everything and nobody else out there that could actually step into the job.”

“You’re right ... but that’s why I said earlier about that concept of having a pool of people within the organization that have put an expression of interest in to say ‘Look, I am going to put my hand up and I am prepared to take on a community fire manager job anytime this year that occurs.’ So you can nurture them specifically, train them up specifically for that role.”

“... it also gives us the opportunity to tailor training specifically to do that specific role. And I have got to say it is a little bit different to any of the other FESA roles because of the local government environment”

Issues management, conflict resolution, and team building

“... I don’t personally believe that managers and this is from, I would even say director down to SO level ... I don’t think the organization supports the managers enough. If a guy has got to counsel a subordinate for whatever reason and that subordinate runs off to the union or the association, the organization seems to fall over backwards to that group and not support the

manager who had gone out on a limb to push the organization's values. And I think that what the organization needs to do is to look at itself very seriously on that and stand up for the manager. Now look ... sure, if the manager is wrong. He's wrong and he needs to be counselled on his position, but if he is right he needs to be backed to the hilt."

Media

"I think you will find that the station officer has the opportunity to do just as many talks to media as do managers, probably much more because the managers would prefer to have the station officers do the talk because they are the people on the front end. They were there when the fire ... and the manager comes on later ... more times that not it is the station officer more than the manager I think you see more station officers talk on TV than you do managers, generally."

"And it's what the media want too. The media want the people who were there making the decisions."

"... they want to talk to the incident controller. They want to talk to the people who were making the decisions ... the critical decisions ..."

"... but I think at manager level as well, I mean there are opportunities where managers do have to, so they need media training as well ..."

"You need training, otherwise are you putting out the messages in the right way and I think our people should be given some form of media training".

Diversity

"... I think FESA is doing reasonably well ... FESA organised for us [names deleted] to go and do a cultural awareness four days at [location deleted] with the indigenous group up there. And they were very good."

"I think even at the floor level the guys are made very aware. We are made very aware of the legal expectations as to how we should treat people both racially and as far as sexes go and everything else. I think we have been very well informed."

"Personally I use to object to the way they actually advertise ... it is bias against men. They say we want women, aboriginal and ethnics to apply. Well what's wrong with whites? We are actually being excluded now. It should be just firefighters. 'There is the application if you wish to apply - apply.' That way it is not biased in any way shape or form."

"But I think that everyone has accepted it that changes had to happen."

“I think the volunteers are more diverse than your fires ... volunteers are from a very broad spectrum of people from different backgrounds.”

Building relationships

“I think you have to have a good knowledge of your organization. A good knowledge of the subject you are talking about. You have got to be committed to it to...”

“If you are in an acting position, it is unfair to expect somebody who has not done it before to go and do it and do it successfully. And that is why I come back to that station officer’s school or that training because that’s I think the foundation block where you are going to learn these skills. With local government, you are always negotiating. You are always trying to push FESA’s view while you know that they are not obliged to accept FESA’s view. So you have got to try and sell the view. You have got to negotiate with them. Sometimes it is ‘give and take’...certainly the honest side ... be up front and honest with them ...”

Feedback

“Nothing annoys me more than putting a lot of work into something ... at least if someone gives you feedback and says ‘look thanks very much but at this stage it is not the direction we are going in and perhaps we will look at it later’ at least you have got something but just to ignore it and hope it goes away ...”

Systems of sharing information eg meetings

“What would be real handy is the Fire Services meetings ... meetings way ahead ... have them at the program timed, rather than this afternoon you are going to a meeting in ... Because you can’t do it. I mean, we can, but all we are doing is upsetting our customer big time.”

“What happens is ... the flow on effect is this ... [name deleted] meets with the directors ... but flowing on from that, then the directors should meet their directorate team meeting the next day after that. Now because of corporate issues and other urgent issues sometimes [name deleted]’s meetings change, so what this means is that changing the date means that all the directors now with short notice have to change the date of their meeting ...”

“In [name deleted] directorate ... there is quite a number of people that take part in that and it is good to know what everybody else is doing. And that is every Monday morning, you get an idea of what people did in the past week and what they will be doing the next day.”

“If you are going to work as a team, all teams need to have something ...”

It is interesting to note that an awareness of communication as a key organizational skill was appreciated and acknowledged by participants. As one mid to senior level manager said: “...communication is the absolute cornerstone

to everything you do...” and “... we haven’t acknowledged as an organization that communication is the most important process in doing our job as a manager.”

While discussion to this point concerned information flow, the focus of this section was investigation of the perceived information and communication needs of employees and how the organization can assist middle management in doing their job effectively. The series of topics participants were led through concerned organizational communication processes and the perceived development needs of managers.

The most important information to participants across all groups supported the view cited in the literature that an employee's most desired information is in relation to opportunities to advance their personal career. As Larkin (1995) suggested future career and gaining greater skills to enable people to make career moves are the greatest concerns to employees.

In relation to skills, the area of most concern to all groups was the need to upskill employees in technology and computers, particularly station officers and senior firefighters to prepare them for their future careers, acting-up opportunities as well functions of their present roles. For example: “... for the organization to function everything revolves around the use of computers”, and “Note the passion here too. Note the time spent on this subject [computers]...”

For personnel in acting roles, IT access, computer skills and forward planning were perceived as major hindering factors which one can reasonably conclude could impact on effective communication.

Professional development for managers as a means to improve organizational communication was seen by the executive at the proposal stage of the study as an area worthy of exploration. Management development is a way organizations can influence what they seek to achieve, such as, survival, growth increased productivity, new processes, or whatever it is they seek to attain. It is one element of organizational development (OD) and entails a long term future focus that unfolds according to strategy. It is considered a powerful instrument of organizational change rather than a set of entertaining training activities. Management development is a wide ranging process that subsumes education and training. It focuses on the supply of managerial talent to the organization, the

intake of potential managers at recruitment, the assessment of managers' development needs and evaluation of their suitability for promotion or assignments (Mole, 2000).

As Goldhaber (1993) noted, "Organizational development (OD) is a method of changing an organization and its beliefs, values, attitudes and structure so that it can better adapt to the changing and turbulent environment of coming decades" (p. 321). A method to adapting to a changing environment that is consistent with organizational goals and values is a method that demonstrates all the elements of systems theory.

Organizational development strategies integrated with individual employee needs for growth and development and organizational goals could mean innovative solutions to organizational communication processes and provide a systems approach to respond to future problems.

Summary

This chapter presented the key findings of my research, within three distinct but integrated sections. Section one investigated the dissemination of information with a particular emphasis on communications hierarchy, channels of communication and the impact of new technologies on communication. Section two examined change communication and whether participants perceived the communication about change was timely and effective. This section also looked at the impact of the grapevine. Section three explored organizational communication processes within a professional development context in an attempt to identify the types of communication processes that challenge managers and what communication abilities managers would like to improve. Chapter 6, the final chapter, discusses the impacts of the findings in greater detail.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Few would disagree that environmental change in this millennium is affecting all organizations, whether it be through crises brought about by world terrorism, increased security, natural disasters, new technologies, globalization, changing populations, diversity, an aging workforce, or increased customer demands and expectations. But, what should be clear is that the need for communication has increased during these turbulent times of change.

To ride above the tumultuous waves of change requires innovation, flexibility and an ability to steer the organization in the direction of achieving the organization's goals. According to Miller (2003) the cybernetic model of systems theory derived its name from the Greek word for a boat's steersman. "... cybernetic systems theory deals with the process through which physical, natural and organizational systems are steered toward reaching system goals" (Miller, 2003, p. 80). Adapting to change challenges our traditional ways of thinking. Systems theory provides a means of studying an organization with its many related and interdependent subsystems. It provides a way of understanding the complex nature of organizational communication systems. It emphasises the importance of feedback in goal directed systems. It is about making sense of organizational behaviour and organizational phenomena that impact on communication. It provides synthesis enabling the systems thinker to take a holistic approach to identifying and linking the disparate functions of the system [the organization] and then applying the same principles to the supersystem [the environment or wider industry]. Systems thinking as a means of investigating an organization's communication systems and processes was utilized in this study and implications were drawn from this view of communication.

Recent reforms in the Western Australia public sector [the supersystem] have indicated the need for agencies to modernise existing work practices and develop new skills in order to facilitate a whole-of-government approach to

policies and services. The Machinery of Government and Functional Review taskforces designed to streamline structures and processes requires government agencies to take a collaborative working approach to the development of policies and delivery of services. To add to this, emerging issues identified by the public sector project *People Making a Difference*, 2004, highlighted the need to address issues related to the anticipated shrinkage of the workforce resulting from the retirement of the baby-boomers and consequential loss of corporate knowledge, and loss of skills (“People Making a Difference: the Public Sector,” 2004). Arguably, the development of new skills to support effective collaboration, retention of corporate knowledge and establishment of a knowledge sharing environment are not only reliant on effective communication systems and processes but also effective communication skills.

The unit of analysis of the thesis fieldwork, organizational communication in a hierarchical state government agency, has identified issues that impact on communication, the main one being information overload. Information overload was clearly a major hindering factor to effective communication brought about by the ease of communication media technologies, duplication of messages, perceived lack of defined communication systems and lack of coordination across the organization’s functional divisions.

While the research findings from the middle management group appeared to support a strong hierarchical structure as a means to solving organizational communication problems and taking into account Goldhaber’s (1993) argument that the structure most suitable for an organization’s current needs is that which allows for important information to flow freely without overloading relevant decision makers, one would wonder if managers at middle management level are indeed the relevant decision makers that the author refers to. Clearly however the impact of technology, duplication of messages and uncoordinated crisscross communication are factors impacting on effective communication and creating information overload for managers at the middle of the hierarchy. However one might wonder—are there other phenomena of organization life that are contributing to communication problems at this level?

The review of the literature suggested that the breakdown in communication generally occurs at the middle management level. As Smith (1991) noted:

Research in the mid-1980s began to point directly to the middle-management group as a serious obstacle to effective communication. This research led to the discovery of the so-called “frozen middle” syndrome, the inability or reluctance of lower and middle-management people to pass information along—upward, downward or laterally. (p. 68)

The author explains however that the reason this group rates so poorly in their communication performance is mainly due to the lack of meaty information, both to and from them, lack of skills training and time to communicate, as well as the lack of recognition that they are doing a good job (Smith, 1991).

However, “Maybe we oversimplify complex problems by analysing them as ‘failure to communicate’ or ‘communication breakdown’” (Goldhaber, 1993, p. 10). While it may be all too easy to blame all organizational ills on ineffective communication it must be put into perspective that FESA faces unique communication challenges due to a variety of factors. Some of these include a diverse and dispersed group of career and volunteer brigades, local government bush fire brigades, regionalisation, geographic dispersion of fire stations, diversity in age and literacy levels of staff and volunteers, a command and control culture, a rotational shift system, and the fast and effective communication networks of interest groups such as the United Firefighters Union (UFU) and volunteer associations.

A survey conducted by Hides Consulting in 1999 on staff and customer attitudes and perceptions towards FESA revealed that a third of respondents rated the communication at FESA as ‘fairly good’ with 3% rating it as ‘very good’ Of note and relevant to this study however was the fact that respondents mentioned the need for improvement in: two-way communication and the dissemination of information. (A Report into the Attitudes and Perceptions of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority Staff and Customers, 1999). As Smith (1991) argued, information flow and skills training should be the prime responsibilities of communication managers—an analogy that appears to complement the research findings of the Hides report.

Since the Hides survey the Fire Services Division has undergone an organizational restructure. Enhancements to the divisional structure to better facilitate the achievement of outcomes consistent with organizational needs involved the creation of new executive, superintendent and middle management level positions and the division of the Perth metropolitan area into four regions. This provided an increased number of career path options and the elevation of a new generation of managers from station officer rank to middle management level positions. It would be reasonable to conclude from the research that the large number of people further down the hierarchy, who are acting up, was perceived by participants as a factor affecting communication. This also demonstrated interconnectedness of events, reflecting the central theme of systems theory in that whatever affects one part of the system affects all parts of the system (Goldhaber, 1991).

Analysis of the findings also suggested a lack of defined systems and uncertainty of communication roles. Trying to make sense of these organizational phenomena, one might wonder if this is a consequence of organizational structure. Structural changes involving additional layers to an organization's structure also have communication implications that need to be considered. According to Goldhaber (1993) despite leading experts advice that advocate new approaches to structuring organizations and managing people, most organizations adhere to the military model with control directed from the top of the hierarchy. While the typical structure for government agencies is undoubtedly hierarchical, top-down (Harris, 2002; Grunig, 1984), the trend identified in recent management literature is to recommend flatter organizational structures to open up communications (Gardner, no date). The classical management approach, also described as machine theory and one of mechanistic 'control' is typical of a highly structured organization. However, as Mole (2000) noted, "It would be wrong to suggest that all management thinking in any organization is attuned to one particular organizational model or metaphor. Organizations are plural places where multiple outlooks and agendas both co-exist and conflict" (p. 37).

This would appear to indicate that a highly structured hierarchical arrangement clearly has its place. This is supported by Gardner's (n.d.) observation, "... recent literature suggests that modified bureaucracies still have their place, particularly in the public domain ...". Considering that the findings

seem to indicate that ‘uncertainty of communication roles’ is a factor impacting on communication one might ask the question: is this a result of poorly communicated structures. On the other hand is it fair to suggest such an inconsistency considering that no organization can remain static in today’s turbulent environment where it is important for organizations to remain flexible, enabling strategy to emerge and evolve.

Goldhaber (1993) suggested that “the organization that is truly coping ultimately lets the communication system dictate the structure of the organization” (p. 56). The author further noted that a proactive organization could cope with the potential for future overload by designing structures that fit existing communication patterns. A tall order perhaps, particularly in a highly structured organization where communication is not considered important if it is perceived that the organization is achieving its goals.

As Grunig (1984) noted internal communication programs are extremely important to an organization because employees communicate information about the organization to external publics. The author explains that employees who dislike a structured organization will communicate that dislike to outsiders. Employees in a less-structured organization who are not well informed cannot communicate accurate information to external publics. Hence, “Organizations must realize that failing to meet internal objectives can make it difficult to meet external objectives” (Grunig, 1984, p. 254).

Communication policies, programs and strategies are a powerful means of heightening levels of commitment to corporate goals from stakeholders, especially employees. Strategic frameworks incorporated into an organization’s business planning cycle demonstrate senior management commitment to improving communication. This includes regular evaluations of current practice, and the setting of standards to measure success (Tourish, 1997).

While the FESA Strategic Plan 2003-2005 and FESA Policy Statements do not specifically address internal communication, organizational key goals which had significance to this study included:

- FS Divisional Plan—Quality People Services: ‘Skilling and developing employees.’

- CET Medium Priority Key Corporate Issue/FS Key Performance Goal: Fostering succession development, mentoring and coaching practices.
- Fire Services Goals for 2004-05: Review the Fire Services delivery model with a view to broadening the concept of a FESA management structure (FESA Annual Report, 2004).

All three goals focus on developing people and present an opportunity for improving communication. The four functions of management: planning, leading, organizing, and controlling are referred to widely in the management literature. However, increasingly over the past decade, communication has been included as the fifth management function (Fall, 2004).

In view of the fact that communication is considered a key management skill, it is reasonable to expect that organizational interventions that focus on developing people and improving their understanding of relevant communication practices and communication skills would at the same time have a positive effect on internal communication.

The results from the thesis fieldwork and analysis of the literature would suggest that it is important that organizations consider a communication policy with relevant procedures and guidelines to encourage best practice systems and one that creates understanding of the roles and responsibilities of employees in the communication process.

A key outcome of the research is a proposed strategic pathway to effective communication processes and practices at FESA through the concept of organizational development. This would involve organizational change to accommodate an overarching organizational strategic communication plan, a subset of which would encompass a communication skills development plan. It would involve reviewing and updating current policies and practices as a means to promote improved information flow and improved communication skills of staff.

The development of a total system as a way of determining priorities, evaluating progress and providing a basis for continuous improvement across the entire communication process at FESA would involve: periodic comprehensive communication audits; regular evaluations to monitor progress; and a communication skills development plan as part of a 'professional development framework' for middle management which utilizes best practice strategies in

communication, feedback, induction and mentoring as a means to improving communication.

I propose that this thesis lays a foundation for an innovative and alternative approach to internal communication through the application of the systems theory model at any organization. According to Bennis (as cited in Goldhaber, 1991) "... organization development concepts encourage people to develop their potentialities within the organizational framework and emphasize individual responsibility and problem-solving" (p. 323). A change to the organizational communication system through 'organization development' as a method of adapting to a changing environment, utilizing all the components of the systems model, would encourage people [components of the system] to develop their potentialities and take responsibility for communication problems both now and in the future. After all, it must be remembered that both the sender and the receiver have responsibilities in the communication process.

A turbulent changing environment should not be feared or treated with disdain, it can be likened to a wave, a small part of the ocean, a subset of the system, that swells and surges to the surface only to dissipate back into the supersystem, the vastness of the ocean in calm and tranquillity.

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