

COMMUNICATION SKILL FOR MANAGERS

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Abstract

Communication is one of the most important skills a manager must develop as he goes up in the hierarchy of the organization. Communication is the transfer of information from one person to another, with the information being understood by both the persons. A manager spends most of his time either sending or receiving information. It would be wrong to assume that in all of the activities, communication is really taking place.

In an organization, communication flows in various directions viz. downward, upward, horizontal and diagonal, each one having its own importance. In the downward communication, directives and policies of the organization are transmitted to lower levels. Upward communication is equally important. Subordinates must feel free to convey their opinions and suggestions towards management policies. Horizontal communication occurs across the departments or between people on the same level in managerial hierarchy. Diagonal communication does not follow the organizational hierarchy and cuts across the chain of command.

The communication may flow through different media like words, pictures, actions etc. Words can be transmitted orally and received by listening or transmitted in written form and be received by reading. Communication is unlikely to be smooth always. There are number of barriers, few of them are like organization structure, lack of planning to communicate, language, distrust, fear, resistance to change etc. Although perfect understanding between two people may be impossible, the barriers can be surmounted by techniques like feedback, direct and meaningful language, effective listening etc.

Keywords: Barrier, Communication, Flow, Feedback, Hierarchy, Language, Listening, Message, Organization, Receiver, Resistance, Skill, Sender, Structure.

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1.0 Introduction

Although communication applies to all phases of managing, it is particularly important in the functioning of managers. Communication is defined as “the transfer of information from the sender to the receiver with the information being understood by both the sender and the receiver.”

Communication is very important to the managers not only in performing his influencing function but in all of his functions and in the successful integration of them. Since managing includes getting things done through others, it is obvious that the manager has to communicate with many members of his organization. It has been estimated that a manager spends 90% of his time either sending or receiving information. It would be wrong to assume that in all of this activity communication is really taking place. The fact that a manager is constantly engaged in sending and receiving messages is no assurance that he is expert in getting ideas across. The frequent lack of understanding and the great amount of confusion and disagreement on all sorts of matters are evidence that true communication often does not take place.

Effective communication involves both information and understanding because the receiver may hear a sender but still not understand what he means. Understanding is a personal matter. If the idea received is the one intended, communication has taken place. But due to different backgrounds people may interpret messages differently. If the idea received is not the one intended, communication has not taken place. The sender has not communicated; he has merely spoken or written. As long as there is no reception or imperfect/partial reception, one cannot speak of communicating. This does not mean that the receiver must agree with the statement of the sender, communication occurs when the receiver at least understands what the sender means to convey.

Each person is endowed with certain capacities for communication. However, some persons are much more effective communicators than others. The personal effectiveness of a manager varies in part according to his ability to communicate. He must be able to transfer information and knowledge so that he is understood and results are achieved. He must know how to receive knowledge and understanding from the messages sent to him by subordinates and fellow

managers. Only through good communication can company policies and practices be formulated and administered. It also helps in ironing out all misunderstandings, achieving long term plans, coordinating and controlling all activities. The success of all managerial functions depends on good communication.

2.0 Communication Flow in the Organization

In an effective organization, communication flows in various directions – downward, upward, horizontal and diagonal. Traditionally, downward communication was emphasized but there is ample evidence that if this is the only direction of communication flow, problems will develop. In fact, one could argue that effective communication has to start with the subordinate and this means primarily upward communication. Communication also flows horizontally, that is, between people on the same or similar organizational levels and diagonally, involving persons from different levels who are not in direct reporting relationships with one another.

2.1 Downward Communication

The chain of formal command suggests that someone at the top issues an order which the next person in the hierarchy passes along to those who report to him and soon down the line. This downward movement is the one management relies on for the communication of directives and instructions. Through this channel, policies are transmitted to lower levels of the organization for implementation.

2.2 Upward Communication

Upward communication is equally important. Subordinates must feel free to convey their options and suggestions to their superiors and to report on activities and actions relating to their work, all of which is essential to the effective operation of the enterprise. Management should encourage such communication because this is the only means by which it can determine whether messages have been transmitted and properly received. It is the best way to learn whether proper action has been taken or is taking place to accomplish company objectives. Generally speaking, downward communication initiates actions by subordinates,

it is primarily of a directive nature whereas upward communication is of an informative and reporting nature. Upward communication carries control information regarding what has happened at various points of performance.

2.3 Horizontal Communication

Horizontal communication is another direction of communication which is essential for the efficient functioning of an organization. Such communication occurs across the departments or between people on the same level in the managerial hierarchy. This kind of communication is used to speed information flow. To improve understanding and to coordinate efforts for the achievement of organizational objectives.

2.4 Diagonal Communication

Diagonal communication is the flow of messages between decision centres and people which are not on the same horizontal plane of the organization structure. A common example is communication between line and staff groups. A great deal of communication does not follow the organizational hierarchy but cuts across the chain of command.

3.0 Communication Media

The media for communicating may be –

- Words
- Pictures
- Actions

3.1 Words

Words are the most important symbol used. It is, therefore, essential for the manager to be able to use them effectively. Words can be transmitted orally and received by listening or transmitted in written form and be received by reading.

3.1.1 Oral Communication

A great deal of information is communicated orally. On an average, managers give about 75% of their assignments orally. Oral communication can be face-to-face meeting of two people, a manager addressing a large audience or on telephone.

The advantage of oral communication is that it can provide for speedy interchange with immediate feedback. People can ask questions and clarify points. In a face-to-face interaction, the effect can be noted. Furthermore, a meeting with the superior may give the subordinate a feeling of importance.

However, oral communication also has disadvantages. It does not always save time, as is well known that there were many meetings in which no results or agreements were achieved. These meetings can be costly in terms of time and money.

3.1.2 Written Communication

Written communication has the advantage of providing records, references and legal defenses. Managers can carefully prepare the message and direct it to a large audience through mass mailings. Written communication can also promote uniformity in policy and procedures.

The disadvantages are that written message may create mountains of papers, may be poorly expressed by ineffective writers and may provide no immediate feedback. Consequently, it may take a long time to know whether a message has been received and properly understood.

Effective writing may be the exception rather than rule, nor do education and intelligence guarantee good writing. Many people fall into the habit of using technical jargon that can be understood only by experts in the same field.

3.2 Pictures

Pictures are powerful tool of communication. They are visual aids the manager may resort to from time to time. They are particularly effective in association with well chosen words. Organizations have made extensive use of pictures in the form of charts, drafts, brochures , posters etc.

3.3 Actions

Actions are third type of media used in communication. The manager must not forget that what he does is interpreted as a symbol by his subordinates and that his actions often speak louder than his words. Due to manager's status all observable acts communicates something to the subordinates whether he intends it or not. Purposeful silence, gestures, a handshake, a shrug of the shoulder, a smile, all has meanings. Unexplained actions, however, often communicates a meaning which is not intended.

4.0 Barriers to Communication

Every manager is familiar with the misunderstandings, frictions and inconveniences that arise when the communication network breakdown. A vast majority of managerial problems result from poor communication or the lack of it. These breakdowns are not only costly in terms of money but they are also injurious to teamwork and morale. After all, the way the superior communicates with his subordinates is the essence of their relationship.

4.1 Organizational Structure

The structure of the organization has a significant influence on the ability of its members to communicate efficiently with ease. The intricate structure of most organizations today involves several layers of supervision, long communication lines, complex relations among staff and line assignments and considerable organizational distance of worker from top management. At any level of supervision, communication may breakdown due to faulty transmission. To overcome these potential breakdowns, management must consider the nature and complexity of the organization structure and determine the best channels and the most effective ways to overcome the barriers. Management might decide to reduce the number of levels of supervision, shorten the line of authority, increase delegation and decentralization.

4.2 Lack of Planning to Communicate

Good communication seldom happens by chance. Too often people start talking and writing without first thinking, planning and stating the purpose of the message. Yet, giving the

reasons for a directive, selecting the most appropriate channel and choosing proper timing can greatly improve understanding.

4.3 Language

Language is a method of using words to represent facts and feelings. It is the basis of most of the communication. Normally words serve well but frequently the same words may suggest quite different meanings to different people. In such a case, the words themselves constitute a barrier to communication. Managers should realize that some words carry a symbolic meaning for some people and that when he uses such words he may find himself communicating something he did not intend to say. In order to avoid a breakdown in communication, the communicator instead of using his own language should use the language of the listener.

4.4 Poorly Expressed Message

No matter how clear the ideas in the mind of sender of communication, it may still be marked by poorly chosen words, omissions, lack of coherence, poor organization of ideas, awkward sentence structure, unnecessary jargon and a failure to clarify the implications of the message. This lack of clarity and precision, which can be costly, can be avoided through greater care in encoding the message.

4.5 Loss by Transmission and Poor Retention

In a series of transmission from one person to the next, the message becomes less and less accurate. Poor retention of information is another serious problem. One study found that employees retain about 50% of the information they receive and supervisors only 60%. This finding makes the necessity for repetition of the message and the use of several channels becomes obvious. Consequently, organizations often use more than one channel to communicate the same message.

4.6 Poor Listening and Premature Evaluation

There are many talkers but few listeners. Everyone probably has observed people entering a discussion with comments that have no relation to the topic. One reason may be that these persons are pondering their own problems instead of listening to the conversation.

Listening demands full attention and self-discipline. It also means premature evaluation of what the other person has to say. A common tendency is to judge, to approve or disapprove what is being said rather than trying to understand the speaker's frame of reference. In short, listening with empathy can reduce some of the daily frustrations in organized life and result in better communication.

4.7 Distrust, Threat and Fear

Distrust, threat and fear underline communication. In a climate containing these forces, any message will be viewed with doubt. Distrust can be the result of inconsistent behavior by the superior or it can be due to past experience in which the subordinate was punished for honestly reporting unfavorable, but true, information to the boss. Similarly, in the light of threats people tend to tighten up, become defensive and distort the information. What is needed is a climate of trust which facilitates open and honest communication.

4.8 Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is another communication barrier. When a message conveys a new idea, the listener does not receive it properly. Although the tendency to resist change is not a healthy one, it results from the natural inclination to leave the environment as it is. The listener's receiving apparatus works like a filter, rejecting new ideas if they conflict with what he already believes. He will only receive ideas that confirm his present belief and he tends to ignore anything that conflicts. Sometimes this filter works so efficiently that he does not hear at all. Ultimately, the listener hears what he expects to hear. If he is insecure, worried or fearful, this barrier becomes even more powerful.

5.0 Means for Overcoming Barriers to Communication

Although perfect understanding between two people may be impossible, there are many techniques available for improving communication. A manager ought to be familiar with several of them in order to maximize his success in communicating.

5.1 Feedback

Among the many methods for improving communication, feedback is probably the most important. Most of the managers use this principle of feedback in their daily communications. As senders, they are alert to the reactions of their receiver, they constantly seek clues from him which show that they are being understood.

The simplest way to obtain feedback is to observe the receiver and judge his responses. One of the outstanding advantages of any oral communication is that it provides immediate feedback. The sender may ask the receiver to repeat complex information in his own words. This is much more satisfactory than merely asking him whether or not he understands and if the instruction is clear.

5.2 Sensitivity to the World of the Receiver

In order to communicate successfully, the sender must be sensitive to the world of the person who will receive the message. Once the manager has conceived the message he wants to convey, he should try to predict the impact of what he will say on the feelings and attitudes of the receiver. Common grounds for understanding is necessary especially if due to different backgrounds and experience, the world of the subordinate is considerably different from that of his superior. The closer working relationship between superior and subordinate, the more the superior will know about the world of the subordinate and more easily he can anticipate how the latter is likely to interpret the message.

5.3 Direct, Simple, Meaningful Language

Since words may mean different things to the sender and the receiver, the manager must be careful to use words which are as intelligible and simple as possible. Multi-syllable and technical words should be avoided and replaced in favour of short terms which are easily understood. Since the goal of communication is to reach mutual understanding, the sender should use language which the receiver actually 'will' understand, not language that he 'ought' to understand.

5.4 Effective Listening

One method of overcoming barriers to communication is for the sender to spend more time listening. In order to get a receiver to hear what he wants to tell him, the speaker should first listen to the receiver. In many instances, this will enable the speaker to learn something about the receiver's values and his relationship to his world. Better communications are achieved by listening to what the other person has to say without the interference of biases and prejudices. There is no need to agree but there is every necessity to try to understand the other person.

Listening will greatly improve communications since it reduces misunderstandings. By listening, the speaker can adjust this message to fit the responses of the receiver. This opportunity to adjust the message to the responses of the receiver is an advantage of oral communication in comparison with written messages.

5.5 Action Speak Louder than Words

The manager communicates by his actions as much as by his words. One of the best means to give meaning to a message is to act accordingly. The manager is often the centre of attraction for his subordinates and he communicates through all observable actions regardless of whether this is what he intended. It will help to overcome barriers to communication if verbal announcements are reinforced by actions. If a manager says one thing but does another, sooner or later his subordinates will 'listen' mostly what he does.

6.0 Conclusion

It is, therefore, concluded that communication is the transfer of information from the sender to the receiver, with the information being understood by both the sender and the receiver. The communication process begins with the sender who encodes an idea which is sent in oral, written or visual form to the receiver. The receiver decodes the message and gains an understanding of what the sender wants to communicate. This, in turn, may result in some change or action. But the communication process may be interrupted by 'noise', that is, by anything that hinders communication. In an organization, managers should have the information necessary for doing a

good job. The information may not only flow downward or upward in the organization structure but may also flow horizontally or diagonally.

Communication can be in the written form but even more information is communicated orally. In addition, people communicate through gestures and facial expression. Communication takes place not only between a sender and a receiver but also among many people within the social system connected through a communication network.

Communication is hindered by barriers and breakdowns in communication. Understanding these barriers and applying the measures for effective communication and listening facilities not only facilitates better understanding but also effective managing.

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