Chapter 13. Organizational Communication[1]

By Kathryn A. Baker

Managers have traditionally spent the majority of their time communicating in one form or another (meetings, face-to-face discussions, memos, letters, e-mails, reports, etc.). Today, however, more and more employees find that an important part of their work is communication, especially now that service workers outnumber production workers and research as well as production processes emphasize greater collaboration and teamwork among workers in different functional groups. Moreover, a sea-change in communication technologies has contributed to the transformation of both work and organizational structure. For these reasons, communication practices and technologies have become more important in all organizations, but they are perhaps most important in knowledge-intensive organizations and sectors and, as such, are of great significance to science organizations and to public science management.

The study of organizational communication is not new, but it has only recently achieved some degree of recognition as a field of academic study. It has largely grown in response to the needs and concerns of business. The first communication programs were typically located in speech departments, but most business schools now include organizational communication as a key element of study. The study of organizational communication recognizes that communication in organizations goes far beyond training managers to be effective speakers and to have good interpersonal communication skills. Moreover, it recognizes that all organizations, not just business organizations, have communication needs and challenges.

The field of organizational communication is highly diverse and fragmented, as evidenced by results of literature searches on the topic, textbooks in the area, and the Harvard Business Review's (1993) compilation of its communication articles, *The Articulate Executive*. It spans communication at the micro, meso, and macro levels; formal and informal communications; and internal organizational communication practices (newsletters, presentations, strategic communications, work direction, performance reviews, meetings) as well as externally directed communications (public, media, inter-organizational). Innovation, organizational learning, knowledge management, conflict management, diversity, and communication technologies are also addressed. As a new academic discipline, organizational communication is struggling to develop and convey some sense of coherency across these many areas.

In addition to its fragmented nature, organizational communication, perhaps more than any other aspect of organizational theory and practice, has been subject to dramatic change. Before 1920, communication in small organizations was largely informal. As organizations increased in size, formal top-down communication became the main concern of organizational managers. Organizational communication in today's organizations has not only become far more complex and varied but more important to overall organizational functioning and success. While research used to focus on understanding how organizational communication varied by organizational type and structure, the emphasis has increasingly turned to understanding how new communication technologies and capabilities can help bring about new and more effective organizational forms and processes (Tucker et al. 1996; Desanctis and Fulk 1999).

[1] Related chapters include: Change Management; Knowledge Management; Leadership; Organizational Culture; Innovation.

This review summarizes the historical trends and the increasing importance of organizational communication, the basic theoretical perspectives that guide the study of communication and the key distinctions that guide the study of organizational communication, the key functions of communication in organizations, and implications of communication technologies for organizations. Because organizational communication has become such a big topic, this review is limited to addressing internal organizational communication. Interactions with external stakeholders and communication of scientific information to external audiences are addressed in separate chapters (see Chapter 10. "Participative Management and Chapter 17. "Communicating Science").

Historical Trends and the Increasing Importance of Organizational Communication

Views of organizational communication can be categorized as those that view organizational communication as one aspect of an organization versus those that see it as the underlying basis of the organization itself. An example of the former is exemplified by Drenth et al. (1998), who define communication as the sending and receiving of messages by means of symbols and see organizational communication as a key element of organizational climate. The latter viewpoint is reflected by Myers and Myers (1982:xv) who define organizational communication as "the central binding force that permits coordination among people and thus allows for organized behavior," and Rogers and Rogers (1976:3) who argue that "the behavior of individuals in organizations is best understood from a communication point of view."

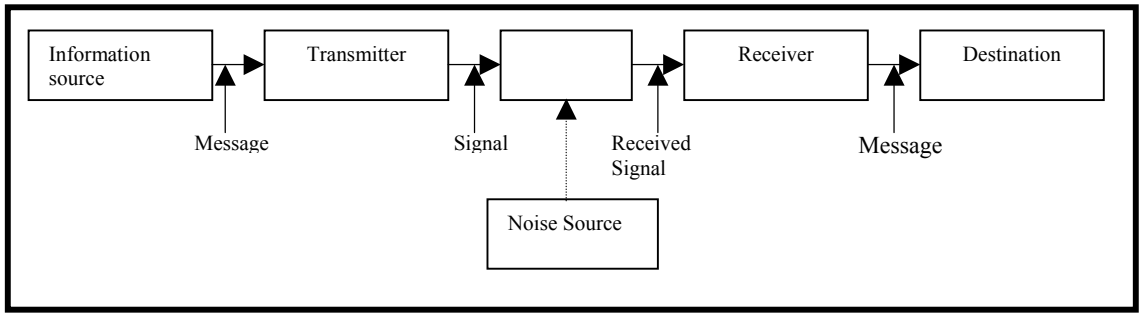
In many ways, organizations have evolved in directions that make the latter view more appropriate. Changes confronting organizations and the associated changes in organizational forms have made organizational communication increasingly important to overall organizational functioning. For example:

- Work is more complex and requires greater coordination and interaction among workers
- The pace of work is faster
- Workers are more distributed
- Simultaneous, distributed work processes are more common
- Knowledge and innovation are more critical to an organization's competitive advantage
- Communication technologies and networks are increasingly essential to an organization's structure and strategy.

Communication is not only an essential aspect of these recent organizational changes, but effective communication can be seen as the foundation of modern organizations (Grenier and Metes 1992; D'Aprix 1996; Witherspoon 1997; von Krogh et al. 2000).

Theoretical Perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives guide the study of communication: the technical, the contextual, and the negotiated perspectives. The *technical* view of communication is associated with information theory and usually traced back to Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949). Shannon, an engineer at Bell Laboratories, portrayed communication as a mechanistic system, as shown in Figure 1. The important question in information theory is "how can an information source get a message to a destination with a minimum of distortions and errors?" In applying this mechanistic approach to interpersonal communication, the question is the same, although the mechanistic system is altered to some extent and the analysis is less technical and mathematical. The technical view of communication persists as a common basis for discussions about organizational communication.

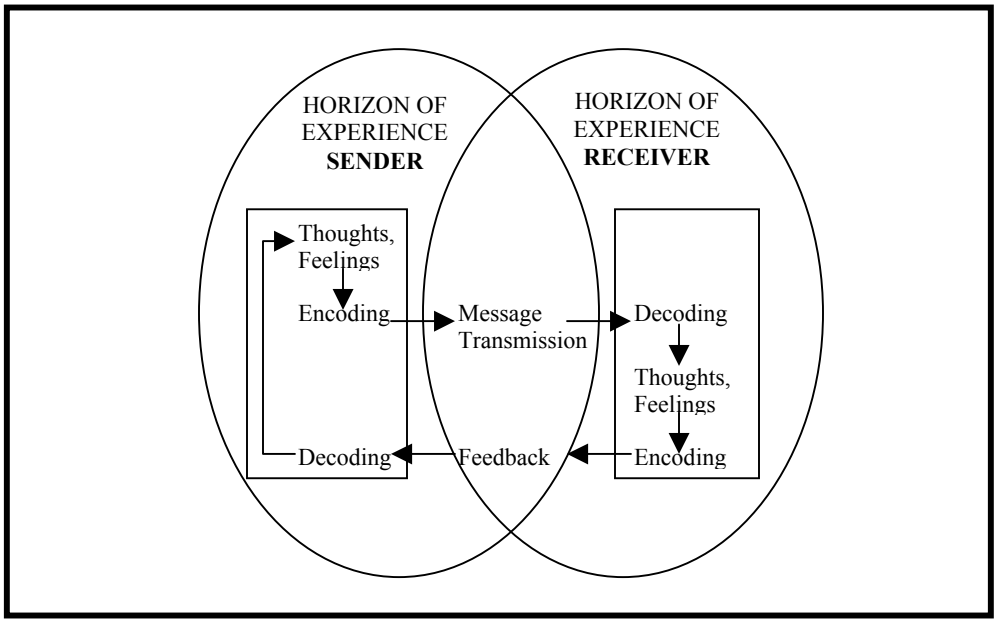


Adapted from Shannon and Weaver (1949).

Figure 1. Information Theory: Communication as a Mechanistic System

White and Chapman (1996:11) introduced into this communication system both human (the person's horizon of experience, thoughts/feelings, the acts of encoding/decoding) and interpersonal feedback elements, as illustrated in Figure 2. Since that time, an array of human filters that are influenced by the person' horizon of experience (such as motive, affect, attention, knowledge, attitudes, values, and beliefs) have been specified. Although the social context affects these human filters, the larger social context is not directly addressed in these approaches.

The *contextual* approach to communication focuses not just on content (e.g. the accurate exchange of information or adequacy of conveying the intended meaning) but on the larger context of communication. It focuses on nonverbal cues as well as verbal content. It also looks at the relational context between the sender and receiver within the larger social/organizational/cultural context. It sees words as symbols interpreted in context. Mead (1934) and Blumer (1972) stressed communication as symbolic interaction that created meaning and one's sense of both self and society. Discourse analysis is an extension and elaboration of the contextual perspective. Rather than looking at a particular interpersonal exchange or sequences of exchanges, discourse analysis looks at an overall body of communication (including formal and informal, oral and written communication of all kinds). The goal of the analysis is to relate discourse patterns to patterns of social relations. It seeks to explicate how the creation and maintenance of social relations materialize in talk (Manning 1992; Pearce 1994, 1995; and Cronen 1991, 1995). Through discourse about itself, the organization enacts (shapes, defines, and marks the boundaries of) itself. Discourse gives rise to objectively known collective representations that have inter-subjective validity. In this sense, discourse is both interpersonal and collective, both inter-subjective and contextual.



Adapted from White and Chapman (1996:11)

Figure 2. Technical Sender-Receiver Model of Communication

Lazega (1992) goes beyond the *contextual* to the *negotiated* view of communication and meaning. Rather than examining how discourse helps create, maintain, and give meaning to social relations, he examines how the communication context itself is negotiated. For example, how *judgements of appropriateness* and *knowledge claims* (standards by which something is deemed to be technically satisfactory) come to be constructed. In this sense he elaborates on the interactive feedback component of the *technical* approach. Feedback exchanges can be viewed as a process of interpersonal negotiation. This approach can be traced back to the notion of language games and word playing introduced by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Key Distinctions

Key distinctions with respect to organizational communication involve: (1) levels; (2) formal versus informal; (3) direction (vertical, horizontal, diagonal); and (4) internal versus external focus. This section discusses the first three distinctions, all concerned with internal communication, in some detail; external communication is the subject of Chapter X, "Communicating Science."

Levels

Communication is frequently divided into the following levels:

- Interpersonal communication
- Group level communication
- Organizational level communication
- Inter-organizational level communication
- Mass communication.

Some authors prefer to distinguish between micro, meso, and macro levels, where micro refers to interpersonal communication; meso refers to group, organizational, and inter-organizational communication; and macro refers to all higher order communication.

Although interpersonal and group level communications reside at a lower level than organizational communication, they are major forms of communication in organizations and are prominently addressed in the organizational communication literature. Indeed, the initial focus of the organizational communication literature was the interpersonal communication skills of managers (particularly speaking and writing). As organizations became more communication-based, greater attention was directed at improving the interpersonal communication skills of all organizational members.

Many of the articles contained in the Harvard Business Review's organizational communication collection, entitled *The Articulate Executive*, address interpersonal communication and, despite the title, they do not focus exclusively on the executive. Key topics include:

- *Active, non-evaluative listening* – the skill to receive messages is as important as the skills associated with sending messages (classic article by Rogers and Roethlisberger 1952)
- *Skilled incompetence* – the tendency on the part of professionals to preserve their reputations of competency by not admitting what they don't know, and on the part of most persons to duck tough issues and avoid conflict (Argyris 1986)
- The potential "flaming" effect of computer-mediated communication – because senders are ignorant of "the social context and feel free to express themselves" and receivers don't have the advantage of non-verbal cues computed-mediated communication may result in more negatively charged communication exchanges (Kiesler 1986).

Key distinctions within interpersonal communication include:

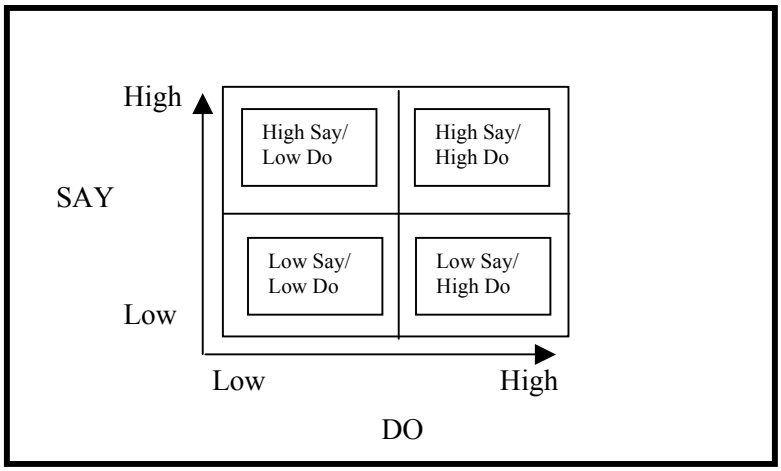
- Sending/receiving (listening)
- Oral/written/electronic (electronic can be computer mediated oral or written communication)
- Verbal/nonverbal.

Organizational communication has increasingly focused on the meso level of communication (group, organizational, and inter-organizational communication). This review similarly focuses on the meso, as opposed to the micro, level. Moving beyond the micro to the meso level introduces further distinctions, such as *formal/informal*, *vertical/horizontal/diagonal*, and *internally versus externally directed*.

Formal versus Informal Communication

In the past, the concern of managers of large bureaucratic organizations and, consequently the major focus of the organizational communication literature, was *formal, top-down communication*. *Informal communication*, generally associated with interpersonal, horizontal communication, was primarily seen as a potential hindrance to effective organizational performance. This is no longer the case. On-going, dynamic, and non-formal, if not informal, communication has become more important to ensuring the effective conduct of work in modern organizations.

Most discussions of informal communication emphasize how to manage organizational culture and climate (the context of informal communications) to prevent informal and formal communications from being in opposition. D'Aprix (1996:39-40) developed a SAY/DO matrix– managers say one thing but do another – as a key explanation of how informal/formal communication issues can arise (see Figure 3). He locates ideal organizational communication in the High Say/High Do quadrant – indicating that there is sufficient communication and that management actions match their communications. An organization in the High Say/Low Do quadrant is most likely to have a culture in which informal and formal communications conflict.



Adapted from D'Aprix (1996:39-40)

Figure 3. Manager's SAY/DO Correlation Associated with Formal and Informal Communication Conflict

Other discussions of informal communication have focused on diversity training as a mechanism for sensitizing staff to potential issues associated with informal (as well as formal) communication.[2] Still others have emphasized conflict management as a strategy for dealing with issues that arise from informal communication and interactions between workers. More recent discussions focus on the growing dependence on dynamic computer-facilitated communications that are neither formal nor informal, such as communication within teams or within communities of practice (see Chapter 5*:* Knowledge Management). It may be that the formal/informal dichotomy of the past is becoming less salient as many new communication channels now exist within organizations that are neither formal nor informal.

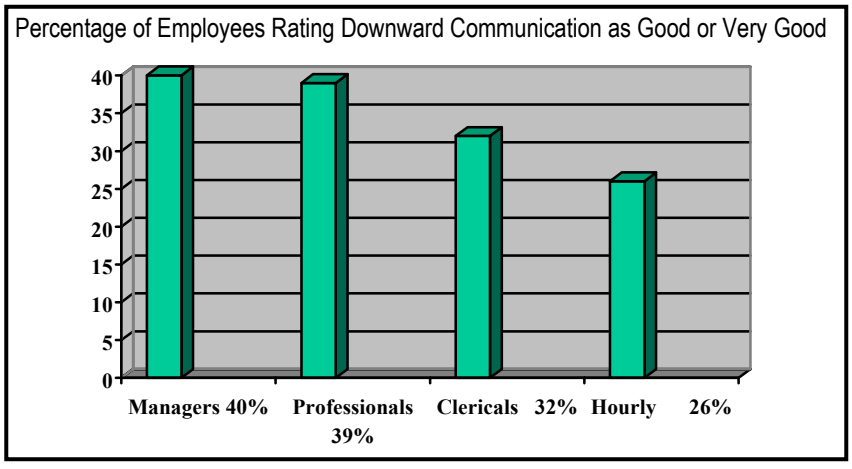
[2] Taking into account diversity among organizational members is important because many organizations are no longer predominately made up of white males. In fact, white males are fast becoming a minority in both the population and the workforce. By 2025, white males are expected to be a minority in most organizations (Neher 1997). The trend toward multinational firms is also making diversity a more important issue for many organizations.

Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Communications

Communication can also be characterized as vertical, horizontal, or diagonal. Initially greater emphasis was directed at vertical organizational communication as compared to lateral communication but that is no longer the case. Diagonal communication is an even more recent emphasis in the organizational communication literature.

Vertical Communication. Vertical communication occurs between hierarchically positioned persons and can involve both *downward* and *upward* communication flows. Downward communication is more prevalent than upward communication. Larkin and Larkin (1994) suggest that *downward communication is most effective if top managers communicate directly with immediate supervisors and immediate supervisors communicate with their staff*. A wealth of evidence shows that increasing the power of immediate supervisors increases both satisfaction and performance among employees. This was first discovered by Donald Pelz (1952) and is commonly referred to as the *Pelz effect*. Pelz was attempting to find out what types of leadership styles led to employee satisfaction (informal/formal, autocratic/participative, management-oriented/frontline-oriented). He found that *what matters most is not the supervisor's leadership style but whether the supervisor has power*. One way to give supervisors power is to communicate directly with them and to have them provide input to decisions. Ensuring that supervisors are informed about organizational issues/changes before staff in general, and then allowing them to communicate these issues/changes to their staff, helps reinforce their position of power. When the supervisor is perceived as having power, employees have greater trust in the supervisor, greater desire for communication with the supervisor, and are more likely to believe that the information coming from the supervisor is accurate (Roberts and O'Reilly 1974). Jablin (1980), after reviewing almost 30 years of research, pronounced the Pelz effect to be "one of the most widely accepted propositions about organizational communication."

Downward Communication. Based on a survey of 30,000 employees conducted by the Opinion Research Corporation, Morgan and Schieman (1983) found that a majority of the workers felt their organization did not do a good job of downward communication. As seen in Figure 4, satisfaction levels were especially low at lower job levels.



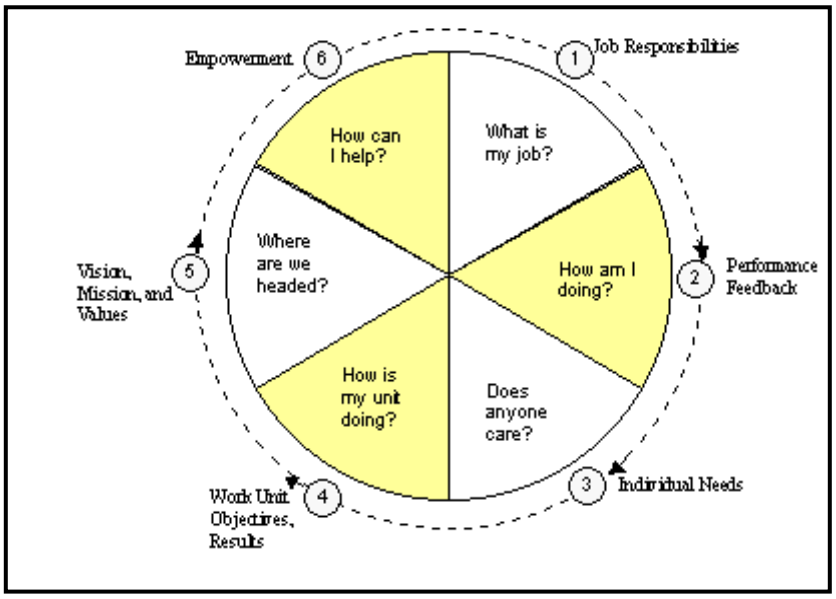
Adapted from Morgan and Schieman (1983:16).

Figure 4. Employee Satisfaction with Downward Communication

A survey of 32,000 employees conducted by the International Association of Business Communication and the firm of Towers, Perrin, Forster, and Crosby, Foehrenbach and Rosenberg (1982) found somewhat higher satisfaction with downward communication:

- 71 percent reported that their organization tried to keep employees well informed.
- 65 percent agreed that they had been given sufficient information to perform their jobs.
- 51 percent agreed that their organization's downward communication was candid and accurate.

They also found that employees want to hear more organizational news directly from the top executives – a finding that potentially conflicts with the *Pelz effect* and associated studies cited above. Finally, they found that the two topics of greatest interest to employees were future organizational plans and productivity improvements, a finding that seemingly conflicts with what D'Aprix (1996) posits as the hierarchy of employees' communication needs, as reflected in the pie chart in Figure 5. This latter discrepancy could stem from (1) the fact that D'Aprix's hierarchy of communication needs is theoretical, as opposed to being based on empirical research, and/or (2) the fact that D'Aprix does not distinguish what employees what to hear from top executives versus what they want to hear from their immediate supervisor.



Source: D'Aprix (1996)

Figure 5. Hierarchy of Employees' Communication Needs

Although the content priorities of downward communication have not been definitively demonstrated, there is some level of certainty with respect to the best approach to downward communication (Jablin 1980), i.e.,

- Top managers should communicate directly with immediate supervisors;
- Immediate supervisors should communicate with their direct reports; and
- On issues of importance, top managers should then follow-up by communicating with employees directly.

Perhaps the most tried and true rule of effective downward communication is to: *Communicate orally, then follow up in writing* (Gibson and Hodgetts 1991).

Upward Communication. Even less is known about upward communication. One consistent finding is that employee satisfaction with upward communication tends to be lower than their satisfaction with downward communication (Gibson 1985; Gibson and Hodgetts 1991:221-22). Larkin and Larkin (1994) found low levels of satisfaction with all the strategies commonly used to enhance upward communication, including employee surveys, suggestion programs, employee grievance programs, and employee participation programs such as quality circles and team meetings. Gibson and Hodgetts (1991:268-69) note several *management-based* reasons for this lack of satisfaction, particularly that these strategies often do not involve two-way communication, are not packaged well, are poorly timed, and are apt to trigger defensiveness on the part of managers. In addition, McCelland (1988) found a number of *employee-based* reasons why upward communication tends to be poor, including:

- Fear of reprisal – people are afraid to speak their minds
- Filters – employees feel their ideas/concerns are modified as they get transmitted upward
- Time – managers give the impression that they don't have the time to listen to employees.

Lateral Communication. Lateral communication involves communication among persons who do not stand in hierarchical relation to one another. While recent trends to flatten organizations have enhanced the importance of lateral communications, studies on lateral communication still lag behind those on vertical communication. One fairly limited study found rather high levels of satisfaction (85 percent) with lateral communication among human resource managers (Frank 1984), but lateral communication across managers of dissimilar functional divisions, while often cited as a major source of organization dysfunction, has not been subject to much empirical research. It has been assumed that lateral communication at the worker level is less problematic, at least within a functional area. However, with the greater importance of teams, more attention is now being directed at communication between team members. Lateral communications between workers in different functional areas is also becoming a bigger concern as greater attention is being directed at increasing the speed of production through simultaneous, as opposed to sequential, work processes. And there is greater emphasis on communication across distributed workers and geographically separated work groups doing similar kinds of work in an attempt to promote learning and the sharing of expertise, best practices, and lessons learned.

Diagonal Communication. Diagonal communication refers to communication between managers and workers located in different functional divisions (Wilson 1992). Although both vertical and horizontal communication continue to be important, these terms no longer adequately capture communication needs and flows in most modern organizations. The concept of diagonal communication was introduced to capture the new communication challenges associated with new organizational forms, such as matrix and project-based organizations. Also, with the rise of the network organization (both internally and externally oriented networks), communication flows can no longer be restricted to vertical, horizontal, and diagonal (see the discussion of network organizations in Chapter 9).

Internally versus Externally Directed Communication

The amount of literature directed at internally oriented organizational communication far exceeds that directed at externally oriented organizational communication. However, externally oriented communication is becoming a more important issue. Chapters 9 ("Organizational Alliances,

Partnerships, and Networks"), 10.("Participative Management and Employee and Stakeholder Involvement"), and 17 ("Communicating Science") discuss some of the special issues associated with external communication. As organizations increase the range and centrality of their interactions with customers, suppliers, and the public preparing for and managing the communication competencies and resources of the organization becomes ever more important.

Key Functions of Communication

The literature on communication generally acknowledges that the basic function of communication is to affect receiver knowledge or behavior by informing, directing, regulating, socializing, and persuading. Neher (1997) identifies the primary functions of organizational communication as:

- Compliance-gaining
- Leading, motivating, and influencing
- Sense-making
- Problem-solving and decision-making
- Conflict management, negotiating, and bargaining.

Neher (1997) and Rogers and Rogers (1976) emphasize the social and organizational functions of organizational communication as a whole rather than focusing on the functions of specific communication exchanges. Thus they combine the functions of informing, directing, and regulating into the broader category of behavioral compliance. They also give greater emphasis to the role of communication in managing threats to organizational order and control, identifying problem solving and conflict management, negotiation, and bargaining as key functions of organizational communication.

Myers and Myers (1982) combine similar functions into a higher level common function and provide a particularly succinct and clear version of the functions of organizational communication. They see communication as having three primary functions:

- *Coordination and regulation of production activities* – This function of communication has changed the most over time. In traditional bureaucratic views of the organization, prescription – clearly communicating behavioral expectations and the behavioral consequences associated with complying or not complying with these expectations—and monitoring are considered to be the basis of organizational order and control. This function of organizational communication was seen as involving fairly proceduralized, rule-oriented, one-way, top-down communication. Tasks in many organizations have become more complex, less routine and repetitive, tightly coupled, and interactive (Perrow 1986) and, as such, the traditional bureaucratic view of organizational communication is no longer sufficient. Production activities of this nature require dynamic, reciprocal, lateral communications between production workers and non-routinized, two-way, vertical communications between production workers and managers. Communication as a means of coordination and regulation becomes more important, complex, and difficult.
- *Socialization* – The socialization function of communication is stressed in the human relations perspective of organizations (see Chapter 1) which asserts that capturing the hearts and minds of organizational members is necessary to effectively coordinate organizational action in the pursuit of collective organizational goals. Communication

directed at socializing organizational members focuses on articulating and reinforcing organizational values and aligning individual goals with organizational goals. It is directed at establishing an appropriate organizational culture and climate. This form of communication cannot be one-way or top-down. It must occur reciprocally between organizational leaders and organizational members.

- *Innovation* – The organizational communication literature is increasingly addressing the importance of communication in promoting innovation as well as control and coordination. Communication to promote innovation is associated with strong communication within and beyond the organization.

This approach focuses on the functional goals of organizational communication, rather than on the near-term outcomes of particular acts of communication, such as to make a decision, to persuade, or to resolve a conflict. The more specific functions of specific acts of communication or sets of communication exchange (decision-making, informing, persuading, negotiating, problem-solving) are subsumed into each of the three higher-level functional objectives.

Communication Technologies

There has been a sea-change in communication technologies and a corresponding sea-change in communication theory and research. The organizational communication literature traditionally focused on how variations in organizational communication were affected by variations in the size, structure, and types of organization and how different types of organizational cultures gave rise to different types of organizational communication. The literature has now switched the causal ordering, emphasizing how new forms of organizational communication can bring about new organizational structures, cultures, as well as wholly new organizational forms.

New communication technologies and possibilities, combined with new challenges confronting organizations, are encouraging a whole new approach to organizational communication that challenges the very nature of organizations themselves. Radically new communication-enabled organizational forms are possible and are now emerging (see Tucker et al. 1996, Lucas 1996, Desanctis and Fulk 1999). On a less grandiose scale, new communication technologies can enable almost every aspect of organizational management and effectiveness, including change management (Chapter 4), knowledge management (Chapter 5), participative management (Chapter 10), innovation (Chapter 14), and organizational partnerships and alliances (Chapter 9).

The most notable advances in communication technology are groupware or computer facilitated group communication technologies. Johansen (1984) distinguishes groupware in terms of temporal (synchronous/asynchronous) and spatial (distributed/co-located) contexts as shown in Figure 5. These communication technologies can help traditional organizational groups work together more effectively. But, more importantly, they help dispersed individuals work as a team. The development of collaboratories, designed to help dispersed scientists conduct collaborative research and development as if they were co-located in a laboratory, may be one of the most exciting applications of the new communication technologies and computer-enabled environments. By capitalizing on new communication technologies, an organization should be able to realize a competitive advantage in its performance and in the marketplace (Lucas 1996; Tucker et al. 1996; Desanctis and Fulk 1999).

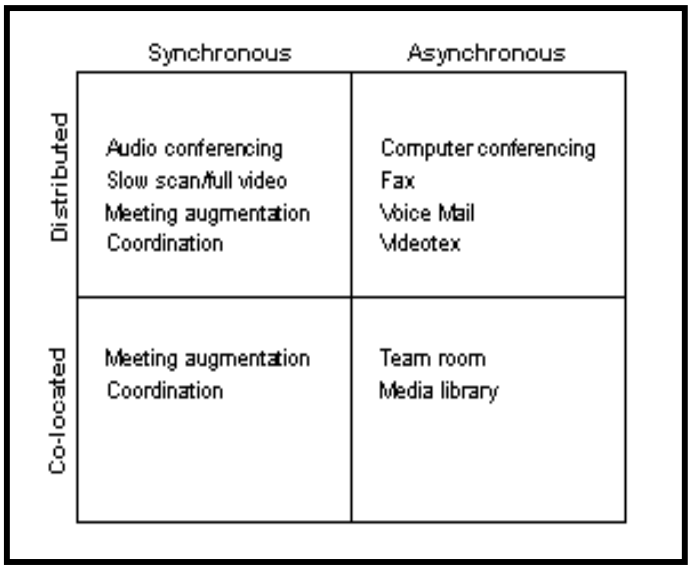


Figure 5. Characterizations of Groupware by Temporal and Spatial Attributes

Although communication technologies have opened up new opportunities, scholars and practitioners recognize that neither the theory nor the practice of organizational communication has kept up with this rapidly changing situation. Organizational communication "best practices," to the extent that they exist, are typically years out-of-date (Sapienza 1995). Also the introduction of new communication technologies has caused problems as well as opportunities. Some communication technologies have led to communication overload. It is a common fallacy to assume that because communication is generally seen as a good thing, the more communication the better. Communication overload is a real problem – what is needed is better, not more, communication (Richmond and McCroskey 1992; Conrad 1994).

The Applicability of Organizational Communication to Public Science Management

Public science management organizations face all the communications issues of other contemporary organizations. In addition, they currently need to orchestrate and implement communication that involves persons from many different organizations (both scientific and non-scientific) and disciplines and to help them function effectively as members of long-term decision-making and problem-solving teams. New strategies to promote excellence in science and more effective and efficient scientific advancement may involve expanded and new communication challenges, such as those associated with partnerships, collaboration, and knowledge management. The changing nature of the scientific organizational boundaries and strategies and the growing need to establish and manage diverse, geographically dispersed partnerships and collaborations, suggests that public science management organizations will need to:

- Identify, deploy and, perhaps, help develop more effective interpersonal, organizational, and inter-organizational communication technologies
- Advance the associated methodologies and skills to ensure their success.

The fact that scientific communication is highly specialized and technical in nature presents additional communication challenges, particularly communicating effectively across disciplines.

Although communication technologies and computer-aided collaborative environments could be useful in bringing about the type of collaboration and knowledge management necessary for encouraging greater and speedier scientific development and innovation, they will require a great commitment from and place burdens on management and staff alike.

Some questions to address are:

1. What current communication needs and challenges in both publicly funded science organizations and public science management (funding and directing) organizations are not being adequately addressed?
2. Do critical formal/informal communication conflicts exist?
3. Are communication challenges and issues greatest for vertical, horizontal (lateral), or diagonal communication? For internally or externally directed communication?
4. What new communication needs and challenges are science organizations most likely to face in the future?
5. How could communication technologies and computer-aided communication rich environments enable and facilitate communication across organizational boundaries, geographic distances, and scientific disciplines?
6. How can public science management (funding and directing) organizations encourage and facilitate publicly funded science organizations to become proficient in deploying and using communication technologies?
7. Can new communication technologies improve the effectiveness and efficiency of scientific production?
8. To what extent should and how can public science management organizations foster the development of needed communication technologies to encourage more effective and efficient scientific production?

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