Managing communication

What’s the best way to say goodbye?

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Business organizations of the 21st century are faced by numerous challenges brought about by a rapidly changing environment. Increased competitive pressures will push companies to introduce new products and services at an accelerated pace, to constantly raise the quality of their products and services, to utilize new technology, and to be environment-friendly. And all these will have to be done as they struggle to cut down on costs and expenses.

Many companies belonging to sunset industries will be forced to close down, scale down their operations, or shift their focus towards products and services that suit the market’s changing lifestyle. If we interpret the developments in the past decade as a precursor of what will take place in the next few years, then we can expect more companies to undergo major organizational changes such as restructuring, reengineering, mergers, and consolidations.

To implement these changes effectively, managers of business organizations must provide a rationale for change, encourage employee participation in the change process, share the rewards of change, protect employee security, stimulate employee readiness, and recognize the complex relationships involved in the change process (Newstrom and Davis, 1997). For all these activities, communication serves as the essential thread.

Unfortunately, employee security could not be assured in all cases. Companies that undertake reorganization will inevitably lay off employees—one of the most difficult tasks a manager must do.

Whenever I tackle the topic Managing Communication in my Human Behavior in Organization classes, I ask my students this question: “If you were a manager, how would you tell an employee that he or she will be laid off?” I then proceed to give them some options. Here is a typical exchange:

Me: Will you e-mail him/her?
Them: No, sir. That would be too insensitive.
Me: Will you text him/her the message?
Them: (Laughter)
Me: Will you write him/her a memo or a letter?
Them: (A few will raise their hands). Yes. It will allow me to choose my words.
Me: Will you do it face-to-face?
Them: (Most will raise their hands). This would be the most appropriate way. It will enable me to personally explain the reasons for the decision, as well as show respect for the employee, especially one who has been loyal to the company.

The students’ responses reflect an intuitive understanding of the concept of channel richness—an important factor to consider in managing communication. But before I dwell on the concept of channel richness, let me review the basics, namely the elements of communication and the functions of communication.

The elements of communication

The two-way communication process involves several elements, namely the parties involved in the communication.
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(sender and receiver), the message, the channel or medium of communication, and the feedback. Simply put, the person initiating the communication process sends a message to another person by utilizing a particular channel (medium), an activity also known as encoding. The other person receives the message through the channel (medium) and attempts to interpret it, an activity also known as decoding. Assuming that the message is successfully transmitted despite the presence of external interference (noise), the person who receives the message may or may not choose to respond to the person who sent the message. In either case, he or she provides feedback, which then becomes the message that he or she sends to the other party.

In a typical conversation, both parties simultaneously act as sender and receiver. Take note that the manner by which a person listens to what the other person is saying also sends a message to the person talking. A person who listens intently implicitly says, "I am interested in what you are saying." A person who is easily distracted sends the following message: "What you have to say is not important to me." This model of communication is captured in Figure 1.

In other forms of communication, though, feedback does not come back instantaneously. A person who writes his or her friend a letter will have to wait a few days or weeks before receiving a response. Only then will the message-feedback loop be completed. In some instances, it is difficult to determine if the loop was even completed, particularly if the medium utilized does not provide for feedback to be given (e.g. newsletters).

The functions of communication

Communication, according to Robbins (1998), has four functions namely: information, control, motivation, and emotional expression.

First, communication provides information that individuals and groups need to make decisions by transmitting the data to identify and evaluate alternative choices. In the work setting, this can take the form of a staff meeting during which team members think of ways to reduce operating expenses or to launch a new product.

Second, communication acts to control behavior in several ways. Employee manuals that contain corporate rules and regulations as well as policies and procedures generally serve this purpose.

Third, communication fosters motivation by clarifying to employees what is to be done, how well they are doing, and what can be done to improve performance. This is the primary responsibility of the operational manager who has direct contact with the employees under his or her department.

Finally, communication provides release for emotional expression of feelings and for fulfillment of social needs. Employees who are excited to go out for lunch or to take their coffee breaks do not only intend to satisfy what Maslow calls their physiological needs (e.g. food and drink) but their social needs (e.g. ex-
change of stories and/or expression of frustrations on and off the job) as well.

To be able to perform these functions effectively, the manager should clearly understand the characteristics of certain communication channels, particularly their ability to send certain messages through.

**Communication channel**

The channel of communication is the means by which a message is transmitted from a sender to a receiver. In an organization the usual channels of communication include the following: memoranda, reports, telephone, e-mail, employee manuals, newsletters, staff meetings, and person-to-person communication. Edralin (1997) identified the different communication channels utilized by small-, medium-, and large-scale companies in Metro Manila (see Table 1). A cursory glance reveals that large-scale companies are more likely to utilize the different communication methods identified. This does not mean, however, that less communication takes place in smaller companies. These companies are just likely to be less dependent on formal channels and more dependent on informal face-to-face talk.

**Channel richness**

According to Robbins (1998), recent research has found that channels differ in their capacity to convey information (see Figure 2). Some are rich in that they have the ability to (1) handle multiple cues simultaneously, (2) facilitate rapid feedback, and (3) be very personal. Others score low on these three factors.

When choosing which channel to utilize, it is important to determine what kind of message is being sent. Is the message simple or difficult? Is the message routine or non-routine? Routine messages are likely to be straightforward and have a minimum of ambiguity. Non-routine messages, on the other hand, are likely to be complicated and may be easily misunderstood.

Simple, routine messages (e.g. notice of meetings, announcement of promotions) are usually sent using channels that are low in the richness scale, while difficult and non-routine messages (e.g. discussion of a new policy, firing / dismissal of employees) require richer channels (see Table 2).

Of course, managers may utilize a combination of channels so as to ensure a better understanding of what they intend to communicate. In fact, some messages require the use of multiple channels.

In a staff meeting, for example, an employee simply cannot make an effective presentation by merely reciting his or her report. He or she must give the participants a written summary of his or her report, and probably utilize a powerpoint presentation to show some highlights. The written summary and powerpoint presentation provide visual cues that greatly facilitate the communication process.

Some managers often make a mistake in believing that communication has actually taken place when dissemination of information has been undertaken. Sending a memo about a possible reorganization or writing a story about it in the weekly newsletter may be the most efficient ways of transmitting the information, but these channels do not allow management to answer the questions of employees and fail to generate feedback from them. Worse, those who feel threatened by the plan could resort to speculation and a distortion of the intended message.

Enlightened managers realize that announcing the reorganization plan is only the first of a series of communication efforts needed to guarantee that employees will understand and accept it.

First, a general assembly might be needed to allow the president of the company to provide the perspective for the


*Percentage of companies surveyed that utilize the communication methods*
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reorganization.

Second, the managers of the different departmental units must be thoroughly oriented about the reorganization plan so that they can explain it to the employees under their span of control. Nothing could be worse than a manager who, because of his or her ignorance, unnecessarily fans the flame of doubt and resentment among employees.

Third, management could actively seek the feedback of employees regarding the reorganization plan through staff meetings, questionnaires/feedback forms, or through their union representatives.

Most of these communication channels are rich, i.e. they allow management to handle multiple cues and facilitate rapid feedback. Take note that the direction of communication in these channels is two-way, one that is difficult to achieve using the leaner communication channels. More importantly, these channels of communication lend some personal touch, something that sends a message of concern and reassurance.

Of course, these communication efforts will work only if management still enjoys the trust and confidence of the employees—something that is built on a history of enlightened management practices, one that can be achieved through a consistent pattern of sincere and genuine two-way communication.

So what’s the best way to say goodbye?

Evidence indicates that high-performing managers tend to be more media sensitive than low-performing managers (Daft, Lengel, and Trevino, 1987 in Robbins, 1998). Given this indicator, coupled with the organizational trends that has taken place over the past decade, it has become imperative for managers to expand their use of rich communication channels because the messages involved in these activities are non-routine, ambiguous, and extremely difficult to communicate.

Laying off employees as a result of the company’s reorganization efforts obviously involves a message that is non-routine and difficult to communicate. An e-mail message would be construed as unfeeling or inconsiderate. Texting the message to the employee sounds hilarious, but would be a cruel joke on the person concerned. A letter informing the employee of the layoff would, of course,

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Figure 2. Hierarchy of channel richness

be a requirement but might not be sufficient for the said purpose. The manager, after all, will have to explain the reasons for his or her decision, and answer so many questions such as:

- What is the basis for laying off an employee? Why am I being laid off instead of somebody else?
- How much will I get as separation pay?
- How will I feed my family? Can you help me find another job?
- Why don’t the managers cut back on their salaries so that the employees don’t have to be laid off?

Telling the employee, face-to-face, while difficult for many managers, would be the most appropriate thing to do. Some managers would probably avoid having to do it themselves because they might not want to face an employee who might resort to any of the following: cry, beg, or turn violent—cues that send powerful signals to those confronted by them.

But a manager must do what a manager has to do.

References


The Internet as a channel of communication

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Most communication takes place under conditions of potential agreement or increasing consensus and consonance and increasing commonality between participants. Often, the interests of senders and receivers of messages are consistent.

According to Rogers, “communication is a process in which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding”. There is a cyclical process towards greater mutual understanding based on the giving and receiving of information. Several cycles of information exchange occur before mutual understanding is reached and this does not have to be complete.

Convergence is always between two or more persons. It compels us to study differences, similarities and changes in human interrelationships over time. Its emphasis on mutual understanding and consensus, on relationships within networks, provide continuous feedback.

The Internet consists of tens of thousands of local networks linking millions of computers, owned by governments, public institutions, non-profit organizations, and private companies around the world. These local networks are linked together by thousands of Internet service providers that interconnect at dozens of points throughout the world. None of these entities, however, controls the Internet; each entity only controls its own computers and computer networks, and the links allowed into those computers and computer networks.

There are a variety of formal and informal groups that develop standards and agreements about specialized or emerging areas of the Internet. For example, the World Wide Web Consortium has developed agreements and standards for the Web. None of these formal and informal groups control, govern, run, or pay for the Internet. None of these formal and informal groups control the substantive content available on the Internet. None of these formal and informal groups has the power or authority to require content providers to alter, screen, or restrict access to content on the Internet other than content that they themselves create.

Communication methods on the Net

There are a wide variety of methods of communications over the Internet, including electronic mail, mail exploders such as listserv, USENET newsgroups, Internet Relay Chat, gopher, FTP, and the World Wide Web — there are technological obstacles in knowing about or preventing access to a communication that might be considered “indecent” or “patently offensive” in some communities.

The Internet Relay Chat, IRC, was first invented by a Finnish hacker Jarkko Oikarinen, in 1989. IRC is a truly distributed chat system, the IRC server of ucsd.edu recognizes 1288 users, 518 channels, 70 operators are on 141 different servers.

One of the impressive roles IRC has played was during the Gulf War in 1991 - a “news” channel opened to broadcast up-to-date information of what happened in the Gulf, mostly about the U.S. Desert Storm operation.

The “Internet Relay Chat” (or IRC) allows real time communication between two or more Internet users. IRC is analogous to a telephone party line, using a computer and keyboard rather than a telephone. With IRC, however, at any time there are thousands of different party lines available, in which collectively tens of thousands of users are engaging in discussions, debates, and conversations on a huge range of subjects. Moreover, an individual can create a new party line to discuss a different topic at any time. While many discussions on IRC are little more than social conversations between or among the participants, there are often conversations on important issues and topics.

There exists a network of dozens of IRC servers across the world. To speak through IRC, a speaker connects to one of these servers and selects the topic the
speaker wishes to “join.” Within a particular topic (once a speaker joins a topic), all speakers on that topic can see and read everything that everyone else transmits. As a practical matter, there is no way for each person who joins a discussion to interrogate all other participants (sometimes dozens of participants) as to their identity and age. Because people join or drop out of discussions on a rolling basis, the discussion line would be overwhelmed with messages attempting to verify the identity of the participants.

Also as a practical matter, there is no way that an individual speaker or an individual IRC server operator could enforce a rule for a selection of the discussion topics. Dozens of IRC servers are interconnected globally so that people across the world can talk to each other. Thus, a speaker connected to an IRC server in the United States can speak directly to a listener in Asia or Europe.

Nor can a speaker, prior to or at the time of joining an IRC discussion, ascertain with any confidence the identity of the other participants in the discussion. Individual participants in an IRC conversation are able to participate anonymously by using a pseudonym. A new speaker joining the conversation can see a list of pseudonyms of other participants, but has no way of determining the real identity (or even the real e-mail address) of the individuals behind each pseudonym.

Based on the current operations and standards of the Internet, it would be impossible for someone participating in an IRC discussion to screen recipients with a level of certainty. Requiring such screening of recipients by the speakers for any IRC discussions would have the effect of banning such discussions.

**“Chat”ting**

A Chat Room is a venue where participants create and share information with one another. Chat rooms are often labeled and grouped according to topics of interest, lifestyle, age and others.

According to the results of an informal poll, the feature of the Net most lauded was the ease of finding shared interests. This ensures commonality of participants and provides them a venue to discuss issues of interest.

The venue encourages participants to present their ideas freely.

**Genies**

The younger generation is usually the innovator when it comes to technology. The segment that is used in this study is the Genie segment.

Genies, the Asian counterpart of the Genies are still conservative

Genies balance the best of both worlds. They absorb the trends of the West (fashion, technology and other modern advances) while keeping the traditions and values of the East (family, religion and hard work).

Given the characteristics of this segment, this study would like to explore the communication behavior of this segment in the Internet.

**Exploratory Focus Group Discussion**

To have a picture of the convergence of Genies in the Internet chat room an exploratory informal group discussion about the Internet chat behavior and culture was recently conducted. The group was composed of six genies that have experienced chatting. There were 3 males and 3 females.

The conceptual framework used for this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

Some questions asked were:

- How did you know about chatting?
- When did you start chatting?
- Why do you chat?
- Who do you usually chat with?
- What language do you use whenever you chat?
- Is there a chat vocabulary that you are aware of?
- Are there any guidelines or rules when you decide to chat in the chat room?
- What topics do you usually discuss?
- Why do you discuss those topics?
- Are you able to identify the person you are chatting with?
- Are there any topics you do not discuss?
- Why do you avoid those topics?
- How do you leave the discussion room?

Results of the FGD show that the participants learned about chatting in the