PLS 500 – Public Administrative Theory

Topic: Communication and Conflict

Communication
- *Communication* is the transference of meaning from one individual to another and the understanding of meaning
  - It can be formal or informal as well as verbal and nonverbal
- Communication serves four major functions
  - Formal and informal communication acts to *control* the behavior of members of an organization
  - Communication fosters *motivation* by clarifying for employees what is to be done, how well they are doing, and what can be done to improve performance
  - Communication provides an avenue for *expressing emotions* and fulfilling needs
  - Communication provides *information* that individuals and groups need to make decisions by transmitting the data to identify and evaluate choices
- Communication process
  - It occurs between a *source* (sender) and a receiver
  - *Message* is encoded (converted into a symbolic form) and passed by way of some medium (communication *channel*) to the *receiver*, who translates (*decodes*) the message initiated by the sender
  - The result is the transference of meaning from one person to another

Flow of Information
- There are three basic directions of communication
  - *Downward*: Communication that flows from a high level of an organization to a lower level. It can include directives and orders, information on changes in the organization's goals, and new tasks or objectives. It can be oral or written.
  - *Upward*: Communication that flows to a higher level in an organization. It can inform them of progress towards goals, relay current problems, and provide feedback on ideas. For example, preparing reports for review by upper management
  - *Lateral*: Communication that takes place among members of the same work group, among members of work groups at the same level, or among any horizontally equivalent personnel

Ways to Communicate Information
- Oral communication includes speeches, telephone, conference calls, meetings, and formal one-on-one or group discussions
  - Advantages are speed, it allows interaction and feedback to clarify messages, you can communicate more information orally than in written form
  - Disadvantage can be the distortion of the message and that messages are not recorded
  - The more people it must pass through the greater the chance for distorting information
- Written communication includes memos, letters, electronic mail, fax transmissions, organizational periodicals, or any other devices that transmit written words or symbols
  - Advantages are that messages are verifiable, tangible, and physically available for reference

- Usually spend more time and are more careful with written communication than oral
- Disadvantages are that it can be time-consuming and there is no built-in feedback mechanism
- Technology revolution has opened up a new world of ways to communicate written and visual information
- Not so obvious is nonverbal communication.
  - It includes body movements, the intonations and emphasis we give to words, facial expressions, and the physical distance between the sender and receiver of the message. Almost any body movement might have meaning
  - Ex: during the early days of the NYSE, chains of semaphore flags were set up between New York and Philadelphia to communicate stock information (pre-telegraph days)

Communication Networks
- Three common forms of communication networks (see exhibit 9-2)
  - *Chain*: network is oriented along the chain of command
  - *Wheel*: leader acts as a central conduit for the group's communications
  - *All channel*: all group members actively with each other (e.g., problem-solving team)
- Communication networks can be formal or informal
  - *Formal* networks include the chain of command, a central leader who acts as a conduit for pertinent information, and regular opportunities to exchange information (e.g., staff meetings)
  - *Informal* networks, also known as the grapevine can be an important means of spreading information. Although the grapevine can also be a way of spreading inaccurate information and rumors

Barriers to Effective Communication
- Filtering
  - Sender of information purposefully manipulates information so that it will be seen more favorably by the receiver of the information
- Selective perception
  - Receiver of information sees and hears things in a selective way based on their needs, motivations, experiences, background, frames of reference, and other personal characteristics
- Gender style
  - Men and women use oral communication for different reasons
    - Men tend to talk to emphasize status and will present problems to obtain solutions.
    - Women use talk to establish connection and intimacy and present problems to gain support and connection
- Emotions
  - Our emotions influence how we interpret communication messages
- Language
  - Words mean different things to different people.
  - Interpretations can be based on ethnic backgrounds or people may simply have different frames of reference.

- Jargon used by technical specialists in the field may not be accessible to other members of an organization
- Status
  - Often easier to communicate from the top-down versus the bottom-up
- Geographic Distance
  - Distance can create communication problems. Although, advent of new technologies such as conference calls, fax machines, video conferencing, email, and express mail have greatly diminished distance related communication problems

Cross-Cultural Communication
- Cross-cultural communication clearly creates the potential for communication problems
  - Process of encoding and decoding messages into symbols is based on an individual's cultural background and is not the same for all people
- Steps to reduce misperceptions, misinterpretations, and misevaluations when communicating with people from different cultures include:
  - Assume there are differences until similarity is proved
  - Emphasize description rather than interpretation or evaluation
  - Practice empathy and consider the receiver's values, experiences, and frames of reference
  - Treat your interpretation as a working hypothesis

Suggestions for Improving Communications
- Encourage feedback such as asking the receiver to repeat back to you your instructions. Feedback can be in words or actions. Suggestions for managers to improve feedback include:
  - Focus on specific behaviors
  - Keep feedback impersonal
  - Keep feedback goal oriented
  - Make feedback well timed
  - Ensure there is understanding
  - Direct negative feedback towards behavior that is controllable by the recipient
- Simplify language
  - Structure messages in ways that are clear and understandable
  - Messages must be both received and understood
- Listen actively by
  - Making eye contact
  - Exhibiting affirmative head nods and facial expressions
  - Avoid distracting actions and gestures
  - Ask questions
  - Paraphrase
  - Avoid interrupting a speaker
  - Don't overtalk (many of think about what we will say next instead of listening to what is being said)
- Constrain emotions
  - When you are emotional it may be best to defer further communication until you have regained your composure

- Watch your nonverbal cues
  - You should be cognizant of your actions, gestures, and tone of your voice to reinforce what you are saying
- Use the grapevine
  - Since you can't eliminate the grapevine, managers may wish to use it to their advantage

Conflict
- *Conflict* is defined as a process in which an effort is purposefully made by A to offset the efforts of B by some form of blocking that will result in frustrating B in attaining their goals or furthering their interests
  - Whether conflict exists is a question of perception. If no one is aware that a conflict exists, then no conflict exists
  - Common elements of most definitions of conflict are the concepts of opposition, scarcity, and blockage – parties are in conflict when one blocks another's means to a goal
  - Incompatible interests is another common component of many definitions
- Transitions in how conflict is viewed
  - Traditional view assumed conflict was bad
    - Used synonymously with terms such as violence, destruction, and irrationality
    - Viewed as a dysfunctional outcome resulting from poor communication, lack of openness and trust, and the failure of managers to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of their employees
  - Human relations view argued that conflict is a natural occurrence in all groups and organizations
    - Advocates accepting conflict
  - Interactionist view actually encourages conflict
    - Group leaders are encouraged to maintain an ongoing minimal level of conflict
    - Whether conflict is good or bad depends on the type of conflict

Functional vs. Dysfunctional Conflict
- Demarcation between functional and dysfunctional conflict is neither clear nor precise
  - Important criterion is group performance in that it is the impact of conflict on the group rather than any one individual that defines its functionality
  - Whether individual group members perceive conflict as good or bad is irrelevant
- Functional conflict
  - Improves the quality of decisions, stimulates creativity and innovation, encourages interest and curiosity among group members, provides the medium through which problems can be aired and tensions released and fosters an environment of self-evaluation and improvement
  - Conflict can further the creation of new ideas
  - Conflict can reduce the chances of groupthink
  - Conflict can be related positively to productivity
  - Heterogeneous groups produce high-quality solutions
- Dysfunctional conflict
  - Uncontrolled opposition breeds discontent which can dissolve common ties and destroy the group

- – Conflict retards communication, reduces group cohesiveness, and subordinates group goals
- ▪ Extreme levels of conflict are rarely functional
- ▪ More creative and unprogrammed the decision making process, the greater the probability that internal conflict will be constructive

Conflict Process
- ▪ Stage 1: Potential opposition
  - – Conditions often exist that can give rise to conflict including:
    - – Communication: semantic difficulties, misunderstandings, or "noise" in the communication channels
    - – Structure: size, degree of routinization, specialization, and standardization in the tasks assigned to group members, heterogeneity of the group, leadership styles, reward systems, and the degree of dependence between groups. Potential for conflict also appears greater when group members are younger and turnover is high.
    - – Personal variables: individual value systems, individual idiosyncrasies and differences. Certain personality types such as highly authoritarian, dogmatic, and demonstrate low self-esteem can lead to conflict
- ▪ Stage 2: Cognition and personalization
  - – Conflict is felt when you become aware that you and a co-worker are in disagreement and both parties begin to experience anxiety, tension, frustration, hostility, and you become emotionally involved
- ▪ Stage 3: Behavior
  - – The third stage begins when a member takes action that frustrates the attainment of another's goals or prevents others from furthering their interests.
  - – Overt conflict covers a wide range of behaviors from subtle and indirect to a direct, aggressive, violent, and perhaps uncontrollable struggle
  - – Common conflict-handling behaviors that occur at this stage include:
    - – *Competition* -- win-lose struggles. You attempt to achieve certain goals regardless of the impact on the other parties to the conflict – your goal is to win
    - – *Collaboration* -- win-win approach. You try to satisfy the concerns of all parties to the dispute. Thus, cooperation is used to search for a mutually beneficial solution.
    - – *Avoidance* -- withdrawal from or suppression of conflict. A party may recognize a conflict exists by withdraw from or suppress the conflict
    - – *Accommodation* -- Self sacrifice. A party may choose to appease their opponent by placing their opponents interests above their own
    - – *Compromise* -- each party gives up something and there is no clear winner or loser
    - – Important to remember that an individual's approach to handling conflict may depend on their cultural background
- ▪ Stage 4: Outcomes
  - – Outcomes may be functional and improve the group's performance by improving the quality of decisions, stimulating creativity and innovation, encouraging interest and curiosity among group members, fostering an environment for airing problems, self evaluation, and improvement

- Outcomes may be dysfunctional and hinder the group's performance by dissolving common ties, creating discontent, destroying group cohesion, creating communication problems, raising individual goals above group goals, and even threatening the group's survival

Managing Conflict
- Some suggestions for when managers should use different conflict management strategies
  - Use *competition* when quick decisive action is needed (e.g., crisis situation), on important issues where unpopular actions are needed (e.g., budget cutbacks), on issues vital to an organization's welfare when you know you are right, and against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior
  - Use *collaboration* to find integrative solutions, when your objective is to learn, to merge insights from people with different perspectives, to gain commitment or consensus, to work through feelings that are interfering with a relationship (resolve old problems and move on)
  - Use *avoidance* when the issue is trivial, more important issues need addressing, there is no chance of satisfying your concerns, the potential disruption outweighs the benefits associated with resolving the conflict, you want to let people cool down and regain perspective, when others can resolve conflict more effectively, when issues are symptoms of other problems
  - Use *accommodation* when you find you are wrong, you want to allow a better position to be heard, to show you are reasonable, when issues are more important to others, to maintain cooperation, to minimize loss when overmatched, when harmony and stability are important, to allow employees to learn from their mistakes
  - Use *compromise* when goals are important but not worth the disruption associated with other approaches, opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals, to reach temporary agreement on complex issues, to reach agreement under time pressure, when collaboration or competition are unsuccessful

Negotiation
- *Negotiation* (also called *bargaining*) is the process in which two or more parties exchange goods or services and attempt to agrees on the exchange rate for them
- *Distributive bargaining* operates under zero-sum conditions
  - Essence is negotiating over who gets what share of a fixed pie
  - *Target point* determines what the negotiator hopes to achieve
  - *Resistance point* marks the lowest outcome that is acceptable
  - Area between the target point and resistance point is the *settlement range*
  - Example: labor-management negotiations over wages
- *Integrative bargaining* occurs when two negotiators agree on a solution that meets both their needs
  - Operates under the assumption that there is a settlement that creates a win-win solution
  - All things being equal, integrative bargaining is preferable to distributive bargaining
  - Most organizational cultures do not support integrative bargaining

Obstacles to Effective Negotiation
- Decision-making biases can hinder effective negotiation
  - *Irrational escalation of commitment* -- People tend to continue a previously selected course of action beyond what rational analysis would recommend
  - *Mythical fixed pie* -- Bargainers assume a zero-sum game
  - *Anchoring and adjustments* -- People have a tendency to anchor their judgments on irrelevant information
  - *Framing negotiations* -- People tend to be overly affected by the way information is presented to them
  - *Availability of information* -- Negotiators rely too much on readily available information while ignoring more relevant data
  - *The winner's curse* -- Winners sometimes have a post-negotiation anxiety that they could have been more successful
  - *Overconfidence* -- Many of the previous biases can combine to inflate a person's confidence in their judgment and choices
- Personality traits appear to have no significant direct effect on either the bargaining process or negotiation outcomes
- Negotiating styles vary among national cultures
  - French like conflict
  - Americans are known for their impatience and tend to treat deadlines as important
  - Russians tend to ignore deadlines
  - Japanese and Chinese negotiate to develop a relationship

Ways to improve your negotiation skills
- Research your opponent
  - Learn as much as you can about their interests, goals, which constituencies they must appease, their strategies. This will help you predict their behavior and responses to your offers
- Begin with a positive overture
  - Concession tends to be reciprocated in a tit for tat fashion
- Address the problem, not personalities
  - Concentrate on the negotiation issues and not the personality of your opponent. When things get rough, avoid the tendency to attack your opponent personally. Separate people from the problem
- Pay little attention to initial offers
  - Treat initial offers as a point of departure. Everyone has to have an initial position and they tend to be extreme and idealistic
- Emphasize win-win solutions
  - Look for integrative solutions and frame options in terms of your opponent's interests. Try to find solutions that allow you and your opponent to declare victory
- Create and open and trusting climate
  - Be a good listener, ask questions, focus arguments, don't be defensive, and avoid words and phrases that irritate your opponent.