

PLS 308 – Public Administration

Topic: Communication

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