

The Impact of 21st Century Challenges on Organizational Communication

Abstract

The field of organizational communication is highly diverse and fragmented. It covers a variety of approaches, theories and methodologies, developed within organizational settings or applied from other areas. As a new academic discipline, organizational communication is significant across many areas. Besides, 21st-century challenges make substantial impact and push those employed in organizations adapt and develop a strong and winning approach to managing organizational communication. Therefore, the article will explore how present-day challenges impact the way organizations manage their communication and provide some recommendations. It is based on research conducted in public organizations and private companies in Georgia between March-June, 2020 using the questionnaire and an oral in-depth interview with staff and managers. The aim of research was to find out what the impact of 21st century challenges was on organizational communication. 55 respondents from 25 public and 30 private organizations were polled. Their positions varied between heads of departments and sections and secretaries and assistants. Besides, a comprehensive review and critical analysis of research literature was made. The questionnaire included open and closed questions and the questions at the interview were asked in a semi-structured way to create maximum opportunity for participants to freely state the problems and challenges of organizational communication.

Key words: Communication; Impact; Challenge; Organization

Literature review

Studies prove that effective communication is a significant determinant of increasing employee productivity and organizational performance. Despite the benefits that emerge in the use of effective communication strategies within an organization, many organizations face a number of challenges that lead to communication breakdowns and problems. Obviously, these challenges affect performance and compromise success.

Organizational communication, 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 also gained significance for the 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, 1996; Desanctis, Fulk1999).

To move to the issue of why organizational communication is challenging these days, we will identify several facts. To start with, the pace of work is faster these days, workers are more distributed and simultaneous 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. All these challenges have made organizational communication increasingly important to overall organizational functioning.

Indeed, 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).

To give some background, 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 are observed 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.

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.

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 clear version of the functions of organizational communication. They see communication as having three primary functions:

- **Coordination and regulation of production activities** –fairly 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 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. Articulating and reinforcing organizational values and aligning individual goals with organizational goals is also important. 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.

Research Methodology

Research was conducted in public organizations and private companies in Georgia between March-June, 2020 using the questionnaire and an oral in-depth interview with staff and managers. To be more specific, 55 respondents – 25 public organization representative and 30 private ones were selected. Their positions varied between heads of departments and secretaries and assistants. Besides, a comprehensive review and critical analysis of research literature was made.

The questionnaire included open and closed questions and the questions at the interview were asked in a semi-structured way to enable to open the participants and let them state the problems and challenges of organizational communication.

The aim of research was to find out what the impact of 21st century challenges was on organizational communication.

Questions included:

- a) What type of organization do you work for? a) private b) state c) other
- b) What is your position?
- c) How important is communication in your organization? Please, explain your answer.
- c) What are the challenges of present-day organizational communication for you?
- d) How do you overcome them?
- e) What strategies do you use to increase your work-efficiency?

Research results

Results indicated that organizational communication in today's organizations has not only become complex and varied but also a vital part of functioning of the company. It has been redefined and given new meaning referring to the 21st century technological revolution. Interestingly, it was stated that the way organizations communicate with their employees was reflected in morale, motivation and performance of employees. More specifically stated, it involved face-to-face, online group and one-to-one meetings. Respondents noted that active listening was a golden rule as through such listening they gained more confidence and consistency and it enabled them to be more focused when it was their turn to speak, awareness of the fact that communication was a two-way street also impacted them positively in a sense that they took their share of responsibility and, most importantly, recognition and positivity enabled them to look forward and achieve tangible results.

Conclusion and recommendations

Obviously, communication in the light of 21st century challenges has a lasting impact on employee motivation. In other words, if employees feel that communication from management is effective, it can lead to feeling of job satisfaction, commitment to the organization and increased trust in the workplace. Overall, through effective and meaningful communication workplaces operate more effectively and successfully.

Thus, to identify future issues concerning communication, one must accept a close relationship between communication and globalization, realizing that one leads to another and vice versa. Besides, present-

day challenges should be incorporated into day-to-day activities and respective strategies and approaches developed to meet those challenges in the most efficient and productive manner. Most importantly, internal communication systems and mechanisms should be focused to develop this line and provide positive outcomes.

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