

Organizational Communication: Looking Up, Down, and Laterally

The trouble with this place is there's no communication.
—Anonymous

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Compare and contrast the characteristics of upward communication and downward communication in the organizational setting, with special attention to the barriers to upward communication.
- Define and describe the supervisor's role in organizational communication.
- Provide suggestions for strengthening communications with other organizational elements including your immediate superior.
- Suggest ways of dealing with "the grapevine."
- Stress the importance of the supervisor's visibility to the department's employees.

FOR CONSIDERATION: THE UNREQUESTED INFORMATION

One morning about 15 minutes before the normal starting time for the day shift, you are enjoying a solitary cup of coffee when you are joined by Mrs. Morris, one of your direct reporting employees. Mrs. Morris proceeds to advise you ("In strictest confidence, please don't say that I told you") that another employee, Mrs. Greely, has been actively talking with the department's staff, passing derogatory remarks about you and your leadership style and essentially undermining your management of the department.

Mrs. Morris proclaims that she ordinarily does not carry stories but she felt that you "had a right to know, for the good of the department."

The options that appear immediately open to you are as follows:

- Thank Mrs. Morris, and ask her to report anything else she might hear.
- Acknowledge her concern "for the good of the department," but tell her to bring you no more such stories.
- Thank her, ask her to say nothing to anyone else, and decide to keep an eye on Mrs. Greely.

Instructions

As you proceed through this chapter, think about whether you would opt for one of the three choices given above, or pursue some other course of action.

WHAT GOES DOWN MAY NOT COME UP

It is safe to assume that in any organization communication should, and in fact must, move both upward and downward through the structure. However,

a realistic view of organizational communication will acknowledge that information does not flow both upward and downward with equal ease. Downward communication is facilitated largely by management's control of its own actions and by its control of most of the means of communication in the work setting, but much upward communication remains dependent on stimulation, encouragement, and the creation of a climate conducive to communication. The essential differences between the accomplishment of upward communication and downward communication can be highlighted by consideration of a number of factors that inhibit upward communication.

Organizational Concerns

Physical Distance

Simple physical distance between supervisor and employee can inhibit upward communication. Simply put, the more time you spend physically separated from the location where most of your employees work, the tougher it is for them to communicate with you. Supervisors of employees who have considerable on-the-job mobility or who are scattered over an extended physical area need to take active steps to keep in touch. The more time you spend physically removed from your employees, the more likely you are to miss something that might have otherwise been communicated to you.

The problems posed by physical distance are becoming more of a concern for an increasing number of supervisors. In this era of rapid and dramatic change in health care, as mergers and acquisitions and other affiliations create health systems from what were formerly individual organizations, some supervisors find themselves responsible for activities in multiple locations. Under these circumstances, when travel time and distance as well as the division of one's time become determinants of availability to employees, the supervisor must be highly conscientious concerning the need to stay in touch with all employees no matter how scattered they may be.

Number of Organizational Levels

The number of levels in the organization structure can also inhibit upward communication. If a piece of information originating with a single hourly-rated employee truly deserves to reach the top, the chances of it being properly communicated up the line diminish as the number of levels it must go through increases. Each level that a message must pass through presents another set of opportunities for the message to be misinterpreted, sidetracked, or stopped. While some modern healthcare organizations are making upward communication inherently more difficult by splitting supervisors among multiple locations, many of these same organizations are also "flattening"—reducing the number of levels in the management hierarchy. Because the presence of fewer levels reduces the opportunity for miscommunication and also reduces resistance to the upward movement of information, this flattening may at least partially offset the problems caused by multiple locations.

Problem Complexity

The relative complexity of a given problem or situation can also hamper upward communication. Some employees are often unable to define complex

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Supervisor's Attitude

Some managers frequently exhibit apparent resistance to becoming involved with the personal problems of employees. This resistance, coming no doubt from the supervisor's understandable uneasiness with hearing things that might be considered "confessional" in nature, serves as a wall that unfortunately keeps out desired feedback as well as unwanted information. Recall the notion of the employee as a "whole person," and learn to accept the high likelihood that many supposedly personal problems have their work-related sides.

The manager's available time can also be a factor inhibiting the upward flow of information. True effective listening is a time-consuming process, and under the pressure of many high-priority tasks it is easy to find yourself dealing with some items lightly, briefly, or not at all.

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Probably one of the greatest inhibitors of upward communication lies in actions of the recent past: management's failure to respond to some earlier communication. A question, problem, or observation coming from an employee remains one-way communication and thus not true communication at all unless you make an effort to "close the loop" by providing the required feedback. This is not to say that employees should always expect to receive the responses they desire. Rather, they need simply to receive something indicating that their messages have been considered and that management responses are offered. Your feedback, after proper investigation, consideration, or consultation as appropriate, may be a simple, "Thanks very much for pointing it out;