



Communication and managerial effectiveness

Good communication is fundamental to effective management. Whether you are negotiating prices with a potential supplier, introducing a new duty rota, chairing a meeting or putting together your annual budget, you need a range of communication skills to achieve your objectives. Many managers admit to some shortcomings in their ability to communicate. Whatever they are, they can impair your managerial effectiveness. Professor of educational technology at the Open University School of Management Euan Henderson examines how you can refine your communication skills to enhance your performance

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION is a skill that can be learned, but it requires practice. This means continually evaluating your successes and failures and learning from them.

Organisations cannot operate effectively without effective communication. If people are to work together towards achieving organisational goals, they must communicate. The better they communicate, the better organisation works.

In health care, we work in a complex network of organisations that are themselves complex and continually having to adapt to changes in the wider environment. Change cannot be introduced successfully unless there is shared understanding about how it can be achieved and commitment to common goals. This requires a process of information dissemination, consultation, discussion, planning and training even before implementation can begin.

Initial, often unanticipated, problems need to be sorted out, and the outcomes evaluated so that strategies can be reviewed and adjustments made. None of this can be achieved without effective communication.

The more complex organisations are, the more communication is needed, and the greater the likelihood of it being inappropriate, misinterpreted or even breaking down.

Managers bear the primary responsibility for creating a climate that responds to change positively and benefits the organisation, service users and staff. Good communication cannot ensure such a climate but it cannot be achieved without communication.

A simple top-down message will not be sufficient to ensure the desired response across an organisation. Hunter (1990) reminds us that 'managers at all levels must be central and equal partners in this process. They should not be passive recipients of messages emanating from on high'.

Changes in the structure, management and funding of health care have been accompanied by greatly increased reliance on new information and communication technologies. These technologies open up tremendous opportunities, but managers need to develop new skills to ensure that they are used to their full potential. New technology, however sophisticated, is only a tool for improving communication.

Communication needs to be managed effectively at both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, communication should be a unifying mechanism that informs and motivates people, and harnesses their creativity. It is essential in generating commitment and empowering people so they have a clear vision of their organisation and can see where they, as individuals, fit into its overall strategy.

At the micro level, communication is about how individuals interact with each other to exchange information about day-to-day issues.

Macro communication

Communication on a macro level has several key functions. Quirke (1997), a management consultant who specialises in the role that communication plays in change management, classified the functions of communication in terms of the objectives they are intended to achieve:

- raising awareness
- achieving understanding
- gaining support
- generating involvement
- earning commitment.

He mapped these approaches on a two-dimensional matrix (Fig. 1). The vertical axis represents how much each contributes to bringing about change and the horizontal axis represents how much they involve two-way interaction, time and effort. Raising awareness, for example, requires little involvement but is unlikely to lead to change, whereas earning commitment requires a high level of involvement but makes a major contribution to implementing change.

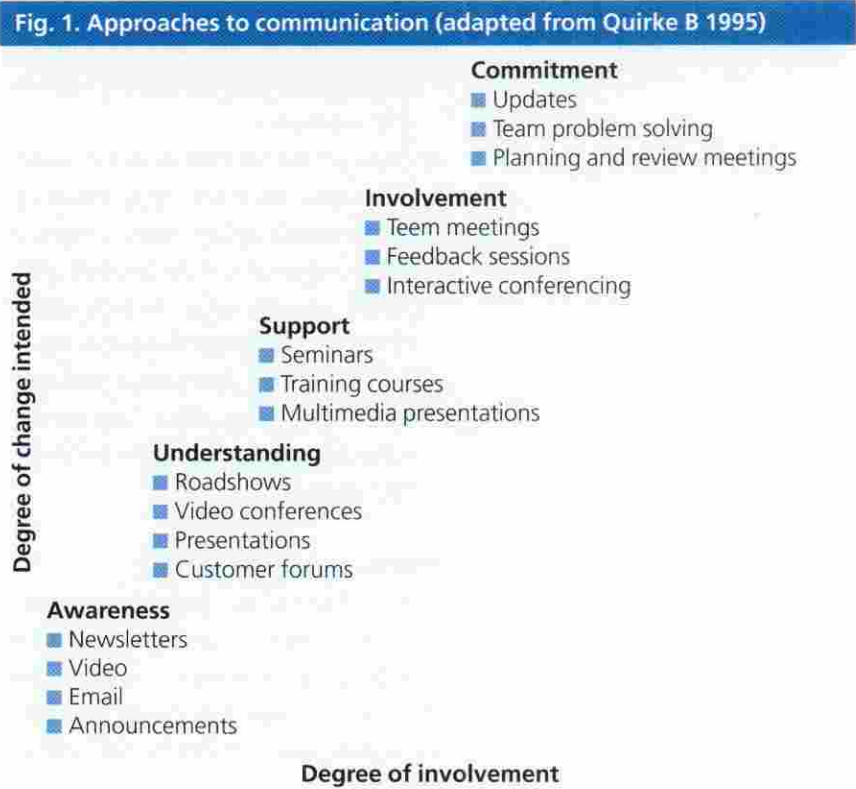
The figure also lists some of the communication techniques that are appropriate to each approach. Your organisation no doubt has its own techniques, but Quirke's analysis suggests that the ones that you choose must match the aims you are seeking to achieve.

He says: 'Research into the most commonly used communication channels within organizations shows that they are concentrated at the lower end of the escalator.'

'What the organization wants from its people tends to be at the upper end. There is a mismatch between what the organization wants from its people and the channels used to try to achieve it. The most commonly used communication channels include:

- newsletters
- memos
- team briefings
- departmental meetings
- noticeboards
- video
- electronic mail.

'Most of these are processes that are aimed at increasing awareness and, on a good day, understanding. Employees prefer face-to-face communication and report that their greatest source of information is the grapevine and that they prefer to hear things from their immediate line manager.'



**ACTIVITY 1**

Identify a situation in which you want to achieve each of Quirke's five objectives and the communication techniques you used in each case:

- awareness
- understanding
- support
- involvement
- commitment.

In terms of Quirke's analysis, were the techniques you used appropriate to the objective in each case? If not, what techniques might have been better?

Micro communication

There are many other factors to consider when we communicate. Albrecht and Boshear (1974) suggest that communication in all social interactions occurs through four separate channels; facts, feelings, values and opinions.

- Facts are real and objective. We believe them because they can be verified or because we can assume they are true on the basis of our knowledge and experience.
- Feelings are our emotional responses to situations and again are based on our previous experience.
- Values are the norms that exist in society and where we work. They are deep-seated beliefs about what is right or wrong and what is important and unimportant. At work, values are rarely explicit although sometimes they need to be.
- Opinions are our ideas about particular issues, events or situations. They are subjective and normally limited to the immediate situation.

Planning and decoding

All four channels are used when we communicate, and each can make a valuable contribution. It is important to maintain clear distinctions between them in planning communications and in decoding other people's messages.

ACTIVITY 2

Here are four statements about access to health care. Decide whether each one is a statement of fact, feeling, value or opinion.

- 1 The waiting list for hip-joint replacement surgery is still too high
- 2 Yet again, despite our best efforts, the waiting list for hip-joint replacements has increased for the third year running
- 3 The waiting list for hip-joint replacements has increased 4 per cent this year over the past year
- 4 The waiting list for hip-joint replacements has increased substantially.

Now check your answers.

- 1 Statement of values: it implies the belief that waiting lists ought to be reduced.
- 2 Statement of feelings: it expresses frustration at a continuing situation that the speaker feels unacceptable. It gives no idea of the scale of the problem.
- 3 Statement of fact: but we would want to know more about other years and other waiting lists before deciding if the increase is acceptable.
- 4 Statement of opinion: what is a substantial increase to one person may not be to another.

These are relatively simple examples. In practice, it is often harder to recognise how these four channels are used, particularly when you feel strongly about something or you are in the cut and thrust of a meeting. But it is important to try to:

- establish the facts first
- invite opinion on the facts
- respect feelings, allowing them to be aired but not to dominate discussion
- restate common values.

Communication problems often occur when the channels are confused, for example when opinions are interpreted as fact. You need to be aware that messages consist not only of content (the facts) but also of less tangible but nonetheless important feelings, values and opinions.

The communication climate

Why does communication seem to go more smoothly in some workplaces than others? One reason is that the prevailing communication climate – the atmosphere or conditions in which ideas, information and feelings are exchanged – directly influences whether communication is a positive or negative force.

An open or supportive communication climate promotes co-operative working relationships and is therefore conducive to effective information gathering and transfer. A closed or defensive communication climate has the opposite effect.

In practice, workplace communication climates often fall somewhere between these two extremes and vary according to managers' leadership styles and the communication styles of the team members. But there is likely to be a tendency towards one or other end of the scale.

Open and supportive climates

Several years ago, Gibb suggested that people are more likely to have feelings of worth and importance in an open or supportive environment, and to feel that they can speak freely without fear of adverse consequences (Gibb 1961).

This kind of environment promotes both an understanding of what each team member wishes to accomplish and collaborative working towards common goals. Supportiveness is communicated most clearly by the following kinds of response:

- Descriptive: statements tend to be informative rather than evaluative
- Solution-oriented: there is a focus on problem solving rather than on what can or cannot be done
- Open and honest: the aim is to help and improve even if criticism is expressed
- Caring: there is an emphasis on empathy and understanding
- Egalitarian: suggesting that everyone is valued regardless of their role or status

- Forgiving: recognises the inevitability of error or misjudgement and encourages action to minimise the risk of it recurring.

Feedback is positive, aiming to maintain good working relationships and high performance. If suggestions are welcomed and acted upon, mistakes are used as opportunities to learn and crises are managed even-handedly, staff are more likely to be open in their communication. They will feel trusted, secure and confident in their jobs and in the organisation as a whole.

Effective team-working, flexibility, and a sense of involvement in what teams and organisations are trying to achieve all contribute to, and benefit from, open and supportive climates.

Closed climates

By contrast, effective communication is often one of the first casualties in closed or defensive environments. In climates where competition for approval, promotion or resources is high on hidden agendas, 'information is power'.

People are often possessive about the information they have access to. Control is maintained through the suppression of open communication; information is given or withheld to reinforce people's positions rather than to contribute to effective working.

Communication behaviours that are likely to predominate are:

- Judgemental: blame is apportioned when things go wrong
- Controlling: people are explicitly expected to conform to certain types of behaviour, and attitudes and behaviour that are inconsistent with the norm are inhibited
- Deceptive: messages tend to hold hidden meanings, or are expressed insincerely or manipulatively
- Non-caring: communication tends to be detached and impersonal, with little concern shown for others



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- Superior: people's interactions tend to emphasise their differences in status, skills or understanding
- Dogmatic: there is little discussion and an unwillingness to accept other points of view or to compromise
- Hostile: a predominantly negative approach places little importance on the needs of others.

Feedback tends to be negative and people are often made to feel incompetent, inferior or out of line.

Such environments are unpleasant to work in. Communication tends to break down and interaction between individuals is minimal. Issues are simply not discussed and verbal aggression becomes common.

ACTIVITY 3

Consider the communication climate in the area you manage. Which of the characteristics of open and closed communication climates can you identify? It will help if you think of specific examples.

Where would you place the area you manage on a continuum of open and closed communication?

Open 1 2 3 4 5 Closed

A closed communication climate sometimes exists simply because it has always been that way. People tend to adopt behaviours that are consistent with their experience. If a closed environment is all they know, that is what they will tend to perpetuate.

This is particularly common in under-resourced organisations where staff are overworked; the pressure to get the job done 'squeezes out' open, participative styles of communication. Similarly, pressure from sources outside the organisation may lead staff to put more emphasis on achieving the outcomes required of them than on developing shared understanding that could improve the processes through which the outcomes are achieved.

Closed climates can be a direct outcome of management style. Managers all too often seem unconcerned about their staff's needs, apparently seeing them as simply being there to carry out jobs. Some lack understanding of the importance of good communication and how to put it into practice. Others may be afraid to 'open up' or lack the skills to do so.

You need to begin to recognise ways in which you can create a positive communication climate in your own work area.

Your performance as a manager will depend very significantly on your performance as a communicator. Recognising your strengths and weaknesses in this area is the first step towards creating an open communication climate that encourages information exchange, without which people cannot work effectively .

REFERENCES

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CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This material is drawn from the Open University School of Health and Social Welfare course K307, Managing Health and Social Care, which can lead to a professional certificate in management.

Activities are designed with reference to vocational qualifications in management at level 4. The course can be taken alone, or as a way into a diploma in management.

For further information about this course, or other CPD opportunities for nurses, contact information assistant Betty Morris on 01908 653743 or access www.open.ac.uk/shsw

