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NATURE AND PROBLEMS OF  
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION:  
DOWNWARD COMMUNICATION  
AND FEEDBACK

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## ABSTRACT

### NATURE AND PROBLEMS OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: DOWNWARD COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK

By

Naz Perwer Chaudhry

Morale, profit and productive climate are the goals of all organized effort. Effective communication within organizations aids in achieving growth for both the individual and the organization.

Management specialists have learned much about the kinds of communication channels necessary to keep an organization functioning well. This is not an easy task and presents many problems. When communicating down the line management needs reinforcement of present policies as well as feedback for formulating future strategy.

Thoughtfulness and careful planning can produce the desired results. Effective channels of internal communication can prevent erection of impenetrable walls between parts of the organization.

NATURE AND PROBLEMS OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION:  
DOWNWARD COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK

By

Naz Perwer Chaudhry

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## INTRODUCTION

Communications are central phenomena in organizations. Barnard (1938) was perhaps the first to recognize the importance of communication systems in organization theory (2). According to Barnard, an organization comes into being when there are persons able to communicate with each other who are willing to contribute action to accomplish a common purpose. The elements of organization are, therefore, communication, willingness to serve, and common purpose. The possibility of accomplishing a common purpose through a system of cooperative effort necessitates effective communication. After World War II, an increasing amount of literature has appeared in the field of organizational communication (34). Significant literature on organizational communication can roughly be divided into two major types: (a) theory-and-research-oriented, dealing mainly with interrelationships between communication and other organizational variables; and (b) how-to-do-it types dealing mainly with techniques and gimmicks for effective communication in organization (8,16,22).

Each manager has a complicated set of relationships with other individuals and groups as he goes about his work,

and these relationships are substantially determined by organization structure; hence, organization is a major influence on communication. Organization provides each person with a specific job to perform and places him at a certain level. Absence of communication barriers between organization levels enhances productivity, morals and profit.

There are several ways of looking into organizational communication. One convenient and often used approach seems to be in terms of direction of flow of information, that is, who communicates to whom. Within organizations, the direction of information flow can follow the authority pattern of the hierarchical positions (downward communication); can move among peers at the same organizational level (horizontal communication); or can ascend the hierarchical ladder (upward communication). Each of these communication paths shows certain characteristics which differentiate it from other paths.

## NATURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

"Organization is that energetic input-output system in which the energetic return from the output reactivates the system."<sup>1</sup>

Definitions of communication are legion. They range from the simple, but perceptive description of communication as "an exchange of meaning" to the more inclusive "communication is any process or form of behavior by which any living organism affects the behavior of another living organism." Communication in human relations is simply defined as the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another (6). A significant point of this definition is that communication always involves at least two people--a sender and a receiver. One person alone cannot communicate. Only a receiver can close the communication circuit. This fact is obvious when one thinks of a man lost on an island yelling at the top of his lungs, but it may not be so obvious to a manager sending out a bulletin. He tends to think that when the bulletin is sent, he has communicated.

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), p. 16.

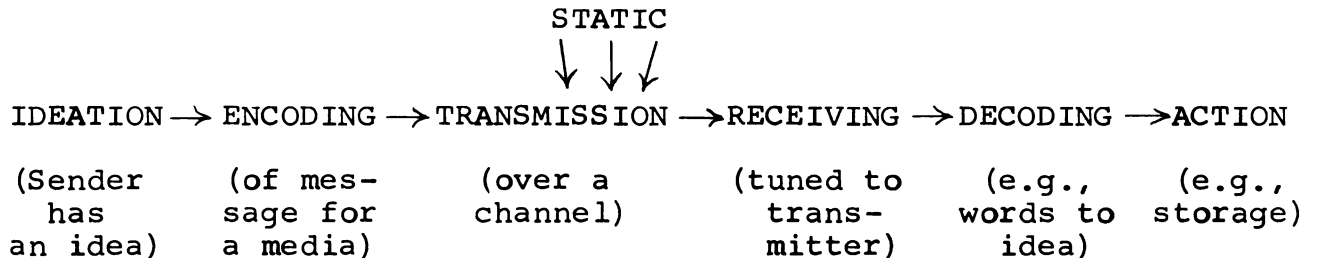
Another significant point is that effective communication involves both information and understanding. A receiver may hear a sender but still not understand what he meant. Understanding is personal and subjective; it can occur only in the receiver's mind. Rogers terms this as selective perception or the tendency for individuals to interpret a new idea in terms of their past experiences and existing opinions (32).

Thus, the specific goal of all employee communication efforts in organizations is to achieve mutual confidence and understanding between employees and management on all matters of common concern, so that employees will eagerly and enthusiastically support all actions essential to the success of the business.

In essence, communication consists of both words and actions. What management does often speaks louder than what management says. Communication also is never unilateral. It does not take place at all unless and until the intended receiver perceives the message--notes and understands it--and the initiator either has assurance through feedback that his message has been understood as intended or is made aware of the recipient's reaction to the message, which might require repetition or modification of the original message in order to arrive at the common understanding which is the goal and essence of communication. This is not to say that communication cannot sometimes be an extremely effective

manipulative instrument. It needs to be conceived of and implemented as a circular process rather than a one-way street.

Process of communication. The whole sequence of "A" communicating with "B" involves six steps, whether they talk, use hand signals or have some other form of communication. This complete sequence is the communication process and may be diagramed as follows.



The first step in the communication process is ideation by the sender, who creates an idea or chooses a fact to communicate. This is the content of communication; it is the basis of the message. The sender has to have something to say before he can "say." This step is crucial, because further steps are fruitless without a message. A poor message will not be improved by glossy paper or bigger loudspeaker. Ideation is determined by the sender's past experiences, his abilities, and his objectives in the situation.

In the next step, encoding, the sender organizes his idea into a series of symbols which he feels will communicate to his intended receivers. He organizes for rationality and

coherence. In this step he also selects appropriate media, because his encoding will be in relation to media as well as to receivers.

The third step is the transmission of the message as encoded. Transmission confirms the media selected in the preceding step. The sender also chooses a certain channel, such as bypassing the superintendent or not bypassing him; and he communicates with careful timing. Today may not be the right day to talk to his manager about that pay raise. The sender also tries to keep the communication channel free of static or interference, so that his message has a chance to reach the receiver and hold his attention.

In the fourth step, initiative transfers to the receiver, who tunes to receive the message. If it is oral he must be a good listener.

The fifth step is decoding, by which the receiver takes meanings from the symbols encoded by the sender. If he is an effective receiver and cooperative, he tries to take from the message the meaning intended by the sender. However no receiver can totally step outside himself psychologically, nor can he totally step inside the sender, so perception of the two as stated earlier, will be different and the meaning the receiver takes will not be exactly what the sender sent.

Finally the receiver acts or responds. He may file the information in his memory, reject it, or ask for

additional or clarifying information. However, if he decodes action of some type necessarily follows. Where possible, it is desirable to give feedback to the sender so that two-way communication is established. The receiver's response completes the communication process for a single communication.

Importance of communication. Notwithstanding certain reservations about some of the more grandiose claims of communication, it must be recognized that communication is clearly an integral part of the management process. It is an essential factor in planning, organizing, directing, coordinating and controlling. Bavelas and Barrett, two of the soundest researchers in industrial communication, say,

It is entirely possible to view an organization as an elaborate system for gathering, evaluating, recombining, and disseminating information. It is not surprising, in these terms, that the effectiveness of an organization with respect to the achievement of its goals should be so closely related to its effectiveness in handling information.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, communication also plays an essential part in the motivating process. Through communication the manager becomes aware of people's needs, achieves an understanding of why they work, and in turn is able to motivate them by conveying to them what the job means to them in terms of

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<sup>2</sup>Alex Bavelas and Dermott Barrett, "An Experimental Approach to Organizational Communication," Personnel, XXVII (March 1951), AMA, p. 368.

opportunity, recognition, a sense of belonging and security.

As Peter Drucker has observed:

The manager has a specific tool--information. He does not "handle" people; he motivates, guides, organizes people to do their own work. His tool--his only tool--to do all this is the spoken or written word or the language of numbers. No matter whether the manager's job is manufacturing, engineering, accounting, or selling, his effectiveness depends upon his ability to listen and to read, on his ability to speak and to write. He needs skill in putting his thinking across to other people as well as skill in finding what other people are after.<sup>3</sup>

Communication is a system. Communication in an organization must be viewed as a system, an organic whole united by regular interaction or interdependence. It should include regular interaction of the company parts, it should be rational, and it should be orderly. A message fed into the system at the top fans out laterally as it progresses down through the organization to the employee. The communication cycle is completed when, through feedback or accomplishment of the desired task, the initiator either has evidence that the message has been received and understood or is led to modify a decision, reinitiate or restructure his communication until the optimum exchange or meaning results. Thus, communication is actually a three-way flow--down, up, and lateral--with perhaps the most important direction being the lateral flow.

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<sup>3</sup>Peter F. Drucker, The Practice of Management (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 346.



## NATURE AND PROBLEMS OF DOWNWARD COMMUNICATION

Communication downward in an organization means that the flow is from higher to lower authority. This is usually considered to be from management to operative employees, but much of it is also within the management group.

To get work done, executives must issue orders and transmit downward some general information. Since understanding and acceptance are not guaranteed, order givers must make their communication as effective as possible.

For downward communication executives use individual messages, circulars, bulletins, manuals, handbooks, employee publications, and a host of other media. Each medium has a particular potentiality, and yet all are interrelated. In spite of the elaborate techniques, management has many times done a poor job (19). Fancy booklets, expensive films, and noisy public-address systems have often failed to achieve employee understanding, affect employee attitudes, or increase productivity, which are the basic tests of communication results. Sometimes these devices become ends in themselves, without any evidence that this approach improved employee understanding (31).

Some prerequisites. Part of the managerial problem has been that management has been unprepared for effective communication, and has failed to lay good foundations. Without a sound system the communication "house" is built upon sand.

What are some of these prerequisites to downward communication?

1. Get informed. If a manager does not know and understand, he cannot communicate. This sounds trite, but it actually appears that some managers do not understand the information they are expected to communicate. Obviously it is best to know in advance if possible. If a manager has to seek answers every time his personnel asks a question, they will soon turn to some other source of information. A manager's span of information and understanding should be greater than his span of communication to his personnel.
2. Develop a positive communication attitude. Both management leaders and communication specialists have for a long time recognized that many managers do a poor communications job because they do not care about it. The positive manager attempts to share information with employees to the extent they think they need it. From the human relations point of view, the manager knows he is making progress

when employees feel informed. Positive attitude works both ways. There needs to be positive listening as well as information sending.

3. Plan for communication. No managerial plan is complete until there is a plan for communicating it to those who will be affected. Since people like to be told in advance about changes which affect them, communication usually comes at the beginning of the course of action rather than at the end of it.

A suitable plan of communication will develop policies and procedures so that employees can expect to be informed. Workers will have less anxiety about whether they are in the know and will waste less time trying to get information from other means, like rumors and grapevines--the informal channels of communication.

4. Gain confidence of others. The meaning which a worker gets from the manager's communication depends upon the confidence he has in the communicator's purpose. The worker searches between the lines wondering, "why did he say that?" If he suspects trickery, unfairness, or blindness to his wants, the worker tends to react negatively and seizes upon every opportunity to misinterpret what was said. He does this both consciously and subconsciously. This requirement of faith may be stated as follows.

Meaning is more effectively imparted when the receiver understands the communicator's purpose. When purpose is seen the situation is ripe for understanding. People need to know why. Understanding does not assume agreement. Understanding does permit people to interact freely and without confusion so that they may seek agreement.

Communication needs. Persons down the line in an organization apart from the top level management, have a number of communication needs, one of which is instruction regarding their role and function at work. This guidance from a manager is called order-giving because its purpose is formally to secure action by a subordinate. Orders may also be indirect or conditional, leaving room for discretion. Orders are necessary when a need must be met, and leadership and discretion are needed to meet it. In a situation like this a manager gets better results if he states his order in terms of the objective requirements of the situation. When the manager uses this situational basis for orders, he takes the role of a problem solver and coordinator instead of a boss. If order giving is done effectively, a satisfying human relationship is built along with better accomplishment of work.

When work orders are not involved, communication to employees is governed by two primary principles: providing information about things which affect employees directly

rather than indirectly, and that most information should reach workers as news, rather than being stale confirmation of what has been learned from other sources (9,10). Matters which affect employees directly, such as products, work rules, and services are of real interest to them. Studies show that this type of information ranks highest with employees whether they are managers, supervisors, office workers or shop workers, and whether they are in manufacturing or distribution (36). A third important principle is that information which helps the employee to understand his social and economic environment should be communicated. It is reasoned that he will function best in a social and economic system, will support it and will contribute more to it if he understands it thoroughly. Further, management is partly responsible for helping him to achieve this understanding. This viewpoint is the main support of modern economic education programs.

Many managers think that they understand the problems of their men, but their men do not think so. This fundamental difference in perception tends to exist at each level in organizations, thereby making communications more difficult. One study (23) gave the following results: 95 percent of the foremen said they understood their men's problems well but only 34 percent of their men thought they did. Though 95 percent of the foremen thought they were understanding only 51 percent of them thought their general

foremen understood them; however, 90 percent of the general foremen thought they understood their foremen. In other words the members of each group thought they understood those below, but that those above did not understand them. These perceptions cause downward communications to be overconfident. Superiors feel that they understand their men when apparently they do not; hence, they probably do not take enough care with their communications.

Obstacles to communication. Even the best planning and most skillful use of communication techniques will not always insure success. Based on recent research findings Jackson (18) discusses some characteristics of organizations that create communication problems. He also draws conclusions regarding the forces which determine the flow of communication in an organization. People will communicate most to those (other things being equal), who are geographically closest to them. Spatial distance can thus be a barrier to communication. Each subgroup within an organization demands allegiance from its members and has its own immediate goals and means for achieving them. Groups within an organization often represent different subcultures, as those inhabited by engineers, accountants, and salesmen, which may create problems because of different systems of values and meanings. A work structure exists, an authority structure exists; these systems of relationship overlap but are not identical.

The relationships among persons in an organization are in a continual state of flux.

There are several kinds of forces in an organization which direct the flow of communication. In pursuit of their work goals, people have forces acting upon them to communicate with those who will help them achieve their aims, and forces against communicating with those who will not assist or may retard their accomplishments. People have powerful forces acting upon them to direct their communication towards those who make them feel more secure and gratify their needs, shun away from the ones who threaten them, make them feel anxious and generally provide unrewarding experiences. Persons in organizations are always communicating as if they were trying to improve their position.

The effect of any particular communication will depend largely upon the prior feelings and attitudes that the parties concerned have towards one another and upon the pre-existing expectations and motives of the communicating persons. The effect of a superior's communication with a subordinate will depend upon the relationship between them, and how adequately this relationship satisfies the subordinate's needs. It will also be affected by the amount of support the subordinate receives from his membership in a group of peers.

Communication problems are often only symptomatic of other difficulties which exist among persons and groups in

an organization. To overcome communication barriers the problems of lack of trust, creating interdependence among persons, distributing rewards fairly and coming to an understanding and common agreement about social structure must be faced.

Obstacles to communication are legion. Several well-known workers in the field of communication (1,4,5,12,13,20) have identified significant barriers to communication which need to be taken into account in planning because they may have determinative effects on results. Presented is a partial listing of such barriers:

- Lack of communication policy
- Lack of empathy
- Lack of motive to communicate
- Lack of follow-up
- Authoritarian attitude of management
- Failure to listen to emotional content as well as words
- Failure to make intent clear
- Failure to seek response
- Failure to appraise attitudes of audiences
- Past insincerity or failure of management to keep promises
- Timidity, indifference or reluctance to communicate
- Legal limitations
- Resistance to change
- Unfavorable climate



- Overconfidence in ability to know what others are thinking
- Overestimating the audience's information and underestimating its intelligence
- Unavailability
- Inopportune timing
- Too many items in the same message
- Vague or complicated language
- Size and complexity of business
- Decentralization
- Poorly defined responsibility and authority
- Too many levels, resulting in chain loss of detail and distortion
- Physical distance
- Overloading of supervisors
- Psychological obstacles due to difference in ranks
- Fear of consequences
- Insufficient communication training
- Union activities
- Heterogeneity of audience
- Prejudices
- Company politics
- Hostile grapevine.

A conscious attempt to overcome these barriers can pay off in numerous ways for the mutual benefit of the employees and the employer.

## UPWARD COMMUNICATION AND BARRIERS TO FEEDBACK

The two way flow of information becomes a communication circuit quite similar to an electric circuit. The message of the sender is taken by the receiver, who makes a response which is transmitted back to the sender. An essential feature of effective employee communication is that there be channels and opportunities as well as incentive for employees to initiate communications to higher levels of organization in addition to responding to communications they receive. Inadequate or poor upward flow robs management of these benefits:

- Stimulation of employee interest and participation.
- Receipt and use of valuable employee ideas.
- Revelation of how downward communication is accepted.
- Encouragement to management to understand employee problems and views.
- More and better information for better evaluation and decision making for the future.

Various methods are used for getting information to flow upwards, of which the most widely used are the attitude survey, the quicky survey, plant panels, the rumor clinic, employee counselors, the grievance procedure, the question box, and the suggestion box. However, probably the most

important contribution to improving the atmosphere for good upward communication to assure constructive and more accurate feedback is to have consistent, articulate and forthright downward communication. Unless the downward communication in an organization sets the tone and establishes the permissive atmosphere, it is absolutely unrealistic to expect that any significant degree of helpful upward communication will take place.

Creating the proper atmosphere for upward communication involves more than just an expression by management that it would be desirable or even welcomed. What is needed is visible evidence that upward communication will be paid attention to, that opportunities for upward communication exist and will be improved upon, that the skills of all involved in upward communication will be sharpened to eliminate distortion and to speed transmission, and that through the interplay of both downward and upward communication, employees come to appreciate that they and their ideas are really important factors in the success of the business.

Barriers to upward communication. Both research and experience indicate that upward flow of information is feeble in organizations. It grinds to a halt at the management barrier. However, upward communication is essential, both for management information and employee satisfaction. Redding and Sanborn (28) have compiled studies carried out in the 1950's presenting crucial points of view concerning human

communication in organization. Another study reports that communications with superiors are perceived by employees as the most important of all and among the most satisfying; however, these are the type of communications that employees are least able to initiate (25). Festinger (15) has pointed out that the structuring of groups into hierarchies automatically introduces restraints against free communication, particularly criticisms and aggressively-toned comments by low-status members towards those in higher-status positions. Kelly (21) has shown that selective screening of information from low-to-high-status members is characteristic of communication in social groups, and serves as a psychological substitute for actual movement upward on the part of aspiring low-status members.

More recently, Cohen (7) has emphasized the 'instrumentality' of upward communication. The instrumental nature of communication upward through levels in larger hierarchical organization, such as industrial concerns is usually accepted as fact of organizational life. Pleasant matters are more likely to be communicated upwards than unpleasant ones, achievements are more likely to be passed upwards than information about errors or difficulties encountered at lower levels. Yet the highly integrated effort required to achieve organizational purposes demands a relatively free upward and downward flow of information, both pleasant and unpleasant, problem-related as well as achievement-related. This

screening of information passed upward is likely to be at a maximum when the information content is of a type which might reflect negatively upon the competence and thus, indirectly upon the security or progress of members of the subordinate level.

Solving communication problems. Management has learned that upward communication cannot be left to chance. It must be positively encouraged in order to overcome the many barriers that stand in its way. This requires initiative and positive action, rather than the lethargy of waiting for signals to come in. Tuning in requires management adaptability for different channels of employee information. It requires sensitivity to even the weak signals from the employee. It requires sensitivity to the distant signals as well as those near at hand. It necessitates some selectivity to separate the static and competing signals from the worthwhile ones. It requires first and last an awareness that signals are being sent.

A manager often does not realize how great the upward barriers are (27). His status and prestige at the plant are different from the workers. He probably talks differently and dresses differently. According to Rogers (32) there is a lack of homophily. The manager can freely call the worker to his desk or walk to his work station, but the worker is not equally free to call in his manager. The worker usually lacks ability to express himself as clearly

as the manager, who is better trained and has more practice in communication skills. Neither can the worker have a specialist prepare his communication, but this service is usually available to the manager. Just as the worker lacks technical assistance, he also usually lacks the use of certain media, such as plant magazines, public address systems, and meetings. The worker is further impeded because he is talking to a man with whose work and responsibilities he is not familiar. The result is that very little upward communication occurs unless management positively encourages it. This dearth of upward information appears to be a symptom in most organizations, not just employers. After a three-year study of unions Strauss and Sayles concluded, "rank-and-file communication upward is beset with difficulty."<sup>4</sup>

In a large structure the chain of command from bottom to top consists of six to ten persons. Going upward, the chain seems even longer than it does coming downward, because upward communications tend to travel slowly; they are usually subject to more delay, filtering and dilution. Each level is reluctant to take a problem upward because to do so is considered an admission of failure; therefore, each level delays it in an effort to decide how to solve it. If it can not be solved, then it may be filtered. This refers

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<sup>4</sup>George Strauss and Leonard R. Sayles, "Some Problems of Communications in Local Union," Proceedings Industrial Relations Research Association, 1952, p. 148.

to each person's conscious and subconscious editing and selecting of the information he passes up. This may very often result in deletions or distortion of the original message. There is a natural tendency of a person to tell his superior only what he thinks the superior wants to hear. Obviously the superior cannot be told all that his subordinates know, so each subordinate has bonafide reasons for selecting, rewriting, and often filtering actions. Usually he is doing the best that his human emotions will let him, but by the time filtering has happened at several levels, the original communication may be hardly recognizable.

Sometimes in an effort to avoid filtering, a person short-circuits the information chain, which means that he skips one or more steps in the hierarchical chain of command. Although this avoids filtering, it introduces the disadvantage that some one who is supposed to know the information is bypassed, which provokes him in two ways. First, he thinks the man who skipped him is disrespectful. Second, he is anxious for fear his superior will discover he does not know something he is supposed to know. Few employers permit short-circuiting of this type because it causes too much conflict. If it is permitted at all, the condition is that a worker must secure his direct supervisor's permission before talking to someone higher in the chain of command. The grapevine, of course, is the exception. It has no

definite channels and can readily short-circuit any formal communication chain.

The overall requirements for upward formal communication may be outlined. A person shall keep his direct supervisor informed on these four areas:

- Any matters in which his supervisor may be held accountable by those senior to him.
- Any matters in disagreement or likely to cause controversy within or between any units of the organization.
- Any matters requiring advice by the supervisor or his coordination with other persons or units.
- Any matters involving recommended actions for changes in, or variance from, established policies.

A smooth two-way flow of communication helps management to achieve organizational goals, and provides employees with professional fulfillment. A well designed system of personnel rotation will yield high dividends not only in the growth of the individual but in organizational fluidity. Free movement of personnel throughout the organization reduces barriers to internal communication. John Gardener in Self Renewal suggests that "every top executive and every analyst sitting at the center of the communication network should periodically emerge from his world of abstractions and take a long unflinching look at unprocessed reality."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>John W. Gardener, Self Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 79.



This look at the operational level helps in providing a true picture of the total system.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There is an increasing emphasis on communication as a vital tool of management. Properly planned and implemented, employee communication can accomplish a great deal towards helping management achieve its objectives. At the same time, expectations of what communication can do often have been unrealistic. To optimize the effectiveness of communication, businessmen need to know more about its capabilities and limitations and most important, they must improve their own communication skills.

Communication is an essential function of any organization. It can help overcome normal operating problems and is usually management's chief reliance in crisis situations. Through communication, the organization is enabled to exert a constructive influence in the economic, political and social sphere to insure the continued growth and profitability of business.

Better and more efficient ways need to be introduced in all organizations to minimize dissatisfaction and maximize outputs for both the employees and the organization. Sensitivity to the importance of communication may help in reducing organizational friction. Management and employees,

with better training and education can begin to work towards common goals. Sensitivity to improve communication can help achieve management goals.

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