

22.6: Reading- Communication Channels

What Is Organizational Communication?

Clearly, the task of preparing and submitting a finished sales report doesn't require the same kinds of communication skills as talking on the phone with a classmate. No matter what your "workstation" happens to be—whether your workplace office or your kitchen table—you're performing the task of preparing that sales report in an *organizational setting*. You're still a sender transferring information to a receiver, but the organizational context of the task requires you to consider different factors for success in communicating effectively (including barriers to success). A report, for example, must be targeted for someone in a specific position and must contain the information necessary to make a specific set of decisions.^[1]

Communication Flows

Here's another way of thinking about communication in an organizational setting. Let's assume that you and the classmate you called on the phone are on roughly equal footing—you're both juniors, your grades in the class are about the same, and so forth. Your phone conversation, therefore, is "lateral": You belong to the same group (your accounting class), and your group activities take place on the same level.

Communication may also flow laterally in organizational settings (as it does between you and your classmate), but more often it flows up or down. Take a look at Figure 1, "Formal Communication Flows," below, which shows the three directions in which communications can flow in a typical organization.^[2]

- As the term suggests, downward communication flows from higher organizational levels (supervisors) to lower organizational levels (subordinates).
- Upward communication flows from lower to higher organizational levels.
- Lateral (or horizontal) communication flows across the organization, among personnel on the same level.

Your boss's request for a sales report is an instance of downward communication, and when you've finished and submitted it, you will have completed a task of upward communication.

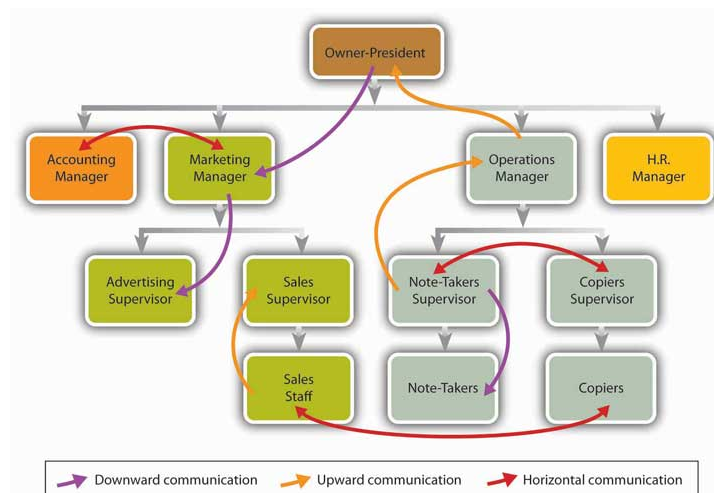


Figure 22.6.1: Formal Communication Flows

Advantages of Communication Flows

Naturally, each of these different directional flows has its functions and advantages. Downward communication, for example, is appropriate for giving instructions or directions—telling people what to do. (As a goal of communication, by the way, giving orders isn't as one-sided as it may seem. One of the things that employees—the receivers—most want to know is: What, exactly, does my job entail?)^[3] Like a sales report, upward communication usually provides managers with information that they need for making decisions, but it's also the vehicle for new ideas, suggestions, and complaints. Horizontal communication supports efforts to coordinate tasks and otherwise help people work together.

Disadvantages of Communication Flows

And, of course, each type of flow has its disadvantages. As information seeps downward, for instance, it tends to lose some of its original clarity and often becomes distorted or downright wrong. (This is especially true when it's delivered orally.) In addition, unlike Donald Trump, most people who are responsible for using downward communication don't like delivering bad news (such as "You're fired" or, more commonly, "Your job is being phased out"); as a result, bad news—including bad news that happens to be important news—is often ignored or disguised. The same thing may happen when bad news—say, a negative status report—must be sent upward.

Finally, while horizontal flows are valuable for promoting cooperation, they can also be used to engage in conflict—for instance, between two departments competing for the same organizational resources. The problem is especially bad when such horizontal communications breach official upward or downward lines of communication, thus bypassing managers who might be able to resolve the conflict.

Channels of Communication

Table \(\PageIndex{1}\) summarizes two additional sets of characteristics of organizational communication—*internal and external channels* and *formal and informal channels*.^[4] Internal communication is shared by people at all levels within a company. External communication occurs between parties inside a company and parties outside the company, such as suppliers, customers, and investors. Both internal and external forms of communication include everything from formal e-mail and official reports to face-to-face conversations and casual phone calls. External communication also takes such forms as customer and supplier Web sites, news releases, and advertising.

Table \(\PageIndex{1}\). Channels of Communication

	Internal	External
Formal	Planned communications following the company's chain of command among people inside the organization —email, memos, conference calls, reports, presentations, executive blogs	Planned communications with people outside the organization —letters, instant messages, reports, speeches, news releases, advertising, websites, executive blogs
Informal	Casual communications among employees that do not follow the chain of command —email, instant messages, phone calls, face-to-face conversations, team blogs	Casual communications with outsiders (e.g. suppliers, customers, investors) —email, instant messages, phone calls, face-to-face conversations, customer-support blogs

Note that Table \(\PageIndex{1}\) takes the form of a grid, thus creating four dimensions in which communication can take place. Informal communication, for example, can take place either among people within the company (internally) or between insiders and outsiders (externally). By and large, though you can use the same set of tools (memos, reports, phone calls) to communicate in any of these four situations, some tools (team blogs, news releases, supplier Web sites) are useful only in one or two.

The Formal Communication Network

An organization's formal communication network consists of all communications that flow along its official lines of authority. Look again at Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\). Because it incorporates the *organization chart* for the company Notes-4-You, it also shows the company's lines of authority—what we call its *reporting relationships*. Here we can see that the reporting relationships in question consist of *upward communication* from subordinates to superiors. In reporting to the operations manager, for example, the notetakers' supervisor communicates upward. Conversely, when the notetakers' manager needs to give direction to notetakers, she will use *downward communication*. If the notetakers' manager and the copiers' manager must get together to prepare a joint report for the operations manager, they'll engage in *lateral communication*. In short, an organization's formal communication network is basically the same thing as its network of reporting relationships and lines of authority.^[5]

The Informal Communication Network

Every company also has an informal communication network (or grapevine), which goes to work whenever two or more employees get together and start talking about the company and their jobs. Informal communication can take place just about anywhere (in one

person's cubicle, in the cafeteria, on the golf course) and by just about any means (phone, e-mail, instant messaging, face-to-face conversation).

Though it's sometimes called the *grapevine*, an informal network is an extremely important communication channel. Why? For the simple reason that it's typically widespread and can rarely be prevented, even if it's not officially sanctioned by the company—indeed, even when the company tries to discourage or bypass it. Unofficial information crosses virtually every boundary drawn by a firm's organization chart, reaching out and touching everyone in the organization, and what's more, it travels a lot faster than official information.

Problems with the Flow of Information through Informal Channels

The downside of “unofficial” information should be obvious. Because much of it is communicated orally, it's likely to get distorted and often degenerates into outright misinformation. Say, for example, that a rumor about layoffs gets started in your workplace. As more than one manager will verify, such rumors can do more damage than the reality. Morale may plummet and productivity won't be far behind. Valuable employees may abandon ship (needlessly, if the rumors are false).^[6]

And imagine what can happen if informal information gets outside the organization. In the 1970s, Chicago-area McDonald's outlets found themselves fighting rumors about worms in their hamburgers. Over the years, Coca-Cola has had to fight rumors about terrorists joining its organization, subversive messages concealed in its label, and hyperacidity (false rumors that Coke causes osteoporosis and makes a good pesticide and an equally good spermicide).^[7]

What to Do about Informal Information Flows

On the upside, savvy managers can tap into the informal network, either to find out what sort of information is influencing employee activities or to circulate more meaningful information, including new ideas as well as corrective information. In any case, managers have to deal with the grapevine, and one manager has compiled a list of suggestions for doing so effectively:^[8]

- *Learn to live with it.* It's here to stay.
- *Tune into it.* Pay attention to the information that's circulating and try to learn something from it. Remember: The more you know about grapevine information, the better you can interact with employees (who, in turn, will probably come to regard you as someone who keeps in touch with the things that concern them).
- *Don't participate in rumors.* Resist the temptation to add your two cents' worth, and don't make matters worse.
- *Check out what you hear.* Because it's your job to replace bad information with good information, you need to find out what's really going on.
- *Take advantage of the grapevine.* Its only function is to carry information, so there's no reason why you can't pump some useful information through it.

Perhaps most important, when alert managers notice that the grapevine is particularly active, they tend to reach a sensible twofold conclusion:

1. The organization's formal lines of communication aren't working as well as they should be.
2. The best way to minimize informal communication and its potential damage is to provide better formal communication from the outset—or, failing that, to provide whatever formal communication will counteract misinformation as thoroughly as possible.

Let's go back to our example of a workplace overwhelmed by layoff rumors. In a practical sense, what can a manager—say, the leader of a long-term product-development team—do to provide better communication? One manager suggests at least three specific responses:^[9]

1. Go to your supervisor or another senior manager and try to find out as much as you can about the organization's real plans.
2. Ask a senior manager or a human resources representative to meet with your team and address members' concerns with accurate feedback.
3. Make it a priority to keep channels open—both between yourself and your team members and between team members and the human resources department.

Because actions of this sort send a message, they can legitimately be characterized as a form of formal communication. They also reflect good leadership: Even though the information in this case relates only indirectly to immediate team tasks, you're sharing information with people who need it, and you're demonstrating integrity (you're being honest, and you're following through on a commitment to the team).

Check Your Understanding

Answer the question(s) below to see how well you understand the topics covered in this section. This short quiz does **not** count toward your grade in the class, and you can retake it an unlimited number of times.

Use this quiz to check your understanding and decide whether to (1) study the previous section further or (2) move on to the next section.

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.com/assessments/214>

1. See Michael Netzley and Craig Snow, *Guide to Report Writing* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 3–21. ↩
2. This section is based on Jerald Greenberg and Robert A. Baron, *Behavior in Organizations*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2008), 351–53. ↩
3. Jerald Greenberg and Robert A. Baron, *Behavior in Organizations*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2008), 350–51. ↩
4. This section is based on John V. Thill and Courtland L. Bovée, *Excellence in Business Communication*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2008), 4–6. ↩
5. See Jerald Greenberg and Robert A. Baron, *Behavior in Organizations*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2008), 349–50. ↩
6. See Steven A. Watson, “Sharing Info and Defusing Rumors Helps Keep Staff Motivated During Layoffs,” ZDNet, July 29, 2003, (accessed October 11, 2011). ↩
7. Allan J. Kimmel, *Rumors and Rumor Control* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2004), (accessed October 11, 2011). See also Jerald Greenberg and Robert A. Baron, *Behavior in Organizations*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2008), 359. ↩
8. Charles R. McConnell, “Controlling the Grapevine,” *Small Business Toolbox*, June 18, 2008, (accessed September 6, 2008). ↩
9. Steven A. Watson, “Sharing Info and Defusing Rumors Helps Keep Staff Motivated During Layoffs,” *TechRepublic*, June 17, 2003, (accessed September 6, 2008). ↩

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