

14.10: Typical Communication Flows

Learning Outcome

- Differentiate between downward, upward, horizontal, diagonal, and external communication flows.

Organizational Communication Flows

Information can flow in four directions in an organization: downward, upward, horizontally, and diagonally. The size, nature, and structure of the organization dictate which direction most of the information flows. In more established and traditional organizations, much of the communication flows in a vertical—downward and upward—direction. In informal firms, such as tech start-ups, information tends to flow horizontally and diagonally. This, of course, is a function of the almost flat organizational hierarchy and the need for collaboration. Unofficial communications, such as those carried in the company grapevine, appear in both types of organizations.

Downward Communication Flows

Downward communication is when company leaders and managers share information with lower-level employees. Unless requested as part of the message, the senders don't usually expect (or particularly want) to get a response. An example may be an announcement of a new CEO or notice of a merger with a former competitor. Other forms of high-level downward communications include speeches, blogs, podcasts, and videos. The most common types of downward communication are everyday directives of department managers or line managers to employees. These can even be in the form of instruction manuals or company handbooks.

Downward communication delivers information that helps to update the workforce about key organizational changes, new goals, or strategies; provide performance feedback at the organizational level; coordinate initiatives; present an official policy (public relations); or improve worker morale or consumer relations.

Upward Communication Flows

Information moving from lower-level employees to high-level employees is upward communication (also sometimes called vertical communication). For example, upward communication occurs when workers report to a supervisor or when team leaders report to a department manager. Items typically communicated upward include progress reports, proposals for projects, budget estimates, grievances and complaints, suggestions for improvements, and schedule concerns. Sometimes a downward communication prompts an upward response, such as when a manager asks for a recommendation for a replacement part or an estimate of when a project will be completed.

An important goal of many managers today is to encourage spontaneous or voluntary upward communication from employees without the need to ask first. Some companies go so far as to organize contests and provide prizes for the most innovative and creative solutions and suggestions. Before employees feel comfortable making these kinds of suggestions, however, they must trust that management will recognize their contributions and not unintentionally undermine or ignore their efforts. Some organizations have even installed “whistleblower” hotlines that will let employees report dangerous, unethical, or illegal activities anonymously to avoid possible retaliation by higher-ups in the company.

Horizontal and Diagonal Communication Flows



Examples of channels that carry external communication include press briefings, fact sheets, press kits, newsletters, magazines, brochures, news releases, annual reports, invoices and purchase orders.

Horizontal communication involves the exchange of information across departments at the same level in an organization (i.e., peer-to-peer communication). The purpose of most horizontal communication is to request support or coordinate activities. People at the same level in the organization can work together to work on problems or issues in an informal and as-needed basis. The manager of the production department can work with the purchasing manager to accelerate or delay the shipment of materials. The finance manager and inventory managers can be looped in so that the organization can achieve the maximum benefit from the coordination. Communications between two employees who report to the same manager is also an example of horizontal communication. Some problems with horizontal communication can arise if one manager is unwilling or unmotivated to share information, or sees efforts to work communally as threatening his position (territorial behavior). In a case like that, the manager at the next level up will need to communicate downward to reinforce the company's values of cooperation.

Diagonal communication is cross-functional communication between employees at different levels of the organization. For example, if the vice president of sales sends an e-mail to the vice president of manufacturing asking when a product will be available for shipping, this is an example of horizontal communication. But if a sales representative e-mails the vice president of marketing, then diagonal communication has occurred. Whenever communication goes from one department to another department, the sender's manager should be made part of the loop. A manager may be put in an embarrassing position and appear incompetent if he isn't aware of everything happening in his department. Trust may be lost and careers damaged by not paying attention to key communication protocols.

Diagonal communication is becoming more common in organizations with a flattened, matrix, or product-based structure. Advantages include:

- Building relationships between senior-level and lower-level employees from different parts of the organization.
- Encouraging an informal flow of information in the organization.
- Reducing the chance of a message being distorted by going through additional filters.
- Reducing the workloads of senior-level managers.

? Practice Question

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/12310>

External Communication Flows

Communications do not start and stop within the organization. External communication focuses on audiences outside of the organization. Senior management—with the help of specialized departments such as public relations or legal—almost always controls communications that relate to the public image or may affect its financial situation. First-level and middle-level management generally handle operational business communications such as purchasing, hiring, and marketing. When communicating outside the organization (regardless of the level), it is important for employees to behave professionally and not to make commitments outside of their scope of authority.

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