# 54

# Communications

Organizations function by means of the collective action of people, yet each individual is capable of taking independent action which may not be in line with policy or instructions, or may not be reported properly to other people who ought to know about it. Good communications are required to achieve coordinated results.

Organizations are subject to the influence of continuous change which affects the work employees do, their well-being and their security. Change can be managed only by ensuring that the reasons for and the implications of change are communicated to those affected in terms which they can understand and accept.

Individuals are motivated by the extrinsic reward system and the intrinsic rewards coming from the work itself. But the degree to which they are motivated depends upon the amount of responsibility and scope for achievement provided by their job, and upon their expectations that the rewards they will get will be the ones they want, and will follow from the efforts they make. Feelings about work and the associated rewards depend very much on the effectiveness of communications from their managers or team leaders and within the company.

Above all, good two-way communications are required so that management can keep employees informed of the policies and plans affecting them, and employees can react promptly with their views about management's proposals and actions. Change cannot be managed properly without an understanding of the feelings of those affected by it, and an efficient system of communications is needed to understand and influence these feelings.

But the extent to which good communications create satisfactory relationships rather than simply reducing unsatisfactory ones, can be exaggerated. A feature of management practices is the way in which different management theories become fashionable or influential for a while and then decline in favour. Among these has been the 'good communications' theory of management. This approach to dealing with management problems is based upon the following assumptions:

- The needs and aims of both employees and management are, in the long run, the same in any organization. Managers' and employees' ideas and objectives can all be fitted together to form a single conceptual framework.
- Any differences in opinion between management and employees are due to misunderstandings which have arisen because communications are not good enough.
- The solution to industrial strife is to improve communications.

This theory is attractive and has some validity. Its weakness is that the assumptions are too sweeping, particularly the belief that the ultimate objectives of management and workers are necessarily identical. The good communications theory, like paternalism, seems to imply that a company can develop loyalty by keeping people informed and treating them well. But people working in organizations have other and, to them, more important loyalties elsewhere – and why not?

The existence of different loyalties and points of view in an organization does not mean that communication is unimportant. If anything the need for a good communications system becomes even greater when differences and conflict exist. But it can only alleviate those differences and pave the way to better cooperation. It cannot solve them.

It is therefore necessary to bear in mind that the group with which we identify – the reference group – influences our attitudes and feelings. 'Management' and the 'the union' as well as our family, our ethnic background, our political party and our religious beliefs (if any) constitute a reference group and colour our reactions to information. What each group 'hears' depends on its own interests. Shared experiences and common frames of reference have much more influence than exhortations from management. Employees may feel they have nothing to do with them because it conflicts with what they already believe.

However, although there may be limitations on the extent to which communication strategies can enhance mutuality and commitment, there is no doubt that it is essential for managements to keep people informed on matters that affect them and to provide channels for them to express their views. This is particularly necessary when new employment initiatives are taking place and effective change management is

very much about communicating management's intentions to people and making sure that they understand how they will be affected.

# COMMUNICATION AREAS AND OBJECTIVES

The main communication areas and their associated objectives are set out in Table 54.1.

Employee relations are mainly affected by managerial and internal communications, although external communications are an additional channel of information. The strategy for managerial communications is concerned with planning and control procedures, management information systems and techniques of delegating and giving instructions. These matters are outside the scope of this book, except in so far as the procedures and skills can be developed by training programmes.

# COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

The strategy for internal communications should be based on analyses of:

- what management wants to say;
- what employees want to hear;
- the problems being met in conveying or receiving information.

These analyses can be used to indicate the systems of communication that need to be developed and the education and training programmes required to make them work. They should also provide guidance on how communications should be managed and timed. Bad management and poor timing are frequently the fundamental causes of ineffective communication.

## *What management wants to say*

What management wants to say depends upon an assessment of what employees need to know, which, in turn, is affected by what they want to hear.

Management usually aims to achieve three things: first, to get employees to understand and accept what management proposes to do in areas that affect them; second, to obtain the commitment of employees to the objectives, plans and values of the organization; and, third, to help employees to appreciate more clearly the contribution they can make to organizational success and how it will benefit them.

**Table 54.1** Communication areas and objectives

| | Communication Area | Objectives |
|---|---|---|
| **I. MANAGERIAL** | 1. the communication downwards and sideways of corporate or functional objectives, policies plans and budgets to those who have to implement them | to ensure that managers and supervisors receive clear, accurate and prompt information on what they are expected to achieve to further the company's objectives |
| | 2. the communication downwards of direct instructions from a manager to a subordinate on what the latter has to do | to ensure that the instructions are clear and precise and provide the necessary motivation to get people into action |
| | 3. the communication upwards and sideways of proposals, suggestions and comments on corporate or functional objectives, policies and budgets from those who have to implement them | to ensure that managers and supervisors have adequate scope to influence corporate and functional decisions on matters about which they have specific expertise and knowledge |
| | 4. the communication upwards and sideways of management information on performance and results | to enable management to monitor and control performance in order that, as necessary, opportunities can be exploited or swift corrective action taken |
| **II. INTERNAL RELATIONS** | 5. the communication downwards of information on company plans, policies or performance | to ensure that (i) employees are kept informed of matters that affect them, especially changes to working conditions, and factors influencing their prosperity and security; (ii) employees are encouraged to identify themselves more completely with the company |
| | 6. the communication upwards of the comments and reactions of employees to what is proposed will happen or what is actually happening in matters that affect them | to ensure that employees are given an opportunity to voice their suggestions and fears and that the company is in a position to amend its plans in the light of these comments |
| **III. EXTERNAL RELATIONS** | 7. the receipt and analysis of information from outside which affects the company's interests | to ensure that the company is fully aware of all the information on legislation and on marketing, commercial, financial and technological matters that affect its interests |
| | 8. the presentation of information about the company and its products to the government, customers and the public at large | to exert influence in the interests of the company, to present a good image of the company, and to persuade customers to buy its products or services |

Communications from management should be about values, plans, intentions and proposals (with the opportunity for discussion with and feedback from employees) as well as about achievements and results. Exhortations should not be used: no one listens to them. It is better to concentrate on specific requirements rather than resorting to general appeals for abstract things such as improved quality or productivity. The requirements should be phrased in a way which emphasizes how all concerned will actually work together and the mutual benefits that should result.

## What employees want to hear

Clearly, employees want to hear about and to comment upon the matters that affect their interests. These will include changes in working methods and conditions, changes in the arrangements for overtime and shift working, company plans which may affect pay or security, and changes in terms and conditions of employment. It is management's job to understand what employees want to hear and plan its communications strategy accordingly. Understanding can be obtained by conducting 'focus groups' discussions which bring together groups of employees to focus on particular issues that concern them, by means of attitude surveys, by asking employee representatives, by informally listening to what employees say, and by analysing grievances to see if improved communications could modify them.

## Analysing communication problems

Specific examples of employee relations problems where communication failures have been the cause or a contributory factor should be analysed to determine exactly what went wrong and what needs to be done to put it right. The problems may be any of those listed earlier in this chapter, including lack of appropriate channels of communication, lack of appreciation of the need to communicate, and lack of skill in overcoming the many formidable barriers to communication. Problems with channels of communication can be dealt with by introducing new or improved communications systems. Lack of skill is a matter for education and training.

# COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

Communication systems can be divided into those using an intranet, those using the written word such as magazines, newsletters, bulletins and notice-boards, and those using oral methods such as meetings, briefing groups and public address systems. The aim should be to make judicious use of a number of channels to make sure that the message gets across.

## Communications through an intranet system

Organizations are increasingly relying on an internal e-mail system (the intranet) to communicate information, especially in workplaces where all or most of the employees have direct or indirect access to a computer. The advantage of intranet communications is that they can be transmitted swiftly to a wide audience. They can also be used for two-way communications – employees can be invited to respond to questions or surveys.

## Magazines

Glossy magazines or house journals are an obvious way to keep employees informed about the company and are often used for public relations purposes as well. They can extol and explain the achievements of the company and may thus help to increase identification and even loyalty. If employees are encouraged to contribute (although this is difficult), the magazine can become more human. The biggest danger of this sort of magazine is that it becomes a public relations exercise which is seen by employees as having little relevance to their everyday affairs.

## Newsletters

Newsletters aim to appear more frequently and to angle their contents more to the immediate concerns of employees than the glossier form of house magazine. To be effective, they should include articles specifically aimed at explaining what management is planning to do and how this affects everyone. They can also include more chatty 'human interest' material about the doings of employees to capture the attention of readers. Correspondence columns can provide an avenue for the expression of employees' views and replies from management, but no attempt should be made to censor letters (except those that are purely abusive) or to pull punches in reply. Anonymous letters should be published if the writer gives his name to the editor.

The key factor in the success of a newsletter or any form of house magazine is the editor, who should be someone who knows the company and its employees and can be trusted by everyone to be frank and fair. Professional expertise is obviously desirable but it is not the first consideration, as long as the editor can write reasonably well and has access to expert help in putting the paper together. It is often a good idea to have an editorial board consisting of management and employee representatives to advise and assist the editor.

Organizations often publish a newsletter in addition to a house magazine, treating the latter mainly as a public relations exercise and relying on the newsletter as the prime means of communicating with employees.

## Bulletins

Bulletins can be used to give immediate information to employees which cannot wait for the next issue of a newsletter; or they can be a substitute for a formal publication if the company does not feel that the expense is justified. Bulletins are useful only if they are distributed quickly and are seen by all interested employees. They can simply be posted on notice-boards or, more effectively, given to individual employees and used as a starting point for a briefing session if they contain information of sufficient interest to merit a face-to-face discussion.

## Notice-boards

Notice-boards are an obvious but frequently misused medium for communications. The biggest danger is allowing boards to be cluttered up with uninteresting or out-of-date material. It is essential to control what goes on to the boards and to appoint responsible people to service them by removing out-of-date or unauthorized notices.

A more impressive show can be made of notices and other material if an information centre is set up in the restaurant or some other suitable place where the information can be displayed in a more attractive and compelling manner than on a typical notice-board.

## Employee involvement

Employee involvement through such means as consultative committees provides a channel for two-way communication. Sometimes, however, they are not particularly effective, either because their thunder has been stolen by union negotiation committees, or because their proceedings are over-formalized and restricted and fail to address the real issues. It is essential to disseminate the information revealed at committees around the offices and works, but it is impossible to rely on committee members to do this. Minutes can be posted on notice-boards, but they are seldom read, usually because they contain too much redundant material.

## DVDs

Specially made DVDs can be a cost-effective method of getting across personal messages (eg from the chief executive) or information about how the company is doing. They can, however, be regarded by employees as too impersonal and/or too slick to have any real meaning.

## Team briefing

The concept of team briefing (previously called briefing groups), as originally developed by the Industrial Society, is a device to overcome the restricted nature of joint consultative committees by involving everyone in an organization, level by level, in face-to-face meetings to present, receive and discuss information. Team briefing aims to overcome the gaps and inadequacies of casual briefings by injecting some order into the system.

Team briefing should operate as follows:

1. *Organization*
   - cover all levels in an organization;
   - fewest possible steps between the top and bottom;
   - between 4 and 18 in each group;
   - run by the immediate leader of each group at each level (who must be properly trained and briefed).
2. *Subjects*
   - policies – explanations of new or changed policies;
   - plans – as they affect the organization as a whole and the immediate group;
   - progress – how the organization and the group are getting on;
   - people – new appointments, points about personnel matters (pay, security, procedures).
3. *Sequence* – the briefing groups should work to a brief prepared by the board on key issues. This briefing is written up and cascaded down the organization. The briefing group meetings should, however, allow for discussion of the brief, and the system should cater for any reactions or comments to be fed back to the top. This provides for two-way communication.
4. *Timing and duration:*
   - a minimum of once a month for those in charge of others and once every two months for every individual in the organization – but meet only if there is something to say;
   - duration not longer than 20–30 minutes.

The merit of team briefing is that it enables face-to-face communications to be planned and, to a reasonable degree, formalized. It is easy, however, for it to start on a wave of enthusiasm and then to wither away because of lack of sufficient drive and enthusiasm from the top downward, inadequately trained and motivated managers and team leaders, reluctance of management to allow subjects of real importance to be discussed throughout the system, and insufficient feedback upwards through each level.

A team briefing system must be led and controlled effectively from the top, but it does require a senior manager with specific responsibility to advise on the subject matter and the preparation of briefs (it is important to have well-prepared material to ensure that briefing is carried out consistently and thoroughly at each level), to train managers and team leaders, and to monitor the system by checking on the effectiveness and frequency of meetings.