Chapter 13

Organizational communication

Learning objectives

After reading through this chapter you will be able to:

- **Describe the communication challenges of the event environment**
- **Discuss the issue of knowledge management: transmission of knowledge within and beyond the event**
- **Describe the factors that can lead to conflict**
- **Evaluate ways in which collaborative work practices can be improved**
- **Describe the difference between national and organizational cultures**
- **Briefly discuss research into cross-cultural communication.**

Introduction

This chapter looks at communication processes. The event environment, due to its turbulent and temporary nature, can provide real challenges for effective communication. Sharing knowledge within and across events can be unreliable, although new technologies are assisting in storing and disseminating a wide range of information. Therefore, the importance of data collection, research and evaluation cannot be stressed enough. For the industry to become more professional, the process of event operational planning needs to be improved and consolidated, particularly where there are serious threats to safety. As O'Toole (2000) has suggested:

> *For too long the event industry has ignored the past problems. Ask many event managers about their events and it's as though it went from 'go to o' without a hitch – except for the client changing their mind and the suppliers turning up with the wrong equipment. I suppose they are protecting their good name. The trouble arises when there is a major problem – it seems to come from nowhere and the results are often devastating. One only has to consider the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race [see Case study 13.1]. If we do look at the past problems then it is often with 20/20 hindsight – of course 'if we had only planned better!' But this does little to help with future events. Each event is a unique combination of suppliers, venues, clients, sponsors, audience. Even if all these event elements are exactly the same, the weather is different, the Australian dollar goes up, a key company collapses or is merged, or there is new legislation pertaining to the event.*

If we do not learn from our mistakes, as the saying goes, we are condemned to repeat them. The individual event manager, on their own, can hardly do this. Certainly they can learn from their own mistakes – but this does not make an industry. An association such as ISES can provide a repository of the 'lessons learned' that can be used to strengthen the industry.

Fortunately the event manager has a tool that can be used for their future events. This is the risk management methodology as set out in project management.

Event communication

Goldblatt (2005) points out that event management is a profession where success or failure depends on communication. He also stresses that there are often barriers to communication, such as noise and visual distractions in the event environment. Regardless of the communication channel chosen, and the barriers to communication, it is essential that messages are clear, action oriented and, in most cases, recorded for future reference. This is particularly the case if a contract variation is involved, where customers ask for more, and more, and more! While a good customer service orientation is essential, it is also essential to recognize when additional services have cost implications.

There are numerous ways in which communication can be conveyed in an organization, the most common being:

- memos and emails
- phone calls
- meetings.

The information booth is at the centre of customer service

In the event environment there are two stages where good communication is essential: developing plans and communication on site. For the first of these, the intranet can be a useful tool, facilitating the storage of project plans on the network and updating by anyone on the team. Generally an email is automatically generated to advise team members of changes made. If this is not the case, another procedure needs to be developed to guard against timelines being modified without anyone noticing. As enticing as this technology sounds, it is not user friendly, and many people prefer to have ownership of part of the project rather than have teams contributing to a common plan or budget.

For communication on site two-way radio is the preferred option, although smaller events usually get by using mobile phones. Two-way radio allows multiple people to work together on the same channel. However, this runs the risk of there being too much communication and staff members are often advised to use the radio channel sparingly so that priorities can be managed effectively. And if the radio is used for chitchat others will be excluded, although there are, of course, overrides or alternative channels for emergency reporting.

Case study 13.1

Sydney-to-Hobart disaster: Who's to blame?

Three years after the tragic deaths of six sailors in the 1998 Sydney-to-Hobart race, the Australian coroner in charge of the case has issued his report on the circumstances surrounding the deaths and blasts both race officials and meteorologists alike. Of the 115 boats involved in the 650-nautical-mile race, 5 sank, 66 retired and 55 crew members had to be rescued as a result of the unforecast storm.

State Coroner John Abernethy's 331-page report criticizes the organization of the race management team, and their lack of timely response to a very serious situation. He said the race organizers lacked the necessary knowledge of meteorology and 'failed to appreciate the impending storm'. Also found at fault were Australian meteorologists who were not steadfast enough in assuring that the racing fleet was informed of the danger that was in their path.

Hours after the race began, the Australian Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) issued a storm warning, but upon calling the race director about the gathering storm, they received no answer. Instead of tracking down anyone in the management team and impressing upon them the severity of the storm, the BOM merely faxed a copy of the warning to the sponsoring yacht club. Unfortunately, the race managers were already aboard the committee boat.

Although race officials did finally receive the faxed storm warning, 22 hours before the sailors reached the treacherous waters and gale force winds in Bass Strait, they failed to grasp the severity of it, and did not inform the race boats. As conditions worsened and reports of 75-knot winds were brought to the race committee, they still did not attempt to relay the warning to the race crews. Once the storm hit the boats and they were in imminent danger, the race management team had no crisis plan ready.

(*Boat/US Magazine*, May 2001, www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0BQK/is_3_6/ai_ 74699537)

Reflective practice 13.1
This article illustrates the communication issues that emerged between the Australian Bureau of Meteorology and the race management team. Explain how they occurred and how they could have been avoided.

Transmission models of communication emphasize that a 'message' be transmitted from one person to another. This message is converted into a signal, which is transmitted via a channel. If, for example, the channel is the telephone, there are various ways in which the transmission can be disrupted. First, there is mechanical noise, making it hard for the receiver to hear the message. Or there could be poor reception on a mobile phone (another form of mechanical noise), interfering with the transmission of the message. The second type of disruption is semantic noise. If your communication is unclear and the message confusing, through the use of words the receiver does not understand, this too can contribute to poor message transmission. Use of jargon or complex words contributes to semantic noise. Finally, psychological noise causes the receiver to block or object to the message, perhaps due to the tone or language used. If, for example, a supervisor used a swear word on a two-way radio this could interfere with the message content. The receiver might get offended and ignore the instruction. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that the meaning of the sender is interpreted correctly by the receiver.

Knowledge management

Broadly, knowledge management is the process of systematically managing the stores of knowledge in an organization and transforming these information and intellectual assets into enduring value for the organization. Within the event operation, the focus of knowledge management is on the development and dissemination of information to the workforce and the management of post-event evaluation.

One of the characteristic features of the event environment is the speed at which decisions are made. When talking about the Wave Aid concert put on in quick response to the 2004 tsunami, Matthew Lazarus-Hall said that decisions were made in record time. On one occasion, he left a meeting to find that the decisions made there had changed before he reached the parking lot.

Responsiveness to operational contingencies often requires quick dissemination of information to staff and volunteers who are dealing with the public. Systems need to be in place to ensure that this happens. As seen above, two-way radio is used for this purpose, although today many event staff rely more on their mobile phones for communication. The advent of a new generation of mobile phones, or personal digital devices, will enable central updates of core information, all of which will be available immediately to those on the ground with micro touch screens.

Knowledge management in relation to event evaluation is increasingly viewed as a priority. The Olympic Games Knowledge Management repository is an example of an initiative developed in 1998 so that future events could build upon the planning of past events by accessing and transferring historical information. A similar system was developed by the Manchester Commonwealth Games and built on by the Melbourne Commonwealth Games. All events – whether one-off productions or annual events – can create a useful legacy for those that follow by assembling, storing and evaluating data related to the event.

Unlike the hotel industry in which standard accounting procedures and reporting statistics have been developed, the event industry has had a limited focus on knowledge management and analysis. Communicating knowledge gained from one event context to another occurs mostly informally through transmission of information by individuals who are experienced in the field. For knowledge to be used as the asset

that it is, it has to be systematically collected and categorized. While it may appear that technological solutions are the answer, the question of human intent is critical as well. The right organizational climate is needed for people to willingly share information and to learn collaboratively in the interests of the industry.

There are a number of ways in which human resources can contribute to knowledge management:

- Developing a culture of trust and open communication
- Developing systems for capturing tacit knowledge
- Using training and mentoring as a means of disseminating expert knowledge
- Providing rewards for projects which capture expert knowledge
- Writing reports, such as training evaluation reports, to contribute to knowledge management in the area of human resources
- Co-ordinating briefing and debriefing meetings
- Developing and presenting training sessions on project management and evaluation, including post-event reporting for the event as a whole.

Conflict management

What better time to raise the subject of conflict management? Due to the dynamic nature of the event planning environment and the many pressures faced by the organizers, conflict is endemic. It can be resolved positively, leading to creative and innovative event designs and concepts, but equally it can lead to teams becoming dysfunctional. As Eunson (2005) points out, conflict can have positive payoffs, leading to better decision making. Equally, it can block communication.

According to Eunson, any of the following four factors may lead to conflict:

1 *Resource scarcity*. This may include lack of time, money, people and tangible resources such as computer hardware and software.
2 *Workflow interdependence*. Gantt charts, frequently used for event planning, illuminate the dependence of one task on another, thus impacting on the critical path.
3 *Power and/or value asymmetry*. People with high–low power relationships or significantly different values may find it extremely hard to work together. For example, the 'bean counters' are often derided by the creative team for harnessing their ideas.
4 *Goal incompatibility*. Goals of different departments, functional areas and teams can clash. For example, the demands made by the waste management team to ban the use of polystyrene and foil may seem unrealistic to the catering team.

Many studies have been done into the nature of conflict in building projects, which is similar to that occurring during event projects and different from the conflict which occurs in business enterprises (Payne, 1995; Sommerville and Langford, 1994; Vaaland, 2003). Vaaland, in particular, looks at the adversarial attitudes of the client and the contractor in construction projects, which often results in loss of productivity and cost increases. This author suggests that if the perceptions of the two parties are properly managed, insights can be gained which help to restore the ability to manage the relationship under pressure. These different perceptions have been studied in the building industry to show that contractors put more emphasis on

minimizing project cost and duration, while clients put more emphasis on satisfying the needs of other stakeholders (Bryde and Robinson, 2005). Research in the event industry along similar lines would be extremely useful (see Case study 13.2 on perception at the end of this chapter).

Working collaboratively

For an event to be successful issues need to be resolved by working collaboratively and productively. Issues may evolve around inequity in distribution of resources; problems with decision making and lines of communication; different values and interpersonal styles; inadequate project planning; or lack of leadership and direction.

So what do we know about collaboration? Here are some assumptions:

- Management involvement in collaborative work planning is essential.
- Teams benefit from regular, professional and neutral facilitation.
- Conflict is inevitable.

Conflict can be reduced by:

- Developing clear roles and responsibilities
- Setting ground rules
- Developing boundaries for acceptable behaviour
- Developing clear goals and targets
- Empowering individuals to negotiate and make binding decisions
- Focusing on super-ordinate goals (the event programme and deadline)
- Establishing conflict resolution processes
- Establishing procedures for conflict escalation
- Meeting regularly and monitoring progress towards agreed goals.

On an individual level, conflict negotiation techniques include:

- Asking questions
- Listening and providing feedback
- Refraining from taking absolute positions
- Repeating key phrases and statements of fact
- Restating the question as a point of focus
- Developing targets and action points
- Focusing on tasks and behaviours
- Avoiding emotional terms and personal blame
- Searching for alternatives
- Reaching agreement on the steps forward.

One of the most interesting features of the event business that has not been widely documented is the 'magic moment' when everyone realizes that only collaboration from this point onwards will enable the event to meet its deadlines. This is the point at which everyone knows that the moment of doors opening to visitors is imminent, and that only positive teamwork will ensure that this will happen. This intense but

positive period of co-operation occurs at different times, depending on the size and scope of the event. Complaining, sabotage, arguments and blaming cease and compromise is reached on almost every issue. Super-ordinate goals are those that sit above the nitty gritty conflicts of every day. In the event business the super-ordinate goal is generally the successful production of the event programme on the date and time specified. Since this deadline is invariably inflexible this becomes the super-ordinate goal for negotiation.

Cross-cultural communication

Multinational teams are a feature of events. In addition, many event organizations work in many different cities and countries. For example, specialists working in the fields of pyrotechnic displays and opening ceremonies typically work around the world. Cross-cultural communication is thus a significant issue for such individuals and organizations.

A company called Pyrovision in the United Kingdom produced the Lord Mayor's Show in London in 2005. In addition to numerous shows done in their home country, employees have worked in Monaco, China, Germany, France, USA and Russia, to name just a few places. To work in a global environment cross-cultural communication skills are essential for negotiation and operational implementation.

Writers in the field of communication differentiate between *national* and *organizational* cultures (Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005; Eunson, 2005; Griffith, 2002). In this text we have described many of the common features of the event organizational culture, the most dominant being the project management orientation and the dynamic nature of the working environment (Allen *et al.*, 2005; Hanlon and Cuskelly, 2002). When discussing national culture, and the impact this has on organizations, we are looking instead at international business relationships and the impact that national culture has on communication. Communication effectiveness is affected by the 'fit' between one national culture and another. Hofstede (1991) is one of the best known theorists in this field and he describes national cultural dimensions in terms of:

- *Power distance* – focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in the country's society
- *Individualism* – focuses on the degree to which the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships
- *Masculinity* – focuses on the degree to which the society reinforces, or does not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control and power
- *Uncertainty avoidance* – focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society
- *Long-term orientation* – focuses on the degree to which the society embraces, or does not embrace, long-term devotion to traditional, forward-thinking values.

This last dimension was added after Hofstede completed a study of Chinese managers. As an example, Brazil's highest Hofstede dimension is uncertainty avoidance, suggesting that, as a result, the society does not readily accept change and is very risk adverse (*Geert Hofstede™ Cultural Dimensions*, 2006). This would have implications for event planners.

While this research has prompted much debate and discussion (largely over the sample chosen for the research), most writers agree that intercultural communication requires a global outlook. They also concur that knowledge and motivation are the key elements of this outlook (Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005; McCabe *et al.*, 2000).

A model for communication effectiveness developed by Griffith (2002) includes three communication competencies. Cognitive competence is the ability of the individual to ascertain meaning from verbal and nonverbal language; affective competence relates to an individual's emotional tendencies (e.g. willingness to accept culturally diverse communications); and behavioural competence. The last of these is indicated by flexibility and adaptability – the ability to respond appropriately in different cultural contexts.

Griffith goes further to suggest the following steps as an action plan to monitor and improve communication effectiveness in international organizations:

- Assess communication competence of internal managers
- Match internal and external manager competencies
- Assess the effectiveness of the communication environment
- Develop an appropriate communication strategy
- Audit performance effectiveness of communication.

Event planning involves extensive negotiation with stakeholders, so event organizations operating offshore need to develop their knowledge of local conditions (including rules, regulations, laws and practices) and fine tune their negotiation skills. An ability to work and communicate effectively in a global environment is a priority for those organizations and individuals working under these circumstances.

Case study 13.2

Different perceptions of crowd control

True picture on the parade 'problems'

I am writing to express my disgust at the one-sided piece of reporting on page three of the journal last week, headlined: 'Animal magic ends in upset.'

Maybe you should make yourself aware of all the acts before publishing such rubbish. Why did you publish only one person's point of view?

I was travelling with my daughter in Black Thunder, we were supposed to be part of the parade through Barnstaple with Father Christmas. Lantern FM were kind enough to take children from the Children's Hospice in their cars to see Father Christmas.

The problems started as we left the service ramp at Green Lanes, the crowd surged forward behind Father Christmas thus making it impossible for the Lantern cars to follow.

There were many children dressed up, I believe they were also supposed to be a part of the parade, but were swamped by the crowd.

As we reached the top of Joy Street a gentleman from the Rotary Club stood in front of the Lantern vehicles and refused to let us pass. Did he not understand that children from the hospice would want to be part of the parade, or did he not appreciate the support and generosity of the Lantern team?

At this stage the police stepped in and diverted us down Joy Street as all three cars quickly became surrounded by people, demonstrating a frightening lack of crowd safety or control.

We sat in the cars at the bottom of Joy Street for about half an hour or so, until Father Christmas came past and we could rejoin the parade to the entrance at Green Lanes, where the children were supposed to follow Father Christmas to the Grotto.

We were advised by the police not to leave the cars as there were too many people, it would not be safe or possible for the children to follow. We sat in the cars until the crowds cleared and the reindeer moved off. We went straight back to the hospice.

The situation could have been a disaster, not only from our point of view in that the children could have become distressed or scared.

It was all thanks to PJ and the Lantern team that the situation was turned into a fun experience. From the crowd point of view, it shows credit to the people of North Devon (most of whom seemed to be in Barnstaple that night!) in that it was their goodwill and humour that kept the atmosphere happy.

Maybe the Rotary Club should think long and hard before marshalling an event of this size, or that has the potential to be this size, as it seems they were ill-equipped to deal with this situation.

But all credit and thanks should go to the police who were brilliant throughout, and to PJ and the Lantern FM team, not only for their support for the children from the Children's Hospice, but for also creating a fun atmosphere to salvage a potentially disastrous evening.

MRS CINDY STONE
Barnstaple

(Reproduced with permission of *North Devon Journal*, 2 December 2004)

Rotarians role was not crowd control

In response to the letter by Mrs Cindy Stone headed 'True picture on the parade problems' in last week's journal may I take the liberty of correcting one of her misconceptions, namely the role played by the Rotary Clubs of Barnstaple.

The Christmas parade was organised by the Town Centre Management who in turn asked for volunteers from the Rotary Clubs, fourteen of us duly gave up our evening at home and turned up.

On arrival at the Green Lanes ramp we were given specific instructions. Two members were sent to Joy Street and told that under no circumstances were they to let any vehicle pass while the remainder were instructed to surround Santa's sled to prevent (for health and safety reasons one assumes) children touching the reindeer.

The assumption by Mrs Stone that we were in some way responsible for crowd control is ludicrous, such tasks are best left to the professionals, the police.

Volunteering for unenviable jobs is what we Rotarians do. We also raise vast sums of money for local, national and international charities one of which is the Children's Hospice to which it would appear Mrs Stone also lends a helping hand.

She is to be congratulated, as is the Town Centre Management, for putting on the parade, and the people of Barnstaple for responding so wholeheartedly.

EDWARD O'NEILL
President, The Rotary Club of Barnstaple Link
Copley Drive, Barnstaple

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Reflective practice 13.2

1 Explain how these problems occurred.
2 How could clear communication have prevented these problems occurring?
3 Write a letter to the Rotarians, thanking them for their help and clarifying the situation.

Chapter summary and key points

Having a clear purpose regarding communication can go a long way towards improving its effectiveness. Different people can make different meanings of the same message because of their different perceptions, but if communication is purposive and clear, fewer misunderstandings will occur. In this chapter we have also covered cross-cultural communication, explaining briefly how differences in cultural background can impact upon communication. It is dangerous, however, to stereotype cross-cultural communication. Instead, an emphasis on understanding differences in perception (by individuals and groups) and a focus on developing effective listening and clear communication is a more constructive approach.

Inevitably, conflict will arise at times in the pressured event environment, so conflict management skills and conflict negotiation techniques have been outlined in this chapter to help event personnel deal with such situations.

Finally, the field of knowledge management has been introduced briefly and its role in professionalizing event management emphasized. Assembling, storing and evaluating data on events provides a useful legacy for future event planning and implementation.

Revision questions

1 Select one communication channel and describe how it is commonly used in the event environment.
2 Visit two event websites and compare their communication effectiveness with their audiences.
3 Give three reasons why conflict might emerge at an event.
4 Using an example, explain how collaborative processes can assist in developing win–win solutions.
5 Discuss the statement: 'Studies of cultural differences are counterproductive as they lead people to stereotype others.'

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