

Formal Communication Channels: Upward, Downward, Horizontal, and External

Fred C. Lunenburg
Sam Houston State University

ABSTRACT

An organization's structure influences the communication patterns within the organization. The structure of an organization should provide for communication in three distinct directions: downward, upward, and horizontal. These three directions establish the framework within which communication in an organization takes place. Examining each one will enable us to better appreciate the barriers to effective organizational communication and the means to overcome these barriers.

Assume that you are an administrator of a school organization (public school, community college, university). Think of the broad range of messages that are communicated to you in the course of a workday. For example, your supervisor may ask you to complete an important state report; another administrator may hand you a memo regarding the status of a new program recently implemented; you may read an e-mail message from a colleague regarding the winner of the office NCAA basketball bracket pool; and your secretary may tell you a funny story. From these examples, it is easy to distinguish between two basic types of communication that occur in school organizations: *formal communication* – the exchange of messages regarding the official work of the organization, and *informal communication* – the exchange of unofficial messages that are unrelated to the organization's formal activities. In this article, I will focus on formal communication.

Organizational Structure Influences Communication

Although the basic process of communication is similar in many different contexts, one unique feature of organizations has a profound impact on the communication process – namely, its structure (Greenberg & Baron, 2011). Organizations often are structured in ways that dictate the communication patterns that exist. Given this phenomenon, we may ask: How is the communication process affected by the structure of an organization?

The term organizational structure refers to the formally prescribed pattern of relationships existing between various units of an organization (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2011). An organization's structure typically is described using a diagram, known as an *organizational chart*. Such diagrams provide graphic representations of the formal pattern of communication in an organization. An organization chart may be likened to an X-ray showing the organization's skeleton, an outline of the planned, formal connections between individuals in various departments or units (Argyris, 2011).

An organizational chart consists of various boxes and the lines connecting them. The lines connecting the boxes in the organizational chart are lines of *authority* showing who must answer to whom – that is, *reporting relationships*. Each person is responsible to (or answers to) the person at the next higher level to which he or she is connected. At the same time, people are also responsible for (or give orders to) those who are immediately below them. The boxes and lines form a blueprint of an organization showing not only what people have to do (jobs performed including appropriate job titles), but with whom they have to communicate for the organization to operate properly (Jones, 2011).

Directions of Communication

The structure of an organization should provide for communication in three distinct directions: downward, upward, and horizontal (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). These three directions establish the framework within which communication in an organization takes place. These communication flows are depicted in Figure 1. Examining each one briefly will enable us to better appreciate the barriers to effective organizational communication and the means to overcome them.

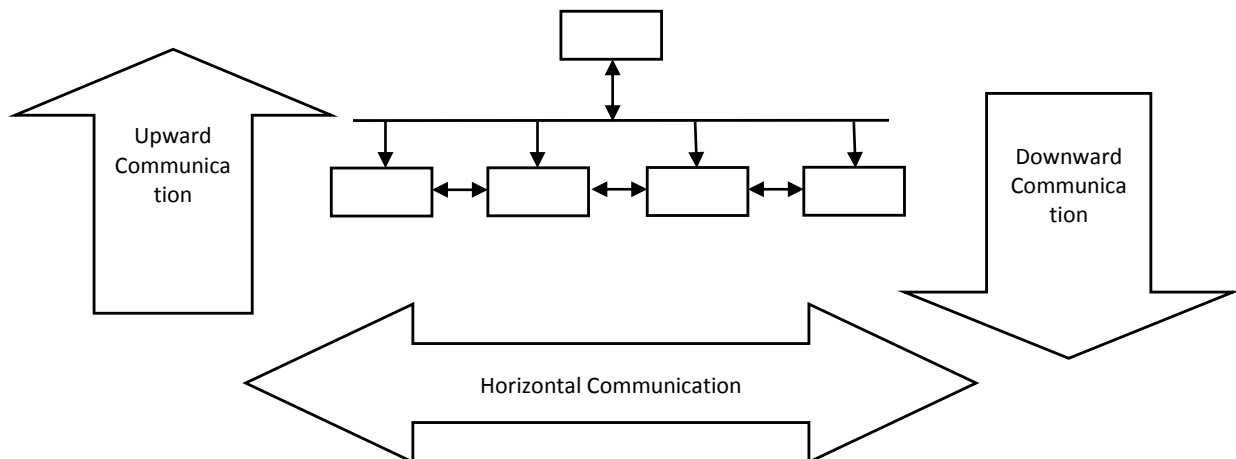


Figure 1. Downward, upward, and horizontal communication.

Downward Communication

Traditional views of the communication process in school organizations have been dominated by *downward communication* flows. Such flows transmit information from higher to lower levels of the school organization. School leaders, from central office administrators to building-level administrators, communicate downward to group members through speeches, messages in school bulletins, school board policy manuals, and school procedure handbooks.

Canary (2011) has identified five general purposes of downward communication:

1. **Implementation of goals, strategies, and objectives.** Communicating new strategies and goals provides information about specific targets and expected behaviors. It gives direction for lower levels of the school/school district, community college, or university. For example: "The new reform mandate is for real. We must improve the quality of student learning if we are to succeed."
2. **Job instructions and rationale.** These are directives on how to do a specific task and how the job relates to other activities of the school organization. Schools, community colleges, or universities need to coordinate individual and departmental objectives with organization-wide goals. We often fail to provide enough of this kind of information, leaving it to the individual staff member to get the big picture.
3. **Procedures and practices.** These are messages defining the school organization's policies, rules, regulations, benefits, and structural arrangements in order to get some degree of uniformity in organization practices. In school organizations, this information is transmitted to staff members through board and organization-wide policy manuals, handbooks, and the day-to-day operation of the school organization.
4. **Performance feedback.** Departmental progress reports, individual performance appraisals, and other means are used to tell departments or individuals how well they are doing with respect to performance standards and goals. For example: "Mary, your work on the computer terminal has greatly improved the efficiency of our department."
5. **Socialization.** Every school organization tries to motivate staff members to adopt the institution's mission and cultural values and to participate in special ceremonies, such as picnics and United Way campaigns. It is an attempt to get a commitment, a sense of belonging, and a unity of direction among staff members (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). For example: "The school thinks of its employees as family and would like to invite everyone to attend the annual picnic and fair on May 30."

The downward flow of communication provides a channel for directives, instructions, and information to organizational members. However, much information gets lost as it is passed from one person to another. Moreover, the message can be distorted if it travels a great distance from its sender to the ultimate receiver down through the formal school organization hierarchy (Tourish, 2010).

Upward Communication

The behaviorists have emphasized the establishment of *upward communication* flows. In a school organization, this refers to communication that travel from staff

member to leader. This is necessary not only to determine if staff members have understood information sent downward but also to meet the ego needs of staff. Five types of information communicated upward in a school organization are as follows (Canary, 2011).

1. ***Problems and exceptions.*** These messages describe serious problems and exceptions to routine performance in order to make the leader aware of difficulties.
2. ***Suggestions for improvement.*** These messages are ideas for improving task-related procedures to increase the quality or efficiency of organization members.
3. ***Performance reports.*** These messages include periodic reports that inform the leader how individual organization members and departments are performing.
4. ***Grievances and disputes.*** These messages are employee complaints and conflicts that travel up the school organization hierarchy for a hearing and possible resolution. If the grievance procedure is backed up by the presence of a collective bargaining agreement, organization members are even more encouraged to express true feelings.
5. ***Financial and accounting information.*** These messages pertain to costs, accounts receivable, interest on investments, tax levies, and other matters of interest to the board, central administration, and building-level administrators.

Ideally, the organizational structure should provide for both upward and downward communication flows. Communication should travel in both directions through the formal school organization hierarchy. Unfortunately, communication from the bottom does not flow as freely as communication from the top. Some barriers to effective upward communication in a school are as follows (Cheney, 2011).

1. Administrators fail to respond when staff members bring up information or problems. Failure to respond will ultimately result in no communication.
2. Administrators tend to be defensive about less-than-perfect actions. When staff members see this defensiveness, information will be withheld.
3. The administrator's attitude plays a critical role in the upward communication flow. If the administrator is really concerned and really listens, then upward communication improves.
4. Physical barriers can also inhibit upward communication flow. Separating an administrator from her staff members creates common problems.
5. Time lags between the communication and the action can inhibit upward communication. If it takes months for the various levels of administration to approve a staff member's suggestion, upward communication is hindered.

The following are some methods of improving the effectiveness of upward communication in a school organization (Keyton, 2011):

1. ***The open-door policy.*** Taken literally, this means that the administrator's door is always open to staff members. It is an invitation for staff to come in and talk about any problem they may have. In practice, the open-door policy is seldom used. The administrator may say: "My door is always open," but in many cases both the staff

member and the administrator know the door is really closed. Typically, this does not occur in a learning organization (Reason, 2010; Senge, 2006).

2. ***Counseling, attitude questionnaires, and exit interviews.*** The leader can greatly facilitate upward communication by conducting nondirective, confidential counseling sessions; periodically administering attitude surveys; and holding exit interviews for those who leave the organization. Much valuable information can be gained from these forms of communication.

3. ***Participative techniques.*** Group decision making can generate a great deal of upward communication. This may be accomplished by the use of union-management committees, quality circles, suggestion boxes, site-based councils, and the like.

4. ***The ombudsperson.*** The use of an ombudsperson has been utilized primarily in Europe and Canada to provide an outlet for persons who have been treated unfairly or in a depersonalized manner by large, bureaucratic government (Hyson, 2010; International Ombudsman Institute, 2009; Kucsko-Stadlmayer, 2009). More recently, it has gained popularity in American state governments, the military, universities, and some business firms. Xerox Corporation inaugurated the position in 1972, and General Electric followed shortly thereafter (Malik, 2010). If developed and maintained properly, it may work where the open-door policy has failed.

5. ***The union contract.*** A prime objective of the union is to convey to administration the feelings and demands of various employee groups. Collective bargaining sessions constitute a legal channel of communication for any aspect of employer-employee relations. A typical provision of every union contract is the grievance procedure. It is a mechanism for appeal beyond the authority of the immediate supervisor.

6. ***The grapevine.*** Although leaders may be reluctant to use the grapevine, they should always listen to it. The grapevine is a natural phenomenon that serves as a means of emotional release for staff members and provides the administrator with significant information concerning the attitudes and feelings of staff members.

In short, the upward flow of communication in a school organization is intended to provide channels for the feedback of information up the school hierarchy. Some deterrents may prevent a good return flow, but there are ways to promote more effective administrator-staff communications.

Horizontal Communication

Upward and downward communication flows generally follow the formal hierarchy within the school organization. However, greater size and complexity of organizations increase the need for communication laterally or diagonally across the lines of the formal chain of command. This is referred to as *horizontal communication*. These communications are informational too, but in a different way than downward and upward communication. Here information is basically for coordination — to tie together activities within or across departments on a single school campus or within divisions in a school-wide organizational system. Horizontal communication falls into one of three categories (Canary, 2011):

1. ***Intradepartmental problem solving.*** These messages take place between members of the same department in a school or division in a school-wide organizational system and concern task accomplishment.
2. ***Interdepartmental coordination.*** Interdepartmental messages facilitate the accomplishment of joint projects or tasks in a school or divisions in a school-wide organizational system.
3. ***Staff advice to line departments.*** These messages often go from specialists in academic areas, finance, or computer service to campus-level administrators seeking help in these areas.

In brief, horizontal communication flows exist to enhance coordination. This horizontal channel permits a lateral or diagonal flow of messages, enabling units to work with other units without having to follow rigidly up and down channels. Many school organizations build in horizontal communications in the form of task forces, committees, liaison personnel, or matrix structures to facilitate coordination.

External communication flows between employees inside the organization and with a variety of stakeholders outside the organization. External stakeholders include other administrators external to the organization, parents, government officials, community residents, and so forth. Many organizations create formal departments, such as a public relations office, to coordinate their external communications.

Conclusion

Organizational structure influences communication patterns within an organization. Communications flow in three directions—downward, upward, and horizontally. Downward communication consists of policies, rules, and procedures that flow from top administration to lower levels. Upward communication consists of the flow of performance reports, grievances, and other information from lower to higher levels. Horizontal communication is essentially coordinative and occurs between departments or divisions on the same level. External communication flows between employees inside the organization and a variety of stakeholders outside the organization.

References

- Argyris, C. (2011). *Organizational traps: Leadership, culture, organizational design*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Canary, H. (2011). *Communication and organizational knowledge: Contemporary issues for theory and practice*. Florence, KY: Taylor & Francis.
- Cheney, G. (2011). *Organizational communication in an age of globalization: Issues, reflections, practice*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Greenberg, J., & Baron, R. A. (2010). *Behavior in organizations* (10th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

-
- Hyson, S. (2011). *Provincial and territorial ombudsman offices in Canada*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- International Ombudsman Institute. (2009). *The international ombudsman yearbook*. Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Ivancevich, J. M., Konopaske, R., & Matteson, M. T. (2011). *Organizational behavior and management*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Jones, G. R. (2011). *Essentials of contemporary management*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Keyton, J. (2011). *Communication and organizational culture: A key to understanding work experiences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kucsko-Stadlmayer, G. (2009). *European ombudsman-institutions: A comparative legal analysis regarding the multifaceted realization of an idea*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Lunenburg, F. C., & Ornstein, A. O. (2008). *Educational administration: Concepts and practices*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Cengage.
- Malik, M. S. (2010). *A comprehensive analysis of the law of the ombudsman*. New York, NY: Aberdeen University Press.
- Reason, C. (2010). *Leading a learning organization: The science of working with groups*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: Currency/Doubleday.
- Tourish, D. (2010). *Auditing organizational communication: A handbook of research, theory, and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.