



MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATIONS

“I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is what I meant.”

This statement is representative of a real communication problem. Are you an effective communicator, or are you often asked to clarify your messages? Are you interested in improving your communicative ability? Do you understand the communication process? These are some of the questions, which will be considered in the following discussion.

If I were to observe daily managerial activity, it is likely that I would find most managers spending the greatest portion of their day engaged in the process of communications. For example, Robert Dubin once summarized the empirical results of a study of managerial behavior and concluded that managers often spend from 50 to 80 percent of their workday just talking¹. If one adds to this the time normally spent in non-oral communications, the proportion of an average workday spent communicating becomes even more substantial. Furthermore, if you consider the role that communication plays in major management functions such as planning, organizing, directing, coordinating, and controlling, its relative importance is more fully appreciated.

Because communication represents such a significant portion of the managerial process, all managers should be interested in improving their understanding of the communication process. A review of the

literature soon shows that a massive volume of “how to do it” type of information has been published. Most of our textbooks on the subject of management communication are filled with exhortations of how one can improve his communicative ability.

Unfortunately, this “how to do it” information bypasses a very critical point: it is doubtful that anyone will succeed in improving his communicative abilities unless he first has an understanding of the communication process, itself. In other words, *when the exhortations for improving a manager’s communicative skills are not preceded by an attempt to increase his understanding of the communications process, they are likely to have only a limited impact on his behavior.* This discussion is designed to provide a basic understanding of the communications process. It is hoped that this understanding will then facilitate a manager’s efforts to improve his communicative abilities.

The World Around Us

To really appreciate the multiple aspects of the communication process, one first must be cognizant of the world around him and the events therein. Our world is composed of an infinite number of interacting processes; each occurring in a different manner and responding to a continually changing reality. The manager must be aware that he is confronting a changing environment and dealing with dynamic events. This awareness will help to establish an attitude of change. Consequently, the manager should be better able to respond effectively to the endless variety of demands placed on him by his particular business.

The Nature of Words

What are words? Communications experts tell us that for the most part, words are: 1) tools of communication, 2) guides to events, and 3) the end product of the process of abstraction. Before words can really be useful in communications, there first must exist an event, e.g., a car, a house, or a number. Each event has its own set of characteristics. Upon the perception of an event and its peculiar characteristics, your mind proceeds through abstraction to construct an object, i.e., the object is the image, which appears in your mind at the time the event appears within the range of your sense organs. Suppose that an event in the form of a car does exist. It has numerous characteristics including white-wall tires, outside rearview mirrors, backup lights, etc. At the time this car enters your visual range, your mind forms an abstraction of the car's total characteristics. The event has now become an object, i.e., one's abstraction of the event. A given event, therefore, becomes a unique object to each person perceiving it. One person may recall that the car had white-wall tires while the person standing next to him may have noticed only the outside rearview mirrors.

Next, a person begins to abstract characteristics about an object and attempts to convey them to others. At this point the word level has been reached; the word finally selected being a first level abstraction of the object and a second level abstraction of the actual event. This explains why a story, when told by one person to another many times over, can change dramatically in the process. A consciousness of this process of abstracting will make the manager aware that an object, as he perceives it, is probably different from that perceived by someone else, and that the word he uses to describe an object may fail to communicate the image that was intended.

A Communications Model

Models of the communication process have been developed by many writers². Generally speaking, most of these models are composed of two parties (the source and the receiver) and four elements (encoding, the message, the channel, and decoding). The source is the instigator of the message. Encoding is the psychological process of selecting and organizing the signs to be included in the message. A message is an organized set of signs. The channel is the medium by which messages are carried from the source to the receiver. A receiver is the intended recipient of the message. Finally, decoding is the process of interpreting and assigning meaning to messages that have been received.

For example, suppose Mr. Brown and Mr. Roberts are two persons, each living in a unique physical and psychological environment. Now assume that Mr. Brown wishes to orally communicate with Mr. Roberts. Mr. Brown's objective, therefore, to choose and organize his words so that his message will enable Mr. Roberts to accurately construct the meaning which first motivated the message. As you can see, Mr. Brown is faced with a formidable task; that of evaluating the environmental and experiential status of Mr. Roberts, since these factors and others still affect Mr. Roberts' interpretation of Mr. Brown's message. Now suppose Mr. Brown has evaluated the status of the intended receiver Mr. Roberts, and encoded his message accordingly. Next, Mr. Brown must select the medium by which the message is to be transmitted to Mr. Roberts, e.g., by telephone, direct conversation, etc.

When the message penetrates Mr. Roberts' field of recognition, he immediately begins the decoding (interpretation) process relative to his own unique frame of reference. As part of the interpretation process, Mr. Roberts also tries to evaluate the status of the message's

source, i.e., just as to perceived status of the receiver is a basic cue for encoding the message, the perceived status of the source is an important cue for decoding it. The end product of the decoding process occurs when the receiver assigns a meaning to the message and his behavior is adjusted accordingly.

When has the communication process been successfully completed? Communication has been successfully consummated when the receiver has assigned a meaning similar to the one motivating the source's message to it. The degree to which the assigned meaning differs from the motivating meaning is a measure of communicative ineptitude on the part of the source.

Implications

The communication process as described above, has several implications. First, the model can be described for a multiple-level organization wherein communicative responsibilities are often delegated. In this situation, the source and the encoder may be two different persons. For example, a manager may perceive the need to communicate with someone, but ask his assistant manager to prepare the message. While the manager is actually the source of the communications, the assistant manager is given the responsibility of selecting the words and preparing the message (encoding it).

Second, the communications process is often a precarious endeavor. For example, while the encoder is in control of many of the signs which comprise and accompany the message, it may also be accompanied by signs which are not under his control and may tend to distort the real message, e.g., facial expressions, tone of voice, and environmental factors. Consequently, an encoder may be surprised or even shocked by receiver responses which do not seem to be consistent with the message.

Third, there exists an implication related to connotative meanings. Connotative meanings are specialized individualistic meanings assigned to words on the basis of a person's unique experiences. The word "hippie" for example, may arouse your strong negative emotions, but have the opposite effect on your teenage son or daughter.

Fourth, the model implies that a good communicator is both an encoder and a decoder. Unfortunately, many managers place most emphasis on their role as an encoder, with a deficient concern given to their decoding responsibilities. In short, a highly communicative manager will be as effective at listening as he is at speaking.

Finally, the communications model implies that the transmission of a message becomes a critical component of the communications process when a person-to-person channel is not being used. If messages are transmitted via non-oral channels, distortions are more likely to appear. These distortions may take the form of incomplete directive messages, misworded messages, and unconditional messages. For effective communications, the manager must attempt to maintain uncluttered channels of communication and minimize the incidence of message distortion.

Importance to Managers

A person can be a good communicator and a poor manager. Good communication does not necessarily lead to good management. Nevertheless, poor communicative ability is likely to restrict managerial effectiveness. It is likely to severely limit a manager's functional activities such as planning, organizing, directing, and controlling, all of which rely heavily on good communications.

Understanding the communications process will reduce managerial frustration about subordinate error. That is, this understanding will help the manager to know that the

procedure of giving a subordinate a directive does not necessarily mean that communications has occurred. Furthermore, this understanding will help the manager build an organizational structure within which more effective communications will occur. Finally, this understanding will provide the basis upon which a manager may improve his own communicative skills. In this regard, a person can achieve a level of communicative competence equivalent to his own natural ability level.

According to a New York psychologist,³ most Americans are at least partially incapable of communicating with each other successfully. If you consider that this is probably true for agribusiness managers as well, this lack of communicative ability results in wasted ideas, wasted leadership, and wasted money. For the agribusiness manager, his deficiencies probably appear in the form of his inability to communicate effectively with: 1) his administrative colleagues, 2) the firm's employees, 3) the firm's stockholders (or members), and 4) the general public.

Communication with Colleagues

Effective communications between administrative colleagues is, of course, vital. Unfortunately many managers fail to realize that while it is certainly important that their directives be efficiently communicated to lower level administrators and supervisors, it is equally important that these persons keep top management fully informed.

In large organizations, top management often prefers that lengthy reports and other types of written communication be condensed before they receive it. While this abstraction is often necessary for the sake of efficiency, abbreviated written reports and reviews must often be supplemented by direct oral communication. This will enable the manager to get both the facts and the feel of a particular problem.

Communication with Employees

Communication between agribusiness management and the firm's employees should also be a two-way process. A multitude of misconceptions, poor supervision, and general unpleasantness can develop if this two-way communications process does not exist. There are several ways this two-way process can be established and encouraged. They include the use of: 1) opinion polls, 2) natural leaders, and 3) improved written communications.

Opinion Polls: Communications with employees are likely to improve if the manager is aware of their feelings and opinions. Opinion polls may provide this information. Remember, however, that those aspects of the job about which employees are unhappy are probably most important to them. Don't be surprised, therefore, if your opinion poll proves more indicative of unfavorable conditions than favorable ones. Finally, such polls will only be helpful if management takes some action on the basis of their results.

Natural Leaders: In all groups of employees, there can be found a person (or persons) who eventually appears as a natural leader. Communications with all employees can often be improved if the manager communicates first with his firm's natural leaders. While this does add an additional link in the communications chain, employees are sometimes likely to be more attentive to communication from another employee than from their employer.

Written Communications: Written communication often fails to fulfill its role simply because its terminology and phraseology are over the heads of the intended receivers. "Keep it simple" is a good rule of thumb to follow when preparing written communication. It may be even more important however, to keep your written communications direct and to-the-point.

Vaguely written communications have a tendency to frustrate the receiver and thereby cast an unfavorable shadow on the message regardless of its good intentions.

Other Methods: A box for anonymous suggestions is one time-honored (and often misused) method of maintaining some degree of manager-employee communications.

Unfortunately, this is usually only a one-way operation. Personally, I would also like to see a box into which the manager might place his suggestions for employees to read.

I'm sure there are many other methods of encouraging two-way manager-employee communications. For example, I know one manager who discovered that his most efficient tool for effective communications was a gossiping secretary. Her ability to communicate a new administrative policy to all persons concerned proved more effective and considerably faster than a formal administrative memorandum.

Communications with Stockholders and/or Members

Most of the stockholders and/or members of your agribusiness are probably not trained accountants or lawyers. Therefore, keep the financial and legal terminology at a minimum when communicating with this particular audience. A few words of clarification will often pay great dividends by giving the stockholder a clear understanding of the business and a greater appreciation of management's ability. (See Agribusiness Management, "*What about your annual report?*").

Communications with the Public

Communicating with the general public is often the most demanding problem faced by an agribusiness manager. This probably is a result of the fact that poor communications at this level is likely to eventually appear in the

form of lost customers and lost business. In communicating with the public, therefore, the manager will find himself involved in the fields of public relations and advertising whether he likes it or not. When faced with this situation, remember, inadequate advertising and public relations programs are often no less costly to conduct than good ones.

If a manager has a true desire to improve his ability to communicate with the public, he should strive to follow the following guidelines:

- 1) The message should attract, or at least maintain, a receiver's attention.
- 2) The message should be easy to remember.
- 3) The message should convey a favorable image of the business and its personnel.
- 4) The message should attract, or at least retain, customer traffic.
- 5) The message should be meaningful and believable.

Conclusion

An agribusiness manager is responsible for providing guidance and control over a complex set of processes. In the conduct of this guidance and control, the manager is likely to spend the largest proportion of his normal workday engaged in communication. Because communication is such a critical component of most managerial functions, a more thorough understanding of the communications process is proposed as the starting point for managers who wish to improve their communicative ability. The communication process was shown to require an in-depth managerial involvement as a

message source, encoder, decoder and receiver. Communicative skill is extremely important to agribusiness managers because receipt and transmission of messages is a fundamental element of planning, organizing, directing, coordinating and controlling. An understanding of the communications process will enhance a manager's awareness of his own communicative deficiencies and encourage self-improvement.

Communication, in all of its forms, is a complex process. All managers should strive

to improve their communicative ability and understanding. In this way, and in this way only, will other administrators, employees, stockholders, and the general public receive and comprehend the messages directed to them by agribusiness managers.



Ken D. Duft
Extension Marketing Economist

¹ Robert Dubin. "Business Behavior Behaviorally Viewed." Social Science Approaches to Business Behavior, Chris Argyris, Homewood, Illinois, Irwin-Dorsey, 1962, p. 12-13.

² F. Craig Johnson and George R. Klare. "General Models of Communication Research: A Survey of the Development of a Decade." The Journal of Communication, XI, March 1961, pp. 13-26.

³ K. V. White. "The Fine Art of Communicating." Banking, February 1968, pp. 94-95.