

Communication: Key to Understanding

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- "Is there just one right way to do things in this organization?"
- "Is it okay to leave the worrying to my boss?"
- "Should I take the initiative to bring up new ideas?"
- "Does the other guy see things the way I do?"
- "Do we agree about how much is enough?"
- "How much should I poke my nose into what the field staff are doing?"
- "Do I have to worry about seeing that things get done?"
- "Does it matter whether I show interest in my supervisor's family?"
- "Is it whether you know the ropes or how well you do your job that's important around here?"
- "Do agents stationed near the head office get a better deal?"

This study was designed to seek answers to questions such as these. Kornhauser, in a monograph about scientists in industry, summed up the critical issue as follows:

. . . The work establishment faces the dilemma of seeking too much integration of its professionals into the organization and thereby losing their professional worth, versus granting them too much autonomy and thereby weakening their contribution to the organization . . .¹

The change agent in Extension presents a clear example of the problems alluded to by Kornhauser and others. His role involves interpreting and diffusing new technical informa-

tion from the agency to the clients in an effort to improve some aspect of their lives, developing and managing informal educational programs, or helping local personnel reach and involve others in educational programs.

Clearly, the emphasis is on communication to the client system. However, links with other systems exist as well. Three distinct systems can be identified, and to be successful the agent must maintain adequate links with each. The principal systems and the communication foci are:

1. The organization — the contact the agent has with his super-

visor and others in coordinative and control positions.

2. The client system — the communication the agent has with the members of an identified client group.
3. The professional organization — involvement with other professionals in the sharing and development of relevant technical information.

Given these three systems, Kornhauser proposes four basic orientations a professional agent can have. These are: professional, organizational, professional and organizational, and client orientation.² Depending on an individual's orientation, he'll rate a particular orientation as the crucial one in his work.

In addition to these conflicting group memberships, there are a number of other differences in the role of a change agent contrasted to that of a "blue collar" worker. The one that's of prime concern is his output. The change agent's output is rarely quantifiable in the short term — because at least in part, it will usually involve communication strategies that may not be reflected in behavioral changes for some time. Also, the agent is rarely the only source of this help or information.

These differences between the change agent and the "blue collar" worker suggest that the change agent will depend greatly on communication. Also, he'll have to maintain membership in markedly different systems in the execution of his work. To concentrate on one role to the exclusion of the others would be to

court disaster and destroy the basic function of this liaison or linking position.

Given this context, this study was directed toward increasing our understanding of the expectations and perceived communication between field and supervisory personnel in Extension.

Results

The results of the study are presented in four main sections. First, some characteristics of the sample; second, the major differences between supervisors and field staff in how they see their communication; third, the levels of understanding found; and fourth, the relationship between level of understanding between pairs and the field agent's success and satisfaction. Throughout, the focus is on the procedural aspects of communication — the rules (or norms) that relate to the communication process, and their expression in the communication between the supervisor/field agent pairs.

Sample Characteristics

The study was conducted with personnel in a Midwest Cooperative Extension Service.

The following quote from a career pamphlet outlines the principal aspects of direct concern to this study:

. . . program organizations. The director of Extension is in charge of all programs, personnel, finances, and operations of the Co-

operative Extension Service. The staff consists of more than 400 professionals.

Five program directors are responsible for guiding programs in Agriculture, Natural Resources, Marketing, 4-H Youth, and Family Living Education. Some program areas have program leaders to assist the program directors.

Three assistant field operations directors are also responsible to the Director of Extension. They counsel with county and district personnel, coordinate joint program efforts, meet with committees of county boards of supervisors, handle special problems, etc.

The five program directors, two assistant program leaders, and three assistant field operations directors were chosen as the supervisors for the study. Ten groups, each with 10 field agents, were then drawn at random from those agents with some direct responsibility to each supervisor. This gave 100 pairs with agents from 63 different counties.

Each agent in the sample completed a 209-item questionnaire about his communication with the nominated supervisor. Each supervisor completed 10 such questionnaires . . . 1 for each of the 10 nominated field agents. Thus, we collected 200 questionnaires that gave matching information about 100 different interactions.

The sample included agents dealing with both rural and urban problems, with a considerable range in their proximity to the nominated supervisors. The median distance

between field agent and supervisor centers was 97 miles, with a range from less than 20 miles to over 500 miles.

Exactly half of the field agents had worked for less than five years under their supervisor's direct authority and half for five years or more. Fourteen percent reported less than two years working under the particular supervisor.

The field agents were generally highly satisfied with their role achievement; equally, the supervisors tended to be highly satisfied with the performance of the field agents. Both field agents and supervisors viewed their relationships as more formal and more business-like than personal and social.

Perception Difference

The major differences in perceptions of communication are shown in Table 1.

Supervisors as a group felt there was less overall communication than did the field agents, although field agents felt there was less communication about personal matters and new ideas than did their supervisors. Overall, the supervisors were much less satisfied with the amount of communication than were their field agents, and, in particular, significantly more supervisors wanted more communication about the existing program.

Field agents felt that much of the communication they received was imposed by supervisors, rather than being sent in response to their needs. Similarly, the field agents felt

Table 1. Supervisor/field agent differences in perceptions of their communication.

Communication dimension	Supervisors' %	Field agents' %
Frequency		
Once a month or more	53	69
Less than once a month	47	31
Satisfaction with amount		
Satisfied	25	47
Like more	75	53
Sequencing of communication FROM supervisors		
Directed by supervisor	17	39
Shared by both members	83	61
Percentage of communication FROM supervisors relating to administration and the on-going program		
Less than 40%	51	23
More than 40%	49	77
Satisfaction with amount of communication about the ongoing program*		
Satisfied	31	48
Like more	68	50
Frequency of communication about nonwork matters		
Once a month or more	20	9
Less than once a month	80	91
Satisfaction with amount of nonwork communication*		
Satisfied	68	77
Like more	20	16
Frequency of communication about new ideas		
Once a month or more	38	22
Less than once a month	62	78
Satisfaction with amount of communication about new ideas*		
Satisfied	24	34
Like more	75	62

*Excludes those who don't communicate about these topics.

that much more of the communication coming from their supervisors had to do with administration and getting the job done (the existing program) rather than relating to personal matters or new ideas, while the supervisors saw the overall communication as being more balanced.

These differences in perceptions suggest that the field agents generally view their communication with their supervisors in a narrower and less central way than do the supervisors. Given their different roles within the organization, this difference would seem understandable. The prime role of the field agent is to communicate with clientele and various county officials, and supervisory communication essentially fills a support function for him.

On the other hand, for the supervisors their communication with the field agents represents a much more central aspect of their work. One major exception is communication about new ideas. Two-thirds or more of both supervisors and field staff would like to have more communication about new ideas. Given that one of the main purposes of the organization is to introduce new ideas to the people, generating, discussing, and sharing new ideas would be one area where more communication and supportive rules would increase satisfaction and enhance performance.

One way to achieve such an increase in the sharing of new ideas would be for those in supervisory roles to act as facilitators — taking

ideas from center to center and encouraging discussion of new methods, etc.

Using a factor analysis of 60 items relating to implicit rules governing communication between field and supervisory staff, 4 independent dimensions of communication were identified. These dimensions focus on different aspects of sharing (or interdependence) in a pair — new ideas, family and personal activities, the responsibility for seeing tasks through to completion, and the responsibility for seeing that the tasks are in fact undertaken.

These four dimensions, called innovation, maintenance, sequencing, and initiation are used in most of the subsequent discussion to distinguish between different aspects of communication. The items that were retained are shown in Table 2.

The supervisors as a group advocated more sharing, or interdependent communication, than did the field agents. Supervisors also attributed more interdependence to the field agents' perceptions of innovative communication. Taken together, these tendencies to advocate and see more highly interdependent communication procedures represents an important difference between supervisors and their field agents.

Two possible interpretations can be offered to explain this trend. First, it may be a reflection of the supervisor's greater involvement because of the centrality of this interaction to their roles. On the other hand, it may represent a basic dif-

Table 2. Items selected for communication indices.

Index	Item
Innovation	<p>Share tentative new ideas with supervisor. Develop new programs through frequent interaction with supervisor. Consider modifying new programs to fit into local conditions. Seek involvement in setting priorities for new programs. Contact supervisor about new ideas whenever agent comes across them. Talk over new ideas with supervisor before submitting a proposal. Take the initiative to seek out new ideas to raise with supervisor. Submit new ideas or proposals in writing to supervisor.</p>
Maintenance	<p>Be concerned with the activities of supervisor's family. Offer suggestions about supervisor's personal affairs. Inquire about supervisor's family when together. Avoid bringing personal affairs into conversations with supervisor. Make a point of introducing personal affairs into discussions. Refer to supervisor's family activities in conversations with him. Include personal news in memoranda to supervisor. Feel free to discuss personal matters over the phone.</p>
Sequencing	<p>Keep reminding supervisor of unresolved issues. Be prepared to offer criticism of supervisor's ideas for agent's advancement. Clarify ambiguous memoranda from supervisor. If not satisfied with the work that has been assigned, then "grit teeth and bear it," rather than complain. Hesitate to question an assignment that is personally inconvenient.</p>
Initiation	<p>Send in reports of current projects even when not asked. Leave it to supervisor to suggest new programs. Wait for supervisor to request any reports he wants. Leave it to supervisor to suggest possible courses for personal advancement.</p>

ference in philosophy of supervision. If, in fact, supervisors do advocate more interdependent communication because of a more "human resource" or "human relations" philosophy, then the seeds may be developing for a coorientation gap based on different rules of what is appropriate procedural communication.

Actual Levels of Understanding

In focusing on the communication between field and supervisory staff, both members of each pair were asked what they thought was the ideal communication between field staff and their supervisors. They were then asked how they saw their actual interaction. Finally, they were asked to predict how the other member of their pair saw their interaction.

From these responses, we were able to develop two measures of understanding: (1) agreement — measures the independent similarity of responses (if I say an agent should never interrupt his supervisor, and independently you say that an agent should never interrupt his supervisor, then we agree) and (2) accuracy — measures the extent to which we know how the other member sees things (if you predict that I'll say we never talk about our families, and in fact that is what I said, then you have an accurate knowledge of my viewpoint).

We first measured the agreement between members of each pair about both the ideal communication and their perceptions of their actual communication. Then we measured

both field agents' and supervisors' accuracy in predicting the other's view of their actual communication.

Overall, we found high levels of both agreement and accuracy in almost all pairs. This suggests that most of the staff shared similar views of what's appropriate communication and how the other members see it.

Despite the limited amount of communication between many pairs, and some differences in experience and educational background, almost all of the pairs in the sample achieved a high level of agreement. Perhaps the most important reason for such a result is the great similarity in basic type and level of education and prior experience. The results suggest that common types of experience and background were much more important in this case than the pressures toward disintegration that are proposed by Kaufman.³

A major implication that follows is that geographic separation need not lead to serious problems of misunderstanding provided that the organization is relatively stable and the members share similar background experiences.

While the overall feature is one of high similarity and understanding, combining the agreement and accuracy scores for each pair reveals some cause for concern. Using Scheff's combination of high and low levels of agreement and accuracy to yield four types of understanding,⁴ it was found that both supervisors and field agents tended to predict that the other member of their pair

would share their particular view of the communication interaction. This trend is similar to that reported by Berlo.⁵

Given high levels of agreement, this feature means a high level of understanding — the members of the pairs agree and know it. However, in about 20 percent of the cases, the pairs actually had low agreement, while they thought that they had high agreement — this is the type of misunderstanding that Scheff calls false consensus.

When agreement and accuracy are combined, we can identify four types of understanding. These are:

1. Consensus — the members of the pair agree and they accurately predict the other member's viewpoint.
2. Dissensus — the members disagree and they're able to accurately predict the other member's viewpoint . . . "they disagree and know it."
3. Ignorance — the members independently agree, *but* they predict that the other member won't share their viewpoint . . . "they agree, but think that they disagree."
4. False consensus — the members disagree and incorrectly predict that the other member shares their viewpoint . . . "they think that they agree, but in fact they're operating under different viewpoints."

With both dissensus and ignorance the members feel that they disagree, while with consensus and

false consensus they feel that they agree. If we accept that under most situations accuracy in understanding the other member's point of view is desirable, then both the consensus and dissensus can be functional and desirable. Generally both ignorance and false consensus will be undesirable if good communication is desired.

While over half of the responses indicated high agreement and high accuracy — the pairs agreed and accurately predicted that the other member would share their view, between one-third and one-half of the responses show disagreement or misunderstanding.

It's this group that gives cause for concern. Certainly the organization shouldn't claim nor assume that everyone shares the same idea about how agents and supervisors communicate. In at least one-third of the pairs studied, one or other of the members suffered from some type of misunderstanding about the communication.

This need not always be undesirable provided that it's known and taken into account. But if it isn't, it will almost certainly contribute to communication breakdowns and strained relationships. With the rotation of some supervisors from one group of field agents to another, different expectations do occur and field agents then go through a period of "trying to psych out" what the new supervisor will want and how he would like things done. Such uncertainty must be dysfunctional to the organization, and informally it

seemed to contribute to a lack of morale in individual cases. This uncertainty should be allowed for or offset in weighing the advantages of rotation of personnel.

False consensus was the most prevalent type of misunderstanding. This state of misunderstanding would seem to be particularly undesirable for most systems. While with dissensus the members disagree and are aware of their disagreement, with false consensus the members think that they understand the other's orientation, but don't. False consensus may thus mask differences and encourage the development of even lower agreement.

As both supervisors and field agents were equally likely to make this type of wrong judgment, *explicit discussion* of the procedural aspects of communication would be desirable. This discussion of expectations could serve to check whether the agreement that the members perceive is based on actual agreement or on a false extrapolation of each individual's particular viewpoint. This discussion should allow more accurate understanding of each other's expectations and points of view.

Level of Understanding and Interpersonal Attraction

A major purpose of the study was to test an application of Newcomb's coorientation model.⁶ The basic hypothesis was that increased understanding would lead to greater interpersonal attraction.

Level of understanding about the procedural aspects of communi-

cation did in fact contribute to the supervisor's evaluations of the system. Pairs with high understanding had better evaluations and more social and informal views of the relationship. Pairs with low understanding had worse evaluations and more negative relationships.

Level of understanding, in terms of accuracy and agreement about the *actual supervisor/field agent interaction* was more strongly associated with the satisfaction measures than was similarity toward the ideal rules of supervisory communication. This suggests that, at least for this organization, the actual communication is more important and more instrumental than the ideal rules.

One finding that's difficult to interpret was a consistent negative association between level of understanding toward nonwork aspects of communication and the various measures of attraction and satisfaction. It's difficult to see why increased agreement and/or accuracy about how much to share personal and family matters with the other member of the pair should lead to less satisfaction and more formal impressions of the relationship.

One possible explanation may be that both field and supervisory staff feel that they *ought* to talk about nonwork matters, such as each other's family life, but that they in fact don't feel comfortable disclosing these aspects to a person they define in a work relationship. If people are disclosing more of their intimate selves than they feel comfortable with, then it could be argued that this

would lead to dissonance and ultimately to a more strained relationship.

Again, if this is the case, if nonthreatening situations could be set up to discuss communication procedures, it may be discovered that many field and supervisory staff would be happier to make a clear distinction between their professional and personal lives. Both groups may be involving themselves in each other's personal lives simply because they think they should, rather than because they want to.

The associations that were found, and the overall gross association between level of understanding and attraction suggest, that agreement and accuracy between field and supervisory staff about the communication procedures in their interaction will be an important contributor to their satisfaction. However, this is NOT the sole or even the major determinant in systems like the Extension Service that was studied.

Implications

This study was undertaken to determine the levels of understanding between members of an Extension Service and to assess the effect of differing levels of understanding on the integration and success of the agents in the field.

A high degree of agreement existed between the supervisor/field agent pairs, and they held accurate perceptions of each other's views.

Nevertheless, some support was found for the hypothesized associa-

tion between level of understanding of communication procedures and the relationship between supervisors and field agents. While this association seems to be mediated by other aspects of the system, it does indicate one area where issues not directly related to job performance were influencing the evaluation and the satisfaction of the field agents.

If we accept this association, then it would seem desirable to commit some time and energy to increasing mutual understanding of communication procedures. We've suggested an *explicit discussion* of expectations and individual orientations might be one way to do this.

At this stage, we have little evidence of how important these differences might be in other organizations. However, if we accept the predictions of such people as Toffler⁷ that organizations and their components will become increasingly short lived with a changing structure built on highly transitory human relationships, then the issue may become critical. If relationships change more rapidly, then differences may become the order of the day and more and more people may get hurt through misunderstanding the communication rules. Such an outcome would seem untenable.

Footnotes

1. W. Kornhauser, *Scientists in Industry* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1962), p. 130.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
3. H. Kaufman, *The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Behavior* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1960).
4. T. J. Scheff, "Toward a Sociological Model of Consensus," *American Sociological Review*, XXXII (1967), 32-46.
5. D. K. Berlo, R. V. Farace, R. A. Connelly, and P. R. Monge, *Supervisor-Subordinate Communication Relations: Summary of Basic Data* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, Department of Communication, 1971) and D. K. Berlo, R. V. Farace, and P. R. Monge, *Supervisor-Subordinate Relations in the Office of Civil Defense: Summary of Basic Data* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, Department of Communication, 1971).
6. T. M. Newcomb, "An Approach to the Study of Communicative Acts," *Psychological Review*, LXI (1953), 393-404.
7. A. Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York, New York: Random House, 1970).