ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS, CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND NEGOTIATION

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LEADER - FOLLOWER COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Communication has always been one of the greatest tools for people to interact with each other. Taking into consideration that the easiness of interacting with people all over the world was never easier, one can see that, today, we have more different channels, languages and ways of how to communicate than ever before.

But globalization also means that our communication and understanding is changing. Globalization asks for adaptation of our old and beloved perception of communication, and creates synergies of our understanding, coming from all over the world. As the world is moving and changing, we are moving and communication plays an important role for us, to recognize and understand what is actually going on around us. Organizations are facing confused employees and leaders do not know how to handle their followers. This change is the reason why communication so to say is a pillar for a world of interacting people. I see great importance, causing threats, and at the same time I see opportunities for improvements with this pillar, which organizations, individuals as well as groups should be aware of. To understand the necessity of this pillar, this project tries to analyze their importance by relating and presenting their effects to and on people's interactions. As it is a project within the field of business and leadership it will mainly deal with the perspectives of organizations and the people involved.

Furthermore it will be tried to narrow down the topic even more, going into detail of internal communication of the modern world, meaning the younger generations using all new methods of communication.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of choosing the right way of communicating is tremendous. Leaders have to be aware how to communicate tasks, information and knowledge. It is all about how employees perceive their leaders and supervisors. Leaders have to create a shared vision with their followers in order to convince them to put all their effort into work in order to increase efficiency and quality. Studies showed that companies, which are lacking good communication, are less successful than their competition as they have a less effective working environment that causes time inefficiencies (Society for Human Resource Management, 2008). Subsequently these companies have a hard time to be as flexible and fast reacting as their competitors, having an effective communication system. Through communication companies can develop intensive knowledge exchange and in the end leaders can create a shared understanding of common goals and visions. This activity is about the sensemaking (Weick, 1995) as a leader as well as the sensegiving (Smerek, 2009; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and is very often given too little attention by leading persons.

Today's world is changing faster than ever before. On a daily basis organizations rise while others fall causing a boiling organizational environment. Adaptation is one of the most important duties of today's organizations in order to survive in this competitive market. It gives these companies the flexibility to react to market changes, and they know the last one reacting fails. Different organizations have different recipes for success but usually there is one ingredient most of them acknowledge as crucial for success. COMMUNICATION.   Organizational communication is split into external and internal communication whereby it has to be mentioned that this project will majorly concentrate on the activity of internal communication.

Understanding the importance of communication, it is also crucially important to understand the roots of organizational communication. When one looks at organizational structures, in the classical top-down communication, leaders can be seen as the "speakers" who have to transmit the companies messages to all concerned stakeholders in the right and most effective way, including factors like timing, channel, addressees and wording. On the other hand these stakeholders are to be seen as the "speakers" in a bottom-up communication flow. As many of us experienced it in their personal and professional lives, communication skills are extremely important especially when it comes to persons in leading positions as they have many "listeners".

RESEARCH QUESTION

As a research question I decided to deal with the topic of the interpersonal requirements of leaders and followers. Therefore the following research question was developed,

♦ What are the possible requirements for leaders and followers in order to facilitate Productive internal communication? "

OBJECTIVES AND PURPOSES

After doing some reading, thinking and discussing about this topic and based on the situation presented above, the idea is to achieve following major objectives.

First of all, this research should yield a comprehensive insight into the importance communication of leaders and followers. It should highlight how communication affects a company and what leaders can influence by playing a communicational role model. It should present also the issue of the relation between leaders and followers, which is a decisive factor for effectiveness. For that different requirements have to be met to create a productive communicative environment. The different ways and tools of how to communicate and how to create an effective communication flow throughout the organization will also be presented to make the picture complete.

METHODOLOGY

I think that the topic of internal communication especially as I worked with it from a very situational perspective rather asks for a qualitative analysis as it would be extremely difficult to extract useful information in terms of numbers (quantitative analysis) (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Therefore the qualitative approach was much more appropriate as it is useful in empirical researches dealing with "research about people's lives, their perceptions, behaviors and emotions, and feelings about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 26).

The importance of qualitative research was also analyzed by Fisher (2007), who explained their potential. He presented them as a great tool to extract in-depth knowledge and a better understanding of specific situations by illustrating them with real life situations. Usually this is done via expert interviews, which was also my way of gathering that information.

GENERAL METHODOLOGY

For this project, five Interviews have been done with members of five different Organizations. These five organizations were chosen to be from different fields of work to filter possible differences. The interviews are to be seen as qualitative interviews as they were done with key players in these organizations who have a high demand for internal communication.

The interviews had duration of 40 minutes and 60 minutes. Usually the basic information about the organization like the size, their position, communication structure and the amount of communication used as well as the general procedure of the interview will be discussed. For some general information a quantitative questionnaire has been given to the interviewees dealing with information like, age, gender, name, company size, internal communication flow and some information about their employment history.

Therefore the interviewees received a sheet of paper with different questions before starting the interview to give me the possibility to better understand possible backgrounds of the interviewees. (Questionnaire – Annex)

As most of the interviewed persons had a very tight schedule it was quite difficult at the beginning to arrange a meeting for the interview. Another time related issue was that some interviews were interrupted one or two times as the interviewed persons had to pick up important telephone calls.

SETTING UP THE QUESTIONS

There was one small part of the interview conducted as a quantitative information collection now, both, the quantitative and the qualitative parts of the interviews are presented in the following paragraphs.

QUANTITATIVE PART,

For these questions the decision was rather easy, as it should just yield to clarify some basic information about the person and his/her communication behavior within the organization. Therefore the following questions were asked on a sheet of paper before starting the actual interview,

• Name, Age?
• Current position in the organization?
• In how many companies did you already work?
• For how long have you been working in your current organization?
• How often do you communicate in your organization? With whom? (Daily)
• Which communication channels are used?
• How often do you personally meet your supervisor? (Weekly)

Here it was important to find out where and how long they did work, in order to get a feeling how long they could enjoy being part of the organizational climate in order to understand their expertise. The question about the quantity of communication daily used in the organization was interesting to see whether they are aware of their "own" communication they are "performing" daily. Finally the question about the personal meetings they have with their supervisors should give me a feeling about the relationship to their bosses, especially for the questions I was asking later in the "real" interview.

QUALITATIVE PART,

When I had to decide for the questions it took long time, rewriting the questions again and again, so that they are as neutral as possible and providing as much quality information as possible. This was important in order to understand the most important topics and questions I wanted to deal with and ask questions about. One could say that my questions are generally yielding at two different fields. The first one is about the internal situation of the interviewees in their organizations and the second was to see what their perspective on the relationship between leaders and followers is.

Therefore it was focusing on the requirements they found as especially important in this relationship to establish a productive communication environment. As it was planned to be a very open and qualitative interview, I asked very general questions to let them talk freely. A the very beginning there was one thing important to clarify in order to later on understand what they are telling me. It was the question "What do you understand as communication?". This was a crucial factor in order and told me that people have different understandings and perspectives on communication especially when they have not thought about it in detail before.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS FINDINGS

As it was described in the methodology the interviews consisted of a quantitative and a qualitative part, which also gives me the reason to split also the analysis part into these two parts.

QUANTITATIVE PART

In average the interview-partners were, 32,5 years old, with the youngest being 28 and the oldest 42 years old. In my opinion this is a very good width as it represents rather young people. When it comes to the position they were working in, I found many different Hierarchical levels with different responsibilities. They range from sales manager to project manager, group leader, project responsible, and department head to PhD student, which represent quite a variety of different hierarchical levels sharing their perspectives and experiences with me. In order to get a general understanding of the interviewees' career, although they are rather young, I asked them about the number of companies they have been working in for longer than six months (in order to eliminate internships and other "student-jobs"). In average they were employed in almost three (2,8) companies for a longer period. For these questions there were no major differences between both organizations. When I comes to the communication behavior questions regarding the amount of communication used in daily profession one could again find major differences between the organizations.

 In the chart below (Figure 1) you can see the findings to this question.

Figure 1, Daily Communication
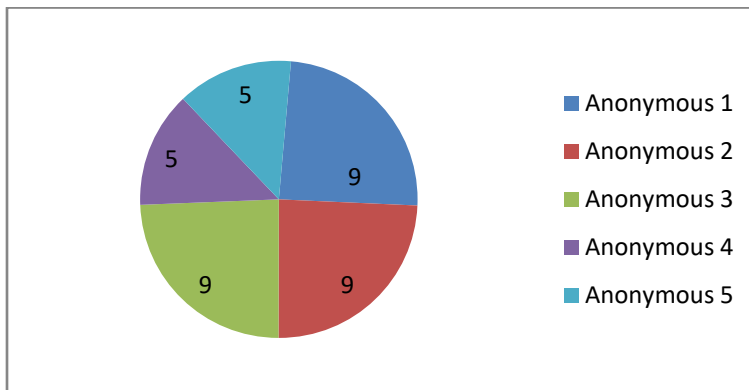
The next communication related question was asking which communicating channel they are using internally. The interview partners could choose between telephone, email, personal, chat, internal post and intranet whereat the last three were not present in the interviewed organizations therefore they are not be found in the chart. What we can see in the chart below (Figure 2) is that the personal or face-to-face communication is the most regular used one and as far as I could find out during my interviews, also the most important one for all interviewees as it eliminates a lot of misunderstandings and is furthermore the fastest communication so far the communicating partner is available and in physical near distance.
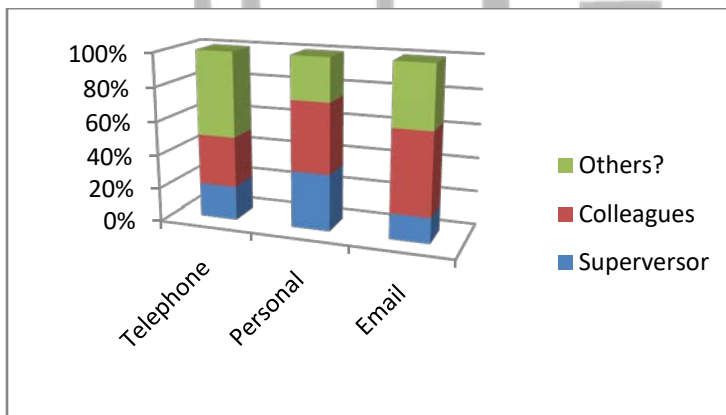

Figure 2, Communication Channels

The last question of the quantitative part yielded to get a first understanding of the relation and contact between the employees and their supervisors. Therefore, the question was "How often do you meet your supervisor for a personal conversation? (Weekly)". What I found out is that the average number of personal meetings with the direct supervisor is about three times.

Having analyzed the quantitative part it is now time to go more into detail and personal experiences of the interviewees having the so far collected information as a background for possible company specific findings. Therefore I will now switch to the qualitative analysis of

the interview, which will hopefully give us a great deep going insight into the interviewees' experiences and organizational situations.
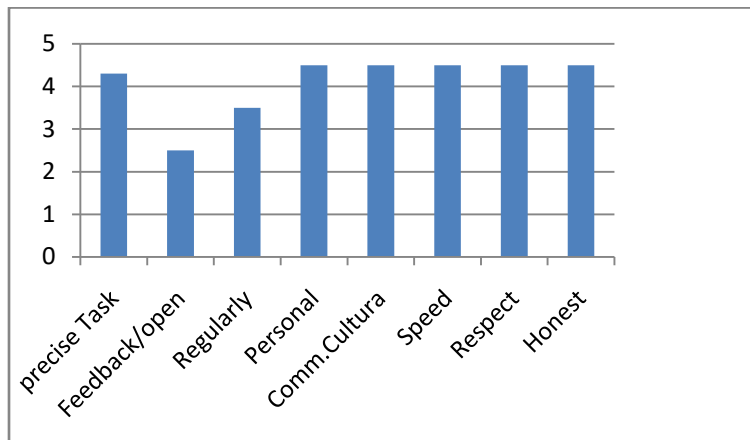

Figure 3

Some themes emerged and the discussion of these will follow. The themes that were identified as very important were:

♦ Clear and Precise message
♦ Importance of an Open communication Environment
♦ The Regularity of communication
♦ Wish for Personal communication

In the following figure (3) the most important themes of all interviewees are presented and in the following text the five most important of them are presented and explained. As one can see there are two elements that are sharing the place of the highest level of importance. What the interviewees ranked the most important is that an effective communication needs a very **clear and precise message.** Any kind of ambiguity has to be eliminated in order to make processes more productive without having misunderstandings. This is also what I have learned during the more detailed questions with my interviewees. All of them criticized that often leaders communicate too vague and not precise tasks that often causes time-cost inefficiency, as they have to contact their leader for further explanations. Referring back to theory, this could be related to Weick (1995) and his sense making approach, as it shows that communication is often understood differently between senders and receivers. It is, again, about understanding each other's position in order to build up a good working communication system where people can effectively communicate. Still, this might also have something to do with Austrians high level of uncertainty avoidance.

The second theme is the importance of an **open communication environment**, which transparently gives people space for feedback. In the name of all interviewees I would say that they understand the importance of feedback if they do want to learn for their personal development. Without feedback people have a hard time to improve weaknesses. Still this is true for all members, as also leaders need feedback from their followers to improve their

leadership style. As I have seen with the interviews they hardly received feedback from their leader but on the other side never gave feedback to their leader.

To mention two more important themes that have been discovered, **the regularity of the communication** is also important as it creates the possibility of a continuous knowledge an information exchange about ongoing projects, processes or next steps. Going further this could again be somehow linked to the importance of a cooperate transparency.

The last theme is the wish **for personal communication (Face to Face).** What is powerful to see here is that this has not only been mentioned, as an answer to this question but was omnipresent at all stages which was presented before. The organizational culture of face-to-face communication in both organizations is very strong and in my opinion one of the most powerful resource of a company as long as it is doable for an organization.

As the question for the interviews have been very open there was no clear structure and chronology. Still, there were different topics that have been addressed. When I would have to cluster the interviews and the received information I would go for three topics. Communication, Leadership and Sense-Making.

CONCLUSION

After dealing with these topics for quite a long time, I can only suggest once more that it is time for every organizational member to understand the importance of internal communication for the organizational success and the individual development. As it was perfectly described by one of the interviewees, it is essential to have a good working internal communication system in place, before starting to communicate externally. If an organizational community is doing a good job when it comes to internal communication and all related issues their efficiency level is rising opening up new business opportunities being shaped through efficiency. It is only a matter of time how long companies with bad communication structures survive and everybody who has experienced that will confirm it. Even if such companies do not go bankrupt they will not use all their potential and opportunities, since weak communication is always time-cost expensive and cost-intensive when it comes to opportunity costs.

Also sense making should become a topic of everybody's interest especially for leaders. Of course it is important for every organizational member but in order that leaders are creating a culture and communicating to a large number of employees and hopefully followers a well-structured and sophisticated communication process is crucial. It is time that leaders acknowledge the important parts of communication where not only content is transferred but also interpersonal elements are analyzed and noticed. All in all it is about the leaders' responsibility to create and shape a culture, which is understood and accepted by everybody.

Only through this task, people of the same company can create a common knowledge and understanding base of any business operation. As soon as people are sharing the same perspectives things are starting to get efficient and easier. Communication gets easier as people do better understand each other's frames of references, which in the end again improves the leader-follower relation. Through such a shared culture, misunderstandings will shrink and the easiness of the internal cooperation will rise. When going further, this will lead to a higher employee satisfaction and a better internal atmosphere that again will positively affect the overall organizational success.

The last major area, which was elaborated within this paper, dealt with the interpersonal requirements between leaders and followers. As not only the examples showed us but also the theory taught us at the beginning, the personal relationship between the two essential parties of leadership is the fundament for any organizational process. This relationship will always have a great influence on the business and it cannot be ignored. Even if people try to establish a neutral business oriented relationship, emotional disputes will arise more often as the interpersonal relation is always present on a subconscious level. Still, too little leaders try to foster their relationships with their employees and high potentials.

There are many different ways of creating a better relationship. On the one hand, leaders have the possibility to use simple tools like incentives, rewards, praise, and feedback in order to increase the employees' satisfaction and their motivation, which usually results in a better leader-follower relation. But on the other hand leaders can make great use out of symbolic activities, like acting as a role model, giving them the feeling to be one big team, sitting in the same boat, sharing responsibility, giving them the chance to present their ideas for changes or improvements. All these factors establish some kind of a trusting and respectful working environment that again has positive effects on their relationship.

All this important elements can also be linked to what my interviewees have told me as important factors of an effective and good leader-follower relation. For most of them the basis consists of mutual respect and acceptance of each other's expertise giving each other the feeling of being heard. Including high potential employees into various decision-making processes could also enhance this. From what I have learned during the last months, also including the interviews, it is very important for people nowadays to have a rather flat hierarchy structure. It seems to be a more open and flexible structure where people feel more included instead of just functioning as task fulfillers. Still most of them, also mentioned that a small level of power distance is necessary to keep the efficiency high. As the example of one of the organization showed us and I have learned, a too flat hierarchy could also create problems as it sometimes make a fast and effective task-oriented communication much harder as the interpersonal and emotional factors coming from a non-existing hierarchy, could represent barriers.

These observations that have been developed throughout this paper are the elements leaders should focus on, recognizing their potential for the organizational success and their personal achievement. As one could learn from this paper these observations are highly interlinked and could also be seen as different steps, which have to be implemented one after each other.

In my opinion, the first task is to create a fair, open and transparent relationship between a leader and his/her followers. Only then the communication process can be really efficient. For my personal understanding I would even say that the sense making process should be "implemented" as a second step. As it is a very complex and sensible process, this rather means that all participating parties should at least be aware of this topic trying to use or notice it in their daily life, in order to "train" it. Only after understanding the theory of sense making one should be able to create perfectly tailored messages for others and interpret their messages correctly. This should arise from the deep going understanding of each other's perspectives one can establish a better cooperation being shaped through mutual understanding and acceptance.

Concluding, it has to be said that leaders have to understand that this cost and time intensive implementations might need an extraordinary investment, which might lower the revenue in one year, but at that same time will be amortized very soon. It is something that could be seen as a one-time investment as it, if done correctly, could create a completely new corporate culture, flourishing of efficiency shaping all future employees frames of references. No question that this process needs a long preparation having different consultants and it might cost a fortune but will be the organization's biggest asset in the future.

As we have learned, all this improvements will have a major positive effect on the employee satisfaction, the production and the company's overall success. As mentioned in the very first paragraph of this paper, today's business environment is changing faster than ever before and only the most flexible companies with the highest efficiency will survive in this competitive market.

Therefore, I recommend all organizations to take the chance. Not tomorrow but today! As I was also mentioning the topic of technology at the beginning of this paper it is also important to conclude what I have learned about this elements and themes. As one could see in the analysis, technology was not a big topic for the leaders and followers involved as they were working majorly by face-to-face communication which is in my opinion their biggest advantage towards other organizations which do not have the possibility to do it due to cost-time reasons. Also from what the interviewees said it was interesting to hear that they do their best to ignore as many technological communication channels as possible. None of the persons was using any technology like chats, blogs or any other media except from telephone and email which are still the traditional communication tools. For me, as I personally think face-to-face communication is by far the most effective communication channel, offering all possible elements that can be used to interact and communicate between two parties, it was a

great surprise to see that they do invest into this asset. Still, we will see what kind of technological devices to support an effective and fast communication the future will bring.

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ANNEX

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY ENGLISH,

1) Name,

2) Age,

3) Organizational Position,

4) Number of organizations you have been employed at for more than 6 months,

5) How long have you been employed in your current company?

6) How often do you communicate internally? (Daily), (encircle your decision)

           1-3   4-8   >9

7) How often do you communicate with the following persons? (Daily and professionally)

Supervisor   1-3   4-8   >9

Colleagues   1-3   4-8   >9

Others? 1-3   4-8   >9

8) Which communication channels do you use with the following persons? Please assign percentages for each channel so that it sums up to a 100% for each group of people.

	Telephone	Personally	Email	Chat	Intranet	Internal Post
Generally						
Supervisors						
Colleagues						
Others…..?						

9) How often do you meet your leader personally for a conversation? (weekly)

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand as communication? What does it mean for you?

2. What would you define as the most important element for an effective communication? Both, from the employee and the employer side!

3. How would you describe the communication and its structure in your organization? Rather formal or informal?

4. Did you experience a change of communication during the period you have been working for this organization? If yes, did it develop to the better or worse?

5. Do you wish for any changes regarding the internal communication? If yes, how would you imagine its implementation?

6. What kind of barriers do you see for a positive development of a good working internal communication?

7. What do you think are the most important tasks and responsibilities of a leader when it comes to internal communication?

8. If you would have to decide for three essential elements for the success of an effective and fair internal communication, which ones would you choose?

9. When your leader is communication tasks or information, do you have the feeling he/she is making great effort to choose the right channel and technique to do so? What about the wording?

10. Could you give me some examples of good and bad communication, you have experienced during your professional career?

11. Do you see colleague-conversations as a crucial element for a positive working environment?

About the Author

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