



FORMAL AND INFORMAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: FRAMEWORKING ITS ROLES AND PURPOSES

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Abstract:

This article intends to analyze communication in organizations. Public Relations aim to spread the good image of an organization among its different targets, generally seeking to reach each restricted group through different actions; this is because, in this area of activity, it is always difficult to reach all relevant audiences through a global campaign, given their specificities and differences. A first major division is therefore created between internal and external audiences, with some subdivisions still being noted in each of them. In the last three decades, personnel management strategies began to make human aspects within the institution one of their priorities. Those responsible tend to adopt more humanitarian values, which facilitate the integration of workers in the company. A slow "mental revolution" is therefore underway, renewing the ideologies of the leaders, but also their personalities and attitudes. This may result in a better rationalization of relations between the Administration and other employees. In this order of ideas, we intend to include within the scope of Internal Public Relations a section dedicated to communication in organizations; this is conceptualized as a means of providing the information and understanding necessary for the efforts of individuals, translated into appropriate attitudes for motivation, cooperation, and satisfaction at work, which allow for the improvement of performance.

Keywords: organizational communication, public relations, communication strategies

1. Introduction

For Public Relations technicians, the institution's internal public is often the most important (Yaxley & Ruck, 2015; Santos, 1998; Silva, n.d.). The first action programs should focus on it, as it is impossible to project a favorable image to the outside if it is not

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positive internally. An employee spends, on average, a third of his life in the workplace: given this reality, the main objective of the Internal Public Relations technician will be to humanize work relations and, consequently, create a good environment in the organization (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Mckie & Sriramesh, 2017)

The best Public Relations agents are the employees at the service of the institution (Barcus & Wilkinson, 1995; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018); if they believe in it, they will be able to promote it effectively and in a lasting way (Silva, n.d.). However, to achieve this result, everyone has to feel fully integrated. Each of them, no matter how insignificant their task, should be conveyed a sense of responsibility towards the entire organization. Coelho (1996) argues that it is not possible to ask a collaborator to participate in a collective work when he is unaware of its objectives and contents. The feeling of belonging is essential, and to participate fully in the organization, the worker has to feel part of a whole in which the objectives are common. For this, he must be informed; hence the importance of effective internal communication. The greater the size of the structure, the greater the need for a communication network, with a disciplined transfer of relevant information, for example, it is essential to have regular meetings with all employees, to inform them of the progress achieved, the new products, corporate policy, and other data that will allow them to better understand what they do and why they do it. Likewise, employees must be able to raise questions or express personal points of view, as they often know the facts from perspectives that are somewhat different from those of those who manage or head.

In Moller's opinion (apud Henriques, 1999: 46), a company's image does not depend only on the products or services it offers, but also on what its employees convey to the public that contacts them. Hence, he points the attention each organization must pay to its human resources. According to this theorist, *"increasingly, institutions can develop the same products, at the same price and with the same quality. But they can differentiate themselves by having people who are more committed and more creative than their competitors."* This is particularly true for organizations that provide services, where there is direct contact between customers and employees; the notion of quality that is conveyed to the customer depends heavily on their performance.

2. Organizational communication

An institution must be able to attract the right people, inspire them to do their best, and retain them. Usually, companies focus their attention on the markets, as they consider this to be the best way to guarantee profits; but they forget that if they lose employees, they also lose customers. In certain areas of activity, when certain employees leave, they take the organization's customers with them, which is forced to recruit and train new elements, restarting the process of retaining the market, with the monetary and temporal costs that this entails. Moller also argues that an institution should have three focuses: productivity, employees, to ensure they are loyal and willing to give their best, and buyers. *"All the problems that occur in a company are not technical or financial, but*

communication if it neglects the human aspect." (idem: 47). Unfortunately, what still happens today is that, concerning business communication, attention is focused on the external aspect. Lampreia, in an interview with Silva (1996), states that as a consultant in Communication and Public Relations, he has experienced some difficulties with certain clients, who are reluctant to invest in internal communication. And yet, for this researcher, a good external image cannot be conceived without a favorable impression from internal audiences. Santos (1996: 5) also does not hide some pessimism about this issue when, discussing the present and the future of Business Communication, he mentions that, *"if in the field of external communication the reality is not so discouraging, (...), internal communication remains the poor relative of Business Communication."*

As communication is a basic social process, it supports community life and is an indispensable condition for all cooperation (Kornienko, Naumenko & Suvorova, 2016). No group is able to progress towards its objectives if, among its members, there is no exchange of communications. And, if we can consider these assertions valid for all human groups, they are particularly valid for the structured groups that constitute labor organizations. A well-designed communications network allows, by correctly informing employees, to create appropriate technical and psychological conditions during worktime. Communication is thus one of the most frequently discussed items about organizations, as it is a basic prerequisite for organizations, regardless of their type, to achieve the desired objectives (Luthans, 1998). As Pepper (1995) points out, Communication is not something that happens inside the organization. Communication is the organization, or, (...) to communicate is to organize. The organization, then, is composed of much more than walls, signs, desks, pencils, and computers. (...) it is the continuing communicative construction of its members.

If communication problems are alleviated in small organizations, since the staff and workers are in almost permanent contact and have direct mutual knowledge, the same is not the case in medium and large organizations, where the lines of communication become longer, lose their effectiveness, and information hardly reaches individuals at the base of the organization chart. Aware of these constraints, Bilhim (1996) systematizes the importance of communication in organizations, based on the fact that it fulfills four relevant functions: providing the information necessary for decision-making; motivating employees, by clarifying them about their tasks, and giving them feedback on their actions; formal and informal control of the behavior of each member; fulfilling the affiliation needs of any human being.

Communication is, in this measure, fundamental for the effectiveness of managers and of the institution itself, as it allows the transmission of messages that can give all employees a general knowledge about it, detailed knowledge of their work sector, and a detailed knowledge of their occupation. As an organization is a set of interdependent people, the performance of an individual affects or is affected by that of the other members, which requires the coordination of activities, and ensures that individual tasks are carried out by global objectives (Ludlow & Panton, 1992). Also, the organization's management policies, and more specifically those of human resources, must be disclosed,

ensuring the Administration that those were known and understood at all levels of the hierarchy. The motivation of all employees should also guide a correct communication policy; pride in belonging to the company will make it easier to maintain your good name and reputation. Human organizations are in essence information systems, with communication playing a fundamental role as a means of legitimizing their activities, not only vis-à-vis society and their external partners, but also vis-à-vis their internal customers (Boone et al., 1997; Camara et al., 1997); thus assumes this function of internal mobilization that seeks the adhesion of workers to the mission and culture of the company (Reto, 1996), and emerges as an evolutionary process that must be based on a system of shared values and company project. It is the interpretative maps that result from communication in the company that result in what it is (Camara et al., 1997): based on daily exchanges, the individual internalizes the values that sustain the organization's identity.

In summary, communication - careful and planned - is fundamental for the effectiveness of organizations, as it is the main way of providing employees with information and instructions about their work, the institution to which they belong, their performance, rules, and regulations. For managers, the internal communication process is also essential for the coordination of work, and the collection of information they need to identify the problems of the respective organic unit, to solve them.

In this way, we conclude that the growing complexity of the functioning of organizations, the existence within them of antagonisms, tensions, and interests, and the imperative need to adapt to all these pressures make it essential for them to establish an adequate communication system. However, as this is an essential process, it is also often misunderstood, which can lead to discontent and misunderstandings. Only through an efficient communication policy can all the elements be informed, and the best way to combine their efforts can be defined, to achieve the ends that the institution wishes to pursue. It is therefore necessary that communications be reciprocal, to be able to compensate for all the efforts made. In this regard, Camara et al. (1997) put focus on the concept of "Internal Customer". Respect for others in the communication process allows for more fruitful interactions, and so it is essential to consider the principle that "*communication is a service provided to the Internal Customer*" (idem; 352). In organizational daily life, each individual establishes constant exchanges with the others; therefore, it will be undeniably useful that each one, as a supplier and customer in an uninterrupted process, has as detailed knowledge of the other as possible, to be able to provide him with adequate service. This will attenuate distortions in communicational relationships, due to the closer sharing of meanings.

Within any organization, communication can be analyzed from different perspectives, with different forms, origins and recipients. It makes use of different media and means of communication to achieve its objectives, promotes the detection and solution of problems, and can assume, from the point of view of the organizational pattern or style, a formal or informal character. In this perspective, communication is formal when it is developed through the lines defined in the organizational chart, or chain

of command (Chiavenato, 1994), by the norms in force in the institution. All official information sent by the Administration to staff passes through this network. However, and for formal communications to be effective, they should not be manifested only in one direction (Men, 2014; Luthans, 1998; Boone et al., 1997): messages should be transferred downwards (originating from the top of the hierarchy, intended for executives, intermediate employees, or workers of the institution), ascending (in which information starts from the lower levels of the organization towards management), horizontally (involving people at the same hierarchical level) or laterally / in diagonal (processing randomly between elements of different levels) (Bilhim, 1996; Katz & Kahn, 1997; Teixeira, 1998).

In the first case, communication has a normative and functional role, allowing the dissemination of the institution's mission, values, and behavior standards. Some other aspects should be disclosed by the top managers, such as those related to the general operating principles and conditions of employment, description of the functions of the various existing jobs, the possibilities of accessing professional training and prospects for progress in the organization, regulations and prevention methods in the area of hygiene and safety at work, how improvements that increase the well-being of employees (canteens, medical care, accommodation, sports infrastructures, library...), social security systems in force in the organization and corresponding legislation, methods of consultation between the Board and the other employees, and also the general situation of the organization, referencing the perspectives of future development. It materializes in reports, manuals, internal newspapers, letters, circulars.

As for upward communication, which is less frequent and usually appears to be less spontaneous, it suffers from filtering that occurs at each of the hierarchical levels, as one ascends to the top positions in the organization (Katz and Kahn, 1997; Ludlow & Panton, 1992). Ideally, this sense of information should translate to superiors relevant data about each employee, their performance, problems, aspirations, as well as opinions about organizational practices and policies. This type of relationship, important for functional effectiveness and balance, is crucial in solving everyday problems. It can be done through group meetings, informal conversations with superiors, suggestion boxes, surveys.

Horizontal communication translates to a situation in which people at the same organizational level communicate with each other. These inter-departmental information exchanges help unite the components of an organization, and function as integrating forces within the structure. For this reason, interactions are generally friendly and less formal than in the top-down or top-down models. However, this does not mean that problems do not arise when people find that they are competing for the same – limited – resources of the organization.

Concerning lateral communication, it takes place between elements of different levels of the hierarchy in a crisscrossed manner; this is often due to the greater facility that some people have to create and develop good human relationships, which makes them highly sought after by other employees, regardless of their hierarchical level.

Naturally, this type of cross-communication translates into and is fostered by blockages in the top-down and top-down models (Katz & Kahn, 1997).

For formal communication to be assimilated and to provoke positive reactions, it has to be an authentic and permanent dialogue between the Administration and the other workers. Let's look at some of the principles of good formal communication (Silva, n.d.): bidirectionality (managers/bases and vice versa); choice of subject geared to the interests of workers, which means that the message should relate to their concerns, anxieties, and experience; translation of concrete and positive facts, not losing sight of the organization's objectives, as well as the workers' needs; concern in the sense that each communication deals with only one subject or, at most, two that are somehow related; adoption of the simple, clear and objective language, based on concrete and real data; selectivity, opportunity, and continuity of the message, fully adapted to the circumstances; answer to the explicit questions that, at every moment, are posed to the elements of the organization, at all levels of the hierarchy; taking into account the knowledge workers have about the structure and functioning of the organization.

3. Conclusions

We have seen some essential traits that characterize formal communication in organizations. However, their information exchange structures cannot and should not be limited to that scope. Another phenomenon - informal communications - is all the more important the more unsatisfied needs remain, due to a formal system that does not effectively fulfill its objectives. Those channels allow messages to circulate much more quickly, and work as a complement to the formal circuit (Boone et al., 1997). They are unofficial, unprogrammed, and spontaneous, being created and modified freely by all elements of the company. The resulting dialogue often translates into friendly relations and cooperation at work, whether within or outside the group. One of its characteristic elements is precisely the emotionality or affectivity that results from the existence of groups in which friendship relationships are generated. It is a communication typology that is alien to strictly work situations, and that does not necessarily obey hierarchical levels, overcoming barriers that are almost always present informal communication.

This communication scheme challenges and jeopardizes the formal model, as it is spontaneous and encompasses all the efforts made by the elements of the organization, to understand and interpret the environment in which they work. It sometimes manifests itself in the form of rumors and exchanges of information and often arises from the fact that the staff on duty are private or poorly informed about issues of concern to them. In this way, *"the rumors (...) may be an attempt to make the organization more intelligible"* (Silva, n.d.: 26). Under-informed or insecure individuals circulate the *"murmurs"* to, even if unconsciously, make the environment in which they work more bearable: the speculations based on which the rumors arise generally start from significant facts that have not been convenient and timely explained.

This informal flow of exchanges is often called “*grapevine communication*” or “*grapevine*” (Bilhim, 1996; Teixeira, 1998; Robinson & Thelen, 2018), due to its casual development and direction in some segments of social groups, being often the fastest way to disseminate some information. It can become dangerous as the word travels away from the group where it originated, becoming increasingly distorted as it spreads. Public Relations technicians must remain alert to the existence of this phenomenon, to eliminate rumors or inaccuracies by objectively explaining the facts, whenever the gravity of the situation so warrants (Cutlip et al., 1994).

Naturally, also in an informal context, we find communications of a descending, ascending, lateral or horizontal type, about the orientation followed. From an organizational point of view, communication then works at a technical level (in the sense that everyone must always know what to do and how to do it) and psychologically (since effective communication allows individuals to be motivated). Therefore, it will be of paramount importance that managers take competing attitudes towards the humanization of work.

The awareness of the existence of a social structure that underpins the company enables a simpler resolution of human problems that hinder productivity, so the good quality of the communication structure is a basic condition for effective organizational functioning. Social problems must be dealt with carefully, as well as technical or economic ones, as they greatly affect productivity.

In this order of ideas, the communication policy must allow the establishment of a two-way network between the Administration and other employees, through which norms or regulations can circulate, as well as suggestions or complaints. It is a way of functioning contrary to the classical system, which was governed by the concept of authority, under which only the bosses had the competence to make decisions, and the workers were only responsible for executing the orders given; the former understood that the strength of their orders resided in the financial incentives and punishments applied.

Currently, however, a concern with the information provided to the worker is beginning to be evident, namely concerning the general production scheme, so that he can understand how the task he performs forms part of the set. So that employees can ideally integrate into the organization, they must also know its history, the evolution it has undergone, and the perspectives for the future. In this way, the internal communication policy assumes itself as an instrument that facilitates the understanding of the man at work as a whole, in his attitudes and his collective behavior when integrated into a group. It also allows for the establishment of connection channels that eliminate islanders who, for structural or operational reasons, isolate groups or sections of the collective (Álvarez & Caballero, 1998).

Internal communication thus has the main objective of keeping informed and motivating the internal employees of an entity, about matters of an institutional, product, financial, or crisis management nature, being important for the construction and maintenance of the group spirit within organizations. No external PR job will make sense without a preliminary internal effort. An organization is made up of people; therefore,

the employee is the company, or the employee is the institution. Good relations between the Administration and the employees are, therefore, an indispensable condition for a good practice of Public Relations. These, because they are authentic, do not allow the use of two weights and two measures: one weak for internal use, the other good and valued for external use.

Paradoxically, however, what is sometimes found is that even large organizations invest heavily in communication with external groups while ignoring or underestimating Public Relations actions for internal audiences. This situation is quite negative, insofar as these are the most important vehicle for external dissemination of the institution's activities and image and, if they are not valued, they may internalize and transmit a negative opinion; on the other hand, if there is no coherence between internal and external communication, this discrepancy will end up showing to the outside, with bad repercussions for the institution. Organizations that, on the contrary, plan and implement coherent Public Relations campaigns, establish complementary objectives for both types of public, and articulate Public Relations actions with other communication actions, as well as with actions to involve all workers in the company project. In this way, they ensure the cohesion of all activities and effective results.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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