

A STUDY OF UPWARD BYPASSING IN THE PROCESS OF
VERTICAL CONTROL OF AN ORGANIZATIONAL
COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

E. STERLING KUHLMEY, JR., CPT
HQDA, MILPERCEN (DAPC-OPA-E)
200 Stovall Street
Alexandria, VA 22332

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INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST

1. Myrvin F. Christopherson, Ph.D.
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Department of Communication
Stevens Point, WI 54481
2. Albert J. Croft, Ph.D.
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Department of Communication
Stevens Point, WI 54481
3. Defense Technical Information Center
Cameron Station
Alexandria, VA 22314
4. Hyun K. Kim, Ph.D.
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Department of Communication
Stevens Point, WI 54481
5. University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Learning Resources Center
Stevens Point, WI 54481



Report on Oral Defense of Thesis

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AUTHOR: E. Sterling Kuhlmeier, Jr., CPT

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Date: Sept 7 1983

Committee:

Albert J. Croft, Advisor
 Albert J. Croft, Ph.D.
Myrvin F. Christopherson
 Myrvin F. Christopherson, Ph.D.
Hyun K. Kim
 Hyun K. Kim, Ph.D.

D E D I C A T I O N

To Kari and Matthew Williams

In the hope that some day their ability
to use the communication process effectively
will help eliminate strife and injustice on
our world and thereby make my chosen profession
unnecessary and obsolete.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To a large extent the "ascent of man" can be viewed as a history of the development of human communication. It is the connective process of communication which makes possible the existence and evolution of society itself. Berlo (1960), in The Process of Communication, estimates that the "average American spends about 70 percent of his active hours communicating verbally," and most of his waking hours in some form of communication (pp. 1-2). He also notes that it is typically impossible for people to keep from communicating verbally or non-verbally when they are in the presence of each other, and that the purpose of all this communication is to manipulate some factor or factors in our environment. Berlo says, "in short, we communicate to influence each other" (pp. 12-13). It is our most human behavior.

People are brought together or linked by communication in society in many ways; the ensuing social institutions are formed by people for the attainment of their common or shared goals. Our most basic social systems, such as the family, friendship and other groups, the neighborhood, the community, are formed by means of communication; they are all, in this sense, communication systems. The concept of organizations, however, probably remains the most pervasive and powerful factor in shaping our daily lives.

Richard H. Hall (1976) in Organizations: Structure and Process notes that a very easy way to understand the dominating role of organizations in society is to review a daily newspaper. In almost every article and paragraph of the paper you will find reference to the way we have responded to our environment by means of organizational action (pp. 3-4). Such human activity in organizations is used to coordinate the behavior of people through communication so that they can take cooperative action to achieve the goals they share.

Nearly half-a-century ago, Chester I. Barnard in The Function of the Executive established a position on communication in the organization which Caplow (1976) summarizes as "every organization can be analyzed as a communication network" (p. 50).

This is a study of characteristics which an organizational communication network/system should possess in order to operate at optimum effectiveness, and is specifically focused on "bypassing," a deviation from the normal process of supervisory control through communication in the formal structure of the organization. Bypassing can occur in many different forms but it always involves some tactic for "short-circuiting" the established channels of communication for organizational control. The study is concerned primarily with the tactic of upward bypassing in the chain of vertical control at the lower echelons of organizations. This tactic will be treated in relation to its impact on the structure and functioning of an organizational communication system and will thus be connected to such topics as channels of communication, the climate in communication situations, and role relationships between persons in a work team or functional division of an organization.

The following section will attempt to establish a working vocabulary and to define a set of applicable concepts from the literature on organizational communication. It will present a particular perspective on organization communication selected from established works in that field, and then will attempt to place the subject of this study in that context. Such a basis for the study seems necessary because of the differences among the various approaches currently taken toward the study of organization communication and because of the different usages of common terms.

The Theoretical Context of the Study

Human communication does not simply take place in a vacuum. Following the position taken by Katz and Kahn (1978), human behavior can best be studied within the context of some "social system" such as the family, the friendship group, the neighborhood, the organization, the community, the reference group, the culture or sub-culture (Chap. 1-2 ff.). Each of these "levels" is in effect both a communication system and a sub-system in some larger social system. But until recently the social context of communication has largely been studied toward one of the two extremes: small groups or cultures. Now, within the general study of communication, and especially from a "social systems" viewpoint, a more or less definable field of study has developed around that middle level of "communication systems" called the organization.

This study is an effort to understand bypassing as a particular type of communication process which occurs within the organization by drawing upon selected concepts from communication theory and organization theory and systems theory. In fact, most of the literature in organizational

communication has been developed around topics common to all three areas and is oriented to the structure of an organization as a communication system, to the functions of communication within that structure, and to the inter-relationship of various sets of "process goals" (sets of idealized characteristics of organization communication). Drucker (1974) says that a fundamental of communication is that "communication is perception" (p. 483). Thus the study of communication and bypassing in terms of communication in the organization is dependent to some degree on how we perceive the act or fact of communication and bypassing. The following set of topics is presented as a necessary context for the study of the bypassing process. It is necessary to see how bypassing occurs in the setting of the communication structure, functions, and goals of an organization. These three aspects of an organizational communication system seem most relevant to our inquiry into bypassing.

Levels of Communication Structure

All communication in an organization can be perceived as occurring between personnel who have come to identify themselves with a position at one or more levels of the organization and within the norms or goals of such level(s).

- (1) The Individual Level in an organization is, of course, the basis of the whole organization since it must to some degree meet his individual needs and goals; within the organization he will communicate with other members from the frame of reference of his own personal value.
- (2) The Work-Team Level is established when organization members

are drawn into groups where they must regularly interact on a face-to-face basis in order to attain the goals shared by that group (e.g., the machine shop operators, the accounting department payroll clerks, the salesmen, the plant foremen as a group, the vice-presidents as a group, a project team, the officers of a club, etc.).

- (3) The Functional Division Level can be viewed as a larger collection of work teams which identify with a common set of duties or functions and in which the work teams are coordinated to achieve a common set of goals. Thus, a business corporation often has functional divisions for marketing, production, personnel, finance, research, etc.
- (4) The Total Organization Level is the interaction of all sub-systems in concert (individuals, teams, divisions) in order to attain and balance out all the sub-goals of the organization; top management primarily assumes that function at this level.
- (5) External Levels involve any other persons, groups or organizations which are not a part of the organization but with whom the organization must interact to achieve its goals. These include customers, competitors, labor unions, government agencies, financial institutions and suppliers, etc.

In any communication event in an organization, each person's behavior will reflect his identification with goals and norms of one or more of these structural levels or their sub-systems; he will communicate from that point of view.

Within the levels or groupings established in the structural level, communication events then take place between individuals based on some set of different and constantly changing role relationships.

Communication Relationships

Within the context of the channels established through the structure of the organization, communication events take place between individuals based on a set of differently perceived and constantly changing role relationships. An event will occur in some predictable "situation" depending largely on which of the following role relationships exist:

- (1) Informal Relationships, interactions between persons who are not acting within their job definitions in the organization. Another way of describing this kind of informal communication event is: two or more persons interacting in a non-role situation.
- (2) Peer Relationships, generally interaction of persons within a specified work team who are equal in status and share both individual and team goals to some degree.
- (3) Vertical Relationships which involve the up and down interaction of superiors and subordinates in the same vertical line of hierarchy within the organization.
- (4) Lateral Relationships in which interaction occurs between two or more persons who report upward in different vertical lines of control (irrespective of status or position). A typical event might involve a waiter in a restaurant (who reports upward to the dining room manager) in an argument with a cook

in the kitchen (who reports upward to the chef, kitchen manager).

- (5) External-Internal Relationships are those where communication takes place between persons inside and those outside the organization system boundaries.

Logically, the differing nature of these role relationships between participants in a communication event will require a different kind of communication behavior in each event.

Communication Function

When communication events or processes are used to achieve different purposes in the organization, we have different functions. In this study we shall use the following classifications of functions:

- (1) The function of sending and receiving information.
- (2) The function of decision making.
- (3) The function of supervision (which would include planning, implementing and controlling work in order to assure goal achievement).
- (4) The function of adapting the internal communication system of the organization to meet the demands of environmental or external change.

The point being made here is that communication behavior varies depending on the communication function it is being used to serve at that time.

Communication Goals

We use communication events in the context of a communication system in order to achieve the substantive goals of the organization and of