Auditing staff-management communication in schools: a framework for evaluating performance

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Introduction

Education, as with other areas of the public sector in the UK, has recently been subjected to a number of major reforms. These reforms have been directed at both the reorganisation of the school curriculum and the management structure of the education system itself. The whole thrust of LMS (local management of schools), for example, is to significantly change the way schools are to be managed. The main effect is to shift responsibility for school management away from local authorities and on to the governors and principal. This creates far-reaching changes in management functions and will impose heavy burdens on managers within schools and colleges. In particular, school managers will be more responsible for staff management relationships, the flow of information on major initiatives and the quality of inter-group relations than at any time in the past.

At the same time staff have had to cope with what could be described as an "initiative overload" caused by the task of implementing the changes required by LMS and the introduction of the national curriculum. Thus, staff within schools are living in what has been described as an age of organisational anxiety (Barker and Tompkins, 1994), characterised by high and rising levels of uncertainty about what the future will bring.

Such levels of uncertainty are a threat to staff motivation, often creating a corrosive preoccupation with organisational politics rather than the achievement of the essential goals of the school. Research suggests that one major source of uncertainty is a poor flow of information from managers to staff and vice versa concerning crucial change issues confronting the organisation (Tourish and Hargie, 1996). Similarly, Berger (1987) postulated that a key concern in all communicative interactions is that of uncertainty reduction. Many writers on organisational theory (Galbraith, 1973; March and Simon, 1968; Perrow, 1970; Thompson, 1967) have concurred with the assertion that the need for information is greater when task uncertainty is high (Wilson and Malik, 1995). Good organisational communications which deliver clear, concise and timely information about issues of central concern to staff is one important way of reducing uncertainty. In turn, the reduction of uncertainty acts to lower the existing levels of anxiety among staff. This enables them to devote more time and energy towards primary organisational objectives. Hence, it has been found that staff working within an open and communicative management structure were three to four times more likely to express satisfaction with their position and twice as likely to be committed to that organisation (Arnot, 1987). This tends to manifest itself in tangible benefits regarding the organisation's bottom-line performance indicators. For example, a recent wide-ranging review of available research concludes that good quality internal communications secures greater commitment, higher levels of innovation, reduced absenteeism, greater productivity and higher profitability (Clampitt and Downs, 1993).

Meanwhile, what we mean by the term quality communications has also been transformed by the change driven context in which such programmes are now being implemented. In the past, communication programmes could concern themselves primarily with announcing management conclusions, rendering management messages comprehensible and ensuring that they were easily filtered through the organisational structure. However, as has recently been pointed out (Quirke, 1995) the following new objectives are also paramount:

• the stimulation of thinking, participation and ideas;
• the networking of know-how and learning across the organisation;
• the involvement of all employees in improving processes;
• the identification of ways of providing additional value to customers;
• the expansion of what all employees believe is possible.

The former emphasis on top-down communication flow has been replaced by ideas such as participative decision making and self-managing teams (Barker and Tompkins, 1994). In large measure, these fresh approaches derive from experience gained in implementing programmes such as total quality management.
Auditing staff-management communication in schools: a framework for evaluating performance

Dennis Tourish and Owen Hargie

(1998) 176–182

Auditing staff-management communication in schools: a framework for evaluating performance

By carrying out such an audit, education managers will be able to discover what communication channels are being utilised, how well they are used, the amount of credence that staff give to various sources of information and, most importantly, how staff feel communication could be improved. Management will benefit by finding out what staff are actually communicating about, rather than what it thinks they are or should be communicating about. Undertaking a communication audit will enable managers to listen better to what staff have to say and thus identify strengths and weaknesses in the communication system. This in turn will allow any perceived communication deficits within the school organisation to be addressed and should facilitate the development of a comprehensive communications strategy.

A focused communication strategy

A focused communication strategy makes a significant contribution to achieving managerial effectiveness and must become an integral part of the strategic planning process for all organisations. As part of this, effective communication systems and practices need to be developed and implemented. This starts with ascertaining the existing level of communication effectiveness (or breakdown) within the organisation concerned. Much management activity consists of “fire fighting” rather than the exercise of strategic leadership, while the conflagrations that prove so distracting on a day-to-day basis are often the consequence of volatile communication systems. These produce poor staff commitment, and lead to staff who are less effective in their jobs (Larson and Fukami, 1984), with more absenteeism (Steers, 1977) and higher staff turnover (Angell and Perry, 1981) than their more informed counterparts. As a result, when winds of change blow through the organisation, flickering embers of dissent can grow into an inferno of dissatisfaction.

By contrast, the communication process should be designed as part of the development of a positive social system (Reilly and DiAngelo, 1990), so as to address any barriers to the promotion of effective communication within the organisation. To continue the former analogy, fire prevention is preferable.

The responsibility for the development of effective communications strategies and systems is essentially that of management. Managers need to organise ways of integrating a communications programme with existing general managerial functions. They should therefore think about how to develop a comprehensive communications strategy as an integral part of their overall strategic planning programme. For this reason, it has been argued that communication is the critical success ingredient in a school’s strategic planning (Negben, 1991).

Hence, education managers must be able to assess the effectiveness of their school’s communication practices. To do so they need...
to know what these are and how well they are currently functioning. It is important that there should be some review of and accountability for the flow of organisational communication. At the practical level, this means that if vital information is not reaching its target audiences, then the blockages in the communication channels can be identified and dealt with (Tourish and Hargie, 1996). The problem, therefore, is the necessity first of all, to accurately assess the school’s present communication performance so as to be able to devise and implement worthwhile improvements. Such a strategy begins with gathering accurate information about current communication systems and practices within the organisation.

The key steps in developing such a strategy could be summarised as follows.

- **Identify the nature of current practice.** The most systematic method for so doing is through the implementation of a communication audit, and this forms the main thrust of this paper.
- **Use the results of the audit to sensitise management and staff to the realities of good communication practice.** Disseminate the results widely and frankly, at all levels. Ask for suggestions to effect improvements, and monitor closely the progress of programmes set up in response to the audit exercise.
- **Integrate this process into the business planning cycle of the organisation.** Ask all contributors to the business planning process to consider the communication consequences of the decisions that are being contemplated. Request detailed examples of how management behaviour can be changed to meet the new communication challenges which have been identified.
- **Feed the results of this planning into future audit materials,** thereby creating benchmarks for further improvements in organisational cohesion and efficiency. In other words, ask specific questions about new communications programmes, assess whether understanding of particular issues has improved and ascertain whether relationships on the ground are improving as a result.

**Auditing communication at school level**

A technique termed the communication audit has been developed and increasingly utilised to investigate the nature and functioning of communication systems and practices within organisations. A communication audit provides managers with hard data on the efficacy of their organisation’s communication behaviours (Tourish and Tourish, 1996). It is a valuable management technique by which the processes of communication data collection and analysis can be carried out and corrective action can be instigated as a result. The communication audit offers a systematic and rigorous approach for assessing not just the quantity but more importantly the quality of communication between groups of staff and between staff and management. By enabling managers to diagnose the efficacy of communication and relationships within the organisation, this approach provides the starting-point for planning specific changes in organisational structure and practice. As Babbar and Aspelin (1994, p. 35) assert:

One effective approach to creating a climate for participation, initiative and excellence is to manage by example. Open up the channels of communication both horizontal and vertical. Restructure and reorganise if that is what takes to facilitate communication and participation at all levels.

The emphasis here is on the idea of managers as facilitators of effective communication throughout the organisation, using the tools of communication analysis in order to promote an organisational climate so as to ensure clarity about organisational goals, permit an upward and downward flow of information, create an atmosphere of openness and trust and encourage the maximum amount of informal interaction between as many groups of people as possible.

Consequently, a communication audit carried out within the school will reveal:

- **Who you should communicate with**
- **Who you actually do communicate with**
- **What you should be communicating**
- **Who you actually do communicate with**

There are two phases in employing a communication audit. The first is diagnostic. Here the existing organisational culture is closely examined, utilising instruments which reveal the ways in which various groups of staff communicate with one other and how well they do so. These communication tools help to demystify relationships and, therefore, make them more visible, and as a result more manageable. There is a danger, otherwise, that the system of organisational communication is merely assumed, taken for granted and hence remains largely ignored. Consequently, it is unexamined and therefore unquestioned.

The communication audit does not measure communication performance simply for the sake of doing so. A prescriptive phase of
Auditing staff-management communication in schools: a framework for evaluating performance

Dennis Tourish and Owen Hargie

The following sequence of steps have been adopted in conducting a communication audit within organisations (Hargie and Tourish, 1993):

- A workshop is organised with senior management within the organisation, at which the rationale and methodology of communication audits are outlined and explained. Managers are asked to clarify what they understand by communication and its place within the effective functioning of their own organisation.

- The workshop is then used to identify and agree on a number of areas and issues where managers consider the organisation needs to have effective communication. This input is subsequently incorporated into the audit process and the audit materials that will be used. For example, when staff are asked to consider how much information they receive on certain key issues, the important topics which management have identified are used as case examples.

- Both the quality and quantity of communication transactions about these key issues and areas are investigated thoroughly, using a range of research instruments. A range of data collection tools are available for use in conducting a communication audit. What is most appropriate will vary from one organisation to another. This is likely to depend on such factors as the size and scope of the organisation, the complexity of its organisational structures and the range of issues that are to be investigated. One of the most important of these audit tools is the use of a questionnaire, specifically designed for the purposes of conducting a communication audit.

- The focus of the audit can be aimed at the general organisational level and it also can be directed to examine particular areas of the organisational structure. It is, therefore, important that a clear picture of the existing structure of school communication is first of all delineated.

- The communication audit questionnaire comprises a number of sections which specifically examine the quality of communication sent and received, and how timely it is received. This can examine perceptions of communication effectiveness in general terms; it can also focus on some of the key issues which management will have identified that they think are fundamental to the school’s success, and on which all staff should be communicating effectively.

- Additional methods of data collection used in conducting a communication audit can also include interviews and “self-reports of interactive episodes”. While the use of interviews is a long-standing and valuable method, it can be a costly, time consuming process depending on the size and complexity of the organisation. However, it can be used to follow-up in greater depth a representative sample of those completing audit questionnaires about particular issues which may have emerged.

- Self-reporting of interactive episodes involves staff identifying and itemising details of their communicative activities over a specific period in a particular area. This can include identifying the source, topic, channel, length/duration of the communication and whether it was one or two way. Respondents are also asked to make qualitative judgements about the communication, for example, rating it on a scale of effectiveness. This method can reveal a rich seam of data about the communicative health of the school organisation.

- In conducting the audit staff should be given the opportunity to comment on the communication system in the school generally and also to provide actual specific examples of existing communication practice. Such data yields a valuable amount of insight into the school’s organisational culture and the quality of interaction and relationship within. These are then content analysed to reveal broad themes and issues.

- The results of the audit questionnaire are analysed to assess the nature and quality of communication. For example the actual issues of concern to staff can be discovered; blockages in communication can be accurately pinpointed; over/under-used channels of communication can be highlighted; or groups of staff requiring “remedial attention” can be identified.

Communication audit: recurrent trends

We have conducted numerous communication audits across a range of public and private sector organisations, including the education sector. The main trends to emerge from these are as follows.

The need for information
Staff desire, and appreciate, being fully informed about key issues affecting their organisation, and in particular those which will have a direct bearing on their jobs. The
main recurring complaint in our audits has been that of people feeling under-informed, and, by implication, undervalued. Given the well-known adage that “information is power”, lack of information understandably results in a feeling of disempowerment. During periods of change, it is even more vital that staff feel fully (and honestly) informed about what is happening or is about to happen within the organisation. While the pace of change is often externally driven and outside the control of senior management, its impact can be lessened by ensuring that staff are informed as soon as possible about what changes will occur, when, and what the implications are likely to be.

Power of the grapevine

If there is an information shortfall, the bush telegraph works overtime to fill it, and staff will devote more time to the rumour. The grapevine flourishes in organisations where staff are selectively informed on a “need to know” basis. Where information is not forthcoming from management, staff will invent it. All organisations have “creative” individuals who, building on basic information, construct plausible scenarios of impending gloom and doom. To circumvent such doomsday stories contaminating the organisation, credible and speedy communication channels are essential. The timeliness of information delivery is more difficult in organisations spanning several different sites, and here mechanisms must be established to ensure a swift flow of information. Organisations should develop free-flowing communication highways along which messages can be delivered both speedily and accurately, and to which all staff should have ready access. One way of achieving this is to appoint communication “champions” - enthusiastic individuals who will be trusted and respected by their peers - to deliver information within their own location.

Upwards communication

Our audits underlined the importance which staff attach to upwards communication. They value a climate in which bottom-up communication is fostered and seen as positive. In the more dysfunctional organisations, there was a fear amongst staff that if they voiced critical views, they might then be “marked” by senior managers. Staff are especially keen to report on initiatives taken in their area and to be able to gain ready access to job-related information. They also want action to be taken on information which they provide, particularly from senior managers. Upwards communication must be solid and not a thin veneer, since a positive benefit will only be forthcoming if action is seen to be taken by managers acting on the information gathered.

Channels of communication

Staff express a consistent preference for face-to-face communication, yet in many organisations there is an over-reliance on written communication. A blizzard of memos from senior managers is usually a good indicator of a frozen organisation, barren of any warm creative free-flow of ideas. We found in many schools and colleges staff view of the stereotypical educational manager located in the safety of the office “bunker”, advised by a bureaucratic administrator, creating a never-ending, unnecessary and irritating armoury of memos and letters which are then fired off by the secretary at the defenceless workforce! This leads on to the next finding.

Visibility of senior managers

Staff wish to communicate with senior managers. A periodical and rather “stiff” meeting of all staff is not what is required here. The notion of “management by walking about” has been recommended for over a decade. However, caution need to be exercised when so doing. When prior notice is given, the red carpet treatment is given and the exercise becomes something akin to a royal visit with rooms (and their inhabitants!) being scrubbed and polished before the senior manager “inspects” them. The manager arrives, announces something akin to “Jolly well done. Good show. Keep up the good work” and disappears back to HQ. In essence this becomes management by walking past! Conversely, if the senior person arrives unannounced, this is seen as a form of “checking up”. The preferred option is for managers to arrange regular formal meetings with various groupings of staff at which there is an opportunity for any issue to be discussed. There should be a formal itinerary about these contacts – they should be round table, over coffee, for a set period (no more than one hour), chaired by someone relatively junior, should begin with a brief statement from the senior manager, and open out to allow anyone to raise any topic. This not only allows senior executives to “address the troops”, it fosters a sense of openness and accessibility within the organisation. There is a cathartic effect in meeting and being listened to by those in positions of power and this should be maximised.

Conclusion

Any attempt to evaluate and change organisational culture must begin with a clear management understanding of and commitment to such a process. Hence, at the outset senior management need to clarify their own ideas of communication within the school;
what might be regarded as their “ideal type” of a positive communication approach and what the key issues in fact are. A crucial part of this is the identification of the values which management believes underpin their communication practices, and the development of standards which reflect these values in action. Expert facilitation is usually required at this stage, to ensure that people express what they really feel rather than what they imagine is “politically correct”. It may well be that this becomes the most long drawn out part of the audit process, since the whole exercise will be doomed to futility unless the senior management team has agreed objectives and a shared system of common values. For example, if schools have been amalgamated it may be that senior managers have a different cultural tradition and possess radically different management styles. The problems caused by this must be faced at an early stage.

It is also important to highlight the question of how improvements in communication strategies, and the systems which result should be measured. It has been argued that many change programmes fail because the evaluation carried out simply focuses on the process that is introduced rather than on what is essential – the ultimate goals of the organisation (Schaffer and Thompson, 1992). It is necessary, therefore, to avoid the easy temptation to evaluate changes resulting from engaging in a communication audit exclusively in terms of expressed satisfaction with new communication arrangements alone, the “feel-good” factor. While such a positive declaration is encouraging, its ultimate importance and worth rests to the extent that it furthers other essential organisational goals. The purpose of a communication audit essentially is to identify problems which can be specifically ascribed to the nature of the existing communication practices and to take planned action for the elimination of these which will lead to changes in how staff interact with each other within various organisational settings.

While communication audits are still not yet widely known about nor utilised within organisations in the UK, there is a growing interest among those managers who have come to realise that it is no longer possible to ignore the quality and effectiveness of organisational communication. The utilisation of this approach within educational organisations such as schools and colleges can contribute significantly to a raising of awareness of the importance of effective communication, not only in rendering relationships more manageable but also in facilitating the development of an organisational culture which strives to improve the quality of its operation. In the long run, it is precisely the development of such a culture which will determine how well schools cater for the needs of children.

References


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Dennis Tourish and Owen Hargie
Auditing staff-management communication in schools: a framework for evaluating performance