The Status of Upward Communication in Area Industry

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THE STATUS OF UPWARD COMMUNICATION
IN AREA INDUSTRY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies
Western Michigan University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
John Clinton Schweitzer
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CHAPTER I

A REVIEW OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

American business and industry have been growing steadily for the past twenty years. With increasing automation of production, business and industry will continue to grow at a rapid rate.

The tremendous growth industry is experiencing is illustrated by a recent report (15) which predicts that twenty-two million more jobs will be created in the next fifteen years. The report further estimates, "two million more businesses will be established to make and distribute the growing production of American mills and factories during the next twenty-five years."

With this growth of industry many aspects of employee relations will become magnified out of proportion to present status. One such aspect in this category is communication. As the size of the company grows, its problems of communication grow. A director of industrial relations (3, p. 105) at one company has said, "There is no question in my mind but what the problem of maintaining effective channels of communication and evaluating employee attitudes is in direct proportion to the size of the company."
There is no doubt that communication within industry is a very real problem. Lunken (6, p. 4) has said, "... the more thoroughly we study the process of management, the more we can become convinced that most of our problems are really problems of communications." Some writers offer many solutions to the problem, others believe there are no practical solutions. The latter believe that communication as a process in industry cannot be relegated to any one method to be of maximum effectiveness. These writers believe that a combination of methods must be used to obtain the best results.

Effective communication has been of concern to industry only within comparatively recent years. Before World War II it was difficult to find much literature on the subject of communication within industry. Since the war the amount of literature concerning communication has been voluminous. As late as 1948, however, Paterson and Jenkins (8, p. 78) said, "The literature of industrial relations and personnel work has ... ignored the problem of communication between management and workers...."

It is not uncommon today to find at least one article on communication a month in one or another of the personnel or business periodicals.

The growth of industry during and immediately after the Second World War brought to light many
problems never before considered. One of these problems was communication. As industries expanded and began de-centralizing, communication problems between the de-centralized plants and the parent, or main plant, became compounded.

**Downward Communication**

At first the communications problem was seen only as one of passing information downward, that is, from management down the organizational hierarchy. As the company grew and the president or manager became further and further separated from those who worked for him, it became imperative for every one down the line to know exactly what management wanted them to know. Minor executives had to know management's directives, line supervision had to know company policy with respect to layoffs, temporary work stoppages, etc. The problems only became greater with the introduction of a union. In a union shop, line supervisors had to know how the company interpreted the contract should any dispute over the agreement arise. If these men did not know the company's interpretation, there would be the danger they would make the wrong decision causing a labor-relations problem.

**Lateral Communication**

As managements became aware of the problems of communicating downward, they realized that lateral
communications, communication between the same levels of management, was also essential to management planning. Lateral communication has received a great deal of attention in the literature and is also receiving much attention by companies. The reason for this is obvious. In most companies it is essential that the various departments within the company know of the others' activities. Cooperation between these various functions would otherwise be impossible. For example, the sales department must know what the marketing research department's activities are to effectively plan their sales campaign.

Downward and lateral communication in industry are problems, but they are problems that are recognized, and steps are being taken to improve present methods and develop new ones. It has been well established that written communications must be carefully prepared if they are to be understood by all people reading them. It is also recognized that oral communications are highly subject to misinterpretation.

Upward Communication

A communication problem that has received much comment is upward communication. This is just the reverse of downward, i.e., employee to management. This is an area characterized by much talk, but little action.
Most of the recent publications dealing with communication mention upward communication as being desirable or even essential to any communications program. Some say communication should be considered as a two-way process. According to Planty, et. al., (10, p. 12) "It is essential ... that top executives be informed fully and constantly of the true attitudes of all levels of employees." Many other authors appeared to be concerned with upward communication but did little more than mention it as being an aspect of the total communication picture that should be given serious consideration. Remmers (11, p. 355) says, "One of the greatest needs of modern industry is an adequate two-way communications system between labor and management." Upward communication seems to have been avoided in research. Little research on upward communications can be found among the numerous articles published on the problems of industrial communications.

Many companies recognize the importance of upward communications but do little about it. According to Fischer (2, p. 495), "It is common-place today to emphasize that communication is a two-way street. In actual practice, however, management devotes far more attention to telling, informing, and commanding than it
does to listening, asking, and interpreting." Some companies hope for adequate upward communication by relying on word-of-mouth communications up through channels. Tiffin (14, p. 465) remarks that management has "... attempted to keep in touch with the morale of the working force only through such factors as chance remarks by employees, appearance and behavior of the men at work, and occasional reports by supervisors."

Much of the reason for the lack of research and application of upward communication is probably because of its elusive nature. It is one thing to design a bulletin, memorandum, or policy directive to achieve maximum effectiveness and quite another to instruct employees in the proper way to communicate to either their direct supervisor or higher in the organizational hierarchy. In other words, management can control downward and, to some extent, lateral communication, but it must motivate and assist employees to communicate upward. Kolb (5, p. 485) points this out when he says, "A good communication system must stem from a belief that employees have a right to hear and a right to be heard."

From the above discussion it is evident that communication as it exists in industry today constitutes a serious problem which must be considered in any program
to increase plant efficiency. Much literature and research can be found that deals with downward and lateral communication. These two means of communication lend themselves more readily to systematic methods than does another important aspect of communication, specifically, upward communication. Upward communication is recognized as being important to the total industrial communication structure in the literature, but little study seems to have been given it.

**Definition of Terms**

Many of the terms used in this paper are open to misinterpretation. Communication itself is a somewhat nebulous term conveying different meanings to different people. As used in this paper, communication means the passing on of information. This is the manner in which communication is commonly interpreted in industry (9).

Upward communication is defined as any means available to an employee (regardless of position) to pass information on to a higher level of management.

Another term used in this paper which may need some clarification is "face-to-face" communication. This is merely the communication which takes place orally between an employee and a member of management other than his immediate supervisor. Face-to-face communication is
what is found when a company has the so-called "open door policy", i.e., the employee is welcome at any time to go to any member of management to talk over whatever is bothering him.

For the purposes of this study the term management means only the members of the middle or higher management group.

The traditional interpretation is given to grapevine in this paper, that is, an unconfirmed rumor circulated verbally throughout the plant.

Reference has been made in this paper to formal or systematic methods of communication. These methods are those which are regular or recurring, such as a grievance procedure or an exit interview.

The Problem

An extensive review of the numerous published articles on the subject of communication in industry revealed a lack of information on upward communication. Therefore, it was decided to investigate the status of upward communication in local industry. More specifically, the problem was to determine, if possible, whether or not local industries considered upward communication significant enough to be concerned about it. If it was considered significant, what, if anything, was being done
to improve upward communication and what progress did these industries believe they were making.
CHAPTER II
PROCEDURE

The Sample

A total of 23 manufacturing organizations were contacted in this study. These companies were located in two medium-sized industrial cities (City A and City B)* in the Midwest and employed approximately 25,638 people. This number was 77.2% of the total number of industrial wage earners of the two cities.**

The number of people employed by the industries contacted in City A represented 76.0% of the total industrial wage earners of that city. The companies contacted in City B represented 78.4% of the total number of industrial wage earners employed in that city.

No attempt was made to select the companies to be included in the sample in a random manner. Since the number of small companies (those employing 100 or less) far outnumbered the large ones, the companies to be included in the sample were selected to represent a range of the total number of people employed from 100 to well

*Kalamazoo and Battle Creek, Michigan.

**Employment figures obtained from the Michigan Employment Security Commission.
over 1000. The companies were selected only partly on the basis of the number of people employed. They were also selected to represent a cross section of the type of manufacturing process. The industry in the area sampled was quite widely diversified with respect to the product manufactured. Nine of the companies were engaged in manufacturing non-durable goods and fourteen manufactured durable goods. Any further breakdown as to type of product would too closely identify the companies.

Table 1 shows the classification of the industries with respect to employment.

Method of Investigation

The method of investigation employed in this study was that of a personal interview with an appropriate representative of the industries included in the sample. The person to be interviewed was found by explaining the problem and asking for an appointment with someone in the organization who would know what the company was doing along the lines of communication. Several people interviewed suggested seeing Mr. _______ in another company.

Most of the men were involved in either personnel or industrial relations' functions. Some difficulty was experienced in locating the proper man with whom to talk in a few of the smaller organizations. Here again, he most often handled the personnel function of the company.
## Table 1

Classification of Participating Companies with Respect to Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Employment</th>
<th>Number of Companies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large Companies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 and over</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900 - 1999</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700 - 899</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Companies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 - 699</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 - 499</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 - 299</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was believed that the unquantitative nature of the problem necessitated an interview rather than a questionnaire or some other means of gathering the information. By means of the interview it was possible to force the interviewee to justify his remarks which would have been difficult or impossible to do by means of some impersonal information-getting technique. Another advantage to using an interview was the continuous evaluation which could be done during the conversation. This was helpful in later asking questions of the subject, should he have neglected some aspect of the problem. It is recognized that the subjective nature of the interviewing technique has many limitations, especially in the sense that the interviewer might have drawn unjustified inferences from what had been said. However, the interviewer was aware of this danger and consciously attempted to avoid it.

The interview itself, as used in this study, could be best described as non-directive. That is, the interviewer was as passive as possible and let the subject talk at length on the subject. The interviewer interposed questions or comments only to ask clarification or justification of some statement by the company representative.
Several very general questions were prepared by the investigator prior to the contacts with the company representatives to use as a guide when the interview was in process. These questions were asked only if the subject failed to mention them himself. Similarly, a list of several formal or systematic methods of upward communication was prepared to be used only if they were not mentioned by the person being interviewed.

The reason for the above behavior is obvious. If answers to specific questions were all that was required, a questionnaire could have been used to greater advantage.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The results of this study do not easily lend themselves to tabulation; however, the results have been adapted to tables for purposes of clarity.

It was attempted to gain certain information from each company, not by posing any direct questions to the company's spokesman but by an indirect method of questioning. A direct question was posed to two company representatives and the obvious answer was given. Therefore, it was feared that by continuing to ask direct questions the obvious answer would always be given.

Table 2 indicates the answers to such questions not as they were asked, but as they might have been asked in a direct question. The answers shown in Table 2 are shown as they were given by small companies and large companies (see Table 1).

As shown in Table 2, seventeen participants considered informal upward communications satisfactory. Some of these companies had one or more formal programs also, but relied more heavily on an informal technique of getting information from their employees. The most heavily relied upon informal method was face-to-face communication.
Table 2

Answers Given to Questions as They Might Have Been Asked*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Responses of Companies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Is upward communications important in your company. . . .</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you consider your communications to be good . . . . .</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is your upward communication a particular problem to be worked on. . .</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Are you interested in getting communication to flow upward .</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is upward communication of at least equal importance to downward</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication . . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Does the responsibility for establishing good upward commu-</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nications lie with top management . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Is an informal upward communications system satisfactory. . . .</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do you rely heavily on face-to-face communication. . . .</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do you place the greatest responsibility for upward communications on</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your first line supervisors. . . . . . . . . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you give your first line supervisors any training in upward</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communications . . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Can you improve your upward communications . . . .</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These questions were not asked in the manner shown above, but the answers were obtained by a more indirect questioning process.
Thirteen of the company representatives emphasized personal contact with employees by management members. They mentioned knowing "most of the men by their first names." These companies made a practice of having members of management tour the plant for the express purpose of being able to talk with employees. Indeed, one of the larger companies found from an attitude survey that their employees desired more of this personal contact with members of the management team.

Table 3 is a presentation of the number of companies having any of several formal means of upward communication.

It will be noticed that fifteen of the companies had a grievance procedure. This was the normal union grievance procedure, and although nineteen of the companies in the sample did have unions, four of them did not consider the grievance procedure as a means of communication.

While meetings may be considered as informal methods of upward communication and as a face-to-face technique, they are included in Table 3 with formal and systematic plans because they were regularly scheduled meetings and in that sense, formal.
Table 3

Formal Systems of Upward Communications
Prevalent in 23 Companies Studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of System</th>
<th>Number of Companies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit-Interview</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Grievance Procedure</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union-Management Committee Meetings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee-Management Meetings</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant Publication</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foremen-Management Meetings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Meetings</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Interviews</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Studies</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Counseling</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION

Most of the authorities consulted agreed that upward communications in industry was important and that it was at least as important as downward communication. The authorities believed communications in industry should be two-way communication.

The data obtained are in agreement with the conclusions reached by the authorities, but there is quite a bit of conflict evident in the results.

Twenty-one of the companies agreed that upward communication was important. They also agreed, with only five exceptions, that upward communication was at least as important as downward communication.

When the question, "Are upward communications good?", is matched with the question dealing with the importance of communication as a problem to be studied, the conflict arises. Only one company had good upward communications, and yet the companies were almost evenly split when they were asked whether upward communications needed to be worked on. In other words twenty-one companies believed upward communication to be important, twenty-two considered their upward communication to be less than good, and yet almost half of the companies, ten
of them, did not think upward communications important enough to work to improve it. A further fact stands out; twenty-one of the companies stated that management was interested in having communications flow upward.

Only one explanation can be given for the results obtained on these questions and that is, at least half of the companies had never seriously considered upward communications. They categorically stated that their upward communications were not good and they thought this communication to be important, but yet they did not think it needed work done on it. When asked if communications could be improved, the same pattern was evident.

Oddly enough, this is almost what can be found in the literature. The authorities are agreed that upward communication is important and it is generally poor, and still no real research has been done in the area.

Eighteen of the companies agreed that the success of good upward communications depends on the interest of management in establishing it. This much of the answer agrees with the literature. For example, according to Guest (3) management must show their employees they are genuinely interested in their welfare before any type of communication program will work effectively.

In view of the other results, however, it would appear that in answering the question having to do with
this matter of management's responsibility, eighteen companies showed that they believed management to be responsible for good communications, and at the same time ten did not show much interest in getting communications upward from their employees. This is an obvious conflict.

Those companies that were not only interested in having good upward communication but were also trying to improve it expressed the idea that the communication which came upward governed the information that was sent downward. One of these companies went so far as to say, without upward communication the organization could not survive.

The only non-conflicting data obtained in this study have to do with formal and informal systems of upward communications. To the two questions asked on this matter consistent results were obtained; that is, seventeen companies expressed the opinion that an informal upward communication system was satisfactory and seventeen companies also stated that they relied a great deal on face-to-face communications. This is interesting in view of the fact that the participating companies were fairly evenly distributed with respect to size. Oddly enough, eight of the companies that relied heavily on face-to-face communication were among the large companies.
It was not expected that so many of the large companies would rely on face-to-face communication. One of the large companies emphasizing personal contact with employees found through an attitude study that the employees desired members of management to be in the plant where they could talk to them. The smaller companies would be expected to have more face-to-face communication. Bethel et. al. (1) remark that the close contact between management and employees in a small company account for its generally greater morale.

Despite the great reliance on personal contact with employees for upward communication, only one company admitted that this would allow a grapevine type of communication to come into existence. None of the other companies could be made to admit that the information received from either personal contacts in the shop or those made during social gatherings or athletic events were tinged with a grapevine flavor. One subject, while not admitting to listening to the grapevine, contradicted himself by saying he used social functions to gain information, yet he said he did not trust the information he received while talking with employees when in the plant.

At least one authority thinks the grapevine should be tapped to gain information. Hershey (4, p. 299) says,
"... good management dictates that the administrator consider these rumors as a public announcement of employees' thinking."

About seventy-four percent of the companies participating in this study said they placed the prime responsibility for their communications, both downward and upward, on their first line supervisors. The first line supervisor was the key individual in the communications system. Despite this fact, only six of the companies had any type of training program for their foremen. Most of them merely gave the foreman the information he was supposed to pass down and assumed he did so. To get information from the foreman, they asked him to report to his supervisor any problems or information he thought necessary. Many of the participants recognized this as being undesirable, but were doing nothing about it. On the other hand, the great majority of them believed this system to be the most effective possible system. This practice is consistent with what Shurtleff (13, p. 104) says, "Management usually relies largely on its supervisors--those who have day-to-day personal contact with employees--as its most effective channel of upward communication."

One of the companies that trained its supervisors had a training program in employee counseling. The
foremen were taught the non-directive technique of counseling and were encouraged to use it with the employees under their jurisdiction. The other companies did not go so far, but they did give specific training in communications to their men.

**Formal Systems**

Although the exit-interview has been described as being an effective means of obtaining information from employees, (Cf. 1, 12, 14) it was used by only six of the companies interviewed. It was not specified as to what type of interview was used; but the primary purpose was not only to find out why the person was leaving, but to get other information such as suggestions for improvement, general satisfaction with the company, and so forth.

As shown in Table 3, eleven companies utilized a suggestion system. However, most of these companies used it only for methods or production improvement purposes; some of them used it for safety improvement suggestions, and only five specified that it was used for any suggestion the employee wished to make. All of the companies using the suggestion system used a follow-up on the suggestions, however. That is, they explained to the employee why his suggestion could not be utilized if such
was the case. However, none of them explained this to the employee in an interview where a two-way exchange of information could take place.

Nineteen of the companies in this study were unionized, but only fifteen of them considered the union grievance procedure as an effective means of upward communication. Of those that did consider it a means of upward communication only four ever made a review of the grievances for purposes of evaluating them not only with respect to what was grieved about, but also as to what did not show up in grievances. Those companies that did analyze their grievances related that it helped them to head off future and potential problems by eliminating the causes. They also indicated that issues which had not been causes for grievances taught them how to handle issues which had been grievances. Another way they used their analysis was to discover which departments had few if any grievances and then to find out why. On this basis, these four companies had instituted the analysis of grievances as a regular practice.

The remainder of the formal or systematic upward communication devices were meetings of one type or another. Some of the companies believed them to be helpful and some did not know. Actually, none of them had
any justification for saying the meetings were effective or not, other than opinions of those concerned. This does not mean the meetings were ineffective; it means that there was no objective criterion for determining their effectiveness.

Only one company utilized an interview other than an exit interview. This interview was conducted with every employee after he had been with the company for two years. The interview was designed originally only to give the employee information on such things as insurance plans, and so forth. However, it was soon discovered that the employee wished to talk about other things as well. Accordingly, the interview was modified. As it now functions, the employee is given the same information as before, then the interviewer becomes passive and lets the employee talk. This company expressed a high opinion of this technique and used a trained interviewer. With a trained interviewer it probably has great value. According to Mandell (7) a trained interviewer is essential to getting accurate information.

An interesting method of upward communications was revealed by three companies. These companies used their plant publication or "house organ" as a means to get information from employees. These companies included
a "question and answer" column in their publication. They reported that the editor received a large number of questions; one company received as many as fifteen to twenty per month. All questions were printed in the house organ and were answered by the person in management responsible for the function asked about. For example, if the question had to do with production, the person in charge of production answered the question, if the question asked about finance, the treasurer answered the question, and so forth.

One company representative who said that communication was no problem raised an interesting point. He said communications flowed well, both upward and downward, but the problem was in having action on these communications initiated. He further remarked that action on downward communications was initiated more rapidly than action on upward communications. He did remark that these communications had to do with production issues. He could offer no evidence that all communications were being passed upward, or downward either for the matter.

This study has several limitations, the most obvious of which is the subjective analysis of the interview data. It was consciously attempted to keep bias and prejudice out of the analysis, however, but some may
have been evident. Another serious limitation was the responses given by the company representatives themselves. As was seen, these responses do conflict. No way can be seen to eliminate this limitation however. A questionnaire could probably gain no better information, perhaps not as good.

Two approaches for further research into upward communication immediately present themselves on the basis of these results. One is to get the employees' opinions as to how well upward communications functions in area industry. Another is to go to first line supervisors to get their reaction to the problem. Since so many companies rely heavily upon first line supervisors for communications, the reactions of these people should be important to the problem.

Another possibility for further research would be to investigate the communications present in an organization to see if there is any correlation between status of communication and type of management structure, i.e., levels of management. One company in this study mentioned communications as being "pretty good because we only have three levels of management."
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

An extensive review of the literature revealed a lack of significant research in the area of upward communications. This was true despite a great many articles saying upward communications were important in industry.

Twenty-three companies in two Midwestern cities were included in this study as a sample. Representatives of these companies were interviewed to determine the status of upward communications in the local area. Through the interviews it was hoped to discover whether local industries considered upward communications to be important and whether they were concerned enough with its importance to work to improve it.

The results of the study reveal a conflict in that twenty-one of the participating companies indicated they considered upward communications important and yet ten of them did not think upward communications to be a problem to be worked on for improvement. At the same time, only one company said its upward communications were good.

Obviously, any conclusions based on these results would be inconclusive. The writer can only conclude that upward communications in local industries representing an employment figure of 77.2% of the total industrial
wage earners in the two cities sampled have never seri­ously considered upward communications and they really have no idea how well it is functioning.

The writer can further conclude that more work is needed on this problem to make any conclusive judgments relative to the conceptions local industries have of upward communications.
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