

TRAINING MANAGERS FOR “BETWEEN YOU AND ME” EXPERIENCES

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This paper investigates the possibilities of formally training managers for effective informal communications in the workplace. Although business communication is taught extensively in most of the B-schools and in the corporate world (through training programs on presentation skills, meeting management, etc), scant attention is paid to training students or managers on how to deal with informal communication, i.e., grapevine activity, rumor, gossip or any other communication which does not fall in the purview of ‘formal communication’. Research has conclusively indicated that informal communication can affect decision making in organizations- favorably or otherwise. In this paper, the role of informal communications is established through extant literature review. After critical evaluation of variables, conceptual models are proposed for ‘informal communication’ and ‘training managers in effective informal communication’

Key words: *Grapevine, rumour, manager training*

INTRODUCTION

UNLIKE the formal organization which comprises organization charts and official messages, the informal organization consists of spontaneous, emergent patterns that result from an individual's discretionary choices. The role of the informal organization leading to informal communication is well established. From the very early Hawthorne studies (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1943), the final conclusion drawn was that “productivity” and “intensity of illumination” were unrelated. There was “something else” that led to the observed productivity increases.

There are Two Models of General Communication

The Linear Model (Berlo, 1960, Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum, 1957—a traditional model, which depicts the communication process as one way, from left to right.

The Convergence Model (Rogers and Kincaid, 1981)—a widely accepted model, which depicts communication as a two way process from the sender to the receiver, including the feedback loop.

A review of the literature does not indicate any such

model for informal communication. Other studies on informal communication have found the following relationships.

- (a) A greater degree of informal communication is found to be correlated with higher turnover and a high level of grapevine activity is correlated with higher levels of stress, threat and insecurity (Brownell, 1990).
- (b) Informal communication travels faster than formal communication (Davis, 1979).
- (c) Gossip is traditionally shown in a bad light.
- (d) Gossip is evaluative talk about a person who is not present (Eder and Enke, 1991).
- (e) Gossip has been defined as the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting (Noon and Delbridge, 1993).

Grapevine satisfies a social function. Informal communication and socialization make work groups more cohesive and provide opportunity for human contact (Baron and Greenberg, 1990). Grapevine may

be used by work groups for different reasons. Case studies reveal that employees often use grapevine in an attempt to outmaneuver others, both inside and outside the organization. In a work setting, negative gossip will enhance the gossiper's coercive power over the gossip's recipients. Positive gossip will enhance the gossiper's reward power over gossip recipients.

Intensity of a rumor (R) is determined by the importance of the rumor to the persons communicating (I) and by the ambiguity (A) of the facts associated with the rumor

$$R=I*A$$

If either A or I =0, there will be no rumor (Allport, 1947).

A Model suggested by Crampton, Hodge, Mishra (1998) proposed that,

$$R\backslash G =F (CB * U * I * A)$$

Where, R\G – rumor or gossip

CB – Breakdown of formal communication

U – Uncertainty

I – Information

A – Ambiguity

Though there is wide acceptance of the role of informal communications – grapevine activity, gossip, and rumor, few studies have been done in the area of how to deal with informal communication. In a survey conducted by these U.S. researchers – Crampton, Hodge, Mishra, (1998), 92.4 per cent of companies surveyed had no policy to deal with grapevine. This indicates that research in the area of informal communication is required to equip managers with skills to deal with informal communication effectively.

The objective of this paper is to conceptualize models for 'informal communication' and for 'training managers in effective informal communication'. We feel that once a manager is aware of the elements/variables impacting informal communication, he/ she is in a better position to understand and deal with unwarranted, unforeseen showdowns, emotional outbursts from either superiors or subordinates.

Based on this, the following models are built.

Conceptual Model for Informal Communication

The conceptual model has (Figure 1), two independent variables, they are The Individual and Training in Effective Communication. Two moderating variables, they are Source and Informal communication

and One dependent variable Effective Informal Communication.

Independent Variables

Individual: The independent variable Individual has four influencing variables-Biographical characteristics, Personality, Type of Organization the individual works for, and the individual's position in the organization.

Biographical Characteristics: Personal characteristics like age, gender, marital status, number of dependents and tenure in the organization (Holland, 1985)

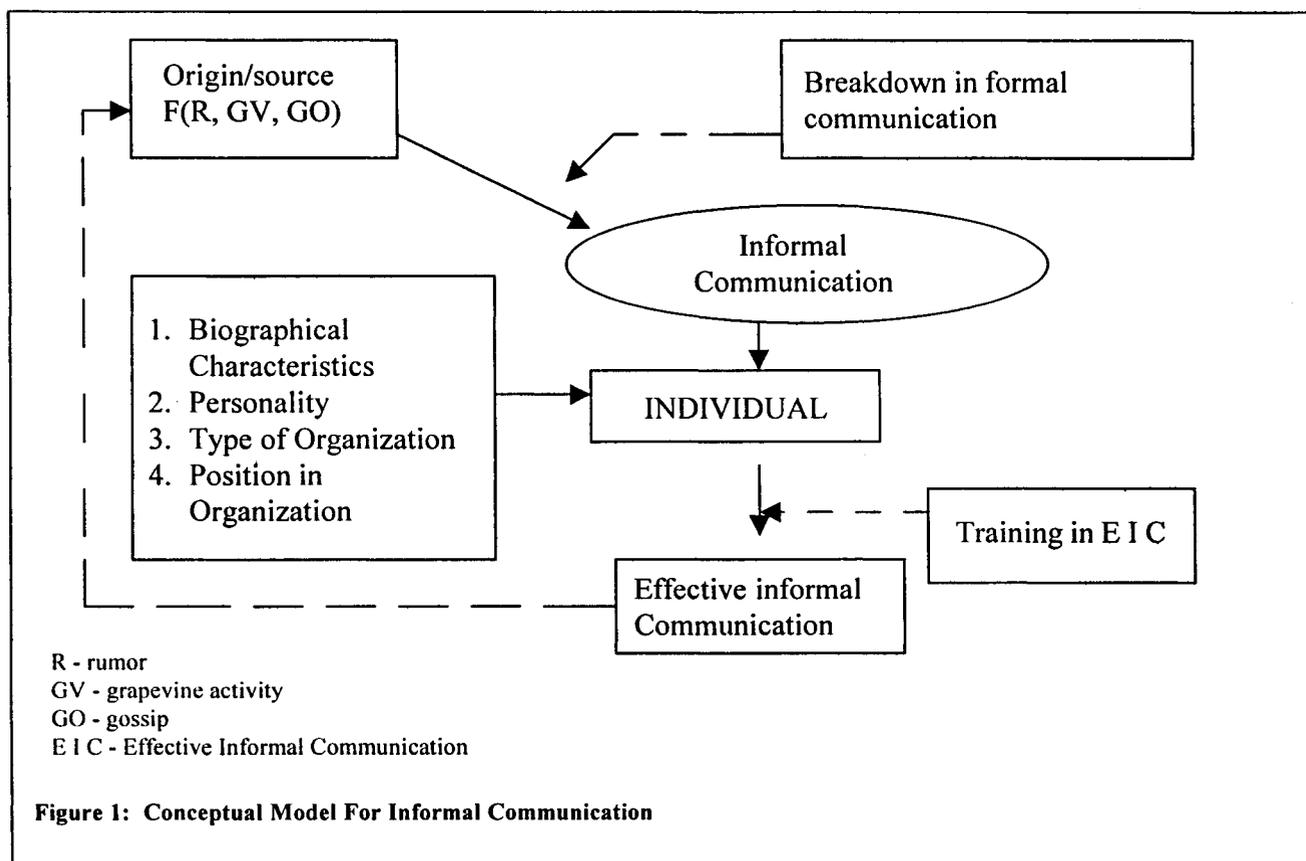
These are personal characteristics which will determine how an individual will perceive Informal communication in the organization. The exact nature of the relationship between Personal characteristics and informal communication has to be investigated.

Personality: Realistic, investigative, social, conventional, enterprising and artistic

(Holland, 1985). Holland's typology of Personality establishes a relation ship between an Individual's personality type with personality characteristic and congruent occupations. The individual's personality is likely to have a bearing on the Individual's perception and response to informal communication in the organization. The factors of locus of control, Machiavellianism, self esteem, self monitoring, risk taking ability etc also have a bearing. "Kiasu" is a common word in Hokkien, the dialect of Chinese, which literally means "scared-to-lose". "Kiasu" is described as a Singaporean code of behavior characterized by cautiousness, politeness, obedience and strong motivation.

(Nevo and Khader, 1995). There is a possibility that the degree of "Kiasuness" an individual possesses will determine the individual's response to informal communication. There is also a possibility that the degree of "Kiasuness" will vary according to age, gender, cultural background, country of origin etc.

Type of Organization: We look at organizations from the perspective of whether it's a Learning organization or a traditional organization. The learning organization embodies new capabilities. It is grounded in a culture based on transcendent values of love, wonder, humility and compassion; a set of practices for generative conversation and coordinated action and a capacity to see and work with the flow of life as a system. Learning organizations are spaces for conversations and concerted action in them, language functions as a device for



connection, invention and coordination. people can talk from their hearts and connect with one another in the spirit of dialogue, weaving a common fabric and connecting at a deep level of being (Peter, 2004). We feel that in a learning organization there would be an open environment, fostering feedback and the response to feedback would be more unbiased as the manager's job would be to enable others rather than control others.

Research needs to be conducted as to the relationship between a learning organization and the importance of informal communication. It is possible that a learning organization will have a lot more of positive informal communication than negative informal communication.

Position in the Organization: The individual's tendency to create or respond to informal communication is based on his/her position in the organization. Research has indicated that only 10 per cent of people actually act as liaison carriers (Davis, 1979). But, whether the person is in Top management or middle management or supervisory management may impact the response to informal communication.

Training in Effective Informal Communication

Our paper is based on the premise that we can train individuals to deal effectively with informal communication, not just as passive recipients, but as active listeners, and participants.

Training an individual in effective informal communication is aimed at improving an individual's awareness towards informal communication. The objective is to develop a model for training, which focuses on creating a clear understanding of the role of rumor, gossip and grapevine. To facilitate an individual's understanding of the power equations in the organization and to suggest techniques to understand and respond to informal communication in organizations.

MODERATING VARIABLES

Origin/Source

The first element impacting informal communication is the source of informal communication. Research conducted by Hodge, Crampton, Mishra (1998), Allyn and Brody, (1985) in the area of informal communication

has conclusively proved that breakdown of formal communication, rumor, gossip and grapevine activity together constitute informal communication.

When formal communication breaks down or is nonexistent, the environment becomes uncertain leading to greater opportunity for grapevine and rumor mill to run rampant (Zaremba, 1988). Grapevine can make employees feel resentful, embarrass managers, distort messages, make employees militant, and adversely affect managerial decision making (Zaremba, 1988). Rumors can drain productivity, lower profits; create stress within the work place and waste valuable time (Rosnow, 1994, Danziger, 1988)

Breakdown of formal communication means information which has resulted as an outcome of formal communication, i.e., orders, memos, letters etc. The message from the formal communication could be distorted or altered to suit the needs of the communicator.

Rumor is unsubstantiated information and has a wider perspective, whereas gossip has some presumption of factuality and is generally observed in more "private" circles (Michealson and Mouly, 2000).

Rumors have at least four purposes: to structure and reduce anxiety, to make sense of limited or fragmented information, to serve as a vehicle to organize group members and possibly outsiders into coalitions and to signal a sender's status (I am an insider and with respect to this rumor you are an outsider) or power (I have the power to make you an insider, Hirschhorn, 1983).

Grapevine has three characteristics (Newstrom, Monzka and Reif, 1989)

1. It is not controlled by management
2. It is perceived by most employees as being more believable and reliable than formal communications issued by top management.
3. It is largely used to serve the self interests of those people within it.

Informal Communication

Evidence indicates that about 75 per cent of what is carried in informal communication is accurate (Davis, 1979).

To summarize, research indicates that informal communication arises out of breakdown of formal communication, rumor, gossip and grapevine -all of which are an important part of any group or organization's

communication network and well worth understanding (Zaremba, 1998, Noon and Delbridge, 1993).

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Effective Informal Communication

The end result of the model is effective informal communication, when an individual has a clear understanding of the impact of informal communication and is equipped with the techniques of handling informal communication, he/she would communicate effectively.

The following section deals with the methodologies that can be used to train managers in effective informal communication.

ACTION MODEL FOR TRAINING MANAGERS IN EFFECTIVE INFORMAL COMMUNICATION

Introduction

This model is aimed at training managers for "between you and me" experiences. Most organizations—large or small, have an active informal communication network. There are many times when a manager finds himself/herself at a loss on how to respond to informal communication, or reacts in a manner which results in negative effects for himself/ herself. Research has shown that people manipulate others using informal communication. The authors feel that some formal guidelines in dealing with informal communication will put the organization's environment in perspective and the techniques suggested are aimed at creating a measured response to a given informal stimuli, rather than a spontaneous or knee-jerk reaction.

So, how does one deal with informal communication?

1. Should the individual listen or refuse to listen to Grapevine/ rumor/gossip?
2. Should the individual believe /trust the information shared? If so, to what extent?
3. How should the individual analyze the information?
4. If information shared is unfavorable or negative about the individual, what should the individual do?

These are all questions which most managers would want to address and the authors feel that formal training is required to deal with informal communication

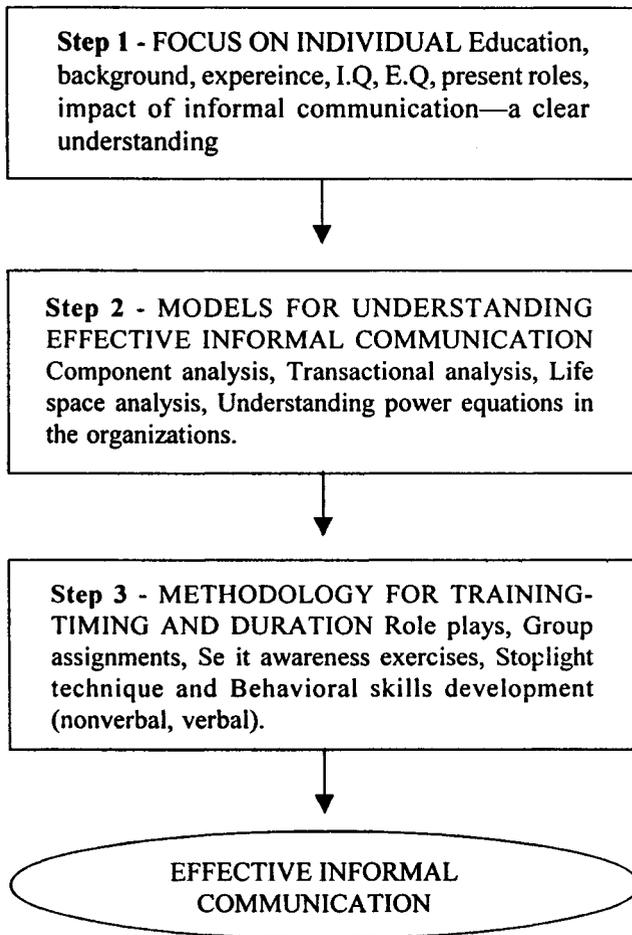


Figure 2: Model For Training Managers In Informal Communication

effectively. Figure 2 describes the suggested implementation scheme for training managers in informal communication.

Step 1 – Focus On the Individual

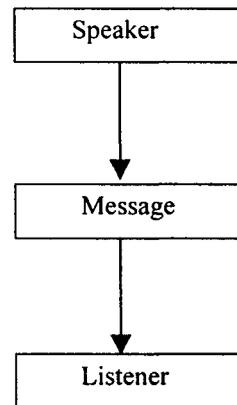
The first step in the training would be to make an assessment of the biographical characteristics of the individual in terms of age, gender, marital status, education, family background, professional qualification, intelligence quotient, emotional quotient (through accepted instruments). A special module would focus on exposing the individual to the impact of informal communication in an organization based on the classification of organizations as traditional or learning organization.

Step 2 – Models for Understanding Effective Informal Communication

There are three models which can be used to understand effective informal communication (Swets, 1987).

1. Component Analysis—A "Snap Shot" Approach

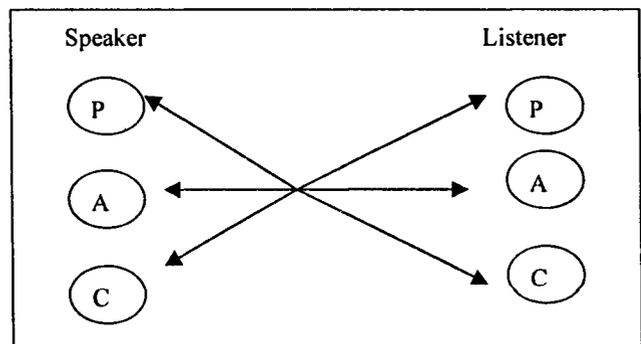
A simple model which focuses on the major components of the communication process.



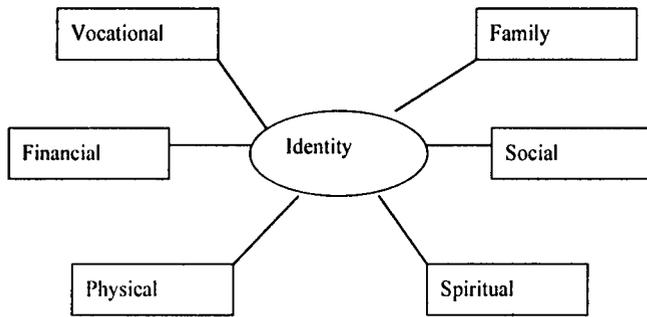
A breakdown could occur at any one of these components. Issues arising out of each component are dealt with—speakers' problems, message problems and listeners problems.

2. Transactional Analysis—A "Motion Picture" Approach

An effective tool, to understand interactive nature of communication. In Transactional Analysis theory, persons are said to normally exhibit three types of personality expression, regardless of age, which are



Where, P-parent
A-adult
C-child



designated as parent, adult and child. These designations describe certain recognizable types of expressions or “ego states”. If we were to use a Transactional Analysis Model to diagram most of the conversation patterns, they would look like this:

3. Life Space Analysis—“A Panoramic View”

Life space analysis lays emphasis on the situation or context in which every individual lives. A simple model for analyzing an individual's life space is to view that individual as an identity surrounded and influenced by six major areas of his/ her life.

Each category is part of an interlocking system. A problem in one area is likely to affect other areas. With limited knowledge of an individual's life situation the chances of misguiding or misunderstanding messages are significantly increased. Life space analysis makes an individual understand the other person in a dialogue and also gives insight to the individual's own life space.

Step 3 – Methodology for Training—Timing and Duration

Training in effective informal communication could be a part of Initial training programme (when an individual joins an organization), could be used in managerial training, and as a part of B-school skill development initiative. Duration of the training could be 20 hours split into 2 hour sessions over six weeks.

The techniques which can be utilized are role plays, group assignments, self awareness exercises (through established instruments), stoplight technique and behavioral skills development (nonverbal, verbal). The stoplight technique is explained below in some detail.

Stoplight Technique

The Stop light technique has been successfully implemented by developmental psychologists in the area

“STOPLIGHT”	
Red Light	1. Stop, calm down, and think before you act.
Yellow Light	2. Talk about the problem and how you feel. 3. Set a positive goal. 4. Think of lots of solutions. 5. Think ahead to the consequences.
Green Light	6. Go ahead and try the best plans.

of social and emotional learning (Elias and Weisberg, 1990; Caplan and Jacoby, 1992). This technique is a part of a life skills programme, which focuses on reading emotions from facial expressions, to understand others better-empathy, impulse control, and anger management.

For impulse control a poster is displayed prominently with the following six steps-

The stoplight technique offers a concrete set of steps for dealing with loaded emotions in a more measured way. Beyond a habitual way of handling the unruly emotional impulse- to think before acting from feelings- it can evolve into a balanced strategy to respond rather than react to a situation.

Behavioral Skills Development

When an individual interacts, both verbal and nonverbal behavioral skills impact the effectiveness of communication. Nonverbal skills training focuses on communicating through eye contact, facial expressiveness, tone of voice, gestures and so on.

Verbal skills training focuses on making clear requests, responding effectively to criticism, resisting negative influences, listening to others, helping others and participating in positive peer groups. (David Hawkins, 1992)

End Result-Effective Informal Communication

The authors feel that with a systematic approach as suggested in this model for training managers in effective informal communication, an individual would be able to understand and interpret informal communication and respond to it more effectively.

CONCLUSION

The role of informal communication in organizations is quite important. Rumor, gossip, grapevine activity and breakdown of formal communication constitute informal

communication and also impact organizational functioning. An understanding of the components of informal communication and making and a methodology to train managers to effectively deal with informal communication is required. Then, by applying the Models of informal communication and training proposed in this paper, managers would be able to understand, analyze and deal with their peers and superiors more effectively.

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