

Group Communication, Performance and Satisfaction in Organizations

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the relationships between communication, on the one hand, and performance and satisfaction of individuals within the organizational groups, on the other hand. The proposed framework is based on horizontal communication as well as on the main types of organizational networks, both formal and informal. First, we stress the relationship between group performance, the satisfaction of individual members of these groups and the configuration of the organizational communication network presented in the literature. Secondly, we argue that there are situations in the dynamics of today's organizations where these relationships are sometimes quite different, and finally we discuss the implications of different types of communication networks on performance and satisfaction.

Key words: organizational communication, communication network, work group, satisfaction, performance

J.E.L. classification: C91, C92, D23, D83, L29, M12

1. Introduction

The performance of organizational groups is a common topic in literature. For the purpose of this paper we will limit to the following meaning of the term, namely: performance of a group is given by the extent to which the group is effective and/or efficient (Zoltan, 2015, pp.55-56), depending on the nature of the tasks it has to fulfill.

The satisfaction of work group members is also intensively studied in connection with various organizational variables such as leadership, organizational culture, working conditions, etc. In short, the employees' satisfaction is given by the extent to which they feel satisfied with their jobs. And of course, this satisfaction depends on a multitude of factors, among which one of the most significant is communication.

And in case of formal communication, advantages and disadvantages of vertical communication both upward and downward are well known in literature. Instead, some issues are raised by the horizontal and oblique communication, especially at the organizational group level.

2. Horizontal communication and oblique communication

Horizontal communication takes place either within one and the same department, between its members, or between different departments, but located at the same hierarchical level.

Some compartments, specialized in areas such as marketing, research and development, human resources, and others perform specific functions of data collection and interpretation, providing relevant information to all interested compartments. Meetings of committees, including people from several departments, and written reports are just two of the most common forms of horizontal communication. (Nica and Iftimescu, 2004, p.367)

McQuail considers that this type of communication should have a more important place than is generally believed. One reason would be the higher tendency for people with an equal status to

speak to each other and not to superiors or subordinates of the organization, especially, though not exclusively, about topics which are not directly related to work (p.116). Diverse studies have revealed numerous "lateral" circuits in various organizations and concluded that a communication system that is non-formal and mainly lateral is essential for proper functioning of the organization. (McQuail, 1999, p.117)

And yet, this type of communication is often done with difficulty, which causes dysfunctions in the proper work of the organization. One explanation would arise from group theory. Departments that usually meet, in terms of number and structure, the characteristics of an interactive group acquire a *group psychology* through which they tend to self-valorize at the expense of other groups they are competing with within the organization. (Păuș, 2006, p.125) This *group psychology* can take shape of free riding, social loafing or sucker effect with serious long-term consequences on group performance. (Zoltan, 2014, p.125)

Although it seems paradoxical, both assertions are valid, but in different contexts, as we discuss in the following sections.

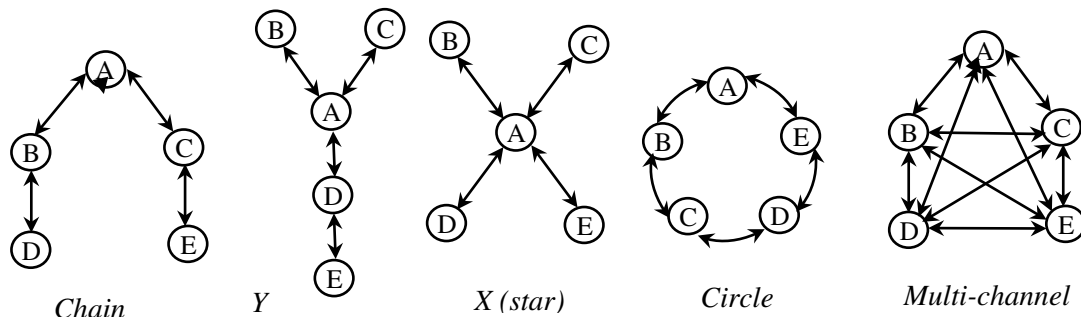
By oblique communication the flow of information circulates between people at different organizational levels without being mediated by middle managers - messages exchange take place in the general meetings of employees, in informative sessions as well as informally at events and celebrations initiated by the organization. Organizations with a modern vision believe that this form of communication is useful for interpersonal knowledge as well as for creating a cooperative climate within the organization. (Păuș, 2006, p.126)

This type of communication shortens the often long circuits of vertical communication. For example, an employee who has to solve a problem with a colleague from another service/department would waste much of his/her and his superiors time if his/her message goes through the entire hierarchical chain: first ascendant to the manager then horizontally, from one manager to another, next descended to his/her counterpart and the cycle restarts in the opposite direction. Thus, his/her performance and his/her work group performance will not suffer, per contra, if he/she has the possibility of oblique communication with his/her colleague from another organizational structure.

3. Performance and satisfaction in formal communication networks

The type of communication network influences the effectiveness of communication through channel accessibility for participants: there are *restrictive networks* that allow a person to reach only a certain part of the network and implicitly access just to a fragment, and not to the whole information, and *flexible networks*, where the participants have more freedom (virtually unlimited access) to use channels. In figure no. 1 are depicted the simplest such channels limited to a group of five members.

Figure no 1: Formal communication networks



Source: Vancea (2008, p.78)

The results of Leavitt's experiment show that the communication network affects the group functioning and especially that there is a direct relationship between the network's centrality and the group performance and morale. (Leavitt, 1951) More exactly, the group achieves maximum efficiency when it is placed in a centralized network. Centralized networks are the best both in

terms of production quality and achievement in terms of speed. Effects are conversely with regard to psychological aspects. The more centralized the network, the lower the satisfaction (despite the good results), because in less centralized networks the morale reaches the highest level. (Abric, 2002, p.175)

In case of restrictive (or rigid) networks (*chain*, Y , X), which have different degrees of centralization (highest for X , the lowest for *chain*), the access of the participants is unequal, the central person A having more information than the people on the periphery of the network; moreover, A can control the circulation of information serving as a bridge between the participants. Over time, by controlling the flow of information in the network, the central person will gain additional power - he/she will be able to control other network participants by granting or refusing access to information. As such, the central person will have a higher degree of satisfaction derived from communication than the peripheral members, whose satisfaction is inversely proportional to the distance from the center. (Luca, 2010, p.28)

Flexible networks (*circle*, *multi-channel*) are decentralized, with no person being in total control of information. Access to information is equal; none of the participants can make from information administration a source for individual power, which results in greater members' satisfaction than in restricted networks. Group morale is higher than in the previous case. These networks are inefficient, but unanimously appreciated.

In flexible networks, all participants have equal opportunities in the communication process and easily adapt to their duties. Satisfaction is high because no member is in the lead. (Georgescu, Gogoș, Dobîrceanu, 2005, p.44) The structure of these networks is democratic, and if there is a leader, it is interested in catalyzing, coordinating, facilitating the communication of all members of the group, not just some, so everyone is involved in the process. (Zlate, 2008, p.509)

In general, it is found that: *star* (or X) represents the most efficient group: the time needed to find the solution is lower, the number of messages is smaller, there are fewer errors, and the organizing structure is more stable, a central role is identified. On the contrary, *circle* involves more messages and leads to more errors. The organization of the group is low, with no special role being identified.

The two observations above, drawn from Leavitt's experiment, are: centralization increases group performance and defines an organizing role. (Amado and Guittet, 2007, p.75)

Thus, the role of an individual and the way he/she will communicate is directly related to his/her place in the communication structure: the more central is his/her position, the more important his/her role becomes. This differentiation implies consequences for the satisfaction of individuals experiencing this situation, namely: *circle* keeps the participants' adherence easier; in *star* (or X) configuration, disinterest installs the fastest and the level of satisfaction is the lowest. (Amado and Guittet, 2007, p.76)

These very important outcomes have been challenged. Resuming Leavitt's study and working with groups performing a complex task, Shaw (1964) reaches opposite results, in which case non-centralized networks prove to be the most performing and fastest. Similarly, Heise and Miller (1951) propose two different tasks to two experimental groups: a simple task (the same type as that used by Leavitt) and a complex task. The results confirm those obtained by Leavitt for simple task and are inverse (like Shaw's) for complex tasks.

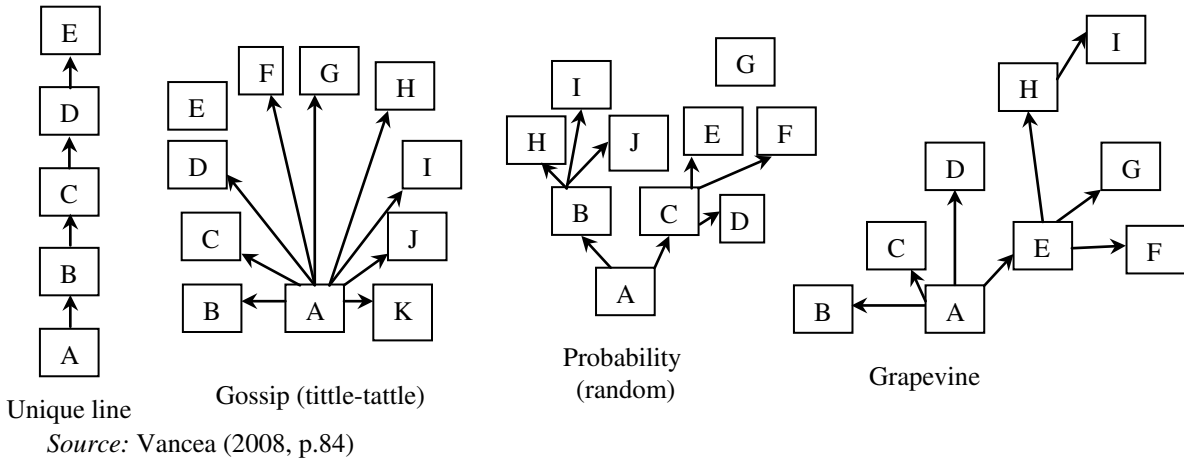
4. Performance and satisfaction in informal communication networks

Informal communication channels are spontaneously configured between people in different positions, compartments or departments. (Militaru, 2005, p.128) These channels pass through the organization and spread information between members of ad-hoc groups based on common sympathy and interests, groups that do not (necessarily) overlap with the subdivisions of the formal organizational structure. (Nica and Iftimescu, 2004, p.367)

The "cobweb" informal, unofficial, psychological connections is sometimes much more extensive and much stronger than the rigid and limited structure of formal communication. In informal communication, information circulates in all directions (ascending, descending, horizontally, diagonally, crosswise, etc.), "jumping" over hierarchical "nodes" (Zlate, 2008, p.504), the most known being those identified by Keith Davis (Davis, 1992) and shown in figure no. 2.

With respect to performance and considering that rarely a communication network within organizations is entirely and exclusively formal, groups' members which have to accomplish a common task will spend, more or less efficiently, their available time in formal communication acts, required to fulfill the task, and in informal communication acts, whether or not required to carry out the task. The extent to which informal communication will focus and ease the activities necessary to achieve the organizational objectives will depend on the degree of members' motivation in reaching the common targets.

Figure no.2: Informal communication networks



As in the case of formal networks, also in informal networks there are members with central positions concerning the access to information. If A member in X or Y networks coincides with A member in *gossip* or *grapevine* networks and uses information to reach organizational goals rather than to follow divergent interests, he/she can be both an efficient manager and an influential leader.

Although informal communication within organizations has, in general, a bad reputation, it is at the same time intensively studied, and also has its potential benefits recognized, such as: an alternative source of information, a means of clarifying formally information, a way of resolving conflicts, a possibility of creating new relationships between members and even more, it is a source of satisfaction for the majority of the members involved in informal communication networks.

Since informal networks can be neither prohibited nor suppressed, managers of departments and organizations which includes various working groups should encourage them in order to obtain an appropriate feedback from these groups, especially during difficult periods of changes or reorganization of activities.

Furthermore, managers need to know informal channels and use them being that through maximizing the information flow towards employees in this manner, group members', having what they perceive as sufficient information about the organization, will feel that they belong to the organization and will achieve adequate levels productivity. (Vancea, 2008, p.82) This sense of belonging denotes the satisfaction of members being considered important to the organization and, at the same time, the satisfaction of knowing that their efforts are known and appreciated by management.

5. Discussion

The communication network therefore influences the performance and the type and volume of communication, the level of satisfaction. In addition, the position of each individual in the communication network depends on his/her chances of becoming a leader, his level of activity within the group and the degree of satisfaction. Consequently, the adequacy between the nature of the task and the communication structure brings forward the performance. (Abric, 2002, p.179)

It's worth to be noticed, however, that there are situations when performance is not possible without the simultaneous satisfaction of members. It's about highly creative groups in which communication in all directions and with all colleagues - thus both horizontal and oblique, formal

and informal - is absolutely necessary in order to achieve, for example, a new product, service or manufacturing process. In this case, the term productivity and just in time performance are no longer useful, but the result will compensate the consumed time for reaching the specific, and often unique, goal. In other words, these groups must be first and foremost effective, and then efficient.

Likewise, although *task force* is a formal group, including members of the organization that interact with each other to carry out non-routine activities (Vancea, 2015, p.161), *task force* members need to communicate with each other and with other members of the organization without the restrictions imposed by hierarchically-centralized formal networks. Therefore, the formal-informal distinction is no longer clear, and the strict use of channels established through the organizational chart is no longer possible, which is quite common in flexible, innovation-oriented organizations.

Afterwards, there are many work groups that can not reach their goals without each member having the same access to information as the potential leader, that person who has a central position in the communication network. Equally, in groups with less complex tasks members do not need all the information held by the leader to achieve their share from the entire task of the group. On the contrary, in this second case, the excess of information will only unnecessarily overload members as long as this information is of no use to them in performing their activities.

Thus, the ultimate idea that needs to be emphasized is that the communication network must have the optimal configuration in order to allow the group to achieve the expected performance and, equally, to allow the members satisfaction not to fall below the limit of which groups members to cease making the necessary efforts to accomplish the tasks or these efforts to be much diminished compared to what they could have done in a context of more satisfying communication. Some possible effects of members less efforts made for achieving the group objectives are attributed to decreased motivation and, as we have already mentioned, the most known are free riding, social loafing and sucker effect. One of the common causes of these undesirable effects, which otherwise are different in manifestations and main origins, is the lack of clear, open and sufficient communication, which in turn, is due to incongruence between the task demands and the communication needs of group members.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of horizontal communication is to coordinate efforts to achieve its own departmental goals or organizational common objectives. The low number of social barriers between the communicating parties sometimes makes it close to informal communication, but it is not always informal. In any case, lateral communication, either horizontal or oblique, is as more important as the compartments and groups are more dependent and require more interaction for the proper running of the activities. (Vancea, 2004, p.136)

The contradictory results regarding the degree of centralization of the communication network and the performance and satisfaction of the group members can be explained by the following: the effects of the communication network depend on the type of task. Centralized networks are suitable for simple tasks, while homogeneous, decentralized networks are effective for complex tasks. (Abric, 2002, p.176) As regards members' satisfaction, this will depend on the members' access to information and to other members both within a formal network and in the case of an informal network.

If flexible networks (*circle* or *multi-channel*) can also be informal or a formal-informal mixed combination focused on task completion, the rigid ones (especially *X* or *Y*), by restricting access to information for some members, eliminates to a great measure the possibility of interpersonal communication, with its potential benefits mainly related to information aimed at improving or just supporting the work of marginalized members (like *I* member in formal network *Y* or *G* member in informal network *probability* and *grapevine*).

Finally, we emphasize that fine distinction regarding the relationships between communication, performance and satisfaction at the work group level can go deeper, such as considering group and team differentiation (Zoltan and Vancea, 2015) and/or Steiner's famous classification of group tasks (Steiner, 1972), endeavor which can be in the future a promising area of research.

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