

Although Emily and William are located in different buildings on the same site, their work requires them to co-operate regularly. Their relations are getting more and more strained and their work is suffering.

Required:

Identify and describe the barriers to communication between the two colleagues.

3.3 Consequences of ineffective communication

If the organisation fails to deal with the barriers to communication, its internal and external communications may become significantly less useful.

Lack of downward communication is likely to result in:

- poor awareness of corporate objectives at lower management levels
- poor understanding of working instructions and responsibilities
- poor morale of junior managers because they are not consulted about changes which affect them or their working conditions.

Lack of upward communication, including 'feedback', has the following undesirable consequences for management:

- early warning of troubled areas is not received
- benefit of creative ability in subordinates is lost
- participation of subordinates is limited
- need for change is not appreciated because management is isolated from the operation areas
- control becomes difficult
- introduction of change is difficult.

Lack of lateral communication often leads to:

- divisions in management teams
- lack of co-ordination
- rivalry between sections and departments
- lack of advice and involvement by staff specialists.



Illustration 2 – Communications in the workplace

Perhaps the best way to think about the way in which communication can go wrong is to consider what good communication would be like:

- It would use appropriate language (e.g. no jargon; written so that the intended recipient can understand it).
- It would go only to who should receive it – not to everyone.
- It would use the right medium to communicate the information.
- The information would get to the recipient in good time for it to be used.

Taking the above list, it is easy to produce a list of how communications go wrong:

- Information is omitted or distorted by the sender.
- Information is misunderstood due to the use of inappropriate jargon or lack of clarity.
- Information is presented using an inappropriate medium (e.g. via email rather than in a proper report, or via telephone when face-to-face is better).
- Information arrives too late, or is incomplete.

3.4 Overcoming barriers to communication

In order to avoid these problems, management should first identify any barriers to communication within their organisation and then consider practical ways of dealing with them.

These could include:

- agree and confirm priorities and deadlines for the receipt of information
- spend sufficient time ensuring that the information is sent to all the right people
- keep communication as simple as possible, avoiding jargon
- confirm that the information sent has been received and understood
- avoid inconsistent verbal/non-verbal communication, as this tends to confuse the receivers.



Illustration 3 – Communications in the workplace

A manager, Manuel, is frequently accused of upsetting his staff by the tone of his memos. How can this situation be resolved?

Manuel could spend time reading memos sent by other managers then compare and contrast both the content and tone with that of his own memos. He can call more meetings or speak to staff individually rather than sending memos all the time. He can ask staff, informally, what they dislike about his memos. He can make it clear to staff that the memos are not intended to cause offence. He can ask to, be asked to, or arrange to, attend a short course on communication skills.

Although anticipating is preferable to reacting to problems when they occur, this is not always possible. Unexpected difficulties will invariably arise. Example of these include:

- Unexpected breakdowns of equipment may occur.
- A communication method may be inappropriate for a particular message.
- Receiver(s) may not be in the correct frame of mind to accept a message.
- Messages may be delayed causing mistrust and suspicion.
- An official message may be received before a manager has the opportunity to discuss an issue informally with their staff.
- People may not be available to receive important messages.

Ultimately, successful communication depends on continuous feedback and monitoring of existing communication systems. Information received from monitoring should be evaluated and findings acted on swiftly. If difficulties are identified these need to be corrected before further damage can occur.



Test your understanding 5

Five possible barriers to communication are as follows.

- The persons communicating might come from very different backgrounds, in terms of work experience and expertise, or socially. Substantial age differences, and lifestyles, can also create barriers to communication.
- The message might be distorted in transmission, e.g. if it has to be transmitted to several people before it reaches the end user.
- In a multi-national organisation employees might have to overcome a language barrier to communicate with each other.
- If there is information overload, an individual might be given too much information, and be unable to understand the message.
- Where there is conflict within the organisation, and two individuals or departments are hostile towards each other, communications from one to the other will be treated with suspicion or disbelief.

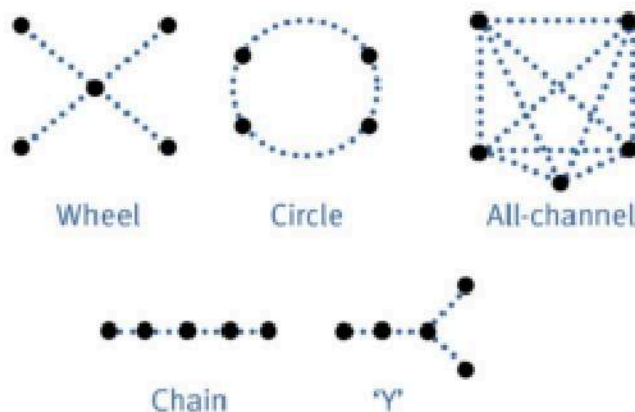
Required:

Suggest how these five barriers could be overcome.

4 Communication patterns

A communication pattern illustrates how individuals communicate with each other within a group or organisation.

Leavitt identified five major patterns of communication: wheel (or star), circle, all-channel, chain and 'Y'.



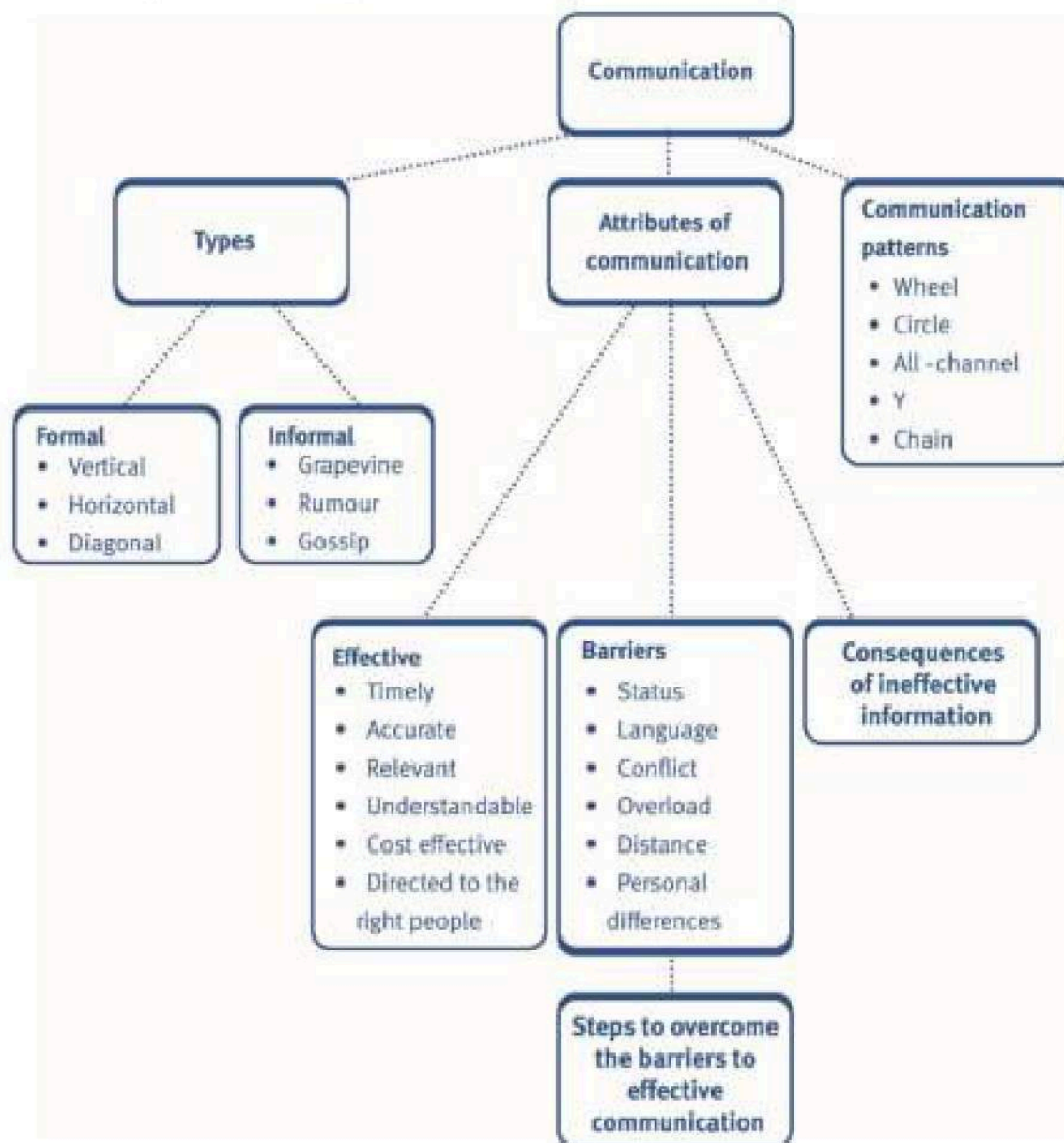
These five can be grouped into two main types:

- centralised networks** – chain, wheel and 'Y' – group members have to go through a central person in order to communicate with others. This leads to unequal access to information within the group
- decentralised networks** – circle and all-channel – information flows freely between members without having to go through a central person.

Leavitt's main conclusions were that:

- The wheel is always the fastest way to reach a conclusion, making it ideal for problem-solving. The circle is the slowest.
- For complex problems, the all-channel is the most likely to reach the best decision.
- The level of satisfaction for individuals was highest in the circle, fairly high in the all-channel and relatively low in the other, centralised networks. The centralised networks saw high job satisfaction for the central figure, with the remaining members feeling isolated.

5 Chapter summary



6 Practice questions



Test your understanding 6

Julie, an office junior, is asked to send a message to the head of another department. What type of communication is this?

- A Diagonal
- B Horizontal
- C Lateral
- D Vertical



Test your understanding 7

Which of the following is not usually a purpose of lateral or horizontal communication?

- A Task co-ordination
- B Problem solving
- C Giving instructions
- D Conflict resolution



Test your understanding 8

Which of the following patterns of communication would be best if a quick decision is needed?

- A Chain
- B Y
- C All-channel
- D Wheel



Test your understanding 9

Which of the following is a likely consequence of a lack of downward communication within an organisation?

- A Rivalry between sections and departments
- B Difficulty when introducing change
- C Poor awareness of corporate objectives at lower levels
- D Early warning of problems is not received



Test your understanding 10

Communication can be structured in many different ways within organisations, including wheel, circle, all-channel and Y patterns.

Identify which pattern of communication relates to each of the following statements.

- A This is the fastest way of reaching a conclusion.
- B This is the best pattern for dealing with a complex decision.
- C This produces the highest overall level of satisfaction for participants.
- D Along with the wheel, this is an example of a centralised network.

For each of the following, select ONE of A, B, C or D.

- (i) **All-channel**
- (ii) **Circle**
- (iii) **Wheel**
- (iv) **Y**

Test your understanding answers



Test your understanding 1

The correct answers are:

- (i) Diagonal
- (ii) Horizontal
- (iii) Vertical



Test your understanding 2

The correct answer is A – True

Vertical and lateral (horizontal) communication flows are associated with hierarchical organisations. Vertical communication flows up and down the scalar chain, from boss to subordinate and from subordinate to boss. Lateral communication flows between colleagues or between different sections and departments.

Very little formal horizontal communication may occur in an organisation that is managed in an authoritarian style. This is because the manager 'at the top' wants to know everything that is happening, and wants to be involved in all decision making. Information must therefore be passed up to the top manager so that decisions can be passed back down to someone else.



Test your understanding 3

- 1 **False** – informal communications in the workplace are inevitable and management should recognise it and use it to their advantage.
- 2 **True** – in the absence of a formal communication system, rumour and gossip will receive too much employee attention and belief.
- 3 **True** – there are circumstances when management can effectively harness the informal system.
- 4 **True.**



Test your understanding 4

Analysis of the case reveals that there are a variety of reasons for the barriers in communication that exist between William and Emily. The major reasons are:

Differences in social background; for instance, age, education, marital status, etc. These might result in:

- failure to understand each other's point of view, values and priorities
- failure to listen to the information the other person is giving
- lack of shared 'vocabulary', which might lead to lack of understanding of the message
- stereotyping each other into specific classes with similar traits and characteristics, e.g. 'stick-in-the-mud'.

William and Emily are located in different departments and buildings which may mean they do not share the same departmental objectives and may not have the opportunity to meet and discuss their differences face-to-face. Communication which is limited to telephone calls prevents access to non-verbal messages, which could provide additional information about each other.

Personal barriers may exist which will hinder effective communication. These may be due to:

- Distrust and feeling threatened by and fearing the computerised systems, which can result in any information provided by the system being viewed with scepticism.
- Emily seeing William as an older person who has failed to advance his career, having reached only junior manager, which may result in her talking down to him. On the other hand William may resent Emily being promoted to supervisor at a relatively young age.
- Emily resenting William working 9 to 5, and exhibiting a reluctance to become familiar with the computerised system. William may feel that his family commitments do not allow him to give the extra time required to the organisation, in order that he may learn more about the new computer system.
- Emily's attitude leading her to make comments which imply criticism of people like William and this could lead to a degree of resentment on the part of William which may also restrict communication.

If the situation described in the question causes personal conflict or antagonism between William and Emily, then further communication problems can occur:

- emotions (anger, fear, frustration) will creep into communications and further hinder the transmission of clear information
- the receiver of the information will tend to hear what they want to hear in any message and ignore anything they do not want to accept.



Test your understanding 5

- (a) When individuals communicating with each other come from different backgrounds, they should be encouraged by management to show consideration for the other person. When an engineer communicates with an accountant, the engineer must be wary of using engineering jargon without explaining it, just as accountants must be careful of using accounting and finance terms that non-accountants are unlikely to know. A highly-educated person, when communicating with someone less educated, should choose their words carefully, so that their message is clear and understandable.
- (b) Communication flows should be organised so that there are as few links in the communication chain as possible between the sender of the message and its eventual recipient. Lateral communications should replace unnecessary upward and downward communication flows. Electronic communication systems should contribute towards this aim.
- (c) Language difficulties can be reduced in two ways. First, employees should be given language training as appropriate in another language. Secondly, the organisation should select an official language for all its meetings at a certain level of management and above. In many global corporations, English is the official language.
- (d) Information overload can be reduced by improvements in reporting systems. For long reports, there should be a much briefer summary containing all the essential points and recommendations. Control reports should use reporting by exception, and draw attention to performance of an unusual or unexpected nature (such as large variances). Narrative can be summarised into tables and diagrams.
- (e) Attempts to resolve conflict between individuals or departments should be made by the management in charge of them both. A solution to the problem of conflict is partly an improvement in communications. Management should arrange for more direct contact between individuals in different departments, and should use their interpersonal skills to try to overcome misunderstandings and disagreements.



Test your understanding 6

The correct answer is A

Julie is communicating with someone who is in a different department AND at a different level of the hierarchy to her.

Note that horizontal and lateral communication are the same.



Test your understanding 7

The correct answer is C

Lateral communication refers to communication between individuals at the same level of the organisation's hierarchy. This means that they will be unlikely to have the authority to give each other orders.

The other main purpose of lateral communication is information sharing.



Test your understanding 8

The correct answer is D

The wheel is always seen as the fastest approach to reaching a conclusion.



Test your understanding 9

The correct answer is C

A tends to be a problem without lateral communication, when different sections of the organisation do not communicate with each other. B and D are problems caused by a lack of upward communication, with managers failing to listen to more junior workers.

C is caused by poor downwards communication, where management fail to communicate with junior staff, leading to a lack of awareness of corporate objectives among the workers.



Test your understanding 10

The correct answers are:

- (i) B
- (ii) C
- (iii) A
- (iv) D

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