Practically everyone is familiar with the old, old anecdote from the First World War where the message transmitted from the trenches urgently asked for reinforcements for an impending advance, but the message received at company headquarters baffled all the brigadiers by asking for three and fourpence because the unit was going to a dance. The failure, of course, was a failure of communication. Similar failures occur during every minute of every industrial day: a microchip factory is brought to the edge of bankruptcy because the ventilating engineer fails to communicate the correct grade of air filters and the resulting atmospheric dust reduces the reliability of the chips to the point where their main customer withdraws his orders; an apprentice loses his right testicle because the safety officer’s talk contained too many facts for him to assimilate; and an employee emerges from a disciplinary interview with the conviction that, despite actual words, his boss does not have any really serious objection to him arriving late for work. These are a few examples of failures of communication in industry.

Many other, classic, examples can be seen in organizations: the failure of the salesman to communicate important market changes to the production and design departments; the failure of the negotiator to make it clear that the offer really is final; and the failure of the chief executive who slows down his whole organization by insisting that all letters, reports, invoices and specifications are channelled through him. Mintzberg’s analysis, which was described in Chapter 2, shows that communication is one of the most important activities a manager must undertake. In a formal sense a manager must communicate to both his superiors and to his subordinates.
Formal—informal and upwards—downwards communication

There is a natural tendency to think of formal communication as flowing downwards from the chief executive to the operative, along the channels shown in an organization chart. In a perfectly predictable, simple and static world, where chief executives know everything, formal downward communication might be all that is needed. But in a complex and changeable world where chief executives exhibit human fallibilities, upward communication is also important, otherwise higher management will continue to evolve an elaborate corporate strategy without realizing the existence of such 'minor' problems as below-target sales figures caused by a collapse of the motivation of the sales team when a zealous accountant introduces new administrative checks on their expense claims.

In addition to the upward and downward communication within the formal organizational structure, a manager must be aware of informal channels of communication. A great deal of a manager's information is obtained from people who, in a formal sense, have no obligation to him. Nevertheless, every organization has its grapevine which develops largely on the basis of personal friendships and proximity (see section on informal groups in Chapter 8). A particularly important aspect of these informal channels are the lateral communications between managers of similar rank. The lateral communications are important in co-ordinating the day-to-day efforts of the organization, and building up norms within groups of managers. Informal communication networks have two particular characteristics: they are quick, and they are inaccurate. Very often, the first news of redundancy within a firm is obtained not from the immediate superior but from a friend, or from the manager in the adjoining office. Indeed, a manager's superior may have received specific instructions not to divulge details of the redundancy until a later date. Managers develop their own informal channels of communication, in part because they are aware of the possibility of a premeditated block in the formal system of communication.

The basic communication process

Whatever the formality or the direction, the process of communication follows the basic pattern shown in Figure 7.1.