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Communication in Organizations

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We saw in Chapter 2 how communication is an important part of the manager’s job. Many studies of managerial work have shown that managers, on average, spend a large proportion of their time working with others. So, if only because of the amount of time the typical manager spends interacting with people, we have to conclude that communication in organizations is important. Though it is clear that managers have an almost over-riding preference for oral communication they do spend some of their time, albeit a small proportion, generating or reading written communications.

The various studies of managerial work also reveal something of the nature of the interaction and the parties involved. For example, Rosemary Stewart’s (1967) work showed that of the time spent interacting with others around 41 per cent of it was with subordinates, 12 per cent with bosses, and the remaining 47 per cent with others, such as managerial peers. From this we can see that some communication within organizations is vertical — upwards or downwards — and some of it is lateral.

All this talk at work is not confined just to managers. For example the study of car workers by Goldthorpe et al. (1968) showed that workers on the shop floor are active talkers; 47 per cent said they spent ‘a good deal’ of their time talking with others with a further 39 per cent saying ‘now and then’.

Such interpersonal communication is, however, just one way of viewing communication in organizations. There is another: this is termed employee communication which is usually
taken to mean the systems by which management and employees communicate with each other. Here, by contrast to managers’ preferences for oral methods, written means of communication predominate.

The Purposes of Communication in Organizations

Let us first consider employee communication and the reasons why managements communicate with their workers.

Because it is the Law

Various statutory provisions require employers to convey certain information to their staff. This might be information about conditions of service, about health, safety and welfare, or about what the company has done to further employee involvement. A useful summary of the legislative requirements is to be found in Townley (1989). More generally, some organizations take the moral view that employees have a right to receive company information. At one level then employee communication is concerned simply with informing staff because the organization is obliged to do so, whether legally or morally.

For the Good of the Staff

Here we are concerned with employee morale and wellbeing. Amongst the several characteristics of jobs identified by Warr (1987) as being associated with good mental health are such factors as the opportunity for interpersonal contact and environmental clarity. This refers to the provision of information about the results of behaviour, the future, and required behaviour – in other words, the sorts of things covered by an appraisal system. Communication is an inherent aspect of these characteristics. However, it hardly seems likely that employers are being wholly altruistic in their motives for fostering positive morale. Quite apart from this one has to wonder whether a formal communication scheme is necessarily the best way of achieving this purpose. For example, an