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Open Communication Climate

Communication, through both formal and informal channels, is the lifeblood of any organization. In reading about communication environments, channels, processes, systems, and hierarchies, we sometimes lose sight of the essence of the communication act: it is profoundly human. At the center of every organization are people held together by slender threads of cooperation. These threads are maintained by people sharing information with each other. The result is a delicate network of human relationships linked through communication.

In these networks, information is a commodity. It has value, can be exchanged, and is crucial to the success of launching a project, selling a product, or marketing a service. Unfortunately, people sometimes refuse to exchange this crucial information. They often erect *barriers* to shut out others in situations they consider hostile. Most communication mishaps in organizations can be traced to these barriers. They impede information exchange and thereby disrupt the orderly flow of activity. Because of barriers, people fail to inform others of a meeting, a project deadline or a client need; they neglect to compliment co-workers on a job well-done; they even lash out at others for little or no reason.

Often these barriers, resulting in a *closed communication climate,* cause lost business, damaged reputations, endangered goodwill, and general unhappiness. Research shows that an *open communication climate* is desirable because it enhances human relationships, which occasion increased morale and productivity.

After reading this article, you should have a clear understanding of

1. the nature and benefits of *open communication* climate;
2. the definition of *supportive environment, participative environment, and trusting environment*; and
3. aspects of *defensive barriers* that affect communication,

Supportive, Participative, and Trusting Communication

Communication climate can be defined as the internal environment of information exchange among people through an organization's formal and informal networks. Communication climate is *open* when information flows freely; *closed* when information is blocked.

In an *open climate,* employees feel free to express opinions, voice complaints, and offer suggestions to their superiors. Employees talk freely among themselves about important policy decisions and their production, personnel, or marketing concerns. Information passes without distortion upward, downward, and horizontally throughout the organization. Research shows that this *open communication climate* has at least three distinct characteristics: it is *supportive, participative,* and *trusting.*

Supportive Environments

In supportive environments, employees convey information to superiors without hesitation, confident that superiors will readily accept it, whether good or bad, favorable or

unfavorable. A worker, for example, who reports an EPA violation in the company's disposing of hazardous waste must be assured of management's support. If employees think that reporting regulatory violations to their superiors will brand them as whistleblowers, thereby endangering their jobs, they will probably say nothing. But because supportive superiors are seen as non-threatening, perhaps even nurturing, employees will usually open up to them and share unpleasant or dangerous information.

Fear, shame, and pride encourage people to keep their mouths shut if they feel vulnerable or unsupported. In a meeting, for example, an individual may not tell the group that product delivery will be late because the receiving agents were not notified in time. A late delivery date puts the whole marketing plan in jeopardy, resulting in millions dollars lost and in eroded market share. With so much at stake, the employee's self-protective reaction to say nothing, in a non-supportive climate, is a rational choice to safeguard employment.

Communication closes down in non-supportive environments because information poses a threat. In supportive environments, employees communicate more readily for a number of reasons: The reporting mechanism accords them dignity and respect. They have no need to fear reprisals for sharing bad news. They are rewarded for being forthright. And they are appreciated as vital sources of information crucial to the organization's success.

Participative Environments

Employees have to feel that what they say counts for something. The best suggestions for improving production processes, for example, come from employees who work everyday on the assembly line. Sales people know what the customers want because they are in daily contact. Customer service representatives are acquainted firsthand with the technical and functional problems that can spell future marketing disasters. All these employees have valuable information that must be shared with the organization's decision makers. The information will be shared if employees feel management regards them as legitimate *participants* in the enterprise. Employees know they are valued participants when their suggestions are implemented, their questions answered, and their concerns recognized.

Sometimes, however, employee participation is not actively deterred by management but rather by the corporate structure, the competitive business environment, or environmental regulatory agencies. Highly formalized, bureaucratic organizations, for example, through their complex reporting procedures, encumbering paperwork, and labyrinth of regulatory guidelines, tend to discourage active participation and thereby stifle the free flow of information. For instance, if the paperwork in implementing an improvement is overwhelming, employees rarely submit suggestions. People opt for the path of least resistance. If the burden always rests with the action initiator, few will initiate action. Thus, bureaucratic systems discourage participation by imposing penalties on initiative. It's easier to do nothing and suffer a tolerable inconvenience than to pursue corrective action and incur an intolerable cost of time, patience, and energy.

Taking action is the key, therefore, to encouraging employee participation. Those for whom the message is intended must act upon the information they receive. Managers, supervisors, and team leaders must listen to grievances, complaints, or suggestions and respond *both* in word and deed. Communication that results simply in talking about situations but in doing nothing about them is a waste of everyone's time. Open

communication puts both sides at risk, however, because in the process of recognizing employees as participants, supervisors must open themselves up to criticism, must explain their actions, and must actually correct difficult situations. And as participants, supervised employees must be willing to articulate difficulties for which they share responsibility with management. Ultimately, employees and supervisors must work collaboratively to ensure successful implementation of communicated intentions.

Trusting Environments

All parties in information exchange must tell the truth as they perceive it. They must also ensure that information is correct. Credibility is any employee's greatest asset. A reputation for carelessness, lying, deceit, or manipulation undercuts all future messages. The result of credibility is *trust;* it underpins all human relationships. Employees have to *believe* their information sources. If, for example, at weekly meetings, the staff hears contradictory information about project plans, decisions, or salary, they will dismiss all information because they cannot confidently choose which to believe. If one week they are told the start-up date is November 14, the next week November 20, and following week November 7, they will understandably dismiss *all* the information as not credible.

Repeated instances of passing such contradictory information will corrupt the integrity of the communication channel. People quickly dismiss information sources that prove to be wrong or untrustworthy. For the communication climate to remain open, the information must be true and the source trusted. Belief in the source's ability to convey accurate information and to follow through with appropriate action is thus essential in maintaining open communication.

Defensiveness and Communication Barriers

Open communication climates derive from the nature of the people participating in the information transactions. *Barriers* to open communication ultimately spring from an individual's unfavorable past experiences. Our nature and background shape our values, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and expectations. Because our sense of self-worth and dignity evolve from these, we often erect barriers to defend them from attack. Some people have deep-seated psychological needs for these defenses; others have short-term tactical needs.

People may hide behind *defensive barriers* because of deep-seated feelings of inadequacy. Employees, for example, whose egos cannot tolerate criticism simply will not share information that exposes them to personal critique. Unable to assert themselves, they refuse to voice opinions, make suggestions for improvement, take the initiative in forming tasks, lead project teams, cold-call customers, correct wayward employees, or perform any of the myriad chores that could oust them from their silent withdrawal into *psychological safety.*

If such people somehow rise to supervisory or management levels, they are usually comfortable only in giving unquestioned orders and directives, in tending to routine, and in operating within thoroughly controlled, self-protective, situations. In an open communication climate, these people withdraw by erecting defensive barriers that establish a *safer* and more predictable environment.

For people without deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, *defensiveness* may be marked by the need to close down communication because information-sharing poses some kind of

short-term, tactical disadvantage or discomfort. In a meeting, for example, employees may remain silent because speaking out will make them vulnerable. They may be asked to elaborate and not have the facts at hand. They may be forced to defend an unpopular decision. They may lack confidence in their vocabulary or logical skills to engage others in the give-and-take of robust debate. Or perhaps they fear they will be caught in error or that someone will belittle them for asking a stupid question or making a silly comment. Rather than say anything and appear the fool, they choose to say nothing. Unfortunately, such defensiveness can have serious ramifications for the organization. In protecting themselves, employees may put everyone at risk by withholding information crucial to a sound decision.

A person truly open in communicating with others must continually guard against erecting these defensive barriers, whatever the cause, for self-defense ultimately inhibits *honest* exchange of information. Such honesty, however, does not come easily for any of us. How courageous, for example, the supervisor who sits in a staff meeting and listens to blisteringly honest criticism of the working conditions, salary, operational dysfunctions, amenities, safety issues, procedures, and level of management support. Few people actually enjoy such forthright discussion of shortcomings.

But lowering defenses, and encouraging honest information exchange, is the only way to guarantee a climate in which truth can thrive. And, while the risks in an open communication climate can be high, the rewards can be great. Typically, these rewards include increased worker morale; prompt notification of, and solutions to, problems; a sense of collaboration, as all work together to articulate operations and policies; and an increased empowerment of employees, who come to see themselves as central to the success of the corporate enterprise.

Summary

Open communication climates encourage employees through supporting them, through allowing them to participate in decision making, and, through trusting them, which assures the integrity of information channels. Ultimately, the openness of any communication climate depends upon the character of the participants. Openness often demands courage because the communicator operates with lowered or eliminated defensive barriers, even when standing up to verbal assault. Because open communicators have to articulate their positions in meetings, public arenas, and in print, they must be secure individuals, confident in their own positions, ability, and authority. Yet, while open communication climate may make formidable personal demands, such openness ultimately rewards both the individual and the organization in providing an environment where people thrive and enterprise flourishes.

Discussion Questions

Reflect upon your own experiences in the workplace. Would you say that you have worked in relatively *open* or *closed* communication environments?

In your experience, what has contributed to a supervisor's communicating *support* for employees?

As a supervisor, what might you be able to do in communicating with your employees to assure that their suggestions and complaints are welcome? How could you encourage their active *participation?*

How might a person foster *trust* in communicating with others? What are the essential elements of *trust?*

As you reflect upon your own personality, what causes you to erect *defensive barriers* in communicating with others? Identify some of the *barriers* that you have seen others erect.

Additional readings

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(3) Deal, T. and A. Kennedy, *Corporate Culture: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life,* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982.

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(5) Goldhaber, Gerald M., *Organizational Communication,* Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1990.

(6) O'Reilly, C. A., "Intentional Distortion of Information in Organizational Communication: a Laboratory and Field Investigation," *Human Relations,* February 1978, 173-193.

(7) Redding, W., *Communication within the Organization,* New York: Industrial Communication Council, 1973.