



BLOCK MRH.104
**EFFECTIVE
COMMUNICATION**

Preface

Previous Blocks of this module have looked at the structure of housing organisations and their obligations to employees.

This Block looks at communication within the organisation and examines the importance of motivation of staff to housing organisations.

Outcomes

On completion of this Block you should be able to:

- understand the role and importance of communication within organisations;
- identify the distinctive features of written, oral and non-verbal communication;
- describe formal structures of communication;
- describe informal mechanisms of communication;
- identify common barriers to communication;
- identify methods by which communication problems may be resolved; and
- identify methods for implementing effective communication.

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A. The Role and Importance of Communication Within Organisations

1. Why is Good Communication Important?

Activity

Think about the organisation you work for, and identify the different groups of people that need to communicate with the organisation (for example, customers), or within the organisation (for example, management, housing officers).

Communicating with the organisation (from outside):

Communicating within the organisation:

Time allocation: 10 minutes

Depending on the type of organisation you work for, you should have been able to identify many groups such as:

Communicating with the organisation from outside:

- customers
- council officers
- contractors
- tenants' associations
- government departments
- professional bodies (such as the Chartered Institute of Housing or the National Housing Federation).

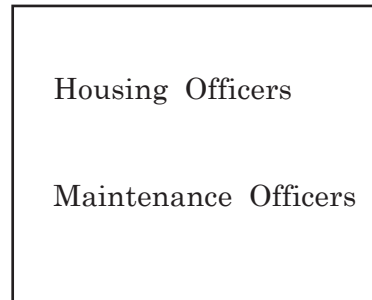
Communicating within the organisation:

- housing officers
- senior management
- secretarial/clerical staff
- maintenance officers
- receptionists
- technical officers
- ancillary staff (catering, cleaning etc.)
- research officers.

Activity

Consider the following diagram which indicates some of the groups of people who need to communicate with and within the organisation. Groups within the organisation are enclosed by the square.

Customers



Contractors

Add to the diagram the names of the other groups of people whom you have identified.

Now draw lines of communication between the different groups of people, showing who needs to communicate with whom.

Time allocation: 10 minutes

As you can see, organisations form complex webs of communication. Each group of individuals that has a stake in the organisation needs to be in contact with others. The more vital they are to the functioning and operation of the organisation, the more constant that communication needs to be.

Activity

Identify a number of reasons why communication is necessary within organisations? In doing this, it might help if you think about the purpose of some of the communication links identified in the previous activities.

Time allocation: 10 minutes

We asked a Housing Assistant to do this activity and these were the reasons he identified:

- to give people instructions and guidance
- to get people pulling together
- to involve people in decision making
- to find out about problems
- to understand and resolve problems
- to obtain commitment to change
- to inspire motivation
- to give people encouragement
- to give people a sense of belonging.

Within any organisation, communication has two main purposes:

(I) To get people working together towards a common goal

An organisation is a community of people working together towards a common goal. Communication is necessary to ensure that everyone understands the goal, feels their contribution is valued and is involved in the communal effort to achieve it.

(II) To provide information for decision making

The quality of decisions made within organisations is largely dependent upon the quality of information received before the decision is taken. Important information must be captured, processed and delivered to the decision maker quickly and effectively.

If you review your answer to the last activity you should see that each of the reasons identified is related to one (or both) of these two purposes.

2. The Subtleties of Communication

Communication encompasses all behaviour that results in an exchange of meaning. You communicate not only with words, but also through your actions.

Activity

Consider the following situation:

Dilys was pleased to be appointed as Housing Aid Manager in a busy Housing Advice Centre. It represented quite a jump in status for her and she was eager to impress.

The staff welcomed her to their large open plan office and Dilys soon settled in at her desk at the back of the room. The previous manager, who had held the post for almost twelve years, had developed a closely knit and supportive unit. Dress was informal, the work shared out, the atmosphere relaxed, and morale was high. At her first staff meeting, Dilys praised the co-operative nature of the group, and spoke at length of her ideas of open management, consensual decision making, and the importance of effective communication.

However, she soon began to feel the pressure of her new position. Much of her time was taken up on paperwork, managing the budget, and liaising with voluntary groups. Moreover it was difficult to get work done during the day. The office was busy and there was constant noise and bustle. Dilys found this so uncomfortable that she spent a weekend clearing out the storeroom at the back and converting it into her own private office.

At a staff meeting on Monday morning Dilys informed the group of her decision and concluded by emphasising that they were all free to interrupt her at any time. She would be in the office working on financial and management matters, but she would always have time to discuss any problems they might have.

Dilys then stood up, brushed down her expensively tailored skirt and walked into her new office, closing the door behind her.

What message is Dilys communicating to her staff here?

Time allocation: 5 minutes

Actions often speak louder than words. Whilst Dilys speaks of her accessibility, her actions communicate a different meaning. By dressing herself more formally than the rest of the group and moving into a private office she is clearly signalling a distinction between 'management' and 'the rest'. By putting a door between herself and the rest of the group she is communicating an unwillingness to be interrupted. By taking and implementing the decision herself she is conveying a reluctance to discuss problems and listen to the advice of others.

These messages may not be intentional, but her behaviour can be interpreted in this light.

Not only do actions speak volumes: the tone of voice adopted, the facial expression, the choice of language, and the receptiveness - or otherwise - of individuals to the messages of others are all ways in which meaning can be transmitted.

Self Test 1

1. *Why is communication important to managers within the organisation?*
2. *Why is communication important to all the individuals within the organisation?*

Now turn to the answers at the end of the Block.

B. Forms of Communication

Communication takes many different forms.

Visual communication is considered in Skills Workbook 9 Presenting Information in a Variety of Visual Forms. Electronic communication is discussed in Section G of this Block, as well as in Skills Workbook 16 Using a Range of Technological Equipment and Systems.

Here we consider three of the main forms of communication which occur within organisations:

- written communication
- oral communication
- non-verbal communication.

1. Written Communication

Written communication is necessary within an organisation when:

- a record of the communication is required
- an agreement is being made or confirmed
- the subject is too complex for a conversation or telephone call or involves numerous facts or figures
- the other person is not available to talk to.

Activity

Identify the various forms of written communication which are used inside your organisation.

Time allocation: 5 minutes

Written communication within organisations can take many forms:

1.1 Memos

Memorandums (memos) are the most common form of written communication within organisations. Generally, there is a standard format adopted by the organisation. Memos are used to:

- inform the recipient of events or activities
- initiate or summarise action
- confirm what has already been communicated orally.

1.2 Messages

Written messages are less formal than memos and tend to be used between people who work closely together. They may be telephone messages or simply notes left on someone else's desk while they are out of the office. However informal, it is worth taking the trouble to write clearly and concisely. A garbled or illegible message is worth than useless!

1.3 Letters

Letters are usually produced to be sent outside the organisation. They are not generally used inside an organisation, except to confirm key decisions made about the performance or progress of individual employees. These letters typically concern promotions, transfers, the results of a disciplinary meeting, formal warnings and confirmation of resignation.

Letters are an efficient means of communication when:

- it is necessary to inform the receiver officially of a decision taken by the organisation
- a formal request for information or action is required.

1.4 Reports

Written reports are another widely used form of communication. We can distinguish between two types of report: the descriptive report and the analytical report. The descriptive report is simply an account of events, or collection of facts. The analytical report gives meaning to facts and concepts by analysing the facts presented, suggesting conclusions and recommending possible solutions to problems.

1.5 Newsletters

Newsletters or bulletins can be used to communicate general information or management policy to all staff or sections of staff within the organisation. These may be distributed or posted on a notice board.

1.6 Minutes

Minutes are a formal written record of what has been discussed and agreed at meetings. They may be:

- verbatim records (a complete word-for-word account)
- a full discussion record where summaries of all the main contributions are minuted
- a summary of the meeting as a whole containing decisions reached (with reasons) and a list of actions to be taken and those responsible for doing so
- decision only/action only minutes.

1.7 Manuals

Manuals or handbooks are used widely by organisations to provide employees with a written set of instructions or guidelines as to the procedure to be followed when carrying out their duties.

1.8 Brochures, leaflets and handbooks

Many organisations produce brochures, leaflets, or handbooks for their customers and the general public. These are useful to:

- summarise information for customers
- provide information on the services offered by the organisation
- advise readers as to the best course of action to take when facing specific problems.

Generally this means identifying the correct source of information or person/department/organisation to contact.

To be effective in organisations it is important to develop good written communication skills. Skills Workbook 10 Communicating in Writing gives practice in developing these skills.

2. Oral Communication

There are many different occasions in which the most effective means of communicating is through the spoken word.

The main advantage of oral communication is that information and views can be exchanged quickly. Both parties can ask any questions necessary for clarification and understanding. Decisions can be made speedily, and the sender of the message has greater opportunity for ensuring that the receiver correctly understands the message. Oral communication is often preferable where a 'personal touch' is required.

Activity

Identify the various forms of oral communication which are used within your organisation.

Time allocation: 5 minutes

Oral communication within organisations may take the following forms:

2.1 Face to face conversations

The most informal and frequent type of oral communication is simple face to face conversation. You may approach a colleague to gain information, discuss a problem or issue, persuade them to accept your point of view, get to know them, initiate action, impress, amuse or pass the time of day with them. In many circumstances a more formal method of communication would be inappropriate. Oral communication of this nature is particularly appropriate for personal matters, or when a manager wishes to praise or reward an employee.

2.2 Telephone conversations

Telephone conversations are another very common form of oral communication. The telephone has the advantage of speed and accessibility. It is often easier to pick up the telephone and dial a colleague than it is to walk across a building to see them. Likewise it is a very effective means of communicating quickly and directly with an individual in a different location. Communications technology is improving and expanding rapidly.

2.3 Meetings

An effective meeting, whether formal or informal, is a highly efficient tool of communication. Ideally, everyone at the meeting has the opportunity to speak, listen to what is said, and discuss the issues. On the other hand, badly planned or poorly chaired meetings can waste everyone's time and less confident people may not find it easy to participate fully.

2.4 Oral presentations

Oral presentations may be necessary to communicate an argument or a message to a group of people quickly and effectively.

Again, this could be a formal occasion, or a less formal briefing to a group of staff.

2.5 Interviews

Interviews are a form of oral communication in which information is obtained from one person by one or a panel of interviewers. Very occasionally a group of people may be interviewed together. Interviews are used for:

- selecting employees
- gathering information
- counselling
- appraising employees
- disciplinary hearings.

The interviewee is usually given the opportunity to ask any questions they might have or clarify matters that have arisen.

3. Non-verbal Communication

Activity

What do you understand by the term non-verbal communication?

Time allocation: 5 minutes

The term non-verbal communication refers to messages which are passed without the use of spoken or written words, for example, through body language, facial expression and appearance. Sometimes we use non-verbal signs deliberately, as when we smile to make someone feel welcome; but often, non-verbal messages are unconscious expressions of our feelings, which can reinforce, weaken or perhaps completely contradict our words.

Body language and facial expressions can indicate states of mind such as interest, boredom, liking, dislike, anger, submission, honesty, openness to ideas and willingness to listen. A simple nod, shrug or frown can communicate its own message very clearly, as can a glance at a watch, a shuffling of papers, or clenching of fists. The ability to understand these signs is an important part of communication.

Personal appearance also gives out messages to other people. For example, a very formal style of dress can be used to emphasise high status. Someone's appearance can determine how seriously the other person listens to the message being communicated and accepts or responds to it.

If you develop your awareness of non-verbal signs, you can use body language, personal appearance and facial expressions to reinforce your message. If you are skilled at reading these signals, then you have an extra dimension to call upon when receiving messages from others. You may be more able to see the truth of the matter.

However, disadvantages can arise if the signals you are sending are misinterpreted, or conversely if you misread the signals from somebody else. You may think your style of dress is comfortably informal, whereas someone else may think you look distinctly scruffy!

Misunderstandings may also arise due to cultural differences. For example, in some cultures it is regarded as rude to look someone of superior status straight in the eye, while in other cultures, avoiding eye contact in this way is seen as a sign of untrustworthiness.

Sensitivity and awareness are the key ingredients in successful non-verbal communication.

Self Test 2

Identify the advantages and disadvantages of each form of communication. Give examples of an appropriate and an inappropriate use of both written and oral communication.

1. *Written communication*

Advantages

Disadvantages

Give an example of a situation where it would be appropriate to use written communication:

Give an example of a situation where it would be inappropriate to use written communication:

2. *Oral communication*

Advantages

Disadvantages

Give an example of a situation where it would be appropriate to use oral communication:

Give an example of a situation where it would be inappropriate to use oral communication:

3. *Non-verbal communication*

Advantages

Disadvantages

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

C. Formal Structures of Communication

Communication in an organisation flows through many different channels. Formal channels of communication are those set up by the organisation to ensure that communication occurs and information is passed between the right people. If the organisation is structured hierarchically the communication flow can be downward, upward or horizontal.

1. Downward Communication

Downward communication flows from senior management to lower levels in the organisational hierarchy. A downward flow occurs when information or instructions are being passed from senior to more junior employees, and it is the most basic formal message system.

There are many reasons for downward communication. The most important are:

1.1 Direction and control

Managers need to direct and control the activities of their staff to ensure that organisational goals are achieved.

Activity

Give an example of an instruction you have received from your manager.

1.2 Job related information

A downward communication channel may provide the individual with some or all of the information they need to carry out their tasks.

Activity

Give an example of job related information you have received through a downward communication channel.

1.3 Motivation and involvement

Managers need to motivate their team and give meaning to the work they do as part of a collective effort. A downward communication channel enables managers to inform staff of the mission and goals of the organisation and how they fit into the corporate picture. Passing information down the hierarchy improves understanding of the way the organisation functions and involves individuals in the collective effort.

Activity

Give an example of a downward communication you received that you feel involved you in the corporate effort.

1.4 Performance feedback

Individuals need to receive feedback from their manager on their performance in the job.

Managers also need this mechanism to praise good work thus raising morale and to give advice as to how to improve poor performance if necessary.

Activity

Give an example of a downward communication that concerned your performance.

Activity

List the various mechanisms by which downward communication takes place within your organisation e.g. briefing meetings, staff appraisal etc. Suggest any ways in which you think the flow of downward communication within the organisation could be improved.

2. Upward Communication

Upward communication flows from subordinate to superior up the organisational hierarchy. This flow of information is important for effective decision making, as it assists the manager in learning what is going on in the organisation.

For managers who want to listen, upward channels provide a wealth of information. The main functions upward communication performs are:

2.1 Reports on performance

Upward communication provides managers with information about the day to day operation of the unit, and feedback on current performance and problems. This information is necessary for informed decision making, and to enable the manager to co-ordinate the work of the unit.

Activity

Give an example of a performance report you have recently made to your manager.

2.2 Improvement suggestions

These enable the manager to harvest ideas and creativity from everyone in the organisation. The best ideas often come from those actually doing the work, rather than directing it.

Activity

Give an example of a new idea or suggestion for improvement you have recently made or could make to your manager.

2.3 Feedback concerning employee feelings

Upward channels can reveal a great deal about how the employees regard their job, and the organisation as a whole. Managers can learn of morale problems and individual grievances before they become major issues.

Activity

Give an example of an occasion when either you tested out the general feelings and attitudes of your team members towards their work, or you were aware that your supervisor was doing this.

2.4 Problems and requests

Upward communication is necessary when unexpected problems occur that the manager needs to be aware of or take action on. Team members may also need to make requests for additional resources, information, assistance or support.

Activity

Give an example of a situation where you reported a problem to your manager, or an example of a request for assistance.

2.5 Employee involvement

An effective structure for upward communication encourages employee participation, and generally results in higher morale and enhanced organisational cohesiveness.

Activity

List the structures (e.g. team meetings) within your organisation or department which have been set up to encourage an upward flow of communication.

Do you feel that these structures are effective? If not, suggest ways in which upward communication in your organisation could be improved.

Time allocation: 10 minutes

3. Horizontal Communication

Horizontal communication flows between members of the organisation at the same hierarchical level. This is peer communication, and occurs between staff in the same department, or cuts across departments and functional boundaries.

Horizontal communication serves a number of important purposes:

3.1 Co-operation on joint tasks

Two or more people may be set to work on a task jointly. Effective horizontal communication between the individuals will enable them to keep each other informed of developments and to plan the work so as to avoid duplication or omission.

3.2 Interdepartmental co-operation

Certain projects require inter-departmental co-operation. For example a modernisation programme will require housing management staff to work closely with their colleagues in the

Technical section to ensure that properties are decanted before work can take place. Horizontal communication is necessary to facilitate co-ordination between different departments, and to integrate organisational effort. Information can be shared, and the potential for conflict reduced. Good inter-departmental communication promotes a co-operative spirit across the organisation.

3.3 Mutual support

Staff can give each other mutual support and advice. Often similar problems will be experienced by individuals at the same level of the hierarchy. A horizontal communication flow can bring to light common problems, and enable individuals to learn from one another in reaching solutions. Often the organisation's social support system is built by such peer groups, which may cross departmental boundaries.

Activity

Give an example from your organisation of a horizontal communication flow that:

- (a) *enables joint tasks to be carried out*
- (b) *facilitates interdepartmental co-operation*
- (c) *provides mutual support*

Time allocation: 10 minutes

Self Test 3

List the most important functions of:

1. *Downward communication*
2. *Upward communication*
3. *Horizontal communication*

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

D. Informal Mechanisms of Communication

The formal pattern of communication in an organisation is always supplemented by an informal communications system, sometimes referred to as the grapevine. As well as receiving and passing on messages coming through this system, individuals will often supplement the formal communication channels by networking with other organisational members. We shall look at both of these informal communication systems in turn.

1. The Grapevine

1.1 Characteristics of the grapevine

The grapevine develops spontaneously out of people's natural desire to communicate, and their curiosity about organisational life. Formal channels are often slow, and generally fail to provide enough information to satisfy that curiosity, hence individuals seek information from other sources. The grapevine provides interesting information, rapidly, about who is doing what, and what policy and personnel changes are taking place. This enables individuals to make choices about their future, and position themselves accordingly. Indeed, the grapevine is most active during periods of change when everyone wants to know what is happening.

The grapevine also satisfies a need for power that some individuals feel. Information is power, and people who do not hold powerful positions in the hierarchy sometimes attempt to gain influence and status by gathering and disseminating information through the grapevine. All organisations have individuals who seem to know what's going on and are good sources of information.

The grapevine connects people from all levels and all areas of the organisation. These connections arise spontaneously and usually develop among people who interact frequently, are friends, or find they have a shared interest. The grapevine will act in different ways each time it is activated, but there is usually some degree of predictability as to how information is spread.

Many people associate the grapevine with unsubstantiated rumour, gossip and speculation. Surprisingly, it is usually a fast, penetrating and accurate communication system. Informal communication channels work rapidly, because they are most interested in transmitting information that is 'news'. If information is interesting, then it is more likely to be passed on. Information dissemination is speeded by the fact that it tends to

be distributed to groups, rather than just to one other person. Each member of the group may then pass that information on to another crowd of people. This ensures the rapid spread of information.

The information is more likely to be accurate for a number of reasons. Firstly, communication chains tend to be fairly short as information is disseminated quickly and abandoned when it is no longer newsworthy. Secondly, individuals are more likely to hear the information from more than one source, enabling some sensible judgement to be made, or further investigation if the material differs in any significant way. Thirdly, there are greater opportunities for clarification and discussion to improve understanding than are often found in a formal communication channel. Fourthly, the source of the information tends to be accurate. Barriers of confidentiality are often lowered in one-to-one and small group settings, hence people with access to information can set the grapevine off in just such a private setting. Finally, individuals with key positions in informal networks, who are often responsible for disseminating information, do not want to undermine their position by passing on false information.

This does not mean that the grapevine is always accurate. Unfounded rumours are sometimes transmitted, and these can be unsettling and destructive. However, if individuals are aware of the extent to which the grapevine that exists in their own organisation is reliable, then they can use it to their own advantage.

Activity

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the grapevine as a communication system? List as many points as you can think of.

Advantages

continued...

Disadvantages

Time allocation: 10 minutes

1.2 Advantages of the grapevine

A grapevine can provide an accurate measure of opinion and morale within the organisation. If managers are sensitive to this, then they can gather information about the expectations, attitudes and interests of the employees as well as their responses to decisions taken or planned.

A healthy grapevine proves an interest in the organisation and how it is functioning, and promotes the social environment and team spirit of the organisation. It can also act as a pressure valve for individuals to let off steam in response to an unpopular decision.

Informal channels provide information when the formal lines of communication fail to deliver, or to deliver on time. Often people will hear something informally that affects their work well before they are informed officially.

1.3 Disadvantages of the grapevine

The information might be incorrect for a number of reasons: people sometimes feed the grapevine with self-serving information for example, or deliberately start malicious rumours. Information passed through the grapevine doesn't usually identify the source of the material (as the formal communication system would) hence no-one bears ultimate responsibility for it.

2. Networks

2.1 How do networks develop?

A network is a 'collection of people, usually with a shared interest, who tend to keep in touch to exchange information' (Nancy Foy). Networks generally occur in large organisations, where it is impossible to know and communicate with everyone.

When two housing officers regularly join a couple from the finance section for lunch, they are networking. At any time one of these members may call on another for a favour - to get something done quickly, or to obtain information outside the normal channels, perhaps.

These networks tend to develop out of personal relationships and friendships. What starts out as a couple or trio of friends, may develop into a small group or clique who share information and offer mutual support to one another.

Ambitious people tend to network with those in more powerful positions than themselves - who may be useful sources of information or assistance in the future.

Activity

Identify any other ways you can think of in which networks might develop.

Time allocation: 5 minutes

Networks can also develop amongst people who:

- join the organisation at the same time
- work closely together
- travel to work together
- have a shared experience e.g. women workers, black or ethnic minority workers
- use the same local or workplace facilities e.g. a cafe, pub, gym, crèche
- share an out-of-work interest such as sport or music.

Individuals can be members of more than one network in an organisation. Occasionally you will find individuals who avoid networking and communicating with others.

Activity

Identify the networks that you belong to at your place of work.

Time allocation: 5 minutes

It is likely that you have identified several networks that you belong to, some of which may be more important than others. Later on in this section we will be looking at the various roles people play in each network.

Activity

1. *What benefits do you receive from the networks you belong to at work?*
2. *In your experience, are there any disadvantages associated with the existence of networks?*

Time allocation: 10 minutes

2.2 Advantages of networks

The advantages of belonging to a network include:

- good source of information. People can use the informal network to find out information, rather than going through formal channels.
- can get the system working. If you have a problem, it might be easier to contact a colleague who you have built an informal relationship with than wait for the organisation to respond. By cutting across formal lines and using the informal network, you can speed things up and side-step red tape.
- provides mutual support and assistance. Colleagues may advise you of opportunities you can take advantage of, or problems heading in your direction.

2.3 Disadvantages of networks

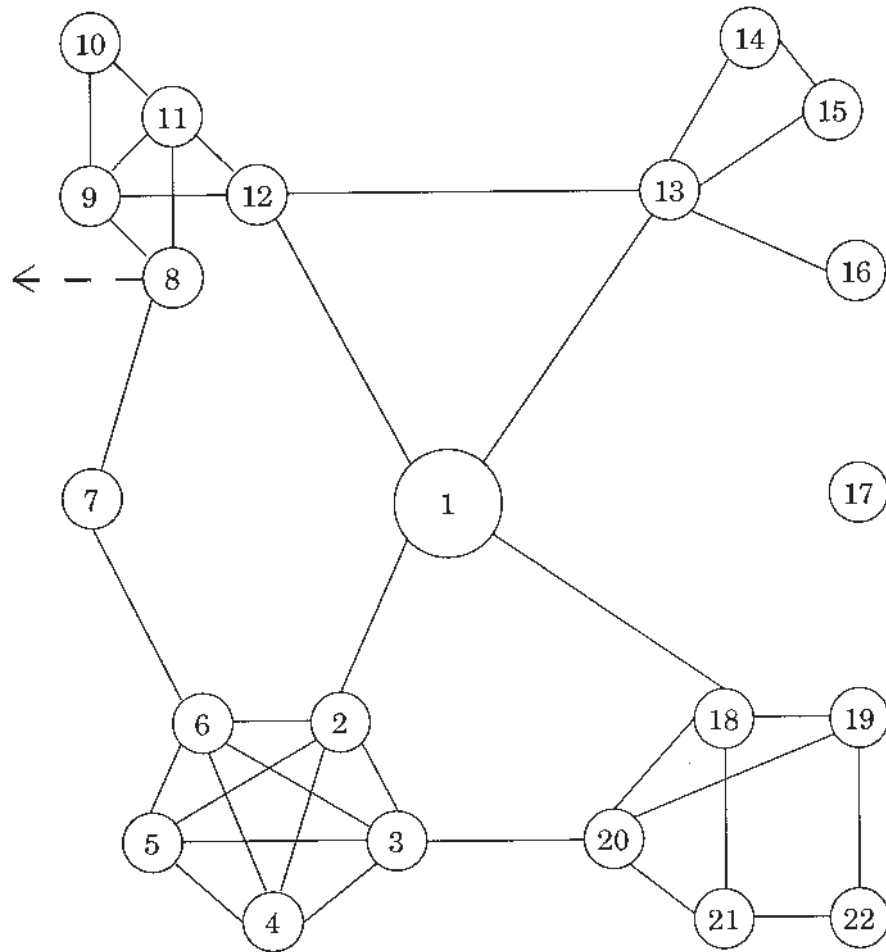
Disadvantages associated with networks include:

- can be cliquey. Newcomers and other individuals may feel excluded. This can lower their confidence and make it hard for them to contribute fully to the organisation.
- certain networks containing powerful individuals may exert undue influence within the organisation, hindering equality of opportunity.

2.4 How networks are structured

Communication networks can have complex structures. You may be part of a small and strongly bonded group, or part of a larger, loosely knit network, where the people who you are in a clique with also have connections with other cliques. Such an example is charted below:

Figure 1: Sample communication network



Clique A

Key to communications network

- ① Opinion leader
- ⑬ Gatekeeper
- ⑦ Liaison
- ③ + ⑳ Bridges
- ⑧ Boundary spanner
- ⑰ Isolate

As you can see, this is a very complicated structure, which reflects the complex interpersonal relationships people develop at work. Individuals can be members of a closely knit clique such as Clique A, where everyone networks with all other members of the group. Or they may network with only one or two other people (as person 10 has done). These other individuals may have network connections with a wider circle of people.

Various roles that people might occupy within a network have been identified. These are the 'opinion leader', the 'gatekeeper', the 'liaison', the 'bridge', the 'boundary spanner' and the 'isolate'. Not every individual holds one of these roles, and not all roles are evident in all networks.

(a) The opinion leader

The opinion leader is at the centre of much communications activity and is an informal leader within the organisation. They may not have a formal position but they are powerful because they receive much information, can control communications and thus influence others' behaviour and actions.

(b) The gatekeeper

The gatekeeper regulates the flow of information to others in the group. They decide what information to pass along and what to withhold. Not all networks will have a gatekeeper.

(c) The liaison

The liaison connects two cliques without belonging to either one. This enables information to be passed between groups.

(d) The bridge

The bridge is a member of one clique who connects with a member of another clique. Thus information can be passed between the two groups, and intergroup co-ordination facilitated.

(e) The boundary spanner

The boundary spanner links the network with the external environment.

(f) The isolate

The isolate is an individual who has very little contact with others in the organisation. Very few of these exist, as individuals usually develop some connections with others at work.

Activity

Think about one of the networks you belong to at work and see if you can identify individuals who act in any of the following capacities:

Opinion leader

Gatekeeper

Liaison

Bridge

Boundary spanner

Isolate

Time allocation: 10 minutes

This is not an easy exercise to undertake without detailed observation and analysis. However, bridges, liaisons and opinion leaders are perhaps the easiest to identify.

Self Test 4

Summarise the differences between formal and informal lines of communication.

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

E. Barriers to Communication

Activity

Read the following passage:

“Inside it’s all change with Phillips’ new SAA7323 PDM DAC replacing the SAA7320 used before. The 7320 family are all single-ended DAC’s using a total of 256 times oversampling and second order noise-shaping. Nevertheless the SAA7323, with its 352KHz dither, is much closer in execution to the 7320 than the intermediate 7321.”

“HI-FI Choice”

Do you understand this piece?

Yes

No

Why?

Time allocation: 5 minutes

How much did you understand? Probably nothing. At best, very little. Unless, of course, you are a hi-fi enthusiast with a good understanding of the terminology and technology of compact disc players. However, if you were simply reading this review as a prelude to purchasing a system you'd find a very powerful communication barrier in place - the use of inaccessible language. It is the use of jargon (dither, oversampling....) and acronyms (bunches of initials, such as DAC) that prevents most of us from understanding this paragraph, and you should have identified this point above. If the magazine is aimed at enthusiasts, then the use of language such as this will not prove to be a problem, however, if it is intended to reach a wider audience the communication problems are obvious.

Barriers to communication are obstacles that distort or block the flow of information. They can prevent a message getting through either:

- to the right person; or
- in the form it was intended.

Communication barriers can leave you in a state of confusion, and can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Activity

Can you identify five barriers to communication from your own experience? Here are a few to start you off use of unknown language, vagueness, defensiveness.

Time allocation: 5 minutes

Many barriers to communication exist which impede interaction between people. These barriers can be categorised into two broad areas: personal barriers, and organisational barriers. You will probably find some of the obstacles you identified listed below.

Activity

As you read through this section, consider each point made and try to identify an example from your own experience either at home or at work. Write the example down in the Box provided; don't worry if you cannot fill all the boxes in.

1. Personal Barriers to Communication

Personal barriers to good communication can arise from differences in personality, perception or social background, as well as from certain individuals' lack of skill in communicating effectively.

1.1 Background

There are times when problems occur due to a difference in social class or cultural background between sender and receiver. Social distance may occur as a result of the extent of privilege in a person's background, and may reflect itself in accent, dress and leisure interests. One person may have received a university education whilst the other may have left school with few or no qualifications. "We just don't speak the same language!" people sometimes exclaim, when they find they can't communicate with someone because their experiences, values and assumptions - which are largely the result of social background - are radically different.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.2 Age

The 'generation gap' is a widely recognised expression used to explain the differences in opinion or attitude that arise between different generations. Difficulties in seeing each others' point of view can be compounded by different methods of expression. Thus communication across age gaps can be difficult. This could be further complicated if there are status incongruities, for example, if you have a young boss dealing with a much older and more experienced member of staff.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.3 Perception

People interpret messages in different ways depending upon their own perception of the situation. Perception can be selective, and is affected by our past experiences, our motives, attitudes, emotions and mood at the time the communication occurs. The way you perceive a situation is an involuntary or subconscious reaction to it and can mean that you filter a message, or colour it with your own unique interpretation. Hence you hear only what you want to hear, and ignore any parts of the message that do not conform to your view. Because this process is subconscious, you may jump to a conclusion or decide on a course of action which is inappropriate for the situation in hand.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.4 Language

The use of unexplained technical terms, jargon and abbreviations usually confuses the receiver and makes it unlikely that the message will be understood. Problems can also arise when communicating with a person in their - or your - second language. Expressions which one person takes for granted may be unfamiliar to somebody else.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.5 Vagueness

If the sender of the information has not clearly thought the message out, or does not have confidence in it, then it may not be communicated clearly.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.6 Lack of assertiveness

In certain situations, people who lack self confidence may not express themselves clearly because they are afraid of damaging a relationship if they express negative or conflicting thoughts.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.7 Receiver not receptive

This can be for various reasons. Perhaps there are many distractions in the office, or the receiver has their mind on other matters and is not really listening. The message may be difficult to understand, or may not be considered as important or interesting to the receiver.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.8 Poor relationship between sender and receiver

A poor relationship or personality clash between sender and receiver means communication tends to get distorted. Personal feelings can get in the way of clear understanding.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.9 Information overload

People can only take in and understand so much information at any one time. If an individual is given too many facts and figures they will not be able to absorb it all, thus leading to a breakdown in communication.

Faced with a burgeoning in-tray and stacks of messages, an individual may choose simply to ignore them. This could mean that important communications are missed because they are hidden amongst all the less important messages.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.10 Lack of feedback

If the sender receives no feedback from the receiver then it is impossible to tell if the message has been correctly understood. Thus misunderstandings may arise that the sender of the information is not aware of.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

1.11 Form of communication

If the information is poorly represented or communicated in the wrong form, it could cause confusion or misunderstanding. Bad handwriting can leave the recipient struggling to understand the message. Poorly laid out and presented material can mean that it doesn't receive the attention it deserves. Sometimes letters or memos are written when oral communication would have been more effective, or vice versa. All of these can act as barriers to communication.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

2. Organisational Barriers to Communication

A poorly designed organisational structure or communication system can also generate barriers.

2.1 Bureaucracy

Large organisations, such as many decentralised housing organisations, tend to develop over-bureaucratic communication systems. The method of communication demanded by such a system may not be the most appropriate one, and messages may go astray, never to reach the intended receiver.

Some bureaucracies demand ‘serial communication’ where the message has to be passed through one or more intermediaries (up or down the hierarchy for example). When communication is passed through many levels it tends to get changed, misinterpreted or even lost. The children’s game of ‘Chinese whispers’ demonstrates this.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

2.2 Geographical distance

It is more difficult to communicate with people who are located elsewhere, for example in a different building, district or region. The greater the distance, the more problems tend to arise. Further problems can occur if the recipient of the message spends much of their time travelling. Again this can be a problem in many decentralised housing organisations.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

2.3 Task specialisation

People in different departments with different specialisations often have differing goals and viewpoints. For example, the arrears officer, the technical assistant, the finance officer, the homeless officer all have their specialist areas of knowledge. They also tend to use technical terms and jargon that members of their own specialised group would understand, but others do not necessarily comprehend. Thus a computer specialist may not be able to communicate effectively with a housing manager and vice versa. As we saw in an earlier Block this is one reason why many housing organisations have moved towards a more generic staffing structure.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

2.4 Status, power and authority differences

Communication can be distorted because the sender and the receiver are of different status within the organisation. Many problems can arise. A housing assistant may feel that he or she has to accept what the housing director says because of this difference. If the assistant does not understand the message they may be reluctant to ask questions. Subordinates may be unwilling to say anything other than what they feel the boss wants to hear.

An individual's willingness to accept and respond to communications often depends upon the status of the sender. Often employees are more responsive to communications from people of equal or higher status in the organisation. The higher the status, the more willing the recipient is to receive and understand the message.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

2.5 Filtering

As information moves up the hierarchy, it tends to be filtered as subordinates give their manager either:

- what they want them to know; or
- what they think they need; or
- what they think the manager wants to hear.

Occasionally 'bad news' or unfavourable information will be filtered out.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

2.6 Size and complexity

The size and complexity of an organisation can form a frustrating barrier to communications as messages go astray and telephone calls do not reach the person concerned. This can mean time is wasted in connecting sender with receiver, and messages are lost or distorted.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

2.7 Technophobia

In today's 'electronic workplace' communications are increasingly taking place through electronic mail, fax machines, pagers, and increasingly complex telephone systems. Some individuals find the use of this technology daunting and try to avoid it.

Identify an example from your own experience if possible:

Many barriers to communication exist. One writer, Philip Lewis, identified 130 of them in his text 'Organisational Communication.' We have identified the most important or common ones in this section.

In everyday life, of course, communication barriers tend to occur in clusters, rather than on their own: one barrier sustains others and is in turn reinforced by them.

In the next section we will be examining various ways of identifying and resolving communication problems.

Self Test 5

Consider the following situation:

A manager with a heavy in-tray is suffering from information overload when in walks a junior member of the finance section. This interloper attempts to communicate a problem to the manager but uses jargon that the manager does not understand. A diagram would have served better in any case. The manager stops listening, irritated by the intrusion of a junior member of staff who then leaves with the parting shot "... so as you can see we cannot authorise that." The manager is now totally confused and has acquired one further problem to deal with.

Identify five barriers to communication evident in this example.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

F. Resolving Communication Problems

In the previous section we identified a number of communication barriers. Some of these were personal, concerned with the difficulty individuals have in communicating with each other, others were organisational, and concerned with the ways organisations are structured.

In this section we will be identifying ways in which you can overcome these barriers, improving both your own ability to communicate with colleagues and customers, and your understanding of how organisations can communicate more effectively.

1. Improving Personal Communication

Activity

Have another look at the list of personal barriers to communication identified in the previous section.

Write down all the ideas you can think of for ways in which individuals can overcome personal communication barriers.

Time allocation: 15 minutes

In order to overcome personal communications barriers, individuals need to:

- use clear and understandable language
- clarify ideas before communicating
- be aware of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships
- overcome prejudice
- be assertive
- choose an appropriate method of communication
- be aware of non-verbal signals
- be sensitive to the physical setting (time/place/occasion)
- give or obtain feedback
- listen.

1.1 Use clear and understandable language

Misunderstandings will be reduced if you use simple, clear, direct, jargon-free language.

Some people use language to impress others with their intelligence and learning. It is much more impressive to be able to communicate effectively, and this means keeping the message clear and simple.

You should ensure that the language used is appropriate for the intended audience. For example, jargon is permissible when communicating with members of the same profession or group as they should understand this form of linguistic shorthand. When communicating with someone in their second language, take extra care about your choice of words, avoiding those that might be ambiguous or misleading.

Beware of emotive words and phraseology. These can make the receiver of the message feel uncomfortable or alienated, and undermine your argument. Using emotion-laden words such as 'fascist', or 'women's libber' to describe someone may strike a chord with your audience, or may irritate and annoy them thus reducing their openness to your message. Emotive language is only appropriate if you are trying to sway hearts and minds, and you are confident that you are addressing like-minded individuals.

1.2 Clarify your ideas before communicating

Before you communicate, think about the purpose of the message. Identify what you want to accomplish, and then decide upon the appropriate tone, language, method and general approach to the communication. Communication can fail if not thought out properly in advance.

1.3 Be aware of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships

Many communication problems arise as a result of poor ‘chemistry’ between people who have to work together. This may be as a result of a personality clash, or because of past history in dealing with one another. The key to coping with such situations is to recognise and accept your feelings, then make allowances for them when communicating with someone you find difficult.

If a problem like this arises between members of a team you supervise, deal with the situation carefully and with sensitivity. It may be possible to move one or both of those concerned, or change working methods so that they need not come into contact, or attempt to confront the issue by bringing both parties together for a frank and open discussion.

Be aware that individuals have ‘off days’ where their ability to communicate might be affected by their general mood, problems and situation. We all react irrationally at times, and can vent our frustrations on people who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Again it is important to recognise when this is happening. If you are the one being affected, it is often best to admit it, and explain that your mind is elsewhere or you are under pressure. Recognising this in a colleague requires sensitivity to others, and an ability to read non-verbal signals.

Be aware that people perceive information and events in different ways. The more supportive and open the climate, the less people tend to read loaded meanings into communications.

1.4 Overcome prejudice

Prejudice is an emotive issue. It is difficult to admit that you might be prejudiced against a group of people based upon some irrational yet deep-seated belief or feeling.

Prejudice is not always based on race, religion, gender, sexuality or the presence of a disability; it can also be based on age, class, background, occupation, style of dress, etc. Stereotyping is a form of prejudice where we make assumptions about members of a group of people based on commonly held views. Any form of prejudice is destructive.

There is no easy remedy for dealing with prejudices simply because these feelings are not logical, and are perhaps unconsciously held. Recognising they exist and confronting the issue can help.

Some organisations have tackled the issue of prejudice by developing equal opportunities policies. If all members of staff are involved in the development of such policies, the discussions which inevitably arise are often thought-provoking and can increase awareness.

A clear and unambiguous equal opportunities policy in the workplace can also make it easier for a member of staff who has experienced prejudice at work - for example, jokes about their accent - to raise the matter with their colleagues rather than suffering in silence.

1.5 Be assertive

Assertive behaviour means standing up for your rights without violating the rights of other people.

People who are assertive have self-respect and self-confidence along with an awareness of, and respect for, the rights of others. They state clearly what they want or how they feel without being abusive, difficult or apologetic.

This can be contrasted with two other types of behaviour:

- Passive behaviour, which means failing to stand up for your rights, or doing so half-heartedly so that it becomes easy to disregard them.
- Aggressive behaviour, which means violating the rights of others in pursuit of your own interests.

1.6 Choose an appropriate method of communication

Earlier in this Block you studied different forms of communication. In selecting the most appropriate method of communication you should consider:

Speed

If the message needs to be transmitted urgently then the fastest form of communication should be selected.

Purpose

If the purpose is to disseminate information then a written memorandum or report may be appropriate. If the communication is to persuade or motivate then an orally transmitted message may be more effective.

Impact

Most formal communication in organisations takes place through established methods. Some messages will generally be sent in a written form, others transmitted orally. Adopting a different method can create an impact.

Degree of Interaction required

If a high degree of interaction between sender and receiver is required then some form of oral communication is more appropriate.

Cost

The cost of transmitting the message should be considered with the other factors.

1.7 Be aware of non-verbal signals

Meaning is communicated by much more than words alone. You can influence how your message is received by others by paying attention to the non-verbal signals you are transmitting. These signals include:

- facial expression
- eye contact
- tone of voice
- gestures
- posture
- appearance
- the actions you take in support of the message.

Likewise, you can improve your understanding of messages by recognising non-verbal clues. Be careful however not to oversimplify matters or read deep meanings into every gesture. Read the whole communication in context. Someone may be shivering because the room is cold, for example, not because they are nervous.

1.8 Be sensitive to the setting in which you communicate

Many factors affect the overall impact of a message. Important considerations to take into account include the time and place of the communication. A public corridor may not be the best place to criticise someone, nor discuss a sensitive or personal issue. A formal meeting room can add dignity to the proceedings, but can be intimidating. Seating plans can inhibit, or encourage, open debate. Scheduling a meeting late in the day can limit or focus

debate, depending upon the abilities of the chairperson. Either might be in your interest. These issues are worth considering before you communicate.

1.9 Give or obtain feedback

Many communications fail without the sender being aware that the message has been misunderstood. The more complex and important the communication, the more vital it is to give or obtain feedback to confirm understanding.

1.10 Listen

In oral communication you need to listen to the message being transmitted. This could include asking questions to improve and confirm understanding. Likewise when speaking, listen to the feedback being given to ensure your message is understood.

Skills Workbooks 10 Communicating in Writing and 11 Participating in Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication give further advice and practice to help you improve your personal communication skills.

2. Improving Organisational Communication

Organisations must have efficient information systems. However, administrative systems have a tendency to proliferate over time and organisations can become over-bureaucratic if not enough attention is paid to the purpose and effectiveness of routine communications. Large organisations in particular suffer from this: much routine communication is continued for reasons of history and tradition rather than need. It is common to see new procedures being set up, less common to see old ones being removed.

Activity

Have another look at the list of organisational barriers to communication identified in the previous section (E.2).

Write down all the ideas you can think of for ways in which an organisation can remove communication barriers.

Time allocation: 15 minutes

The quality and effectiveness of organisational communication could be improved by some or all of the following:

- communications audit
- exception reporting
- briefing groups
- meetings
- management by wandering about
- workspace design
- electronic communications media.

2.1 The communications audit

The communications audit is a complete analysis of an organisation's communications system. The purpose is to:

- assess the effectiveness of current systems;
- identify key strengths and weaknesses;
- make recommendations as to how communications might be changed to become more effective.

Communications audits should be taken regularly and where possible led by an external consultant.

2.2 Exception reporting

To prevent management overload, progress reports could be limited to exception reporting where only deviations from normal operations need to be communicated upwards. This has the added benefit of demonstrating a trust in the subordinate's abilities. For example, managers may only require detailed reports where void relet times exceed the organisation's performance targets, rather than reports on all voids.

2.3 Briefing groups

A supervisor or manager could use a briefing group to pass information or instructions orally to a small group of individuals. In this way information can be transmitted much more quickly than written communications allow, and clarification and feedback can be sought. In one local authority the Chief Housing Officer has a monthly meeting with all Principal Officers primarily to debrief them on the work of the Housing Committee and other committees which affect the housing service. This is backed up with a monthly "briefing" paper issued to all members of staff. Principal officers are then expected to brief their staff in turn.

2.4 Meetings

Well-structured meetings can be a powerful mechanism for two-way communication, so long as the chairperson enables everyone to contribute, by ensuring that meetings are not dominated by those with the highest status or the most powerful personalities.

2.5 Management by Wandering About

Peters and Waterman in their book *In Search of Excellence* describe a method of management they call MBWA (Management by Wandering About). They suggest that managers of excellent companies learn a great deal about what is going on by taking the time to wander about the organisation, listening to and communicating with individuals. If done in a non-threatening manner then this can be a highly effective way of obtaining upward communication.

2.6 Workplace design

The immediate working environment can create or reduce barriers to communication. A balance must be sought between open and closed locations, depending upon the type of work to be done. Open plan offices can encourage team working and open communication. They can, however, be distracting and noisy places in which to work. Individual offices can inhibit communication by separating individuals and imposing physical and psychological barriers.

2.7 Use electronic communication systems

Information Technology (IT) offers many opportunities to improve organisational communication. Of particular importance is the increasing sophistication of telecommunication systems, which enable rapid, secure and effective communication between different locations.

In the next section we will examine the potential of electronic communications media in more detail.

Self Test 6

1. *The efficiency of your department is being impaired because two members of your staff seem unable to communicate properly with each other. What remedies would you suggest in an attempt to solve this problem?*
2. *You feel that the formal communication systems at work are bureaucratic and inefficient. When you raise this with your manager, she asks for your advice. What remedies would you suggest?*

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

G.Implementing Effective Communication

So far in this Block we have looked at the different forms and structures for communicating within organisations. Now let us turn to consider ways in which effective communication can be achieved within the organisation, and with external agencies and individuals.

1. Line Management Communication

Most social housing organisations have management structures which are based on hierarchical lines, with ‘scalar chains’ of command. The typical structure will have teams of front line staff managed by a team leader. Team leaders are in turn managed by middle managers who are themselves managed by more senior managers. This chain continues to a single Director or Chief Executive responsible for the management of the whole organisation. The number of levels of middle management will vary depending on the size and structure of the organisation. As we saw earlier in this Block the more levels of management that exist, the more potential there is for barriers to effective communication. So how can the line manager ensure effective communication?

The relationship between a manager and his or her team will be to a large degree dependant on communication. There may be perceived or actual favouritism, and resentment of the colleague thought to be currying favour with the boss.

An insecure or inexperienced manager may feel bolstered by the sycophant or, frustrated by any one of a score of factors – vested interests, indecision elsewhere or clashing personalities – can be happy to lean on or use the willing shoulder. Additionally, a manager may have a closer personal relationship with one member of the team than others, perhaps because of shared interests, age, background, or opinions.

All of these factors can affect the line manager’s relationship with other members of the team. For effective line management, however, it is necessary for staff to be treated fairly and equitably, and for them to feel that this is the case.

Staff may also be having difficulties in performing their work effectively because of personal issues outside the work place, or a lack of confidence about particular skills or abilities.

As such it is necessary for the line manager to create an environment in which individual members of staff feel safe and secure in communicating their concerns to the manager. They will not share personal thoughts and concerns, for example, if they do not think that the manager will keep confidence, or take their concerns seriously.

Activity

List ways in which the line manager might create a safe and comfortable environment for staff to communicate. You might think about examples from your own experience where you have felt either hesitant or open about communicating with a line manager.

Time allocation: 10 minutes

Your list might include such suggestions as:

- Creating opportunities for staff to have ‘one-to-one’ discussions with the line manager. If working in the same office this might be through the adoption of an open door policy. If based in diverse work locations it might be necessary to programme regular meetings.
- Setting ground rules with individual staff members about who information communicated in ‘one-to-one’ discussions can be shared with.
- Agreeing any action arising from the discussion, where action is necessary and feeding back the results of such action. This can demonstrate to an individual that their concerns have been taken seriously and addressed. A failure to do so might discourage staff from communicating concerns in the future if they feel they will not be listened to.
- The line manager should share their time and attention amongst members of the team. If other team members perceive that the manager is focussing on those with whom they are friendly this can lead to the development of cliques which will be a barrier to effective communication.

You will no doubt have also thought of other approaches. The key is that the line manager must encourage individuals to communicate through being open and approachable to staff, respecting confidences and showing individuals that their concerns are important through responding to them efficiently.

2. Communication in Groups and Teams

Communication can be seen as the glue that binds teams together. A team that communicates effectively with each other will be more effective and its members are likely to be more motivated and achieve greater job satisfaction.

Activity

List ways in which you think that communication within teams can be encouraged.

Time allocation: 10 minutes

The location of team members in relation to each other can have a bearing on communication. For example, if a team of housing officers are located together information can be exchanged more readily and quickly than if members have their own individual offices. In addition, social interaction can take place, building a greater sense of belonging and improving communication between team members.

It will not be possible to resolve some issues whilst team members engage in their day to day activities. It is important, therefore, to create opportunities for staff to take 'time out', such as regular team meetings to allow detailed discussion of important matters such as staff views on working practices that could be improved or changes to the organisation's policies and procedures.

3. Communication with Service Departments, Housing Departments and Other Agencies

As we noted at the beginning of this Block, staff of housing organisations will have regular communication with a wide range of people outside of the organisation. It is necessary therefore to establish effective mechanisms for communication with other departments, other agencies, and customers.

Strong links with those providing services, such as the local housing benefits authority or maintenance contractors, and your customers, such as individual tenants or other departments for whom you provide a service, are essential.

The main foundation of this will be the maintenance of accurate records and awareness of agreed service standards and regular monitoring to ensure that these are being achieved.

In terms of service delivery, an example might be the establishment of procedural guides and training for staff to ensure that a tenant or applicant who might deal with two different housing officers on different occasions receives the same level of service and consistent information. If this does not happen there is clearly a risk that, from the customer's perspective, the organisation is sending a confused and confusing message.

Equally, if a protocol for a particular approach has been agreed with another agency, such as an agreement with the Social Services Authority for arrangements for housing care leavers, all staff who may receive rehousing requests must be following the same procedure in dealing with applications. Clear communication of the practical implications of such a protocol must be effectively communicated to all relevant officers to ensure equal treatment in equivalent circumstances.

There are also many situations in which housing officers will rely on the actions of other agencies to enable them to deliver housing services. For instance, when arranging repairs on behalf of tenants it is essential that staff are fully aware of any agreements on timescales and service standards which have been agreed with maintenance contractors. Such information must be accurate and up to date if housing officers are to be able to give tenants accurate information on what level of repairs service they can expect.

Identified link persons within other agencies allow relationships to be built and prevent the need to revisit previous discussions. If we stay with the example of the repairs contractor, the housing officer who becomes aware that the expected service hasn't been delivered should have access to key personnel within the contractor organisation to ensure that queries can be dealt with efficiently and effectively. Whilst many of these relationships will be established through regular contract the identity of contacts and procedures to be followed should be established by the manager within the contract specification and communicated to all relevant staff.

Summary

1. Communication is at the centre of organisational life. It is basic to whether work gets done effectively or ineffectively.
2. Within an organisation the two main purposes of communication are:
 - to get people to work together towards a common goal
 - to provide information for decision making.
3. Three main forms of communication can be identified:
 - written communication
 - oral communication
 - non-verbal communication.

You need to be a skilled communicator in all of these areas to be effective in organisations.

4. Formal communication structures within organisations allow information to flow in the following ways:
 - downwards from management to staff
 - upwards from staff to management
 - horizontally between peers.
5. Formal systems of communication are always supplemented by informal systems such as the grapevine and networks. The weaker the formal system of communication, the stronger the informal systems seem to be to compensate.
6. Various barriers to communication can be identified, both personal and organisational. In order to resolve these communication problems, we can improve our own personal communication skills, and identify ways in which the organisation can improve its communication systems.
7. Effective communication through line management structures, within teams, and between organisations is essential if quality housing services are to be delivered to customers.

Answers

Self Test 1

1. Communication is important to managers because they need to:
 - obtain information for decision making
 - guide and direct staff
 - give staff support and encouragement
 - find out about and resolve problems
 - inspire motivation
 - co-ordinate team effort towards a common goal.
2. Communication is important to individual members of an organisation because they need to:
 - obtain and share information
 - understand what they are required to do
 - resolve problems
 - understand the common goal of the organisation
 - participate in the decision making process
 - feel their contribution to the organisation is appreciated.

Self Test 2

1. Written communication
Advantages:
 - provides a record of the information or decision for future reference
 - complex information can be absorbed more readily by the recipient.Disadvantages:
 - lack of immediate feedback
 - no non-verbal clues to aid interpretation
 - information or instructions could be misunderstood without the sender realising it.

Appropriate situations for the use of written communication include:

- to record decisions made at a meeting
- to confirm action taken
- to confirm promotion to a new position.

An inappropriate situation for the use of written communication would be to deal with a sensitive and personal matter.

2. Oral communication

Advantages:

- information/opinions can be exchanged quickly
- immediate feedback to minimise misunderstandings
- non-verbal clues can aid interpretation.

Disadvantages:

- without a written record each person may remember the conversation differently
- complicated information is not always easily absorbed through the spoken word
- individuals may be shy and fail to put their message across clearly.

Appropriate situations for the use of oral communication include:

- an urgent message or request for information
- a brief report
- matters that require a personal touch.

An inappropriate situation for the use of oral communication would be to present complicated facts and figures.

3. Non-verbal communication

Advantages:

- can reinforce a message you want to convey
- can help you to interpret messages from others.

Disadvantages:

- non-verbal signals can sometimes be misinterpreted
- non-verbal signals may betray your true feelings in an inappropriate situation.

Self Test 3

1. The most important functions of downward communication are:
 - to give staff direction and guidance
 - to give staff the information they need to do their jobs
 - to inspire motivation and involvement
 - to give feedback on staff performance.
2. The most important functions of upward communication are:
 - to give managers reports on performance
 - to give managers suggestions for improvements
 - to give managers feedback concerning employee feelings
 - to identify problems and convey requests to management
 - to enable staff to participate in decision-making.
3. The most important functions of horizontal communication are:
 - to enable co-operation on joint tasks
 - to facilitate interdepartmental co-operation
 - to facilitate mutual support.

Self Test 4

Formal lines of communication:

Informal lines of communication:

- | | |
|---|--|
| - set up by the organisation; | - unplanned; emerge from social interaction; |
| - flow downward, upward or horizontally, following the structure of the organisation; | - can connect anyone and everyone; |
| - messages may be transmitted orally or in writing. | - messages transmitted orally. |

Self Test 5

In the example given, five barriers to communication are:

1. Manager is suffering information overload.
2. Junior staff member uses unfamiliar jargon.
3. Wrong form of communication chosen: a diagram would have been more appropriate than the spoken word.
4. Receiver (the manager) is not receptive to the communication.
5. Manager does not value a message delivered by someone of lower status in the organisation.

Self Test 6

1. The two individuals should be persuaded to recognise the problem and their own contribution towards it. It may be a good idea for the supervisor to see each one separately for a private discussion, and then bring them together in a supportive environment to discuss ways of resolving this issue. If the problem remains after this counselling, then the supervisor should consider changing the working methods or responsibilities of the pair.
2. You could recommend that the organisation conducts a communications audit to determine what problems exist. If possible, this should be led by an external consultant to provide objectivity. You might also suggest some of the following ways of communicating:
 - exception reporting
 - briefing groups
 - increased employee involvement through effective meetings
 - increased flow of information to management through MBWA
 - better workplace design to enhance informal communication flows
 - electronic communication (e.g. electronic mail) to replace current methods.