

Management communication

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Introduction

Management communication is a relatively new academic field, and one of several that encourage scholarship focused on business discourse. In this chapter I sketch a history of management communication as an offshoot of business communication and as related to the emergence of MBA (Master of Business Administration) degree programmes in the USA. I also provide a brief description of current conditions before turning to a discussion of management communication research.

With regard to research I (1) review some of the historically important studies of managerial communication behaviour, a research focus that began in Europe and migrated to the USA; (2) acknowledge the range, quality and some apparent omissions of more recent research; (3) argue that management communication would benefit from increased emphasis on scholarship, particularly the scholarships of integration and discovery (Boyer 1990); and (4) note that (at least in the USA) an emphasis on the scholarships of teaching and application (Boyer 1990), and the typical career paths of management communication lecturers in leading business schools, hinder the development of the field.

Historical background and current activities

I define the discipline of management communication as the study of the communicative behaviours of managers, within the evolving context of human organisations, in order to facilitate societal benefit, organisational performance, and the individual achievements of current and would-be managers. In this approach, I build on the work of others (e.g. Smeltzer 1996; Smeltzer & Thomas 1994) and call attention to some of the challenges faced by the field.

Management communication was called into existence to improve the communication abilities of would-be managers. It emerged in the USA concomitant with the growth of postgraduate MBA degree programmes (Knight 1999). Management communication is, perhaps, most accurately seen as an offspring of business communication (Reinsch 1996; cf. White-Mills & Rogers 1996). It evolved to meet the needs of persons enrolled in MBA programmes, young men – and, later, young women – who had already completed a university degree and accumulated several years of work experience.

When postgraduate business programmes began to develop – the Tuck school at Dartmouth College was established in 1900 – they frequently included some instruction in written communication. Over time that instruction evolved to include more material on oral communication (e.g. the briefing and the team meeting) and, in some cases, to create additional courses (Munter 1989, 1990). Today, around the world, many postgraduate business programmes include one or more required or elective courses in communication (Knight 1999, 2005).

Some US textbooks provide exposition with illustrations (e.g. Hynes 2008; Penrose et al. 2004); others emphasise cases (e.g. Hattersley & McJannet 2008; O'Rourke 2006). The most enduring management communication text appears, however, to have been Mary Munter's *Guide to Managerial Communication* (2005). And some management communication instructors select their textbooks from the available trade books (e.g. Alfred et al. 2006; Long 2004; Morgan 2003).

A proliferation of courses and instructional materials does not, however, mean that management communication has a secure place in every MBA curriculum. A number of highly ranked MBA programmes in the USA operate without any formal instruction in communication. Furthermore, business schools that have communication programmes sometimes abandon or reduce them to pursue other objectives. And revisions of MBA curricula can produce results like those at 'School A' (Kleiman & Kass 2007).

'School A' set out to develop a 'proactive mission-based' MBA curriculum (Kleiman & Kass 2007: 85). The developers articulated a clear mission statement; identified the tasks that MBAs should be able to perform; specified the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that MBA students should acquire in school; and created a set of courses designed to teach the most important KSAs. The list of desired courses included 'Managerial Communication Skills' (Kleiman & Kass 2007: 94). The course description stated:

The goal of this course is to help students develop the skills that a manager needs to effectively communicate with various stakeholders and build and sustain a productive workforce. The students learn how to communicate in a supportive and persuasive manner, manage conflict, build and lead a team, and produce effective presentations and written reports. (Kleiman & Kass 2007: 101)

However, 'when the proposed slate of courses was shown to the full faculty, [some of] the . . . professors balked'; it turned out that none of the business school professors 'felt competent to teach . . . [managerial communication skills] and feared that their attempts to do so would jeopardize their careers' (Kleiman & Kass 2007: 94).

As illustrated by this episode, MBA programmes in the USA have a conflicted relationship with management communication. The manifest needs of students regularly stimulate MBA programmes to re-emphasise communication. And then, periodically, either professors or deans conclude that tenure-track business school professors should not teach management communication. Thus, at many of the highly ranked business schools in the USA where competition for rankings is most intense, communication education either is omitted or is delivered by persons employed as part-time, adjunct or non-tenure-track professors. And, in many cases, the persons in these irregular instructional positions lack political clout, teach very large numbers of students, and spend uncounted hours giving feedback on individual assignments.

As a result of the emphasis on teaching, most management communication scholars in the USA have less time and energy than colleagues in other business disciplines to contribute to their field's intellectual capital. In fact, management communication professors who succeed in earning tenure at some of the more highly rated universities in the USA do so by directing their research efforts away from management communication (e.g. Yates & Kelly 2007: 434).

The evolution of *Management Communication Quarterly (MCQ)* provides another window on the history of management communication in the United States. The idea for *MCQ* emerged from conversations in the early and mid-1980s within the Management Communication Association, an informal organization of persons who teach communication in some of the leading business schools in the USA. As the idea took shape, the planners envisioned *MCQ* as a multidisciplinary journal, publishing work in management communication, organisational communication, corporate communication and related areas. Over time, however, *MCQ* became in reality – but not in name – a journal of organisational communication (Miller 2007). So, for example, the journal can now publish a spirited exchange on the topic 'Whither management communication?' in which all the authors write about 'organisational communication' (Barker 2006).

The evolution of *MCQ* away from management communication and towards organisational communication was probably inevitable, given the relative levels of maturity of the two fields when *MCQ* began (Miller 1996), the inherent difficulty of maintaining a multidisciplinary journal across sequential editorial transitions, and the need for a strong outlet for research in organisational communication, a field sometimes undervalued by its originating field, speech communication. Perhaps the most accurate summary would be to say that the management communication community wasn't ready for *MCQ*.

Today, members of the management communication academic community find intellectual nourishment in professional associations and scholarly periodicals. The professional associations include the (still informal) Management Communication Association, the Association for Business Communication (the MBA Consortium Interest Group) and the Academy of Management (the Organisational Communication and Information Systems Division). Research related to management communication (not necessarily about management communication per se) appears in a number of periodicals within the broad fields of management and communication. Examples include the *Journal of Business Communication* and *Business Communication Quarterly*, both of which have their editorial policy controlled by the Association for Business Communication. Other examples are *Management Communication Quarterly* and the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, both independent journals published by Sage.

So, is management communication a discipline? Historically a discipline was defined in terms of intellectual features; more recently it has been described as a social construction, a construction based on professional associations and research outlets. Shelby incorporated both perspectives in describing a discipline as defined by '(a) a community of scholars with shared interests, (b) a research focus, (c) a coherent body of knowledge linked to theory, and (d) a commitment to communicating knowledge' (1996: 99). Against this standard, the management communication butterfly is only a caterpillar. An enduring community of scholars shares research and teaching interests. But management communication research lacks both a unifying focus and a significant and coherent body of theory-based knowledge.

Research focus, methods and results

Published research that touches on the communication of managers is voluminous, particularly within the fields of management and communication. Only a small portion of that research, however, deals with the issue that should be central to management communication: discovering the means of persuasion that a manager may use to further organisational goals and benefit organisational stakeholders (cf. Aristotle 1991: 36).

Building on the work of others (Smeltzer 1996; Smeltzer & Thomas 1994), I argue that the field of management communication should focus on the communicative behaviour of managers within the context of human organizations and do so with a goal of benefiting society, organizations and individuals. Speaking approvingly of organisational objectives may open me to accusations of managerial bias, said to infect many aspects of organisational studies (Mumby & Stohl 1996: 55–8). I would argue, however, that educating managers and would-be managers calls for supporting the goals of an employing organization, without losing sight of the individual's and the organization's responsibilities to society. This focus describes, I think, the central interests of the management communication community in the USA. It also provides a foundation for thinking about the development of management communication scholarship.

Boyer has argued that scholarship can be placed in four categories: discovery, integration, application and teaching. The scholarship of discovery aims to develop new knowledge (1990: 17). The scholarship of integration 'seeks to interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear . . . [,] fitting one's own research – or the research of others – into larger intellectual patterns' (1990: 19). The scholarship of application asks questions such as 'How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems?' (Boyer 1990: 21). The scholarship of teaching makes available to others the results of discovery, integration and application.

Viewed through the lens of Boyer's categories, the management communication academic community in the USA emphasises the scholarship of teaching and the scholarship of application. Both teaching and application are, however, dependent on the scholarships of synthesis and discovery. Historically, some of the most important discovery research relevant to management communication – research that provides a foundation for the field – emerged as management scholars used surveys, diaries and direct observation to describe the activities of managers at work. The following paragraphs review some of those studies, organized around three questions.

What do managers do?

The earliest studies that contribute to our understanding of management communication described the work of managers. Previous treatments had – on the basis of anecdotal observation – claimed that managerial work consisted of several functions such as planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling. The newer studies aimed at more concrete and granular descriptions.

One of the earliest was a diary study of nine directors of Swedish companies (Carlson 1951). Results showed that managers were frequently interrupted and rarely alone. A decade and a half later, Stewart (1967, 1976) collected data from 160 senior and middle managers in the UK. The managers she studied spent an average of 43 per cent of their

time in informal discussions, 7 per cent in committee meetings, 6 per cent in telephone conversations and 4 per cent in social activity, for a total of 60 per cent of their time engaged in interpersonal communication.

In the USA, Mintzberg (1973, 1975) – building on the European work – directly observed the activities of eight North America managers, five in the initial study and three in a follow-up study. He noted that the managers read and wrote, and spoke and listened, with considerable frequency (1973: 250–1). He observed managers spending about one-third to one-half of their time communicating with subordinates and about one-third of their time communicating with persons outside the organization (1973: appendix C). In his conclusions, Mintzberg described ten managerial roles, several of which (e.g. ‘liaison’, ‘disseminator’, ‘spokes[person]’) called attention to communication (1973: ch. 4).

About a decade later, Kotter observed and interviewed fifteen general managers in the USA. He noted that general managers spent up to 90 per cent of their time interacting with others, not only subordinates and bosses but also customers, suppliers and even apparently ‘relatively unimportant outsiders’ (1982: 80).

These studies revealed a significant mismatch between anecdotal descriptions of management and the activities of working managers and, as a consequence, transformed academic thinking.

In what ways do managers communicate?

The studies cited in the previous section provided information about the ways in which managers communicated. First, the studies noted that managers communicated orally. Mintzberg, for example, explained the preference for face-to-face or telephone interaction as an indication that managers need timely information (1975: 166), a need that renders the carefully prepared written report stale before it arrives. Second, the studies also reported a good deal of variation from manager to manager. Mintzberg attributed the differences to environment, job demands, personality traits and situational variables (1973: ch. 5; cf. Kotter 1982: 98; Luthans & Larsen 1986).

Other studies addressed managerial communicative activities more directly and specifically (e.g. Luthans & Larsen 1986: 162). Managers make speeches (Beason 1991); serve as chairperson for meetings (Bilbow 1998); read books (Pagel & Westerfelhaus 2005); write memos, letters and reports (Smeltzer & Thomas 1994); intervene with troubled supervisors (Hopkins 2001); gather information (Barnard 1991); lead change (Harrison & Young 2005); consult with others (Salk & Brannen 2000); and increasingly do all these things in multicultural contexts (Rogers & Lee-Wong 2003). Managers also adopt and adapt genres as audiences, expectations and cultures change (Yates 1989a, 1989b).

Does communication influence performance?

As scholars acquired better descriptions of managerial behaviour, their attention shifted to a related issue (e.g. Bray et al. 1974): which of the various behaviours might account for differences in effectiveness?

Boyatzis (1982) used data from more than 1,000 managers to identify four clusters of managerial competencies: goal and action management, leadership, human resource

management, and focus on others. Several of the competencies related to communication. For example, the leadership cluster included the oral presentation competency, defined as speaking and asking questions in arenas ranging from one-on-one to an 'audience of several hundred' (1982: 105). And several of the competencies with communication elements were positively associated with managerial performance; the relationship between oral presentation competence and managerial performance was particularly strong (1982: 108, 116).

Boyatzis also distinguished between a threshold competency and a competency. He designated an element as a threshold competency if increments beyond a certain level were not associated with improved performance: examples included logical thought (in the leadership cluster) and the ability to communicate positive regard (in the human resource cluster). On the other hand, abilities such as oral presentation ability, conceptualisation, and management of group processes were identified as competencies; that is, more ability was associated with better performance even when the manager's level of ability was already high.

In another extended research effort (as summarised by Luthans et al. 1988), Luthans and his colleagues (e.g. Luthans & Larsen 1986; Luthans et al. 1985) used participant observation, interviews and surveys of subordinates to collect data on 457 managers. They grouped managerial activities into four categories: (1) communication activities (exchanging information, handling paperwork); (2) traditional management activities (planning, decision making, controlling); (3) networking activities (interacting with outsiders, socialising/politicking); and (4) human resource management activities (motivating/reinforcing, disciplining/punishing, managing conflict, staffing, developing).

Luthans and his colleagues defined individual success as 'an index of the speed . . . of promotion' (Luthans et al. 1988: 3). They defined unit effectiveness with a combination of subordinate satisfaction, subordinate commitment, and the qualitative and quantitative performance of the manager's unit (1988: 64). Thus, success concerned a manager's personal advancement, and effectiveness concerned the productivity of a manager's unit. After identifying the most and least successful managers and the most and least effective managers, the authors calculated the amount of time that managers spent in various activities. They found that the most rapidly promoted managers emphasised networking (48 per cent) and communicating (28 per cent). On the other hand, the managers leading the most productive units emphasised communicating (44 per cent) and human resource management (26 per cent).

Other evidence indicates that a manager's communicative skilfulness – not just allocation of time – is important. For example, Shipper found that both unit performance and morale were related to a manager's mastery of the arts of clarifying goals, encouraging upward communication, providing feedback and recognising performance (Shipper 1991; Shipper & White 1999).

More detailed analyses using the individual as the unit of analysis have linked personal communication abilities – for example, persuasiveness, cognitive differentiation, perspective-taking, listening, media selection and audience adaptation – to personal success (Russ et al. 1990; Suchan 1998; Suchan & Colucci 1989; Sypher et al. 1989; Sypher & Zorn 1986; Turner et al. 2006; Zorn & Violanti 1996). Other studies have demonstrated a link between a manager's personal communication abilities and unit performance (Alexander et al. 1992; Penley et al. 1991).

Studies using the company as the unit of analysis have also shown that communication practices and training relate to organisational performance. For example, Baum et al. (1998) collected vision statements from CEOs of 183 entrepreneurial firms. They assessed the vision statements both on content (explicit commitment to growth) and on other attributes including brevity and clarity. They also conducted interviews to learn whether employees believed the company had a vision and whether the CEO had communicated the vision. The results showed that both vision content and vision attributes (clarity, brevity, etc.) had direct effects on growth. However, 'the indirect effects through vision communication were more important . . . [A]lthough a vision affects performance directly [apparently by guiding management decisions], it is more likely to affect performance if employees know about it and understand it' (1998: 51–2). Similarly, in a study of branch managers in a Canadian bank, Barling et al. (1996) found that leadership training (designed to help managers communicate higher expectations, clarify the organisational mission and coach employees) enhanced employee commitment to the organisation and produced significant increases in loan sales during a subsequent year.

Research supports, therefore, a number of conclusions. We know that managers spend a lot of time communicating, sometimes as much as 90 per cent of the workday. We know that many managers use multiple media. We know that senior managers communicate with many persons who perform a variety of roles both inside and outside of the organisation. We know that individual managers differ considerably in their communication practices – for example, Stewart (1967) identified various clusters of managers as 'emissaries', 'writers', 'discussers', 'trouble shooters', and 'committeemen'. And we know that communication behaviours and skilfulness make a difference in personal success and in unit effectiveness, and we have some ideas about which behaviours are sometimes relevant and what sort of differences they can make.

However, some of our information is growing dated, reflecting neither contemporary communication technologies nor organisational forms. The studies that locate communication behaviours in a comprehensive matrix of managerial practice are now twenty or more years old (e.g. Luthans et al. 1988). And, in general, our information is neither as comprehensive nor as holistic as we might wish.

Managers work within organisations, social environments created by humans and, therefore, 'artificial' (Simon 2001). Because such environments evolve, and because they seem to be evolving rapidly during the current era of corporate responsiveness to environmental issues, globalisation and metastasising communication technologies (e.g. Reinsch et al. 2008), even the most basic questions should be re-examined periodically. How do contemporary managers communicate? How does communication influence performance in contemporary organizations?

Excellent research completed in recent years identifies a number of personal communication abilities that can affect personal success and managerial effectiveness. That research needs scholarly assessment and synthesis. In their study of reading, Pagel and Westerfelhaus called the relevant literature 'not only fragmented and incomplete but . . . also inconclusive and sometimes contradictory' (2005: 422), a description that applies to the entire field of management communication (e.g. the type of listening that has been linked to success and effectiveness differs from study to study and the differences have not been satisfactorily explained).

Future developments

Management communication remains a perennial pedagogical need in MBA curricula; its future as a teaching area seems assured. A 1988 study of business education in the USA found the graduate not well prepared in terms of ‘communication (in the broad sense of being able to get meaning across and to be persuasive)’ (Porter & McKibbin 1988: 122). More recently, a *Wall Street Journal* article (Alsop 2004) described US MBAs as deficient in communication abilities. Some students and graduates lacked facility in the local language (‘English isn’t their native language’), a problem of insufficient fluency. Others made ‘spelling and grammar errors . . . [or used a] casual tone suitable for e-mails between friends’, a problem of insufficient professionalism. Still others were – in language that sounded like the 1988 study – ‘unable to write even the simplest of arguments’, a problem of insufficient effectiveness. This third area – effectiveness – is the appropriate focus for management communication pedagogy. What most managers and would-be managers need is not declarative knowledge about how managers communicate, although such information is highly valuable to the pedagogue and may be helpful to the student, but, rather, experiences that allow them to learn to sharpen their personal communication abilities.

The future of the field of management communication depends, therefore, on whether scholars develop a substantive body of theory-connected knowledge. If the field emphasises only teaching and application, members of the management communication community are likely to remain employed in irregular positions, working directly or indirectly for business schools that grant them little status and little research support. If the field can supplement its pedagogy and application with synthesis and discovery, it may yet become a butterfly.

Implications for Pedagogy and Research

Management communication is most likely to make a substantive and enduring contribution as a genuinely interdisciplinary field by seeking synthesis rather than mere ‘disciplinary juxtaposition’ (Gardner 2006: 55). Hydrogen and oxygen gases can either merely mix as gases or they can combine to form a liquid, water. The goal should not be to mix management and communication but to develop a new field, management communication, with a focus on genuine synthesis in every realm of scholarship including teaching, application, integration and discovery.

The scholarship of teaching

Teaching will be central to management communication so long as individual managers are less effective than they, and their employers, want them to be; in other words, forever. The field should – and generally does – cultivate and celebrate the scholarship of teaching.

However, the rapid pace of change in the world of business implies that teachers in both universities and corporate settings will need to monitor changes in managerial behaviour in order to remain relevant. Furthermore, recognising that organisational contexts constantly evolve implies that the educational task does not consist only of helping the student to develop a finite list of identified skills. Rather, the educational

task consists of helping the student to develop habits of thought that will allow him or her to assess the rhetorical dimensions of a new technology or a new organisational structure, to identify emerging problems and solve them creatively (Reinsch & Turner 2006).

The scholarship of application

As a field that borrows much of its intellectual capital, management communication emphasises the scholarship of application, the deployment of knowledge to solve managers' problems. 'Learning from the management literature', the subtitle of a fine recent paper (Berry 2006), suggests a continuing series of papers in which scholars could explore the managerial communication implications of research in other fields. Such scholarship will require scholars who understand both the source literature (e.g. management, communication, information technology etc.) and the field of management communication; when completed it will have value for both the university lecturer and the corporate trainer.

The scholarship of integration

Management communication needs studies that aggregate and evaluate relevant research. Excellent models of such work can be found in other fields, particularly in organisational communication (e.g. Jablin & Putnam 2001). However, there seem to be only a few such papers directly relevant to management communication (e.g. Smeltzer & Thomas 1994) and only a few attempts to articulate macro-level theories of management communication (e.g. Shelby 1988, 1991). If management communication is to overcome the condition of being fragmented, incomplete, inconclusive and contradictory, it will need to give more attention to the scholarship of synthesis.

The scholarship of discovery

While management communication is a narrow field with an appropriate emphasis on application and teaching, the field needs both integration and discovery. In the past much of the discovery scholarship that has been useful to management communication has been conducted by scholars affiliated with other fields such as management or organisational communication. But some research questions (e.g. the role of the memorandum in the emergence of American management; Yates 1989a, 1989b) may interest primarily management communication scholars. And many questions central to management communication – for example, identification of personal communication abilities that contribute to unit performance – are not likely to be explored thoroughly, holistically and systematically except by management communication scholars.

Conclusion

Collectively managers do much to shape the quality of human life in the modern world, affecting the daily lived experience of their subordinates, colleagues, suppliers, and customers. Management communication – a field focused on understanding and improving

communicative behaviour in the managerial context – can contribute to the performance of managers and to the quality of life for all those whose lives they touch; that is, for all of us.

Managers do their work by communicating, and many of them are neither as effective nor as successful as they could be. That deficiency defines the need for management communication pedagogy. But the effectiveness of management communication pedagogy will depend, in the long run, on the quality of other dimensions of management communication scholarship.

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