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How to Determine the Situations and Conditions of the Communication in the Organizations through a Communication Audit?

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They are quick to see that issues like the style of the organization, timeliness of the communication, the amount of communication, vertical as well as horizontal bottle-necks, and a healthy grapevine need to be explored, monitored and evaluated. Enter the communication audit.

One way to begin a class or workshop on Communication Audits is to engage the participants in a learning activity or exercise that highlights the crucial role of effective communication. One activity goes like this. Participants are divided into groups of three or four and given a brown paper bag filled with various objects. They are told they must use all the objects to create a useful and marketable product. They name their new product. Then, they carefully write clear, step-by-step instructions for building their product. No pictures or diagrams are allowed. They must rely solely upon words. Time is allowed for them to double-check their instructions before the product is disassembled and all the parts and instructions are put back in the bag. Then groups exchange bags and produce the product based solely on the instructions provided in the bag. The finished products are displayed for the product designers. The original producers determine how accurately their product has been replicated.

Then each group answers these five questions. (1) Did you recreate the product exactly? (2) Were the instructions written clearly? (3) What makes instructions effective? (4) What impact do assumptions have? (5) How does this exercise apply to written communication in your job? Once the groups are finished, a debriefing session is conducted where everyone participates. Typically issues like "team work was helpful," "the opportunity to ask questions, especially at critical times, would be most beneficial," "ineffective communication costs time and energy," "assumptions got us in trouble," and "the inclusion of visual communication would really help" are discussed. Finally, the debriefing session concludes by linking the effective communication activity experience to communication audits. Now that participants are keenly aware of the vital need for effective communication, they are ready to explore ways and means to assess the situation and condition of communication that occurs within organizations. They are quick to see that issues like the style of the organization, timeliness of the communication, the amount of communication, vertical as well as horizontal bottle-necks, and a healthy grapevine need to be explored, monitored and evaluated. Enter the communication audit.

The focus of this paper is the question: "How effective is the communication audit in determining the situation and condition of the organizational communication?" To answer the question we will first address reasons for conducting communication audits. Second, we will present an overview of the communication audit process. Third, we will report results from communication audits where organizational communication students formed the audit

teams. Finally, we will conclude by providing answers to our question.

Reasons for Conducting a Communication Audit

Since this paper is being presented to the Congreso Iberoamericano sponsored by the Comunicacion Organizacional CIESPAL, justification for conducting communication audits within organizations will be brief. Undoubtedly, most if not all organizational communication scholars and practitioners share a belief that communication is the coupling that holds organizations together and the agent of change that insures health and growth. Therefore, reasons to conduct a communication audit are almost self-evident. An audit is a test of the quality of communication within an organization (Zaremba, 2003). Downs (1996) points out that the term audit is often associated with a negative action or procedure used to remedy some organizational problem. He encourages the consultant to substitute the term assessments for audits suggesting communication interventions in organizations are simply an examination of the quality of communication. Communication audits frequently identify strengths of the organization as well. Monitoring the organizational communication provides insights that enable organizations to not just bounce from crisis to crisis but to proactively initiate change. Since organizations can be accurately described as organisms, which go through life cycles (see for instance *Fifth Discipline*, Senge, 1990), a periodic health checkup is strongly advised. Like diagnosing a disease in the early stages within the human body, communication audits enable organizations to respond to needs and changes in a timely and effective manner.

Arnold and McClure (1996) summarize the purpose for doing needs assessment, and we would argue especially communication audits, is to gather relevant information to help define the problem, provide background for alternative solutions, and create an atmosphere that will support the training program that will ultimately be provided. DeWine (2001) points out that communication audits are simply diagnostic tools for intervention.

Therefore, a communication audit, as Downs (1996) notes, "is merely a process of exploring, examining, monitoring, or evaluating" the communication within an organization (p.3). Its goal is to identify how things are done there as well as what is done well and what needs improving. So, rather than seeing the communication audit as a bad thing, as often is the case with tax audits, we would argue that when a communication audit is conducted in a professional manner, it is as valuable to management as a echocardiogram is to a cardiologist. Both are means of diagnosing what is not easily apparent.

Downs (1996) in his text, *Communication Audits*, explains that management typically sees five functional benefits to a communication audit. One is the verification of facts. While managers often know the strengths and weakness in their organizations they almost always desire some verification. The audit enables everyone in the company to get past idiosyncratic perceptions and assumptions in order to make decisions based on valid information. Thus, as managers attempt to monitor the pulse of the organization, sometimes they are surprised by what really is happening. A second benefit is the diagnostic benefit. As addressed above, communication problems can be headed off before they become critical. A third benefit is feedback. Most of the time when difficult and even welcomed new policies are implemented the only feedback loop is informal chat. While "management by walking around" has its merits, there is the danger of distorted perceptions. Therefore, the audit provides an internal benchmark of how well the current policies and practices are working.

A fourth benefit identified by Downs is the communication benefit. The well-established "Hawthorne effect" happens with an audit. Issues that might have been forgotten or ignored will often become common practice once employees are asked for their

input about those policies and practices. The intellectual capital of the organization is utilized on a much broader basis since everyone involved in the audit is provided a forum for suggestions and ideas-an important element in any audit. A study by Brooks, Callicot, and Siegerdt (1979) in Human Communication Research claimed that 85% of the organizations in their study did make changes in their communication practices due to conducting an audit. Finally, Downs mentions the training effect of an audit. He argues that managers who participate in the planning and conducting of a communication audit inherently improve their communication processes and skills

Overview of the Communication Audit Process

Based on several years of experience conducting and managing communication audits, we use an acrostic of the term A-U-D-I-T to describe the process. It is: **A**-pproaching organizations; **U**-nderstanding the goals and strategies for that specific audit; **D**-ata collection tools must be carefully selected; **I**-nterpretation of the collected data; and, **T**-alking about insights and possible actions.

A-pproaching Organizations

An audit can be initiated internally or externally. As facilitators of a communication audits course, we act as external consultants. In most cases, the approach is built around the philosophy of expanding the walls of the classroom in the context of service learning. Initial contact requires defining clearly for the potential client the purpose of a communication audit, the potential benefits, and an interview plan for gathering information to identify appropriate assessment strategies and tools that compliment the process and structure of a particular organization.

U-nderstanding the Goals and Strategies for That Specific Audit

When a person says "communication audit" often the response is bewilderment, even by managers. But the reality is that communication audits, just like financial audits, are simply assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of the communication within a particular organization. The more common and inclusive concept in the business world is the needs assessment. As Goldstein and Ford (2002) have powerfully argued, any healthy needs assessment must contain at least three levels of analysis. He labels them the Organizational Analysis, the Requirements Analysis and a Task and Knowledge, Skill and Ability Analysis. Elements of the organizational analysis include clarification of the mission and vision of that organization, identification of the training climate, and determination of unique legal or external constraints faced by that particular organization. When explaining the requirements analysis, Goldstein includes clarification of the requirements of the job as well as the role of each job in the context of that organization. He spends time within the task analysis to discuss the knowledge, skill and ability required to succeed in that task.

Our experience suggests that who initiates the approach to the communication audit--researchers, consultants, professors with classes or management--is far less important than making sure everyone involved Understands the objectives that hope to be achieved. What is important is that all parties are fully involved in laying the groundwork so that full agreement is reached as to what will occur. The organization must be confident that their purposes will be achieved or the entire experience will likely be sabotaged--intentionally or unintentionally. Also, everyone must agree to and be clear about what data will and will not be collected and analyzed, and how that data will be reported. Issues like the number of people who will be involved, when they will be interviewed or administered questionnaires, who will conduct the interviews, and where it will take place, must be stipulated in the initial phase. Furthermore, as is most often the case, the audit team needs to become familiar with that particular organization. Our experience has been that a taking

the audit team through a typical new employee orientation, having them read the employee handbook, and requiring them to spending a few days just observing are enormously beneficial to the audit team's insightfulness when it comes time to conduct interviews as well as interpret the data.

Another element of our understanding aspect of the process is the opportunity to educate management about the entire communication audit process. Issues like financial arrangements ought to be addressed. Downs (1996) stresses that issues like financial arrangements that address the cost of phone calls, postage, travel, data entry and analysis, and employee time for participating in the audit are important. Furthermore, during the planning phase the nature of the final report must be finalized. It is very important to the audit process to be able to tell those participating exactly what will happen with what they tell you. Employee honesty will be significantly enhanced if they know who will be told what and in what form. We strongly advise that management be given both a written and oral report of aggregate data only. Anonymity is crucial especially in the interview process. Similarly, it is also helpful if management agrees to provide everyone access to the final written report. It is during this phase that the relationship between the audit team and the organization is established. Sometimes the organization already has a fairly clear idea of what is causing a problem, at other times only vague symptoms are known and the organization wants the "doctor" to conduct the complete examination. In other scenarios, as occurred with our General Electric (Harmon Industries) audit, it was a joint project throughout. Management had some ideas of what they thought was needed and the audit team suggested diagnostic measures to verify the supposed need. A strength of this approach is that external auditors, who are almost always eyed with some suspicion, should honestly admit that they could never know the organization as well as those who work there. Thus, during the planning phase key expectations, who will be liaison, what areas will be audited, which means of data collection will be used, which employees will participate, the timeline for the entire process, and how the audit will be presented and promoted throughout the organization must be determined.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the understanding phase requires careful attention to the relationship between the communication within the organization and its functions in that organization-task, social, motivational, climate and improvement. Communication, by its very nature, is dynamic, changing, and a process, not static. Therefore, issues like filtering, feedback, external constraints, identity and others must be considered when designing the audit. Auditors must carefully relate their examination of the communication to all the relevant processes within the organization. Thus, key issues like the amount of information exchanged, the directional dimensions to that flow, and how well the various media are used by the organization must be considered.

Data Collection Tools Must be Carefully Selected

The tool bag of the communication audit is filled with numerous instruments (see Downs, 1996, for an excellent description of many). However, we believe they can be categorized as interviews, questionnaires, critical incidents, message tracking, and communication networks. Most would agree that the basic instrument is the interview. While this is the most low-tech and oldest means of assessment, it remains an excellent tool. Although perceptions can be inaccurate, they remain the basis of behaviors and decisions. In communication exchanges, meaning is in the listener not the sender. Thus, perceptions are quite important. Also, the interview provides the opportunity to probe issues deeply and discover areas that had not been identified as noteworthy by management or the auditors. Those with first-hand experience provide the information and the interviewee receives the reward of being heard. Finally, the interview, not

being so time-bound, provides a wonderful opportunity to probe serendipitous topics.

Along side the interview is the questionnaire or survey. The standard issues of sample size, scope of the questions, wording, format, order and distribution and collection all apply. Return rates often depend on overall support of management, when and where the questionnaire is filled out, where they are turned in, and how the process was publicized. Similarly, analysis can consist of frequency distributions, means and ranks, differences in actual means, correlations and statistical comparisons among demographic groups.

Another important thing to determine about a communication audit is whether or not the appropriate strategies have been selected for that organization. Many perspectives need to be taken into account before the audit is conducted. Like quality research, often a pilot of multiple audit tools ought to be made before a full-blown communication audit is conducted. One crucial reason for this is that an audit, at best, is only a snap shot of what actually occurs within any organization. Thus, it is imperative that the snap shot be as accurate as possible. Issues like confidentiality, when and how it is administered, who will have access to the data, how the data will be reported, etc. must be clearly determined before the audit can be conducted in order to get reliable results.

Since we use organizational communication students as audit teams, we spend a great deal of time educating them about the audit tools of interviewing, questionnaires (paper or online), critical communication experiences, ECCO analysis and communication networks. What we use and strongly recommend is a combination. For example, with the General Electric (Harmon Industries) audit, we began with the Downs/Hazen Communication Satisfaction questionnaire and followed that with two levels of interviews.

I-nterpretation of the Collected Data

The data from an audit is only as good as those trained to interpret the results. Evaluation of data is a crucial step in the audit process. As often happens, data that is relative to different types of organizations and settings is often interpreted as absolute data. For example, what does it mean that 30 percent of the employees are dissatisfied with the amount of information they receive about company stock? Or that 17 percent say they receive excellent feedback? Are those the key people who need the information about the stock or the feedback? Several issues are important when interpreting the data. One is relevant strengths and weaknesses. In the audit of UMB Bank we found every item on the questionnaire had mean score of 3+ on a 1-5 scale. Thus, the issue was not glaring weaknesses or problems but relative strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, we compared the results with a national data bank for that particular industry. Therefore, the absolute score could be more accurately interpreted when compared with the benchmark of national trends in that particular type of industry.

T-alking About Insights and Possible Actions

The pre-arranged agreement regarding to whom the final report will be made must be fulfilled. From the beginning we would typically argue for a broad reporting of results or, perhaps two different reports-one for general distribution and one for just management. Either way, the auditors must produce and present what was promised. If as the audit process has progressed management has requested a change in the reporting format or forum, the auditors owe it to those questioned and their personal integrity to never violate what was promised. Instead, compelling arguments can be made for sharing the insights and possible actions widely so that the next audit will produce even more reliable and valid results.

Case Studies

Over the years we have conducted numerous audits, usually using organizational communication majors taking either a Communication Training or Communication Audits course. These courses are senior-level and graduate-level courses. Therefore, by means of these genuine learning experiences, students learn first-hand about communication audits of area organizations. Our roles have been to be both teacher and consultant. The following cases provide samples of communication audits as well as a means of illustrating how well audits enable organizations to determine their communication situations and conditions.

General Electric (formerly Harmon Industries)

In 1991 and again in 1996 a communication audit of General Electric's Electronic Components Division in Warrensburg, Missouri (formerly Harmon Industries) was conducted. Several meetings with all top management at the facility-including all three shift supervisors since the plant was in production 24 hours a day for seven days per week-resulted in selection of the Downs/Hazen Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire as the initial audit tool. Based on the findings from that survey, two levels of interviews were conducted. Once all the data was collected it was interpreted and the findings were transmitted to all supervisors who had agreed to share the results with the entire workforce.

The Downs/Hazen survey identified strengths at GE. Workers were most satisfied with communication about benefits and pay, company profits and finances, company accomplishments, the amount of supervision, receptivity to supervision, job satisfaction, a compatible work group, that supervisors trust workers, company policies and goals, and the ability to self-rate productivity. Weaknesses centered around horizontal communication-problems with group leaders, differences between shifts, and the third shift often being left out of the communication loop; downward communication-lower management needs more floor time, conflicting reports from plant and production managers need to cease; personal communication; and, the communication climate. The follow-up interviews revealed a need for standardization in reports and implementation of policies, recognition via constructive feedback rather than destructive feedback, and significant improvement in the performance appraisal system. Recommendations for improvement in consistency, communication strategies and performance appraisal were made.

UMB Bank

Another communication audit was conducted on the Warrensburg branches of the UMB Bank. Relative strengths and weaknesses were again identified using mean scores. But with UMB Bank a percentage breakdown was also provided to help understand the most and least satisfied aspects of their communication. For example, their most satisfied issue was "extent to which my supervisor trusts me." And their least satisfaction included "recognition for my efforts" where 21.5% were satisfied, 11.9% were neutral and 66.7% were dissatisfied. That made recognition a much greater concern than the relative weakness regarding "extent to which supervisory communication motivates and stimulates and enthusiasm for meeting company goals" where 34.2% were satisfied, 22.0% neutral and 43.5% were dissatisfied. Also, based on the results of the survey data, interview questions included "How do you reinforce positive behavior in your employees since the survey revealed a concern with recognition for effort?" Finally, the relative strengths as well as the relative weaknesses were compared with a national data bank. For example, regarding "information about accomplishments and/or failures of the company" (mean 7.0) far exceeded the national norm (5.27). Again, based on the communication audit, data driven interventions were recommended.

First Community Bank

In the Fall of 2002, a communication audit was conducted in a 12-branch banking institution of 150 plus employees. The bank has grown substantially and is experiencing rapid changes in organizational structure. An organizational climate audit was constructed that used a survey instrument along the dimensions of communication flow, organizational values, individual values, professional development, image, and work environment. The audit in survey form was electronically distributed to Customer Service Managers at each location. A small incentive was provided by the Vice President of Marketing to increase the response rate. As a result, the response rate was over 90%. The audit instrument/survey collected qualitative and quantitative data. The organization scored high marks on values, image, and work environment. Employees were most concerned about amount and structure of communication flow within their organization, typically of an organization experiencing rapid growth and change. The triangulated method of data collection assisted the audit team in interpreting their findings. This was valuable to the audit team in the presentation of data findings and recommendations to the bank's management team. This audit demonstrates and reinforces the importance of selecting and using multiple tools in collecting, interpreting, and recommending phases of a communication audit/assessment.

An Assessment and Call for Research

The overall value of a communication audit, to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the communication within the organization, is well established. With the use of carefully designed audits, management as well as labor can make decision based on verified facts. As was found in the audit of General Electric, it was inconsistency in how communicated policies were applied, improvement in communication especially between shifts and the need for more and better performance appraisals that were the real needs, which were only partially recognized by management prior to the audit. But, following the audit, actions could be taken with confidence since the facts had been verified.

Similarly, the organizational communication audit does function as an effective diagnostic tool. At UMB Bank, while employees were quite pleased with the trust placed in them they were surprisingly dissatisfied with the recognition they received for their efforts. In fact, when the Warrensburg branches scores (mean 3.5) were compared with the national norms for the banking industry (4.86), the extent of the dissatisfaction became clearly apparent. Additionally, the use of multiple assessment methods at First Community Bank did provide the audit team a reliable means to explain consistent or inconsistent themes present in each phase of the audit process.

Another aspect of audits that was confirmed was the feedback aspect. While most clients with whom we have worked have all had "Suggestion Boxes" or other ways to garner feedback, all have extolled the amazing clarity of the snap shot provided by the audit. After every audit, the companies have highly praised the audit as the most beneficial feedback experience they have ever had.

Finally, the audit has produced both a communication benefit as well as a training effect. Again, every organization has commented, when approached three to six weeks later, before they had implemented many suggested improvements that the overall communication climate had improved. And it was not uncommon to hear managers say that even without formal training, they had seen improvement. Being made aware of what was actually happening and having verified facts to base decisions on rather than just rumors, improvement in performance had occurred.

What is needed now is research on the cost effectiveness and long-term benefit of communication audits. We have lots of anecdotal evidence for the success of communication audits. But

all graduates need to be surveyed and asked to assess the value of communication audits in their workplaces. Just because most organizational communication graduates have productive careers does not mean experience with communication audits is worthy effort. So specifically, we need to learn what role the class project of the audit has played in their careers. Finally, we need to know how to insure that online surveys work as well as pencil and paper surveys. What needs to occur to make that happen? And what must organizational communication practitioners do to insure that online interviews produce as insightful and useful data as face-to-face? These issues need to be studied.

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