Chapter 7.7
Organizational Communication

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INTRODUCTION

All organizations depend on communication. Communication is the exchange of information between two or more people with the intent that the sender's message be understood and considered by the receivers in their cognition, affect, and behavior. As organizations are designed for action, most organizational communication eventually leads to action and to working relationships between actors. Indeed, communication plays a pivotal role in organizations and may even be seen as the foundation for most organizational action (Galbraith, 1977; Weick, 1979).

KM and communication go hand in hand. On the one hand, communication is the basis for knowledge sharing, which is a necessary component of successful knowledge management. On the other hand, knowledge is crucial for effective communication, and KM is therefore potentially central in facilitating communication. This article concentrates only on the latter direction, namely, the role of KM in promoting effective communication, although as we shall see, the two directions are interrelated. (For literature on the former, i.e., the role of communication in knowledge sharing, see numerous resources in Alavi & Liedner, 2001). Furthermore, our discussion is restricted to computer-based knowledge management, as well as computer mediated communication. Therefore, the terms KM and communication, whenever used here, imply that these functions involve computer support.

Despite the central role of communication in organizations, organizational communication is unfortunately susceptible to numerous obstacles and barriers to effective communication. Barriers to communication occur at the individual and organizational level. At the individual level, interpersonal dynamics interfere with communication, individuals choose inappropriate channels and media, the sender and receiver use different semantics, making it difficult to communicate, and people send conflicting cues in different messages and channels. At the organizational level, different functions and departments see things differently, power and politics interfere with open and sincere exchanges, and organizational

norms or policies dictate ineffective channels and inappropriate forms of messages. KM can help overcome these barriers and improve organizational communication, and, in particular, KM can enhance computerized communication support systems such as structured e-mail, video conferencing, listservs, and so forth. However, to do so, designs of KM systems must be based on an understanding of communication.

BACKGROUND

Our understanding of communication, and particularly computer-mediated communication in the organizational context, has developed dramatically in the last few decades. The classical information-transmission model introduced by Shannon and Weaver (1949) has transformed into more active, psychological, and social models of communication (Axley, 1984). See, for example, Riva and Galimberti (1998) for an overview of these transformations in theories and metaphors of communication. In the interest of brevity and in order to identify the role of KM in enhancing communication, we select one model of organizational communication (Te'eni, 2001) that helps to define the link between KM and communication. The model has three main factors, each of which includes several attributes:

1. Inputs to the communication process include (a) distance between sender and receiver, (b) values and norms of communication, and (c) attributes of the task that is the object of the communication;
2. A cognitive-affective communication process of exchanging a message that describes the choice and implementation of (a) one or more communication strategies used to transmit the message, (b) the form of the message and (c) the medium through which it is transmitted; and

3. The communication impact: (a) the mutual understanding and (b) the relationship between the sender and receiver.

Consider the following example. A product designer in an industrial plant may send a message to the marketing director about a new product under development, explaining the bill of materials expected for the product. This information is useful to the marketing director when pricing the product. The communication (semantic) distance between the communicators may be large due to their different background disciplines (engineering and marketing). However, working for the same company, they accept the same communication norms by which information in the organization is always openly shared as early as possible. The sender may choose to communicate the message by a typed letter (choice of medium) and using the formal template for internal budgeting (choice of message form). Additionally, the sender sends an informal memo in the form of a story describing how this product has been developed at home by one of the engineers. This story provides contextual information about the product and explains the rather expensive list of required materials (this is an example of a communication strategy). Finally, the impact of the communication is essentially that the marketing director understands the message and prices the product accordingly. This example demonstrates how organizational communication can take on different forms and media and how the communication situation and people involved adapt these communication parameters to ensure effective communication. This article explores how KM can help communicators achieve this goal.

KM FOR SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION: A FRAMEWORK

Four concepts in this model are especially relevant to the link with KM: context, levels of abstraction,

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