A Way to Healthy Workplace Environment: Linking Communication and Employee Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Being able to communicate effectively is an essential life skill of an individual. Proper communication helps an individual narrow down gaps along with promoting a critical understanding among others.

Therefore the concept of communication and knowledge about how it is supposed to be mastered, is of pioneering importance. Perfecting communication skills helps an individual leave an indelible mark and thus makes the whole communication process much more effective. These skills are required in every sphere of life.

Over the recent years, concepts of communication, such as interpersonal and intrapersonal, have gained focus in most organizations, management institutes, schools etc. A comprehensive exploration of meaningful communication with a focus on Positive Psychology is now an important subject area of the analysis of any organizational behavior.

Positive Psychology essentially deals with the positive aspects of human existence and is heavily influenced by the Humanistic-Existential schools of thought. Well being is studied extensively by this branch of psychology and one can definitely not ignore the importance of effective communication, especially in a formal workplace environment to ensure betterment of the employees. Various factors like personality pattern and emotional quotient (E.Q) influence the communication process, which we are going to explore in this chapter. Inability to communicate effectively leads to confusion, conflict, frustration, poor job performance etc. which in turn have a direct impact on the well-being of the employee, both in and off his/her workplace.

Keywords: Communication, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Positive Psychology, Organizational Behavior, Humanistic-Existential, Personality Pattern, Emotional Quotient, Job Performance, Verbal, Nonverbal.

INTRODUCTION

"Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools because they have to say something."

-Plato

Human beings are essentially a species that has high intensity gregarious needs. In other words, human beings are social animals. In the process of societal acceptance, communication plays a very important role.

In the light of this interaction with others, especially in a workplace or organizational setting, the well being of the concerned individual largely depends on how he communicates with others. This is where the fields of Positive Psychology and Organizational Behavior work in close interaction to ensure the well being of people (the domain of Positive Psychology) in the workplace environment to ensure maximum productivity and employee efficiency (the domain of Organizational Behavior).

CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION

The way the word "communication" is used in society in general is quite different from what it actually means even though it is widely used by almost every individual in some way or the other. This is probably because there is no universally and unanimously agreed upon definition of the word.

According to the American Psychological Association, communication refers to " the transmission of information, which may be by verbal or nonverbal means. Humans communicate to relate and exchange ideas, knowledge, feelings, and experiences and for many other interpersonal and social purposes. Nonhuman animals likewise communicate vocally or nonvocally for a variety of purposes. Communication is studied by cognitive and experimental psychologists, and communication disorders are treated by mental and behavioral health therapists and by speech and language therapists. Communications is the discipline that studies the processes and systems involved in communication at both the interpersonal and broadly social levels, in the latter case paying particular attention to the publishing media and telecommunication systems (telephones, radio, television, Internet, etc.)."

A few important aspects of this definition are to be noted. Firstly, communication can be of various types. The most basic typology includes dividing communication into verbal and non verbal communication.

- **Verbal:** This mode of communication involves exchange of ideas, thoughts and emotions in the form of words either written or spoken. A specific language is used in most cases of verbal communication.
- **Non Verbal:** This mode does not necessarily use verbal language as a means, but relies on body language, eye contact, posture and similar gestures to communicate.

   Note: A very important thing to notice here is that there are a lot of categories of non verbal communication, the most notable one being "body language" and "paralanguage".

Body Language essentially refers to body movements, gestures, postures, facial expression etc. that have an effect on the message being conveyed. The information being derived from such cues have a great impact on how a receiver of a message perceives and makes meaning of the message.

Paralanguage on the other hand refers to characteristics of verbal communication that do not involve the words or the speech itself. On the contrary, it involves features like the tone of talking, the volume and similar characteristics.

Secondly, communication is not a linear process of transfer of ideas. It involves a dynamic system of interpersonal, intrapersonal as well as social interactions.

Thirdly, the content of a communicative process varies largely across time and space and hence serves a vast array of functions which will be discussed in the subsequent sections.
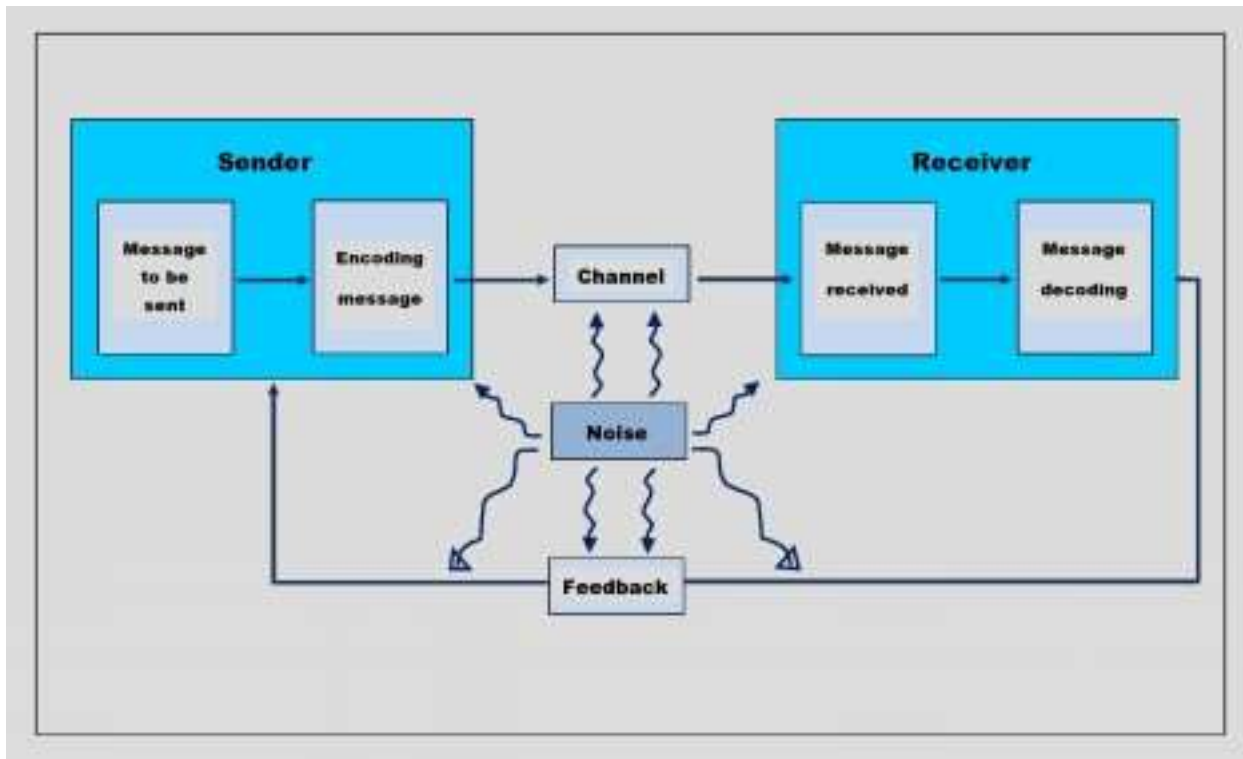
THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

A Communication Process involves all the bits and pieces of phenomena, entities and individuals involved in a simple communicative relationship. The communication process is very important to be studied and

understood properly because among various other purposes that it serves, it helps us identify any loopholes in the process and by addressing it we can improve the nature of communication between the individuals involved.

In the simplest form of a communication process there is typically a **sender** and a **receiver**. The sender has a message that needs to be conveyed to the receiver. Thus, the sender **encodes** the message and through a medium or a **channel** it is passed on to the receiver, who then **decodes** it. There are certain other factors involved here as well. Firstly, there can be added distractions while the transfer of the encoded message is taking place, which we call **noise**. Also, it is very essential that after the receiver decodes the message, a **feedback** is sent to the sender.

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Fig 1: The Communication Process

WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

In a workplace, or an organizational setting, we generally find two categories of communication networks.

1. **Formal Networks:** Formal communication networks are very complicated in nature mainly because of two reasons. Primarily, in an organization, a formal network includes a large number of people. And secondly, these large groups of individuals are distributed into an array of hierarchies based on their designations. Horizontally, a formal network is thus extremely widespread and covers a lot of area and vertically it has a complicated hierarchy with a number of layers making the whole network design much more complicated, though structured.

For the sake of simplicity we often try to draw typical patterns out of a formal network.

a) <u>Chain:</u> Typically a chain pattern of communication includes a chain of commands in an unidirectional manner. In other words, in a workplace, this pattern of network is seen in lower tier staff to higher tier staff or vice versa involving a chain of messages from one point to the other proceeding gradually through points in between. A major problem of this is, that leaders often do not get the originally sent message but an altered version of it due to the number of intermediate members in the communication process.

b) <u>Wheel</u>: A wheel generally involves a central figure who is generally the leader of sorts who is the conduit for all the communication. Communication problems are less and the method is quick. There is no distortion of information by other members of the group while passing the message.

c) <u>All-Channel</u> : An all-channel network generally is characterized by a holistic communication pattern in which all members engage in an active communication process with each other.

d) <u>Y-Pattern</u>: Y pattern is a complicated network because it involves one or more subgroups. At the core is generally the leader who manages these subgroups.

2. **Informal Networks:** Also known as the "grapevine", this involves all the informal connections and networks that develop in a workplace environment. It consists of all those contents of conversation that employees engage in without any rules or regulations.

The following study by *Davis (1953)* involving 67 managers from a manufacturing firm is a famous one pertaining to grapevine communication patterns:-

In the study each of these 67 individuals were asked how they received a piece of information and to trace it's source.

Results: While the grapevine was important, only 10 percent of the executives acted as liaison individuals (that is, passed the information to more than one other person). When one executive decided to resign to enter the insurance business, 81 percent of the others knew about it, but only 11 percent told someone else. This lack of spreading information through the grapevine is interesting in light of how often individuals claim to receive information that way.

IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK IN COMMUNICATION:-

As we have already stated, communication is not a simple and unidirectional process, in spite of whatever the common notion about it might be. We have seen that in a basic communication process there is at least one sender and one receiver. People often underestimate the role of the receiver in the process of

communication. However it is evident that the receiver's inputs are equally important, if not more, as that of the sender's.

The receiver's major task or role in the communication process is to send feedback to the sender. This allows the sender to get a proper understanding about how the message conveyed was perceived and made sense of by the receiver, allowing room for locating and identifying miscommunications, misunderstandings or any other kind of error in communication.

There is even research evidence that a graphical feedback format has a more positive impact on performance than does a strictly tabular, numerical feedback format. (Paul W. B. Atkins, Robert E. Wood, and Philip J. Rutgers)

There are certain characteristics given by Luthans and Martinko called the "Characteristics of Feedback for Effective and Ineffective Interpersonal Communication in Human Resource Management". They are as follows:-

1. **Intention:** The purpose of saying something is very important. The aim of any feedback in a workplace should be to improve job performance. If, instead of that, the message is aimed at derogating someone or to personally attack someone, it would not work as effective feedback.

2. **Specificity:** Say, an employee does a task and submits it to his team lead. The team lead tells him that he did not do a good job but does not mention where exactly were the errors. In that case, the feedback is not effective as it leaves the sender with vague information and doubts in his or her head.

3. **Description:** Any receiver must provide an impartial descriptive criticism of any task rather than a subjective and critically evaluative one. The former works as effective feedback and the latter is ineffective in nature.

4. **Usefulness:** If the sender receives feedback, from which the receiver cannot derive any meaning or any room for improvement, the feedback is ineffective. If the sender knows

   that the receiver cannot improve on an area or if it is impossible for him/her, then saying that same thing is useless resulting in an ineffective feedback.

5. **Timeliness:** When feedback is provided to an employee is extremely important. Imagine you submit a project report to your boss, the first thing in the morning. You get a feedback of the same after about a week. In that case you would not be much motivated from that feedback. Hence, timely feedback is very important and effective in nature.

6. **Readiness:** Any feedback becomes ineffective if the receiver is not in the place of, or does not want to receive feedback. Hence, feedback must be given only when it is required and expected by the sender for it to be effective.

7. **Clarity:** When a feedback is given to a sender, it must be ensured that he or she understands the same. For it to happen the feedback must have a high index of clarity. The best way to ensure this is to ask the sender to **paraphrase**. Paraphrasing refers to the act of rephrasing or rewarding a received message in order to make sure that it has been properly interpreted and understood.

8. **Validity:** Reliability and Validity of the feedback must be high because if not, the employee might believe that it is a partial and subjective feedback that might hinder his performance. Hence, effective feedback is valid in nature.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:-

An effective communication can distort by numbers of barriers which are discussed below:

1. **Filtering** : In the filtering process the information coming on behalf of the sender, manipulated in such a manner , so that the receiver favorably perceives it. If organizational communication is more on a vertical level, there is more scope for filtering. Some filtering will occur based on status difference in organization. Filtering can distort upward communication by conveying bad news desire to place supervision accordingly.

2. **Selective Perception** : The receiver of the communication process selectively chooses those messages which they want to see and hear based on their needs, desires, motivation, experience and their personal characteristics. They also project their interest and expectations into communications as they decode them.

3. **Information Overload** : Individuals have a limited capacity for processing information. When this information exceeds our processing capacity, the result is information overload. When the individuals have more information to use, they can sort it or manage it to use. They may select, ignore, pass, forget or put off for further processing. For information overload less effective communication can result.

4. **Emotion**: Individuals may interpret or evaluate a message differently when they are in a different mood than normal. Emotion can most likely hinder effective communication. Because in this state we are prone to disregard our rational and objective thinking and substitute emotional judgement. When individuals are in a positive emotional state, they are more stable and confident in processing any persuasive message. But when they are in a negative emotional state they are likely to scrutinize and critically evaluate the message in great detail.

5. **Language** : Communicating in the same language, words have different meanings to different people. Factors that influence such differences are age and social context.In short, we are lacking the uniformity to use our language. We could minimize our communication difficulties by modifying the language but we are unable to do so because of our lack of knowledge. Our incorrect assumption often leads us to the ideas about communication discrepancy between senders and receivers.

6. **Silence** : Silence or lack of communication is defined by the absence of information. However, research suggests that silence and withdrawal from communication are both common and problematic. In workplace silence regarding discrimination, harassment, corruption, and misconduct can influence top management. Sometimes management cannot take action to eliminate this type of behavior. Finally, silence can cause psychological distress among employees.

   Silence is less likely when workgroup identification, minority opinion and procedural justice are high. Act of ignorance can express employees withhold for future communication.

7. **Communication Apprehension** : A communication apprehension, or social anxiety is very common in people. In the workplace these people experience undue tension and anxiety in oral

communication, written communication, or both. It is extremely difficult for them to talk with others face-to-face. An employee with oral-communication apprehensive wants to avoid a situation, but almost all jobs require some oral communication. It distorts the communication demands of their jobs in order to minimize the need for communication. So some people limit their oral communication and rationalize their actions by ignoring the effectiveness of the communication process to avoid social anxiety.

8. **Lying**: Misrepresentation of information is called lying. It is the final barrier to effective communication. People differ in their conception of lying. For ethicists and social scientists, there is no concept of denying the prevalence of lying. As most people are not very good at detecting deception in others they can't find the nonverbal or verbal cues unique to lying such as averting gaze, pausing, and shifting, posture that can also be signals of nervousness, shyness, or doubt. Moreover, most people who lie take a number of steps to guard against being detected. To avoid detection many lies are embedded in truths and give a somewhat true account in enough detail. In sum, the frequency of lying and the difficulty in detecting liars makes this an especially strong barrier to effective communication in organizations.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN WORKPLACE:-

The advent of positive psychology marked a paradigm shift from traditional approaches which principally centre around curing mental illness to an approach that prioritises human strengths like optimism, hope and resilience instead of only focusing on the insufficiencies of a person. This direction of thought, hence, found its place in most branches of psychology offering the psychology fraternity a new lens to look at behaviour. A working individual spends roughly around 7-8 hours of his/her daily life in his/her place of work. Workers form the groundwork of any organisation and therefore in order to maximise the yield from this resource it is imperative to view it not merely as a means to bring the organisational goals into effect but as a dynamic assemblage of human emotional effects, moods with psychological and social needs.

Positive psychology aims to establish an optimal human condition which focuses and nurtures the positive attributes of a person more than his/her shortcomings. Positive psychology underlines an individual's wellbeing and prioritises it over negative psychological attributes unfavourable in maintaining the finesse of human functioning. Thus, it could be rightfully said that the wellness of the employee is directly associated with their performance and organisational productivity.

Role of positive emotional affect in workplace:-

The way people respond emotionally to situations influence their attitude towards their job. In this vein, positive emotions proliferate job satisfaction levels and instil a healthy attitude towards work and the respective organisation and in turn inculcates a sense of wellbeing. Similarly, negative emotions tend to drain a person and attend to the displeasing conditions of the environment and in-turn overlook and dismiss the more gratifying elements of the situation.

It is also observed that Positive emotional affect quite directly increases the sense of wellbeing. Positive emotions impact the way one thinks and behaves thereby moulding ones attitudes, judgements, and mood.

Workers who have a positive emotional affect inculcated in them are less rigid in their thought process and do not suffer from functional fixedness. They view every situation from a broader perspective and have an inclusive approach while addressing an issue. Positive emotions also make it likely for people to infer a situation based on past experiences which have been rewarding and successful and not their failures.

RESILIENCE AND COPING WITH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:-

In the simplest terms, resilience refers to nothing but an individual's (employee's, in this case) ability and potential to cope with a crisis situation. The barriers that we have discussed before, serve as notable and extremely instrumental hindrances to effective communication. The resulting miscommunication can lead to multiple negative outcomes like stress, conflict, disruption in interpersonal relationships etc., none of which are desirable or acceptable in a workplace environment. But these conflicts are evident and employers and employees must have the resources to deal with the same. This is where the role of resilience comes into play.

Coping strategy of an employee: In Health Psychology we talk about coping strategies. We will discuss them in brief and try to link them with better communication. Whenever a particular conflict or crisis situation arises, human beings have a tendency of employing either of these strategies. And better communication gives a major impetus to the effectiveness of these strategies.

a) <u>Problem Focussed Coping</u>: In problem focussed coping an individual generally tries to address the source of the conflict and try to resolve it. In an organizational setting communication problems are better dealt with this particular coping strategy. People high on resilience will actively try to resolve the conflict in a problem focussed way. For example, in case of the barrier of *information overload* and employee who is resilient is most likely to filter out the absolutely unnecessary information and work on the information on a priority basis by communicating about his problems to his superiors or colleagues, thereby reducing the cognitive overload.

b) <u>Emotion Focussed Coping:</u> On the other hand, emotion focussed coping essentially deals with the internal and subjective management of emotions to cope with the stressful situation. In the same example of information overload, a resilient employee who happens to adopt this approach is likely to communicate to himself and moderate the cognitive overload with the help of affect (emotion).

WELLBEING AS A RESULT OF OPERANT COMMUNICATION

Workplace is a social environment populated by co-workers - superiors and juniors of every level of designation. While research evidence supports that increased communication improves the quality of output diminishing the possibilities of information gaps causing delay and disharmony in the process of achieving organisational goals, it also enables smooth transition of information within the various social systems.

Coordination between business activities, transfer of decisions through vigorous levels of management are some of the key communication activities that take place at work.

A successful communication not only allows to overcome these problems but also helps in creating a sense of happiness and well-being for both (or all) the persons involved in the communication process, ensuring a long term and meaningful relationship.

Thus, practitioners and researchers in this field train the employees on both individual and organizational levels, on how to develop skills pertaining to establishing meaningful and effective verbal and nonverbal modes of communication.

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