Promoting Internal Communication

Worst-case scenario: It's 3:45 p.m., and your organization has scheduled a rally in favor of the new Youth Center at 4:00. The press is there, the folks pushing the Youth Center are there, the politicians are there...where are all the people from your organization? In a panic, you call the office to ask where the rest of the staff is. "Rally? What rally? Nobody told us about it," they say."We're not prepared for any rally."

Even-worse-case scenario: You're the director of a community health clinic, and you're about to open on Monday morning. Suddenly, all the clinic's nurses are lined up in front of you. "Working conditions at this place are terrible. We've been abused and exploited long enough! We're all handing in our resignations...right now!" You stammer, "But you never told me you were unhappy. Let's discuss it!" Then you realize that you're talking to the slamming door.

Each of these situations results from poor communication within an organization. They're particularly awful examples, it's true, but poor internal communication has plagued many grass-roots and community-based organizations, and has been the downfall of quite a few. It's tremendously important that your organization foster an atmosphere of openness and create systems that will lead to the freest flow possible of, not only information, but ideas, feelings, and a sense of shared purpose.

A lot of the information and suggestions in this section assume a staff of at least five or six members, which is the number at which sustaining internal communication can become particularly difficult. This is not meant to imply that smaller organizations don't have internal communication needs, or that the need for good internal communication is any less in an organization with three staff members than in one with 30. If your staff is larger than one, internal communication is an issue that you can't afford to ignore. Most of the material that follows is relevant to small organizations as well as large ones. This section will help you establish an atmosphere and set up systems that will lead to good internal communication and to the effectiveness of your organization.

WHAT IS INTERNAL COMMUNICATION?

In its simplest terms, internal communication is communication within an organization. It encompasses both "official" communication -- memos, guidelines, policies and procedures, etc. -- and the unofficial communication that goes on among and between the staff members of all organizations -- the exchange of ideas and opinions, the development of personal relationships, and the proverbial conversation around the water cooler. It goes in all directions among line staff (those who do the specific work of the organization and work directly with the target population), administrators, supervisors, clerical and support staff, volunteers, and, perhaps, even the Board of Directors.

Internal communication is a lot more than people talking to one another, however. It's the life blood of any organization, the way in which everyone gets the information she needs. It means that anyone can easily get his question answered, as well as that no one gets left out when there's a birthday celebration for a staff member.

Good internal communication can:

- Provide people the information they need to do their jobs effectively
- Make sure they know about anything that concerns them
- Provide people with clear standards and expectations for their work
- Give people feedback on their own performance
- Provide them emotional support for difficult work
- Suggest new ideas about both their work and their lives
- Allow them to take the pulse of the organization and understand its overall situation
- Help them maintain a shared vision and a sense of ownership in the organization

In many ways, internal communication is the glue that holds an organization together. Without it, you're just a collection of disconnected individuals each working individually at her own job. With it, you're a unit with power far beyond the sum of your parts.

Communication, in general, is the process of transmitting ideas, thoughts, information, emotions, etc. between and among people. Regardless of the context in which this transmission occurs, there are certain basic ideas about communication which always apply, and which should be understood when reading this section.

- *Communication is not one-sided.* You can blanket the organization with information, but if that information isn't understood, or isn't understood in the way you meant it, you might as well not have bothered. Any good communicator has to empathize with the audience and try to anticipate what they will think and how they will feel about a message they receive.
- *Communication involves more than words.* It can include body language, facial expression, and tone of voice, as well as the attitude and general tone that are projected in speech, writing, or actions. The condescending or hostile message sent by someone's tone or stance may be stronger than the supportive message sent by his words.
- *Communication can either be direct* (i.e. go directly from the source to the recipient of the message) *or indirect* (i.e. either go through a third -- or fourth or fifth -- party). While indirect communication is often necessary, it always carries the possibility that its message will be distorted as it goes through the network between the source and the recipient, and it also eliminates the source's non-verbal communication. (E-mail and memos do the same.)

- *Different individuals and groups communicate using different styles and assumptions*. People's personal experience, gender, racial and cultural background, education, and perception of who has power all influence how they send, receive, and interpret communication.
- *All communication has three aspects: its content; the tone in which it's delivered; and the structure through which it's delivered*. All of these together contribute to what the communication's actual message is, how well the communication is understood, what effect it has on the person or group to whom it's directed, and what its ultimate result will be.

To communicate effectively, organizations and individuals have to take all of these ideas into account.

WHY SHOULD YOU PROMOTE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION?

So good internal communication is a good thing. But there's so much to do. Why spend a lot of time on this stuff? Can't the organization do just fine by leaving people alone to do their jobs and let internal communication take care of itself?

The short answer to that last question is "No." Unless you're a one-person organization, communication is one of the most important aspects of managing what you do. What can internal communication do for you? Here's a short list:

- *It can improve the effectiveness of the organization*. The more information people have, the more quickly they get it, and the better connections they have with others in the organization, the better the work of the organization gets done, and the better jobs individuals do. The better jobs they do, the better they feel about their jobs and about the organization. The ultimate beneficiaries of all this are the target population, the community, and the organization, which finds itself with committed and efficient staff members, satisfied participants, and community respect.
- *It keeps everyone informed of what's going on in the organization*. No one gets any unpleasant surprises, and everyone has the chance to deal with changes, good news, and bad news together.
- *It allows the organization to respond quickly and efficiently to change, emergencies, etc.*
- *It makes problem-solving easier by providing a channel for everyone's ideas and opinions*. Solutions can come from unexpected directions, but only if there's the possibility that they'll be heard.
- *It creates a climate of openness within the organization*. If everyone feels he has access to whatever information he needs or wants, and can talk to anyone in the organization about anything, it encourages good relations among people, promotes trust, and forestalls jealousy and turf issues.

Turf issues arise when people feel insecure and believe they have to defend their "turf," their own little piece of the organization. That can translate into their hoarding information or materials, or becoming jealous of (or hostile to) anyone else who tries to do any of what they do, even in attempts to help them. Defending turf can poison the atmosphere of an organization, ruin the relationships among staff, and make it harder for the organization to do its work. The more secure everyone feels -- and knowing that communication is open is a big part of security -- the less likely turf issues are to arise.

- *It promotes an atmosphere of collegiality, and makes the organization a pleasant place to work*. Good internal communication means that problems among people get resolved and the workplace

is generally a pleasant place to be. This, in turn, leads to job satisfaction and organizational stability (people will be less likely to leave their jobs if they're happy in their work and working conditions).

- *It gives people more of a sense of ownership of the organization*, and more of a feeling that everyone is working together toward the same goal. The combination of openness and the easy flow of communication to everyone combine to make people feel like part of a coherent whole, and to feel that their ideas and opinions are listened to and valued.
- *It promotes fairness and equity within the organization*. If everyone has equal access to information and to everyone else, it's harder for anyone to feel that she's particularly privileged, or that she's being left out of the loop. It ultimately should lead to everyone feeling she's part of a team of equals, all of whom are treated similarly.
- *It shows respect for everyone in the organization*, by assuming that everyone's ideas and information are valuable.
- *It gets problems and potential problems out in the open*, rather than letting them fester and turn into something far harder to deal with. You can't deal with a problem if you don't know it's there; exposing it is the first -- and often the hardest -- step toward resolving it.

The director of a small organization was constantly being told "in confidence" about problems among other staff members or issues that staff members had with the way he was doing things. The informants, who wanted to avoid conflict, would explain that he couldn't act on any of their information, because that would expose them as informants: they just "thought he ought to know." After a short time, he made clear that he would no longer consider himself bound by confidentiality, since their information was worse than useless if it meant he couldn't act on it. It simply made him feel totally powerless, and made them powerless as well, because the issues they raised continued and worsened.

He raised the issues he had been told about at a staff meeting, and groups were formed to deal with each. The groups arrived at resolutions that everyone could live with, and that both reduced tension among staff and greatly increased the effectiveness of the organization. The director had proven his point: open communication about problems does far more to relieve anxiety than avoiding conflict does.

- *It forestalls the spread of rumors* by making sure that accurate information is constantly being communicated to everyone.
- *It improves the work of the organization* by increasing the likelihood that ineffective practices, problems, etc. Can be identified by those closest to them, and replaced or resolved by things that work better.

HOW DO YOU PROMOTE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION?

There are three interrelated issues that an organization needs to address in promoting internal communication. The first involves the *organizational climate and culture*. The organization has to be a place where open communication is accepted and encouraged. The second concerns *establishing clear definitions of what needs to be communicated, and by whom*. If you assume that everyone always needs to know about absolutely everything, the staff would spend all its time merely receiving and passing on information. There need to be guidelines about what and how information gets passed. The last issue is that of the *systems* that the organization creates to get its work done and to enable internal communication. Are they structured to encourage communication in all directions, or to discourage or channel it in particular ways?

ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

To foster internal communication, the first and most important step is to establish a climate of openness that encourages the free flow of communication and information in all directions. This means that the organizational culture has to embrace internal communication, and that individuals -- particularly key individuals, who might be the director and other administrators, or who might simply be the people that others respect and listen to -- have to feel comfortable with, and model communicating regularly and clearly with, anyone and everyone else in the organization.

The culture of an organization consists of accepted and traditional ways of doing things, particular relationship structures, how people dress, how they act toward one another, etc. People get used to that culture, and, just as in a society, changing it can be difficult. If the culture of an organization has encouraged hoarding information and lack of contact among staff, switching to a culture of openness and free exchange may take time and a lot of tact. Whether you're a director, and want to initiate change from above, or you're a staff member frustrated with the ways people relate to one another in your organization, you need to be patient and celebrate small victories. It won't happen all at once, unless everyone's ripe for change.

The suggestions below about creating an appropriate climate for communication apply to everyone in an organization, but are particularly applicable to directors and managers. No matter how democratic an organization is or claims to be, people still tend to look for leadership to those with the most responsibility. Especially if the establishment of internal communication involves a real change in organizational culture, leaders have to set a very high standard of real openness and respect if they expect others to follow.

Ultimately, the organizational climate becomes the organizational culture.

Creating a climate that fosters internal communication includes:

- Practice what you preach, i.e. listen to others, and act quickly and appropriately on their questions, complaints, suggestions, issues, etc. This is probably the most important aspect of developing an atmosphere of openness. People have to be consistently treated as if they and their ideas and opinions matter. If that doesn't happen, you might as well forget the rest of this section.

Don't assume anything is trivial if someone is concerned enough to talk to you about it. On the other hand, there are people in the world who like to see conflict, or who feel it's their right to complain about everything, whether their complaints are justified or not. If there's one on the staff of your organization, you and everyone else will know it soon enough. You need to be respectful in any case, but you can also use some judgment in how you respond without compromising the atmosphere of the organization.

- Treat everyone similarly, regardless of what job they have in the organization, or of how you feel about them personally.
- Be sensitive to your -- and others' -- style of communication. Ideally, the people on both ends of a communication are partners. Being open and offensive or condescending is probably worse than not being open at all. Many people are apparently born expert communicators; others need to be trained to communicate appropriately (see the description of "Staff training" below); and still others simply need to be informed that -- often because of differences in age or gender -- their style of communication is bothering others. Again, leaders need to set a clear example here, but part of good internal communication is the willingness of people to speak out when they feel uncomfortable or offended. Often, that can be enough to solve the problem.
- Be culturally sensitive. This encompasses a large area, and runs both ways. The people on both sides of a cultural divide -- whether it's a divide of race, ethnicity, religion, or something else -- need to be sensitive to the assumptions and needs of the other. Something as simple as how far apart they stand can create tension, and the use of some terms that seem innocent on the part of one --

"you people" is a prime example -- can cause anger and lasting bad feelings on the part of the other.

- Make sure information flows in all directions. The organization should ensure that people learn immediately about things that interest or affect them, and should set up systems to make sure that happens, as well as mechanisms to make sure that less timely information gets passed around (see "Systems" below). Information flow might include -- in larger organizations -- an internal newsletter or bulletin that contains interesting or important information (this could be circulated as either print or e-mail).

CLEAR DEFINITIONS OF WHAT NEEDS TO BE COMMUNICATED AND BY WHOM

Much of the information an individual gets is directly related only to him or his job. He obviously can't relay all of it to everyone else. What does need to be communicated to others, and who is responsible for doing it? The answers to those questions will vary from organization to organization, but here are some broad guidelines:

- Any information that anyone needs to do his job or to better understand the context of the work should be communicated to him immediately by whoever has the information. Some possibilities here include information from another staff member about a participant that both are working with; information from another staff member about a situation that he is about to encounter as part of his job; or new rules, regulations, guidelines, etc. that affect his work (from the director or his supervisor if they are internal; from whoever learned about them if they are external, e.g. federal laws).

People often forget that, in order to do their jobs, receptionists or others who may take messages for them need to know such things as when they're available, where they're going to be, and when they'll be back.

- Anything that directly affects the work, employment status, working conditions, or working relationships of an individual should be immediately communicated to her. A potential layoff, a raise in pay, a change in job conditions, a promotion -- all of these fall into this category. Under most circumstances, the communication should take place before the situation is set in stone, so that she, and perhaps others as well, can be part of a discussion about what's going to happen. She should never hear about this type of situation from rumor or from anyone other than the director or her supervisor (depending upon the management structure of the organization). And she should hear about it first -- as soon as the director knows about it, and before anyone who's not affected.
- Any problem or issue with someone's job performance should be communicated to him as soon as it becomes apparent. Rather than "You're messing up. You better get your act together," it should take the form of a supervisory session. The staff member should be informed by his supervisor of exactly what the problem is, and the two should work together -- with others if appropriate -- to find ways to solve it, and to improve on performance. If the problem is serious enough to be a potential reason for dismissal, the staff member should be told that, and the procedure by which he might be fired explained to him. (This procedure should be part of the personnel policy, if the organization has one.) The assumption should be that the situation will improve, but if it gets worse, neither the seriousness of it nor the consequences should come as a surprise.

Besides its benefits to both the organization and the individual, there is another, more pragmatic, reason for clear communication here. It is actually very difficult to fire an employee for not doing his job. In order to avoid a lawsuit or an adverse ruling from the Labor Relations Board, an organization needs to have, and to follow, a clear procedure for recording unacceptable performance over time, informing the employee of the problem, and giving him a number of chances to improve. Thus, an organization's ability to dismiss an incompetent employee may hinge on its communication.

- Any problems that arise between or among staff members should be addressed immediately. As discussed above, the ideal is that all parties would be capable of simply dealing with the issue face to face. If they can't or aren't willing to, there should be an organizational procedure by which the situation can be mediated by someone trusted by everyone involved. In either case, it's vital that the situation be identified by at least one of the parties involved as quickly as possible, so that it can be addressed and resolved before it affects the work of the organization.

Training has a role here. If staff members have tools with which to communicate (conflict resolution skills, I-messages, etc.), they are more likely to be willing to address problems or conflicts directly than if all they can envision is a screaming match.

"I-messages" are just that: a way of explaining things by referring to one's own feelings and perceptions about what has happened, rather than a more general -- and blaming -- pronouncement. It is easier for someone to hear and respond to "I felt hurt when you said that," than to "You never think about anyone but yourself."

- Any problems between staff and the organization as a whole, or general staff dissatisfaction with any aspect of their situation (pay, working conditions, the running of the organization, etc.) needs to be communicated reasonably and quickly to the director or other person designated to handle those issues. (In a large organization, there may actually be a human resource director or other administrator who deals specifically with personnel issues. In smaller organizations, the director may be the only administrator, and may do everything that line staff don't.)
- Any information important to the working of the organization as a whole -- a funding cut or increase, a visit by a celebrity, a staff resignation, a new program possibility, etc. -- should be communicated to everyone, usually by the director. (In the case of a resignation, the staff member may want to write a general note or tell others herself at a meeting or individually.)
- Positive information, praise, etc. should be communicated as often as possible by anyone who has it to give, but especially by directors or supervisors. People in grass-roots and community-based organizations too often deal with bad news. They need to hear good news and get credit for what they do. In situations where an individual is being praised for a job well done, he should be praised twice: once privately by his supervisor or the director, and then again publicly (at a staff meeting or awards presentation). And every opportunity should be taken to pass around that kind of praise.

SYSTEMS

Just about every organization sets up systems of different kinds to make it easier or more effective to complete some parts of its task. Internal communication can be stifled by your organization's systems, or it can be promoted and strengthened through both existing systems and new ones you create for the purpose. It helps both to understand what you can do, and what you'd be better off not doing. Some ways that systems that can be used to promote and strengthen internal communication:

Hiring

You may already have a plan for hiring staff members. It can easily include making clear to all applicants -- for every job in the organization -- that communication is absolutely necessary to what goes on in the organization, and that openness is part of the organizational culture. Your hiring plan can also include searching for people with the qualities that foster openness and communication -- comfort with oneself, friendliness, a sense of humor, a relaxed attitude, among many others. You may be able to devise questions and structure the interview situation to find those qualities. An important piece of this process is to be sure that your communication with applicants, including the interview itself, models what you're seeking in the working of the organization.

A good way to make sure that you don't hire the wrong person is to put candidates through an experience of anxiety and harassment. That will demonstrate to them that the organizational culture is high tension, survival-of-the-fittest. The person who looks best in that kind of situation is probably exactly the wrong person to help establish an atmosphere that encourages internal communication.

Staff training

As with hiring, you may already have a staff training plan or program. You can adapt it for promoting internal communication by adding or enhancing training in the communication needs of the organization and individuals:

- Some explanation of what ideal internal communication for the organization might look like.

A caution here: the ideal of openness in communication should be balanced with the necessities of getting the organization's work done. It doesn't make sense for a staff member to communicate an issue straight to the director if the person who'll have to handle it gets bypassed by that communication. It should be made clear in training, and in general discussion, who has responsibility for what, and people should be encouraged to direct their communication to the individuals with the appropriate areas of responsibility.

- Listening skills. More than just asking people to listen to others, training here might include specific instruction and practice in active listening.

Active listening is a process by which you learn to temporarily turn off the voices in your own head and simply pay close attention to what another person is saying. Most of us "listen" by preparing our reply to what someone else has said, a reply that usually concerns our own experience. By learning to concentrate on the whole of what the other person is saying, we can learn a great deal not only about what he really means (often lost as we listen to our own thoughts), but also about its importance to him. This makes it far more likely that we'll respond in a meaningful way that opens up communication, rather than closing it off.

The simplest and most common active listening exercise is one where several people hold a conversation with certain rules. It's often a more powerful learning experience if the topic is one on which people disagree. No one can interrupt anyone else, everyone gets a chance to speak, and each person must correctly summarize what the last speaker has said (according to that speaker) before he can offer his own thoughts. Knowing you must summarize the last person's message encourages real concentration, and a much more controlled and profound conversation than if everyone is simply fighting to state his own opinion.

- An assessment of the trainee's own communication style. (Please see **Tool # 1** for one way of doing this.)
- Cultural sensitivity. As discussed above, cultural differences can be a difficult obstacle in communication. This is not only an issue of place of birth, but of race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexual orientation, gender, disability...each of these brings with it its own set of cultural norms and

values, and it's important to be aware of them. Training here can and should involve as diverse a group as possible from the organization, should draw on trainees' and others' own experiences, and should include asking questions when you don't understand why something is happening or being said. Role playing is an essential part of training in this area, as is the understanding that good will, and admitting when you don't know. A willingness to learn will usually go a long way toward eliminating discomfort on all sides.

Some things need to be mentioned here. One is that true cultural sensitivity demands a certain level of personal development. In a small Massachusetts town, the high school mascot was a cartoon figure of a rampaging, warbonneted Indian with a tomahawk. A Native American group was brought in by a student to explain why the mascot was offensive to them, and why it might be appropriate to change it. The town's reaction was that the mascot was fine, and Native Americans had no right to be offended by it. Most citizens were simply incapable of understanding that anyone could be offended by something they weren't offended by, and that there could be differing opinions or feelings about something. Some staff members may simply not understand the issue of cultural sensitivity, and may need time -- a long time...in some cases, forever -- to get to a point where they can understand it.

Another important point is that cultural sensitivity needs to be considered from both sides. When it's not a question of offense (If someone is seriously offended by particular words or actions, that is generally -- although not always -- enough reason for everyone else to avoid them.), there needs to be the potential for compromise on both sides. If one person's culture involves speaking loudly and another's speaking softly, the way to accommodation may be for both to speak in a moderate voice.

Finally, it's important for everyone to understand that offensive or inappropriate communication is seldom intentional, and is therefore not likely to stop unless someone calls attention to it. Just as the offender must take responsibility for changing her behavior, the offended must take responsibility for speaking up in a reasonable way. And both must at least start with the assumption that the other is not a bad person.

- Examples of appropriate and inappropriate communication, and of the kinds of things that need to be communicated.
- Some instruction in conflict resolution. When there are problems among staff members, it is always preferable that the participants settle them face to face. It is easier and more constructive for someone to approach a person with whom she has an issue if she also has a set of skills for dealing with face-to-face conflict. If everyone on the staff is trained in conflict resolution, it both makes for better communication and reduces the amount of mediation that administrators or others have to do.
- Lots of opportunities to practice different styles and kinds of communication through role play, and lots of supportive, but honest, feedback.

Training, like every other aspect of the organization, should reflect the values you want to communicate. If all training is lecture, or is passed down as "truth " by an authority figure, it is unlikely that trainees will feel that the organizational culture is one of openness, or that their opinions matter. If people are encouraged to share their own experiences, to discuss any information given, to challenge the trainer if they disagree, not only will the training be more valuable, but new staff members will learn what the organization wants and expects from them. In short, the form and the content of the training have to go together.

Supervision

The form that supervision takes in an organization can easily either foster or stifle internal communication. If supervision is seen as intrusive and punitive (like looking over people's shoulders and trying to catch them doing something wrong) internal communication, particularly among supervisors and supervisees, probably won't benefit. If supervision is seen -- and practiced -- as supportive and helpful, a way to

continually enhance the quality of one's work, then internal communication is more likely to flourish. Another role that supervision plays here is that it can help staff and volunteers to examine and improve their own communication, and thus improve communication within the organization.

Regular meetings

A staff of any size, particularly one that operates out of a variety of places (different communities, for instance), should meet regularly, ideally every week. Such meetings are often slighted because they appear to take time away from the work of the organization, or because most people dislike them. But they are, in fact, vital to the work of the organization, allowing people the chance to share ideas (and thus improve their own work by applying what they've heard), hear what's going on in the organization as a whole (and confirm their commitment to the work), and renew relationships with one another (making it easier to work together).

When people dislike attending staff meetings, it's often because the meetings feel like they're imposed by the administrator who runs them. They may not deal with issues that are important to most of the staff, and, all too often, they consist of only one person talking -- the administrator. A meeting that takes this form sends exactly the wrong message in an organization that's trying to foster open communication.

If you want to make meetings more conducive to real communication, you can try one or some combination of the following ways to make them more interesting and enjoyable:

- *Add food.* Make them breakfast or lunch meetings; ask different people to bring special, perhaps ethnic, food each time; provide, or encourage people to bring, coffee and snacks. Food changes the whole tone of a meeting: breaking bread together breaks down barriers as well, and turns a meeting into something more congenial.
- *Rotate the responsibility for running the meeting among all staff members.* This way, it doesn't have to be seen as the director's or administrator's meeting, but as one that reflects the concerns of everyone on staff.
- *Make sure the agenda is open to everyone.* Anyone should be able to put items on the agenda, and have them attended to with the same priority as any other items. The person running the meeting could check with everyone beforehand, asking for agenda items.

At a large mental health center, with over 100 employees, The Superintendent took it upon himself to call a General Staff Meeting once a month. At those meetings, the Superintendent would make some opening announcements and share some general news, but the bulk of the meeting was set aside for any staff member to ask any question or raise any issue at all. The meetings were open to anyone who worked there, from Chief Psychiatrist to groundskeeper. Everyone was encouraged to attend and speak, and many did. These meetings were almost always lively and sometimes controversial; but more often than not, they were also productive. Unfortunately, when the Superintendent left his position, the tradition of the General Staff Meeting left along with him.

- Contributed by Bill Berkowitz

- *Build in a mechanism for everyone to get a chance to talk* about what she's doing and what's currently exciting about the job for her. This makes it possible for people to feel that their experience is valued, and for others to pick up ideas that they can use in their own work.
- *Keep meetings informal.* Don't be afraid to use humor, or to make at least occasional fun part of the organizational culture.

At a community college, the Dean of Students was famous for running long, boring staff meetings. One staff member took it on himself -- with the unacknowledged cooperation of the Dean -- to be the court jester at these meetings. He would make jokes at the expense of the agenda, tease the Dean about his clothes, and concoct terrible puns based on the meeting's information. The point of this was to keep people interested...and it worked. Years later, both the Dean and others told the "jester" that one of the things that kept people alert during meetings was wondering what he would come up with next, and whether the Dean would get angry.

- *Hold meetings in places that have nothing to do with the organization.* Meetings can be held outdoors in good weather, in cafes, in people's homes, or in other institutional spaces (a library or college, for instance). Sometimes getting out of the office can help to change perspective and give birth to new ways of looking at things as well.
- *In organizations where there's a distinction, line staff might have regular meetings without administrators or supervisors present.* They could freely discuss their particular concerns and raise issues about, say, working conditions, which could then be brought up with the appropriate administrators later.

Other avenues of communication

An organizational newsletter -- either printed or e-mailed -- can be a way of getting large amounts of information to people so they don't feel left out, and at the same time give them the choice of how much of that information they want to digest. That and any other communication (bulletins, memos, etc.) should embody in their style and the method of their distribution the same principles of openness and general respect as the rest of the organization's functioning.

Everyone should have easy and direct access to the means of communication, i.e. mailboxes, phone and voice mail, fax, e-mail, phone and pager numbers, e-mail addresses for everyone else in the organization, and both electronic and actual bulletin boards and newsletters.

E-mail is a particularly effective method of internal communication. It's possible to create an internal list-serv, so that everyone can receive e-mails sent by any other person in the organization. There should be guidelines for using list-servs, so that messages meant only for a particular person and non-work-related messages are not sent over them.

In addition, people may ask to be put on specialized lists that cover their area of work (counseling, grant information, new medical developments, etc.).

Procedures and clear lines of communication for dealing with out-of-the-ordinary situations

When problems arise, communication is made easier - and more likely - if there are systems that help people understand exactly what to do to deal with the situation. Some of the more common instances:

Problems among staff. Unresolved conflicts in an organization make life harder and more tense for everyone. The ideal here is always that a staff member at least tries to resolve issues by approaching the person with whom he has difficulties. If that's not possible, a well-drawn procedure for addressing the conflict (First, tell X, who will try to mediate. If X is involved in the issue, go to Y. Etc.) makes it more likely that it will be brought out in the open and that it will be resolved.

Problems, or potential problems, in the organization that need to be discussed and addressed. As in the story about the director who was told about organizational problems "in confidence," issues

unacknowledged are issues unresolved. It's possible to create procedures for flagging problems that take the responsibility off the reporter, and outline clear, inclusive steps for dealing with the situation. One possibility, for instance, would be to refer issues to a small group which could then come up with one or more potential solutions to be discussed by the whole staff. In order for problems to be dealt with effectively, or, even better, nipped in the bud, people have to believe that:

- Problems can be resolved, but only if they're identified and acknowledged
- There are no organizational repercussions or blame for identifying a problem
- There are organizational systems that work for addressing problems quickly and resolving them fairly and effectively
- These systems require the participation of everyone in the organization
- Conflict can lead to organizational and personal growth if it's faced squarely and resolved in reasonable ways

Some ways to ensure that conflicts and problems in an organization don't get communicated or resolved:

- Make sure that all problems are resolved by orders issued by an administrator or someone else in authority, without consulting anyone else
- Call in the person(s) at the core of the problem, yell at them, and record the scolding in their personnel files
- Call an emergency staff meeting and blame everyone for what's going on
- Encourage people to flag problems in the organization, but deny it or don't do anything about it when they do
- Blame the person making the report for starting trouble

Emergencies. These can take many forms, from an attack on the organization in the press to an injury on the job to a security problem that results in a rape. There need to be clear lines of communication for reporting the situation, and the person to whom it's reported needs to know exactly how to respond, both to the reporter -- who may be injured, terrified, or shaken up -- and to the situation.

Accessibility of everyone in the organization

This is a fairly simple concept that is sometimes difficult to effect. In essence, it means that anyone should be able to speak to anyone else in the organization without permission from anyone else (a common example is a staff member needing permission to attend a Board meeting or to speak to a member of the Board).

All too often, the opposite of "good internal communication" is the "chain of command." This metaphor, borrowed from the military, lines out who can speak to whom in an organization, and defines the scope of each person's authority. In a proper chain, you can contact anyone below you, but only the person immediately above you. If you need to talk to the director, you have to go through your immediate supervisor (who then has to go through her supervisor, etc.) to get permission. This model and its variants are not exactly conducive to free and open communication.

At the same time, it's important to understand when it's appropriate to bring particular issues to an administrator or Board member. If there's been no attempt to resolve the issue at the level on which it exists, for instance, then it shouldn't be going anywhere else until that attempt takes place. That's the reason for creating systems of communication that everyone understands.

Occasional or institutionalized opportunities to socialize, either at work or elsewhere

One way to encourage communication is to set up ways for people to get to know one another well. Many organizations grab any excuse they can find to have a party, a celebration, or just time to relax and talk about things other than work. Some staffs eat lunch together as a regular daily ritual, which can be fostered by the presence of a refrigerator, coffeemaker, and hotplate. Celebrating birthdays, organizational anniversaries, and particular successes is another way to bring people together. The goal is not necessarily to make staff members best friends who spend all their time together out of work, but rather to make people comfortable with one another.

HOW DO YOU MONITOR AND IMPROVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION?

As with so many aspects of organizational management, developing plans, systems, pathways, and a conducive climate for internal communication is only the beginning. The hard part is getting and keeping it going, essentially forever. In order to maintain internal communication and continue to make it better, you have to look at it regularly to see how you're doing. Monitoring it on a regular basis will help you identify where it's working and where it's not, and to keep working toward your communication goals.

Analyzing something as vague as "communication" can be difficult: it often falls into that realm of "I know it when I see it." Sociologists use complicated research strategies to map communication among individuals in a group, but it's unlikely that most organizations have either the resources or the desire to go to those lengths. There are a number of simpler ways to look at your internal communication that will give you at least a general picture of how well it's working.

Some ways of monitoring internal communication:

- Check staff satisfaction on the level, speed, and inclusiveness of the information and other communication they receive. (Depending upon how formal you want or need to be, this could involve conducting a formal staff survey, written or otherwise.) Do they feel included in the working of the organization? Are they the last to know about things that affect them? Do they always, or almost always, have the information they need to do their jobs as well as possible?
    - If you're afraid they won't answer honestly, you can give people the option of answering anonymously -- less useful information, but better than inaccurate information. On the other hand, if people aren't willing to answer honestly under their own names, or even if you think they aren't, that probably tells you a great deal about the quality of your internal communication.
- Ask for feedback at the end of staff meetings, either on the meeting itself, on the decision-making process, or anything else of concern. You could also, on a regular basis, devote all or part of a staff meeting to a review of internal communication procedures and how well they're working.
- Make internal communication a topic at whatever staff retreats or evaluation sessions you hold to look at the organization as a whole.

- See how long it takes to actually run a piece of information through the organization, and whether it can be done accurately. In other words, play a game of organizational Telephone by putting some information into the network (in this case, the network of all staff members) and see how long it takes to get to everyone, and what it looks like when it gets there. If it's fast and reasonably accurate, congratulations. If it's sluggish and distorted, you still have some work to do.
- Try to determine whether internal problems over the period of time you're assessing (a year, perhaps) have decreased in frequency and/or severity compared to the previous period. If there's a noticeable change for the better, it's likely that at least some of that change is due to improved communication.
- Try to identify and rectify sticking points. These might be individuals, systems, or organizational inertia.
    - *Individuals*: If particular people seem to be bottlenecks in the flow of communication, you can try to pull them into the network by enlisting them in seeking solutions to the problem; trying to address the issues that keep them from communicating effectively; or, if all else fails, bypass them in some way so that they don't hang everyone else up.
    - *Systems*: You can work as a staff to modify or change systems to be more responsive to the communication needs of the organization. This may mean changing the form of a staff meeting, as described above; instituting alternative ways for people to get information or have contact with one another; rewriting policies and procedures to include or encourage communication at particular steps; etc.
    - *Organizational inertia*: the organization as a whole may have made a commitment to a policy of open communication, but if there are attitudes or preconceptions or procedures left over from what the organization was like before, they may work against the new order. Individual staff members and the organization as a whole have to look at these outdated ways of functioning and find ways to change or eliminate them. This kind of change is never easy, and is often slow. It is more apt to happen if everyone works together to understand the ways in which the organization and individuals are working against themselves, and to come up with solutions. In addition to bringing everyone's ideas into the mix, this process has the advantage of people then being able to keep one another honest when someone backslides.

Like all aspects of an organization, communication should be monitored on a regular basis, at least annually.

IN SUMMARY

Promoting internal communication is one of the most important things you can do to make sure that your organization runs smoothly and effectively. Good internal communication will flourish if you can create an organizational climate of openness that is conducive to the free flow of communication and information in all directions; adjust your organization's systems or develop new ones to encourage, rather than discourage, internal communication; and create clear definitions of what needs to be communicated and by whom. Monitoring and adjusting your internal communication will help to maintain it at the level you need over the life of your organization.

Contributor

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Online Resources

Communication and Organizational Structure provides a quick summary of some basic internal organizational communication principles from eHow.com.

Basics in Internal Communication from the **Free Management Library**.

"**Internal Communication Strategies – The Neglected Strategic Element**", by Robert Bacal, Bacal and Associates.

Internal communication tips from the **Mission Based Management Newsletter**.

Talking Internal Communication is a blog on internal communication from Lee Smith, of Gatehouse, a British management consultant. The August 24, 2010 post on ITS (Ivory Tower Syndrome) is particularly interesting.

Print Resource

Johnson, W., & Frank P. (1997). *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.