What is Organizational Communication?

Inquire: Different Uses for Different Structures

Overview

Almost everyone has, at some point, been part of an organization. At the time, you might not have paid much attention to how that organization communicated or how it was structured. Organizational communication has many different uses. This lesson will cover what those purposes are, as well as how organizations structure themselves. You will also learn about groupthink and how to fix it. Finally, this lesson will provide a few suggestions about how to make the most of your time working within an organization.

Big Question: How do different companies use their organizational structure to their benefit?

Watch: Making Work Work for You

Organizational communication deals with several things. It is the way an organized entity, such as a company, communicates to members inside of the organization and those outside of the organization. This strategy is meant to serve four purposes: relationship, organizing, change, and outreach.

This lesson will explain how organizations talk and the three kinds of organizational structures that organizations use: bureaucratic, divisional, and matrix. Each structure dictates how workers are organized. Do you work better in a skills-based job with a permanent boss? Or maybe you prefer to report to different bosses as you are assigned different tasks? Knowing the style that works best for you can help you find an organization that will allow you to blossom as a worker.

Have you ever worked in a group where no one questioned the decisions the group was making? This is a symptom of groupthink. Groupthink is one of the dangers that comes with working in an organization. This lesson will help you identify the symptoms of groupthink and offer some solutions for it.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to fit into a well-run organization. When this happens, there are a few simple things that can help you feel like you belong. This lesson will give you some of those tips. Have you ever been in a group where you feel like you could be doing more? This lesson will cover that situation so you can maximize your contributions to your organization.

Imagine that you have just started at a new company. What is important for the company to tell you? How quickly should they tell you about things you are expected to do? How quickly should they introduce you to the group you will be working with? Effective organizational communication can address all of these questions. By the end of this lesson, you will know how to make the most of working in an organization and how to best use an organization’s communication patterns to your benefit.
What is Organizational Communication?

Organizational communication is the way that an organized entity, such as a company, communicates to members inside of the organization and individuals outside of the organization. There are four purposes for organizational communication: relationship, organizing, change, and outreach. Employees talking to each other on their lunch break is an example of relationship purpose within the organization. Organization communication also includes how managers communicate with members of the organization to give them instructions. This is known as an organizing purpose. Organizations also need to convey to members inside how they are going to solve problems or update policies. This is known as a change purpose. Finally, organizations need to talk to those outside of the organization with tools such as announcements or press releases. This is an outreach purpose.

Types of Organizational Structures

There are three primary types of organizational structures: bureaucratic, divisional, and matrix. A bureaucratic organization divides work based on a person’s skills and specialties. Companies that have a PR department, an HR department, an IT department with a boss, and managers and workers underneath them are bureaucratic. This is a common type of organization most people think of when they consider how a company is organized.

A divisional organization divides work based on ongoing projects. As an employee finishes a project and gets assigned to a new one, they are given a new boss with new coworkers. Rather than departments, this structure has teams that create their own structures based on the needs of a project.

Finally, a matrix organization divides work based on both department and project. It’s a combination of the previous two organizational structures. Employees answer to a boss for a project and are assigned tasks for that project. At the same time, they have a boss for their department that also assigns tasks for the department.

What is Groupthink?

Groupthink is a phenomenon that occurs when a group thinks it does things perfectly and that it can make no mistakes. Groupthink happens when a group leader is able to convince others that the work they are doing is being done the best way already. The group works well together. Groupthink requires a strong amount of pressure from outside of the group to perform well.

Symptoms of groupthink are: rationalization, peer pressure, complacency, an illusion of unanimity, and censorship. Rationalization happens when someone outside the group points to a problem but members inside the group dismiss the problem claiming that the group is too good at what they do to suffer from that problem. Group members may pressure other members to agree with the way things have always
been done. This is an example of peer pressure. Complacency can develop when groups that have been successful in the past feel they can’t fail in the future. An illusion of unanimity happens when everyone assumes that everyone else is on the same page. No one asks what other people think, everyone just assumes they know what everyone else is thinking. When members of the group prevent other members from saying things that are contrary to what the group as a whole says or believes, they are engaging in censorship. This censorship might not be explicit. For example, a person may not say, “You can’t say that,” but censorship can manifest if an individual that says negative things is treated as an outcast.

There are ways to avoid groupthink: seek outside opinions, encourage new ideas, and have alternative plans. Because groups suffering groupthink assume they are perfect, listening to outside voices is a great way to avoid groupthink. If your group doesn’t want outside involvement, or can’t have outside involvement, a great alternative is to encourage members of the group to submit new ideas. If members feel comfortable sharing different approaches to problems, then you avoid falling into the traps of groupthink. Finally, coming up with several different plans to approach an issue helps to avoid groupthink. Members can admit that some solutions might not be perfect and develop strategies to account for those possible mistakes.

How to Make the Most Out of Being in an Organization

Working in a large organization can be tricky. Here are some tips on how to take advantage of an organization’s work setting to make sure you can maximize your efficiency. First, don’t be afraid to ask for help. Organizations have multiple people working on a project for a reason. Asking for help when you feel overwhelmed or when you are unsure of what to do next is an important skill to learn. Second, use your coworkers as a sounding board. If you have an idea for something, bounce it off the people around you to come up with the best idea possible. You all work in the same place, so they can help you come up with the best version of your idea and bring it to life. Finally, use the structures in place. If you have a complaint, take advantage of human resources protocols to voice that complaint. If your boss has a suggestion box, put your suggestions there. Don’t be afraid to take advantage of the things that your organization has created. They were put in place for a reason. Using those structures to your benefit will only help you be better at your job.

Reflect Poll: Which Do You Prefer?

Which organization structure would you most like to work in?

- Bureaucratic
- Divisional
- Matrix

Expand: Effective Organizational Communication

Overview

People strive to develop an effective organization. When dealing with organization communication, effective communication becomes even more important. If an organization can keep their communication effective, many benefits can follow. Conversely, if they are ineffective in their communication, it can cause many harms to an organization.
The Importance of Effective Organizational Communication

Effective communication allows organizations to have a shared message, motivate their employees, and strive for a common goal. When the organization effectively shares the vision for the organization’s future, employees know what goals they should strive for in order to contribute the most. The mission is one of the first messages an organization sends. A mission statement includes the organization’s values and its goals. Organizations work to make their values and missions support each other. Effectively sending this message is essential and requires a cohesive communication strategy. The communication strategy is developed using a set of guidelines that outline what an organization wants to communicate and how it is going to communicate it.

On the other hand, when an organization has a poor communication strategy, it leads to ineffective communication which causes many problems for an organization. These harms include damaged trust amongst team members that hurts the productivity of a team. It might also cause misunderstandings that cause someone to do an unnecessary task or miss doing a task that needed doing. These mistakes can cause anger and frustration to grow, worsening not just productivity but also morale of team members.

In order to avoid this, an organization needs to outline very clearly their communication strategy. This means that managers need to provide clear instruction to those below them. After that, an organization needs to use different communication channels for their messages. This might be email messages for daily reminders, but weekly face-to-face team wide meetings for bigger picture information. This communication strategy needs to have a feedback system that allows members at all levels to identify problems with the strategy and suggest solutions for those problems. Finally, and most importantly, this strategy needs to be easily understood. In order for a team to maximize efficiency, all members need to be on the same page and doing the same things. Easily understood content will ensure that there are the fewest possible chances for someone to be confused.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A short video explaining an easy way to avoid groupthink
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p-uY_i-wvc

An article providing recommendations on how to make your place of work a better place to work
- Link to resource: https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/280747

An article providing recommendations on what you should do when you are new to a job
- Link to resource: https://www.fastcompany.com/3044955/10-ways-to-make-the-most-of-your-first-month-at-a-new-job

Lesson Glossary

**organizational communication**: the way an organized entity, such as a company, communicates to members inside of the organization and individuals outside of the organization

**bureaucratic organization**: an organization that divides work based on a person’s skills and specialties

**divisional organization**: an organization that divides work based on the project being worked on
**matrix organization**: an organization that divides work based on both department and project

**groupthink**: a phenomenon where a group thinks it does things perfectly and that it can make no mistakes

### Check Your Knowledge

1. You should keep your head down and never talk to your coworkers in a large organization.
   - a. True
   - b. False

2. Censorship is a symptom of groupthink.
   - a. True
   - b. False

3. Organizational communication is never used for small talk between employees.
   - a. True
   - b. False

**Answer Key:**

### Citations

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