



ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION-A MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM-PART 1

Sending and receiving information is a complex process. The process involves assimilating and internally processing data, storing the result (at least momentarily), recalling the result, and then expressing that result in a way that one thinks he or she is conveying the reality in which they participated. Information satisficing is used by personnel to account for randomness and uncertainty in the environment under discussion. Many biases line this information highway making organizational communication a most important problem.

The Communication Gap Begins

Information processing and cognition seem like natural functions of the human senses and mind when it comes to observing data/information in the environment. But does everyone have the same data acquisition and processing speed? What about a technical understanding of what is being observed? These are important because they determine in a significant way what goes into memory and how it goes into memory for later recall. It's commonly observed by investigators that multiple witnesses of the same event will provide different accounts of that event when questioned later. The lesson learned here is "take good notes."

What one observes and/or perceives depends on how fast they acquire data and process that data into information. This information is further processed in the unconscious as well as the conscious mind against the experience, thought processes, and judgement of the observer. What happens next can be mind boggling especially in matters regarding probabilities, explicit tradeoffs among alternatives, and information that is interconnected, uncertain, and time dependent.

Information satisficing helps unboggle one's mind, but it also is a major cause of the organizational communication gap. So, what does this look like in everyday settings? The easiest way to understand information satisficing is to be aware of typical modes of judgement individuals use to manage the uncertainties and randomness they observe in their environment. **Use of the typical modes of judgement results in a bias in communications.**

As an aware manager, one will be able to assess the modes of judgement their subordinates, peers, and other organizational personnel use to manage data and information as they convey organizational business to others. Note that aware managers will also be able to assess their own use of the satisficing methods and through introspection gain a better understanding of their own communication shortcomings. This is an excellent starting point for self-improvement and managing one's milieu. Let's review the five, typical modes of judgement that managers must understand and be aware of so that they can adapt communications to minimize biases.

1. Availability

Communications, hence, judgements, are based on the ease with which relevant information is recalled or visualized. For example, assigning too much weight to recent information or events with potentially disastrous consequences (AKA the current bombshell headline). The availability bias is an important judgement mode in most communications but one must be aware of its use to spot it.

2. Anchoring and Adjustment

The most readily available piece of information forms an initial basis for formulating responses. Subsequent responses then represent adjustments from the initial basis. Anchoring generally occurs when some information is more easily available than other pertinent information at the beginning of the communication setting and results in failure to process the other pertinent information regarding other possibilities.

3. Representativeness

This mode of judgement is often used to remove uncertainty from discussion of a topic. Many people are uncomfortable in dealing with uncertainty as it requires probabilistic thinking that is more difficult than deterministic thinking. This bias takes the form of assuming the probability of a topic is representative of or similar to major characteristics of the population from which it originated. The net effect of this assumption is to disregard general information and base probability assignments on what appears to be a specific fact or single hypothesis as determined by the individual.

4. Unstated Assumptions

This is the bias that leads to many problems because it introduces unknowns into the conversation without anyone's knowledge. Unstated assumptions indicate a failure to consider possible conditions that can affect the outcome and an analysis. Again, this is another bias that reduces uncertainty by ignoring items of consideration or not sharing items of consideration regarding the communication topic. This bias reduces some unknowns to inconsequential levels by excluding them from consideration. It has such a negative affect because personnel involved in this type communication will not have considered all possibilities in reaching their conclusions.

5. Coherence

When considering events, individuals sometimes craft a plausible scenario that would lead to the occurrence of the events. The event is deemed unlikely if there is no plausible scenario that could make the event occur or explain how the event could occur. Many plausible scenarios that would make the event likely would indicate that the probability of the event occurring has a high degree of certainty. The bias due to coherence comes in when a created scenario and prior knowledge of the individual is used to establish a relationship between topic A and topic B. That individual then extends this relationship to conclude that events in topic A and topic B are related or highly probable. This bias is often manifested as confusing correlation with causation.

Memory Effects on Communication and Judgement

A good memory can be considered a necessary but not sufficient condition for good judgment. Memory affects judgement because it affects the way judgmental tasks are structured and communicated. It affects cues selected from the environment and/or memory. It affects the rule used to process the information assessed to make the judgement and form the associated communications. It affects the interpretation and coding (communication) of the outcome of the judgement. The bottom line here is that there are biases in the unconscious that work to color the memory and the bad thing is these generally are not known to managers and especially the people with whom they communicate. Consequently, memory is a critical item to understanding biases and overcoming them or at least being aware of them in a conscious manner so that they can be controlled in organizational communications.

Just a couple of other points on memory that are of interest in this communication topic. First, the efficiency of memory depends on being able to encode information in such a way that it can be recalled and decoded in detail. Memory works by reconstructing fragments into a whole and associating some form of meaning with all these fragments that were pulled from memory (this is the essence of analysis). The second point is that meaning (some form of structured relationships) guides our interpretation of what we see and anticipation of patterns, based on memory can affect what a person does see. Recall the earlier discussion on data observation and assimilation.

For a manager, the implications of the above relative to judgement and communications are obvious and can be summarized by the following observation: "Everybody complains about the badness of his memory-nobody about his judgement." And don't forget the corollary: "If you want to improve your memory, take good notes!" **Now you know; inattention to memory and its associated processes has a direct negative affect on judgement and hence, organizational communications.**