THE EFFECTS OF LIMITING NEGATIVE UPWARD FEEDBACK UPON ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Brindusa Maria POPA

Regional Department of Defense Resources Management Studies, Brasov, Romania

Communication is a complex process aiming beside the transfer of information, to the creation of meaning and understanding. Meaning and understanding will never be truly attained and developed without feedback. Feedback, be it positive or negative, is the element that completes communication. In this paper we shall try to discuss upward negative feedback and what it entails, what happens when it exists and is used within an organization and what the consequences are when it is absent or disregarded. Upward negative feedback is the most delicate type of feedback since it is provided by subordinates to superiors. Upward feedback is valuable and necessary in the decision making and problem solving processes unfortunately, information is frequently distorted due to the intricate manner it reaches top levels, especially in the organizational cultures which are very hierarchical and centralized and the impact alters..

__Key words__: communication, feedback, negative feedback, performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational communication is a sub-domain of the communication field which deals with the interaction from inside and outside the organization. It aims to providing understanding, facilitating organizational activities and support for the achievement of organizational goals.

Organizational communication is a complex process aiming beside the transfer of information, to the creation of meaning and understanding within the organization. In his book *The management profession*, Allen (1964) states that communication is the sum of all the things one person does when they want to create understanding in the mind of another [1]. It is a bridge of meaning. It involves a systematic

and continuous process of telling, listening and understanding in order to achieve goals and tasks. However, this process is not only about accomplishing tasks and reaching organizational objectives, it also supports relationship development among the individuals composing the organization, their attitudes, morale and organizational climate.

Meaning and understanding will never be truly attained and developed without feedback. Feedback, be it positive or negative, is the element that completes communication. In this paper we shall try to analyze upward negative feedback and what it entails, what happens when it exists and is used within an organization and what the consequences are when it is absent or disregarded. Upward negative feedback is the most delicate type of feedback since it is provided by subordinates to superiors.

Most of the time, organizational communication is considered, due to a limited interpretation, as being synonymous to what is called *business communication*. Business communication includes official messages, business letters, reports, advertising, planned work meetings etc. However, organizational commu-nication has a broader

spectrum which encompasses business communication, as well as leadership activities like supervision, guidance, conflict management, team building activities and informal and daily interaction among organizational members, all of the above being part of the communication process developed within an organization. Informal communication includes stories, grapevine talk, rumors and socializing that represent a significant exchange of information (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993), especially when informal or casual talk combines with discussions about work tasks.

Organizational communication, as a study domain, developed during the beginning of the 20th century, at the same time with the development of management theories. Frederik Taylor, who is a management pioneer and a leader of the Efficiency Movement, in his book *The principles of Scientific Management*, presents the employee only as a task achiever therefore, he sees organizational communication as meant to support employee productivity. Consequently, instructions, orders, recommendations, feedback (down-ward) were provided strictly with

the aim of facilitating the tasks necessary to attain the established level of productivity. One of his four management principles says that there should be provided "detailed instruction and supervision of each worker in the performance of that worker's discrete task" (Montgomery, 1997, p.250). This type of communication was mostly unidirectional, the employee feedback was of little or no interest to superiors.

Henry Fayol (1916) has a slightly different approach, seeing the employees as being more than task accomplishers, but individuals who can be motivated in different ways not only financially. Thus, he identified the importance of the relation between the employee's interests and the organizational objectives. Aligning employees with the organizational objectives and values will result in a better sense of teamwork and higher commitment. Understanding how the achievement of organizational goals will help them reach personal ones will increase their engagement. Therefore, communication must be put to use for the organizational advancement.

Organizational communication gains some importance as can be noted in *General and Industrial Management* where Fayol mentions miscommunication and animosity among members of the same or different departments as sources of a difficult work climate [2]. However, communication was still mainly vertical and bottom-up feedback was not taken into consideration, if existent.

W. Charles Redding, developed organizational communication into a domain of study called at that time *business speech* and *industrial communication*. In his work *Communications within the organization: An interpretive review of theory and research* (Redding, 1972) he discusses about meaning and the fact that we can consider a message as being received only if it is acted upon. He regards communication overload as an interference in the good reception and understanding of messages and discusses feedback, highlighting its importance and impact on the life of an organization. His fifth postulate states that "Feedback is not only essential in the operation of an organization but these messages have both beneficial and harmful consequences." [7]

2. NEGATIVE UPWARD FEEDBACK AND ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

Redding analyses feedback from the point of view of *responsiveness* and *receptiveness*: Feedback within an organization is a two-way circuit including both managers and subordinates. Feedback receptiveness refers to how much feedback managers welcome from subordinates while responsiveness refers to how much feedback managers give. Redding stresses another difference between being *receptive* to feedback and being *responsive* to it. When one is *receptive*, they are able and qualified to receive feedback however, they will not take it into consideration and act upon unless it is convenient for them. *Responsive* refers the capacity of an individual to welcome, acknowledge and act upon the information (feedback) provided. Most of the time managers mock acknowledging feedback, especially when it is negative, for various reasons among which we can mention: time pressure, lack of interest, lack of consideration towards the provider of feedback, personal ego etc.

Negative feedback is avoided mostly because of leadership's reluctance and refusal to accept opinions contrary to theirs. Also, because of the fear of the other members' reaction, the anticipation that discontent will gain more voices and conflict or activity disruptions could appear, upward feedback is not encouraged.

Organizations will always have an element of chaos and conflict within, perfect harmony is just an idealistic, to hope for state. Nevertheless, this is normal, even productive, as long as the leadership is capable of solving the conflict through communication and understanding of what has provoked it.

Alexander R. Heron's (1942) book, *Sharing Information with Employees* [8] looks at manager-employee communication from the point of view of the informational content that is shared and the channel used. It is stated here that the simple act of giving orders or an impersonal transfer of information is not enough for the task to be accomplished successfully, unless the receiver understands the larger context which includes the reasons for doing the specific task. Managers need to share enough information so

that the employee should be able to create meaning of their role and responsibilities and they should also check understanding through feedback.

Kassing (1998) says that organizational health and harmony are not similar. Healthy, from an organizational point of view, signifies an organization that develops and improves, adapts to challenges and searches for new opportunities and this endeavour can be a smoother or a rougher process. Having open lines of communication, accepting comments that are not aligned with the official trend, is part of a healthy organization's core processes. For such reasons, two way feedback, top-down and bottom-up, is necessary provided it is honest and unaligned.

Apart from the organizational structure and leadership style, organizational trust is another very important organizational variable that impacts how the employees feel and act towards providing feedback. Reina and Reina (2006) formulate that trust is the basis for effective organizational communication, and that its absence generates "…decreased risk-taking and collaboration, breakdowns in information sharing, decreased

performance…" (Reina and Reina p. 34).

Upward feedback is valuable and necessary in the decision making and problem solving processes. Unfortunately, information is frequently distorted due to the intricate manner it reaches top levels, especially in the organizations which are very hierarchical and centralized and where feedback coming from lower organizational levels is not taken into consideration. Lacking or distorted negative upward feedback will impact negatively the decision making process due to the incomplete and doubtful quality information used for it. Therefore, the decision might not address or might not be appropriate for solving the actual problems.

Redding (1972) discusses participative management and presents communication as an important characteristic of participation. He differentiates between real participation and pseudo participation [12]. Pseudo participation is a façade for authoritarian management, a pretense of decision-making process where subordinates have a say in. There is no real power shared and no open communication, the

information discussed will not be taken into account and subordinates are reluctant to speak.

Locus of Control is another variable that influences negative feedback. Employees are mostly reluctant to speak their mind because of the consequences they envisage when disagreeing or presenting information about organizational inadvertences. Locus of Control, or more formally, "Internal versus external control of reinforcement… refers to the degree to which persons expect that a reinforcement or an outcome of their behavior is contingent on their own behavior or personal characteristics versus the degree to which persons expect that the reinforcement or outcome is a function of chance, luck, or fate, is under the control of powerful others, or is simply unpredictable." (Rotter, 1990, p. 489). The higher the external locus of control is for one person, the least they will be prone to speaking the truth. When one feels that their rewarding depends on the receiver of their feedback, they will try to avoid creating any discontent. People having a stronger feeling of internal control of reinforcement will be more likely to provide real feedback, even if it is negative feedback.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Upward negative feedback plays an important role in the workplace, it is an indicator of the level of health present in the organization, it can shed a different light upon many of the situations existing there and help in the decision making process. Negative feedback can be provided in a non-aggressive manner and it is not a source of conflict. Divergent opinions can offer a new perspective when they are analyzed and not disregarded for the basic reason that they were provided by subordinates.

Negative upward feedback can be meaningful and it can improve organizational performance as long as it is real. Effective communication entails listening to others and considering the information provided. Absence of negative upward feedback is a sign of unhealthy organizational climate causing low employee engagement and in the long run it will hinder the achievement of organizational objectives.

REFERENCES

[1] Allen A. L., *The Management Profession*, McGraw Hill Text; First Edition, 1964

[2] Ibarra, H., Andrews, S. *Power, Social Influence, and Sense Making: Effects of Network Centrality and Proximity on Employee Perceptions*, Administrative Science Quarterly, 38, 1993, pp. 277-303

http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2393414

[3] Taylor F. W., *The principles of Scientific Management*, New York, London, Harper & Brothers, 1911, https://archive.org/details/principlesofscie00taylrich

[4] Montgomery D., *The Fall of the House of Labour, New York: Cambridge*, 1997

[5] Fayol H., *General and Industrial Management*, Financial Times Prentice Hall; Rev Ed edition, 1988, reprint of the 1916 ed

[6] Redding, W. C., 1972, *Communications within the organization: An interpretive review of theory and research*. New York: Industrial Communication Council

[7] Ibidem 6, p.73

[8] Heron, A.R., *Sharing information with employees*. California: Stanford University Press, 1942

[9] Kassing, J. W., Development and validation of the organizational dissent scale, Journal Management Communication Quarterly, 1998, pp. 183-229

[11] Reina D. S., Reina M. L., *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace Building Effective Relationships in Your Organization*, Advances in Developing Human Resources, 2006

[12] Ibidem 6

[13] Rotter, J. B. (1990). *Internal versus external control of reinforcement: A case history of a variable*, American Psychologist, 45(4), 489–493. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.45.4.489

[14] Smircich, L., Concepts of culture and organizational analysis. Administrative Science Quarterly 28(3), 1983, pp. 339-358

[15] Johnson G. & Scholes K., *Exploring Corporate Strategy*, Prentice Hall, London, 1993

[16] Detert J.R., Edmonson A., *Implicit Voice Theories: Taken-for-Granted Rules of Self-Censorship at Work*, The Academy of Management Journal 54(3), 2011

[17] Milliken, F.J., Morrison, E.W. and Hewlin, P.F., *An Exploratory Study of Employee Silence: Issues That Employees Don't Communicate Upward and Why*, Journal of Management Studies, 40, 1453-1476, 2003, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00387

[18] Edmondson A., *Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams*, Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 2, Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell University,

1999; https://web.mit.edu/curhan/ www/docs/Articles/15341_ Readings/Group_Performance/ Edmondson%20Psychological%20 safety.pdf

[19] Tepper B. J., *Consequences of abusive supervision*, Academy of Management Journal, 43, 2; ABI/INFORM Global, 2000; https://www.researchgate. net/publication/228079372_ Consequences_of_Abusive_ Supervision

https://www.researchgate.net/ publication/242770265_ Trust_and_Betrayal_in_the_

WorkplaceBuilding_Effective_ Relationships_in_Your_ Organization

[20] Kallinikos, J., Leonardi, P. M. and Nardi, B. A., *The Challenge of Materiality: Origins, Scope, and Prospects*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 1-22

[21] Kassing, J. W., *Dissent in Organizations.* Malden, MA: Polity Press., 2011

[22] Kassing, J. W., *Going Around the Boss: Exploring the Consequences of Circumvention*, Management Communication Quarterly, Vol. 21 No. 55, 2007, pp. 55-74