The Effects of Hierarchal Structures and Complex Policies on Organizational Communication

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This study analyzed the hierarchal structures and complex policies within a for-profit organization that contributed to creating a work environment with poor communication, specifically the effects on employees. Adaptive Structuration Theory provides a theoretical foundation for this study and discusses the creation of social systems through using rules and resources in interactions. The study did not intend to devise a clear solution to these pre-existing issues but rather shed light on the effects this type of problem has on communication between employees within an organization. A Likert Scale survey with 20 questions was distributed to 30 out of 50 employees within a for-profit organization. To provide further analysis, a face to face interview of three employees, one from each hierarchal level was conducted. The results of the survey revealed some policy and hierarchal structural issues within the organization that may be contributing to some vertical communication issues within the company while the interview supported the results of the survey. The organization would most likely benefit from making a few changes to its current policies and structure to enhance the flow of communication between employees.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Importance of the Study

Organizational communication involves the transmission of messages that develop and sustain a “system of consciously coordinated activities or forces of two or more persons” (Salwan & Stacks, 1996, p.384). Companies are made up of interactive individuals who communicate daily to translate their choices into action (Conrad & Poole, 2005). If companies don’t invest time in implementing effective communication procedures, they risk leaving the company and its employees vulnerable to poor communication practices. Whether it’s relationships with customers or among different employees, with the right tools and understanding of what essentially is causing the problems in communication, any company can improve on these issues. Hence, since healthy communication channels are an integral part of sustaining successful relationships within organizations, awareness of such problems within these organizations is the first step toward solving them.

Statement of the Problem

Organizational communication issues continue to be an endemic problem that affects the jobs of many employees around the world. To improve the inefficiencies these communication issues create, an analysis of the structures and policies in place within organizations is needed. Thus, this study is essential to understanding poor communication and inefficiencies within a for-profit company. It assesses how this hierarchal structured company, where the leader sits at the top with subsequent levels of power falling underneath, and complex policies are involved in creating communication problems which in turn contribute to poor employee relationships. Healthy communication channels are crucial for a company to run smoothly and valuable information may be revealed that could contribute to resolving this problem.
By identifying different alternatives available to assist in alleviating this issue, solutions towards improving or even eliminating this problem entirely would be beneficial to a company. The study builds from the existing literature and will add to this information to assist in eradicating this prevalent issue. It emerges from Marshall Scott Poole’s Adaptive Structuration theory, which describes the interplay between social structures and interaction and how social systems are created and then recreated when group’s use the rules and resources within institutions to guide their interaction with others. (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994).

**Definition of Terms**

1) Adaptive Structuration Theory: A process that involves the production and reproduction of the social systems through member’s use of rules and resources in interaction (Griffin, 2009)

2) Hierarchal Mum Effect: The reluctance for individuals to provide negative feedback due to fears of being associated with that particular type of message (Bisel & Kelly, 2012)

3) Organizational Communication: Communication involves people perpetuating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal signs and symbols within a certain context and the reason why our interaction with colleagues becomes complicated is our relationships with them (Conrad & Poole, 2005)

4) Hierarchal Structures: Pyramid like structure that consists of a large base of workers, who are directly supervised by the smaller level above them and so on until the top is reached where the ranking officer sits (Conrad & Poole, 2005)
Organization of Remaining Chapters

This study is organized into five main chapters. Chapter two consists of the literature review that reveals the findings and research that already exists on the topic. Chapter three summarizes the scope and methodology used to organize and carry out this study. The discussion of the results after analysis of the findings and comparison to the information revealed within the literature review is conducted within Chapter four. Chapter five provides a summary of the thesis, its limitations and further recommendations.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Philosophical Assumptions

Communication is the means through which information gets conveyed from one person to another. In reference to organizational communication, the dynamic of interaction between employee’s plays an important role in the sustainability of a company and these interactions are greatly affected by the way a company is shaped. The intent behind companies creating hierarchal structures and policies usually stems from the goal of maintaining a level of order and ease, while creating a greater sense of efficiency. Although at times companies successfully discover this balance of implementing structure with policy, many companies around the world deal with poor communication between their employees. John Dewey, a pragmatist philosopher was fascinated by the dynamics involved in social interaction between people and how habits and environments play a significant role in shaping these interactions. Specifically, Dewey argued that people are interconnected through their actions and reactions to their surroundings and as such how they interact with others within a particular environment is significantly affected by the type of interaction that occurs within their environment (Schlipp, 1951). Dewey states that “association in the sense of connection and combination is a law of everything known to exist. Singular things act, but they act together and nothing has been discovered which acts in entire isolation” (Schlipp, 1951, p. 346). He emphasizes how much these interactions effect the type of communication that occurs as it forms his whole interpretation of the social experience (Schlipp, 1951).

Further, Dewey argues that the actions one takes part in also plays a role in creating the very environment they are immersed in. The very act in engaging in an environment through interaction with others also contributes to how that environment
is structured. This process of communication and associating with others shapes experiences, ideas and values so that they remain common (Dewey, 1957).

**Theoretical Basis**

The organizational environment that employees are emerged in is a reflection of the reality they have taken a part in constructing. Through their action and choices within the organization, employees are active agents, which means that they play a role in creating their work environment, including its structures and policies, by following the structural format of the organization and integrating policies within their daily work. Desanctis and Poole (1994) discuss how group structure is mainly developed by the tasks and organizational environment they are within. When social structures are produced and reproduced, this act is termed structuration, which defines how one within a work environment helps perpetuate the very structure they were brought into when they joined an environment. In this sense, the social structures that exist within companies shape the actions of employees, and vice versa.

Marshall Scott Poole was intrigued by these social structures and their role in shaping people’s actions in group dynamics while at the same time being shaped by their actions (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). He believed that group structures do not remain static between members and their assigned tasks but rather are always evolving to create and re-create the apparent stable interactions systems (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). This recursive process between the structures and systems is called Adaptive Structuration Theory (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). Poole’s thoughts are derived from Anthony Gidden’s idea of Structuration, which is the “production and reproduction of social systems through group members use of rules and resources in interaction” (Griffin, 2009, p. 237).
Social Structures and Systems – Structuration

Giddens argues that structures, which are made up of rules and resources that one is placed in, and the behaviours of people, are intertwined. People are shaped by social structures while also playing a role in shaping those structures. This reveals that people should understand while they may be restricted by these social structures put into place they too also play a role in creating the same restrictions that prevent them from acting in any other way. Each structure has the following features (Cohen, 2000):

- **Procedural rules** – how the practice is performed.
- **Moral rules** – appropriate forms of enactment of social action. Laws, what is permissible and what is not. These do not refer to ultimate values (e.g. spiritual or sacred values), but refer to appropriate ways of carrying out social action and interaction.
- **Material resources** – allocation of resources among activities and members of society.
- **Resources of authority**, formal organizations, how time and space are organized, production and reproduction, social mobility, legitimacy, and authority.

Giddens (1984) states:

The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors.
In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible (p. 2).

The Literature

Hierarchal Structural Barriers

The structures that make up an organization are defined by the arrangements of people and jobs that are there to achieve organizational goals effectively and efficiently (Ahmad & Ali, 2010) through formal chain of commands. Although companies vary in type, size and personnel, many organizations that are highly structured usually have more centralized processes with an increased level of specialization and formalization (Conrad & Poole, 2005). A typical aspect of vertical relations is that communicating is something that supervisors do to influence, control, or evaluate, while subordinates are conceptualized as passive recipients of information (Kirkhaug, 2010). A type of downward style of communication, where information is delegated to others at lower levels through formal guidelines that reduces the opportunity for facilitated discussions and immediate feedback (Kirkkaug, 2010). David Johnson (1993), defined organizational structure by connecting communication to structure. Specifically, he describes structure as a “relatively stable configuration of communication relationships between entities within an organizational context” (p.11). The structures that make up an organization eventually define the types of relationships that exist and as such, these relationships and interactions lead to creating the types of social structures that exist within a particular organization.

Command structures within organizations contribute to producing relational contexts that create consequences for communication between subordinates and their supervisors (Bisel & Kelley, 2012). In the workplace, they serve as potent contextual resources in the meaning-making process of supervisor-subordinate communication.
Bisel and Kelley (2012) argue that supervisors and subordinates “draw on these potent contextual resources in order to make sense of their interactions.” (p. 3) while Johnson (2003) states that although structure is usually formed to promote order and enhance workplace effectiveness, it may actually promote negative relationships between power levels that exist within the different levels of structures in organizations as those in these powerful position usually control how these structures are formed and what information gets released throughout the organization. Additionally, Ahmad and Ali (2010) state that the greater the level of structure of an organization, the lesser will be the job satisfaction, hence a participative type of structure rather than hierarchal system will produce positive relationships with job satisfaction.

In contrast, Tucker, Meyer and Westerman (1996) state that firms who rely on highly structural processes perform better than firms with less structure. They argue that this creates effective communication systems, which leaves companies in a stronger state (Tucker, Meyer & Westerman, 1996) while Tushman (1979) states that studies reveal work environments that encourage interdependent type of interaction assist with positive interaction between unit structures within organizations. Tushman (1979) discusses further that research supports there is no “one best way of structuring subunit communication” (p. 1), but rather than focusing on the organizational structure focus should be placed on the type of work that is given to employees and how this may contribute to structural issues. For example, work that coincides with one’s skill level should be an emphasis as this would eliminate confusion and the need for that individual to seek continual assistance from someone in another department or management, that may contribute to job dissatisfaction, fear of communication, and inefficiency.
Kirkhaug (2010) conducted a study that assessed the efficient communication levels within decentralized and risk exposed organizations. The aim of this study was to reveal whether “vertical and loyal relationships between subordinates and leaders, or horizontal and informal relationships between colleagues, had the most influence on perceptions of being in a favourable communicative situation” (Kirkhaug, 2010, p.8). The data revealed horizontal relationships between employees had a major effect on the perceptions of the ability to communicate important data and receiving important information (Kirkhaug, 2010) in comparison to vertical relationships between leaders and subordinates.

Nordin, Halib and Ghazali (2011) focus on a different approach and stress the importance on studying internal communication structures in order to improve employee performance. In addition, Tucker, Meyer and Westerman (1996) emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication systems, stating that organizational communication systems are “fundamental internal resources which are directly related to competitive advantages and financial performance” (p. 3). Processes that involve effective and efficient institutional communication process result in better strategic and business performance (Tucker, Meyer & Westerman 1996).

Hence, despite some arguments within the literature stating that the greater level of structure the better the organizational communication, most literature seems to support a move away from formal and vertical interactions towards a more horizontal, open style of communication across official channels. This is especially the case when organizations are exposed to turbulent environments and have to deal with complex tasks and technologies that may create surprises (cf Burns and Stalker, 1961; Schulman, 1993; Weick, 1987; Weick and Roberts, 1993). In addition, Daft and Lengel (1986) have suggested that horizontal and informal relations enable
organizational members to exchange and process richer and more complex information within a shorter period of time than what is allowed by more formal and vertical lines of communication.

*Complex Policy Barriers*

Organizational policies are “communicative attempts to concrete and routinize instructions, directions, commands and orders so that actions may be coordinated and superordinate goals may be achieved efficiently” (Bisel & Kelly, 2012, p. 3). This process sets into motion numerous “important implications for supervisor-subordinate communication as well as what we may expect of its content and outcomes” (Bisel & Kelly, 2012, p.3). Boyd (1965) argues if we want to discover how to improve communication between departments we should figure out a way to promote a deeper understanding of what type of functions exist within organizations, how these functions relate to each other and the role communication plays. Another problem addressed within the research on policy barriers discusses the lack of knowledge between employees on what procedures to follow and roles each plays within their organization (Boyd, 1965). Poorly defined “channels of distribution of information or lack of consistency in distribution information” (Boyd, 1965, p. 5) is argued to be at the core of many communication problems. Boyd (1965) recommends that an improved understanding of the functions and responsibilities of each department within an organization should be carried out. Gilsdof (1998) adds to this argument stating that emphasis should be placed on deliberate, workable, and consistent messages about how we communicate in our environments which will minimize costly errors. If employees know exactly what is expected of them and are immersed within an organizational structure that encourages clear communication, a strong corporate culture, effective communication and savings in cost should occur (Gilsdof, 1998).
company could gain as much as “one or two hours of productive work per employee per day” (Gilzdof, 1998, p. 5). Gilzdof’s (1998) study findings that assessed 560 respondents views on their organizational culture, suggest that “many mixed or nonexistent messages result from inadvertence – that is, from managerial inattention to the need for clear consistent communication with employees” (p.8) and subordinate employees don’t feel comfortable approaching their managers for clarification (Gilzdof, 1998). The study also revealed the serious financial costs communication problems cause, with the majority of the respondents revealing the cost of each communication error resulted in their company losing between $1000 - $9,999 (Gilzdof, 1998).

Patterson, Warr and West (2004) completed a study with 42 manufacturing companies and conducted an overall analysis that revealed that company productivity was more strongly correlated with those aspects of climate that had stronger job satisfaction loadings (p. 1). Interestingly though, Managers assessments of most aspects of their company’s climate were significantly more positive than those of Non-Managers, illustrating how differing perceptions of the work environment are tied with where within the organizational structure one lies. Consequently, based on these results and the literature that supports it, companies should study the messages they send employees and the means in which they send them to assess the consistency or inconsistency of those messages (Patterson, Warr & West, 2004).

**Employees and Communication**

Employee morale, satisfaction and productivity result from increased communication (Ahmad & Ali, 2010). Subordinate employees reluctance to disagree with supervisors results in silence which Bisel and Kelley (2012) call the Hierarchal Mum Effect. “Research in organizational communication over the past few decades
has regularly emphasized the importance of all organizational members talk in the constitution of organization” (Bisel and Kelley, 2012, p. 2). Hierarchal relationships in relation to structure and procedures, may alter upward information sharing, and hold implications for systemic organizational ignorance (Bisel & Kelly, 2012).

“Communication incompetence arises when communicators are overly effective, overly appropriate or neither effective nor appropriate, within the context of a given situation” (Bisel & Kelly, 2012, p. 7).

Interpersonal relationship scholars define the Hierarchal Mum Effect as the reluctance for individuals to provide negative feedback due to fears of being associated with that particular type of message (Bisel & Kelly, 2012). They argue that increased perceptions of high structural and functional distance in the supervisor-subordinate relationship increases the Hierarchal Mum Effect (Bisel & Kelly, 2012).

“Subordinates reluctance to provide dissent originates in a fear of harming relationships” (Bisel & Kelly, 2012, p. 13). An analysis of inter-departmental communication immediately reveals that it is an interpersonal problem (Boyd, 1965). “When two department heads understand how much they depend on one another and are each in sympathy with the needs of the other for clear, concise, accurate information, they will do a creditable job of communicating without rules and guidelines” (Boyd, 1965, p. 2). Boyd (1965) argues that we tend to easily overlook how particular terminologies and semantics between people or within departments create jargon that exclusive people only engaged in the exchange understand. Attention should be placed on stressing the importance of strengthening a Manager’s empathy so that they are able to see things from a subordinate’s perspective which Boyd (1965) argues is one of the most important qualities within effective communication between different hierarchal structures. For example, training
employees within organizations by making them switch into one another’s roles for a few days at a time proves to be beneficial in helping them understand the procedures each role should follow (Boyd, 1965).

Social structures “serve as templates for planning and accomplishing tasks” (Desanctis & Poole, 1994, p. 125). These structures are made up of reporting hierarchies, knowledge and operating procedures (Desanctis & Poole, 1994). The content and constraints of a work task are argued to be another source of structure within an organization (Desanctis & Poole, 1994). For example, if certain projects within an organization are prioritized over others for budgeting reasons, then information for these projects and standard organizational procedures are important resources and rules for staff as they undertake these prioritization tasks (Desanctis & Poole, 1994).

Brunner (2008) did a study which had seven respondents mention that direct, face to face communication was vital to building strong relationships. This research serves as a “preliminary qualitative investigation into the role of building and maintaining relationships within businesses” (Brunner, 2008, p. 7) however, it is noted that the study represents the opinions and ideas of a certain group of business communicators during a particular point in time (Brunner, 2008). The significance of this research could be expanded to help determine the role of “listening and communication building and morale, creating tolerant workplaces and increasing productivity” (Brunner, 2008, p. 9).

Edmondson (2006) argues “voice systems represent sanctioned channels for employees to express their content and discontent” (p. 308). Most voice systems “identified in the literature are open systems that identify the employees” (Edmonson, 2006, p. 308) such as email, open door policies and performance appraisals.
Employees often will not voice their discontent to their managers or leader due to fear of retaliation (Edmonson, 2006). Although leaders are obligated to be open to bad news in the workplace, research and studies have shown that employees are reluctant to voice their dissent about issues within their organization and would rather express their concerns to those who cannot effect the necessary change (Edmonson, 2006). Hence, a channel that supports all employees to “voice dissent to effectual audiences without certain identification” (Edmonson, 2006, p. 308) should be encouraged.

Adaptive structuration theory posits that an organization’s work group internal system can affect social interaction. In order for the lines of communication to remain effective, leaders who control how structures are shaped must be willing to alter the existing structures, minimize constrains and improve access to resources for employees. In response to this, the actions of employees will evolve to adapt these changes.

Gilsdof (1998) completed another study that suggested “most organizations could do more to help employees reduce uncertainty and make better and more profitable communication decisions” (p. 1). The study sought to draw inferences about how “employees perceived and articulated organizational rules as they described specific communication problem incidents and commented on what their organizations expected” (Gilsdof, 1998, p. 2). Another goal of the study was to “try and infer the origin of the rules whose violation led to financial costs” (Gilsdof, 1998, p. 2).

Organizations need to have the ability to engage with the employees effectively as internal communication occurs continuously within organizations. Even though employees spend much time communicating, many actually face difficulties when communicating. (Nordin, Halib & Ghazali, Z., 2011). In order to ensure success, productivity, communication barriers, styles of management as well as types of
relationships among employees should be focused upon. If proper communication development programs are organized then it enables the employees to comfortably communicate their problems directly to the right people (Saxena, 2010).

**Rationale**

This study is essential to understanding poor communication within for-profit companies as it assesses the hierarchal structure and complex policy barriers involved in creating communication problems which in turn contribute to decreased employee morale and reduced productivity. Healthy communication within the workplace leads to minimal ambiguity and fosters the exchange of ideas, promoting meaningful work relationships. In order for a company to remain successful, the lines of communication must remain clear and effective and as such, resources should be invested in ensuring that communication among employees remains healthy. By identifying different alternatives through the study of ineffective communication dynamics within organizations, increased resources will be available to assist organizations with alleviating this issue and provide solutions towards improving or even eliminating this problem. The following study builds from the existing literature to hopefully add to this information and assist in eradicating this endemic issue within organizations.

**Research Questions**

Although there is quite a bit of research that exists on the effects of barriers on organizational communication in general, there is not enough that revolves around the dynamics of hierarchal structures and complex policies within for-profit companies specifically. Out of the literature review, questions still remain, specifically:

Q1: How do hierarchal structures promote poor communication within for-profit companies?
Q2: How do complex policies within for-profit companies lead to poor communication?
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

Past research has shown that structures in organizations play an instrumental role in shaping the communication environment within organization, thus illustrating a parallel between the effectiveness of an organization and how healthy the communication within its environment is. This study however went deeper, looking at how hierarchal structures and complicated policies contribute to creating work environments with poor interpersonal communication, specifically within for-profit organizations. This hopefully helped shed light on this specific aspect of organizational communication and provides a base for a more comprehensive study.

The scope of this study focused on examining one for-profit organization with 50 employees, consisting of five departments in which 30 employees among three departments made up of Administrators, Associates and Managers received a set of 20 survey questions electronically through the survey monkey program. All employees surveyed were full timers, working a minimum of 40 hours per week. It was determined to focus on just these three departments due to their heavy involvement in the organizational dynamics of the company with the other two consisting of either part timers or who those could not participate due to company regulatory reasons. The purposive sampling method was used as it was important to choose staff who were full timers and who represented one of three hierarchies of organizational structure: Administrator, Associate or Manager. The following aspects within the organization were measured: sources of information, timing of information, perception of relationships and channels of information, to gain a better perspective on how each level within the organization rated the effectiveness of the current structures and policies that were in place and perhaps reveal which aspects of the company had more
issues. Since the total population of the organization is 50, and 30 were chosen to participate, the design chosen was a good representation of the company. To provide even further in-depth analysis, a face to face interview of three employees, one from each hierarchal level, was conducted that consisted of eleven questions. This was done to be a representative measure of each of the index factors measured.

Methodology of the Study

The design was partially quantitative in nature, by first employing a descriptive research study that implemented the use of surveys to obtain results. The use of surveys in this case was favored due to its cheap cost, assured confidentiality and the ease in which the data could be obtained. Twenty Likert Scale questions were created with the intent to assess focal areas of the organizations communication dynamic. The twenty Likert-scaled questions were sectioned into 5 varying levels to choose from: 1=never, 2=seldom, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=always, to keep consistency throughout the entire questionnaire. This allowed for comparisons between data sets. Based on the review of the literature which revealed a lack of research done specifically around hierarchal structure and complex policies within for-profit organizations as well as the writings of Cal Downs and Allyson Adrian (2004), teachers and organizational communication consultants, focus was placed on coming up with questions that revolved around how task process impacted communication, the adequacy of information exchange, assessing the directionality of communication flow and looking at the quality of communication relationships to assist with answering the research questions.

Further, the questionnaire divided the Likert–scale indicators into four indexes to measure several aspects of the construct to improve reliability and validity (Neuman, 2006). Each index consisted of five questions focused on the following:
The questions were sent to participants through the online survey tool called Survey Monkey. The study followed standardized methodological procedures, which allowed measures with numbers and the data to be analyzed with statistics (Neuman, 2006). The numerical results helped answer the research questions pre-determined before the study was carried out (Neuman, 2006). It explored the relationship between hierarchal organizational structures and complex policy barriers and their role in creating poor communication among three vital levels in the for-profit company: Administration, Associate and Management. Surveys, intended to reveal descriptive results, were used here to obtain information about the current status of the underlying communication problems.

*Interviews:* Interviews, which covered the qualitative aspect of the study, consisted of three employees that included a Manager, Associate and Administrator and were scheduled after the surveys were completed. An hour was allotted for each interview to minimize anytime time constraint. Each participant was asked eleven open ended questions (Appendix B) that would allow comparisons to the findings that were discovered during the literature review and address the research questions posed in this study. Information collected provided further in-depth analysis of the results obtained from the survey. The results from this study weren’t intended to provide a definitive answer to the research questions, but instead reveal important information that could be used to improve the issues that currently exist within this and similar
Data Analysis

Survey Monkey, an online survey tool, was used to collect participant responses. These responses were then exported into an Excel spreadsheet where the figures were also converted into percentages. Since the questions were separated into four indexes which allowed comparisons between timing, relationships, sources of information and channels of information as well as the position of the respondent: Management, Associate or Administrator, these descriptive statistics provided the opportunity to determine which hierarchal roles were mostly effected by the current structures and policies in place.

This tool proved to be the most suitable for this study due to:

- The online data collection was easily accessible for participants, making participation more likely. Responses remain anonymous.
- Responses were automatically stored within the systems database which could easily be accessed and downloaded for analysis.
- The option of automatic entry and storage of information eliminated the need for manually entering the data received, resulting in time saved.
- The cost to administer this survey using Survey Monkey was minimal.

All respondent data remained secure by login and password which could only be accessed by the researcher. The scores from these indexes provided a more accurate measure of the participant’s experiences (Neuman, 2006).

To finalize the study and obtain further depth into the findings, one participant from each department was chosen, for a total of three, to complete an open-ended interview. The participant’s answers were written down as they answered each
question. After the interviews were completed all the responses from each interview were reviewed to look for common themes that could help answer each of the research questions. For consistency, responses were placed into the same four categories that coincided with the survey indexes. To maintain organization, responses were given a code that corresponded with each index category so that specific sections of each interview could easily be connected to one of the four categories. An example of the chart used to organize the response can be seen with Figure 2:

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Figure 1: Coding of Interview Questions

The interview questions for the survey questionnaire and interviews were created after completing the literature review to assess what information was available on this issue already as well as reviewing Adrian and Downs (2004) findings on which areas a questionnaire and set of interview questions should focus on when assessing organizational communication dynamics.

Validity

The validity of the study was determined by how well it measured what it intended to measure (Rubin, 2010). To sustain construct validity, it was imperative to
ensure the survey design and interview questions assisted with answering the research
questions and included all aspects of the construct being measured.

Since this study analyzed how hierarchal structures and complex policies
contribute to poor communication in this particular organization, the questions were
designed to not provide conclusive results but rather allow this information to provide
inferences upon how the current hierarchal structures and policies in place are
perpetuating poor communication within the company.

**Reliability**

Reliability in this case was attributed to how consistent and dependable the
study was. To ensure that this remained, each participant received the same survey
questionnaire. The intent was to make sure that the study did not yield inconsistent
results. Also, each participant interviewed was asked the exact same questions.

**Ethical considerations**

It was important to ensure no invasion of privacy occurred when it came to
administering the survey questionnaire to participants. Surveys can “intrude into a
respondents privacy by asking about intimate actions and personal beliefs” (Neuman,
2006, p.312) so care was taken with regards to the type of questions asked and in what
context. To start, all participants were assured that all responses would be kept
confidential and used for legitimate research purposes only. They were also informed
that the research results may be shared in aggregate, without any identifying
information, to top management to help assist with solving the issues.

Another concern revolved around the option of voluntary participation. Before
participants took part in completing the survey, they were made aware that
participation is completely voluntary and that they could refuse to participate at any
point during the process (Neuman, 2006). Participants who gave informed consent
were only allowed to participate and it was imperative that the questions were
developed in a way that remained sensitive, treated respondents with respect and
sustained confidentiality (Neuman, 2006). A third ethical issue, was the “exploitation
of surveys to mislead others” (Neuman, 2006, p. 313). Once again, participants were
assured that the data obtained from the survey results would only be used to assist in
providing insight into the issue being researched. The following were the steps taken
in carrying out the survey:

1. Using Survey Monkey, the test survey was emailed out to 30 participants
within the company. They were given two days to complete the survey.

2. Since the Survey Monkey tool automatically backed up all of the respondent’s
answers, the data could easily be exported from this tool into a worksheet to analyze.
The choice to extract numerical information or graphic representation of the responses
was available

3. In order to understand the data processed, descriptive data analysis occurred to
summarize the data and get an accurate description of the variables involved.

4. To finalize the process, all of the analyzed data was reviewed to come up with
inferences for the issue being studied.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

The intent behind this study was to observe the effects that hierarchal structures and complex policies had on contributing to poor communication within for-profit companies. The hierarchal structure within the company was made up of a few powerful executives at the top of the organizational chain with subordinates beneath that reported to this group. The complex policies within the company were defined by how difficult and convoluted the policies were for employees to understand, which made it hard to follow or implement effectively.

As discussed within chapter three, a survey questionnaire made up 20 questions was sent out to 30 employees within a for-profit organization. In addition, one employee from each department: Management, Associate and Administrator, was interviewed to provide in-depth results that went beyond the survey questionnaire. This chapter presents the findings of the study, to assist in understanding the effects that hierarchal structures and complex policies have on poor communication within for-profit companies.

Results of the Study

Among the 30 that received the survey, 80% of employees actually completed it. Out of the 24 that participated, 25% identified themselves as Managers, 33.3% identified themselves as Associates and 41.7% listed themselves as Administrators. Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the participant demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Table of Response Rate
Hierarchal Structure

At first glance, the overall consensus seemed to look like the majority of employees surveyed felt “satisfactory” towards the hierarchal and policy structures within the company. However, when the answers were divided into their respective indexes, there was a prevalent trend related to the effects of hierarchal structure within the company. In reference to the effects of the source of information on communication dynamics, the results revealed that there may be issues with the accuracy of information being relayed throughout the company as the majority of participants across all three levels stated some issue with the accuracy of information coming from Management, revealing a possible vertical communication situation as illustrated in Figure 3.

The results also revealed those who were lower on the hierarchy structure scale, exhibited more trust with the accuracy of information between co-workers, then Management.
It was also revealed that among the group who had the greatest trust in the information they received from co-workers that they also felt this type of exchange contributes to creating a healthier work environment.

Complex Policies

Since the current policies in place effect the rate in which information is relayed to employees, it was important to measure the timing of information within the organization. Once again, the results seemed to form a trend where the majority of those at the Administrative level were not satisfied with the rate at which they received
information from Management. The results also illustrated that those at the Management and Associate level had the most problems with the current organizational polices, revealing that they see this as a barrier in getting information to subordinates in a timely manner. There was a consensus among all participants that the organization would be more productive if these timing issues were resolved.

Figure 6

Figure 7
Interviews

The interviews played a supplementary role to the results of the survey, and assisted in diagnosing the organization communication dynamics (Downs & Adrian, 2004). One employee from each department was interviewed to elaborate in further detail what they perceived as being some of the issues with the current hierarchy structures and complex policies. The results of the interview supported some of the findings brought about in the survey, specifically around the differing perspectives Management and Administrators had on the current communication dynamics. Once again, it seemed that those among the lower end of the hierarchy structure experienced greater issues with the current state of the organizational structure and policy system then those such as the Management group, who have more control on this aspect of the company

When each participant was asked “Please specify what the most important communication weaknesses of this organization are” the Manager stated:

*I believe we have excellent policies in place that clearly layout the procedures, rules and regulations for each department clearly, but perhaps the real issue lies in how slow this information gets relayed to employees in less executive positions and this probably should be looked into more closely. Also, information between Management isn’t usually freely exchanged as much as it is within other departments so there may be discrepancies in how each Manager chooses to relay information to subordinates within each department that should probably be more consistent throughout.*

The information revealed by the Associate interviewed with regards to assessing the communication weakness of the company did not differ significantly from the Manager’s response:
Information in this company definitely needs to be relayed a lot quicker in order to remain effective. I do see problems arising because Management is aware of details that haven’t trickled down to other employees and that needs to change sooner rather than later.

The Administrator interviewed had a slightly different take on the some of the communication issues. Although there was agreement that timing of information was an problem, a few others were revealed:

I don’t think Management fully understands how slow information on changes, revised policies or updates on regulations gets relayed to us. It’s a bit frustrating since the effectiveness of our jobs relies on this information but yet this continues to be an issue. Another weakness is around how difficult the policies are to understand. They don’t make sense half the time and part of the problem lies in there being no consultation with our group when these policies are created for specifically us.

When each was asked “What would you like to see done to improve information flow in this organization?” Management stated

It would be great if all the Managers were required to relay information’s to those they supervise within let’s say 1-2 days. It might prove to be beneficial to also have more frequent Management meetings to encourage the exchange of information between Managers more.

Associate: Something has to be done to increase the speed in which information gets to everyone in this company. Perhaps an intranet system could be setup or more departmental meetings should be encouraged. Either way, this will at least improve information flow and employee relationships.
Administrator: *Maybe they could hire a consultant, have he/she consultant with our group, then have them write out our policies. I think Managers need to use email more often, its quick and a convenient way to get information across. It would be nice to also meet with Managers more often, I feel so disconnected from them and I can only see meetings improving this relationship.*

**Discussion**

The findings among both the survey and interviews, suggest that vertical styles of communication create more communication dissatisfaction and barriers within a for-profit company than does horizontal styles of communication, coinciding with the perspective of arguments made from scholars who have conducted similar studies such as Kirkhaug’s (2010) study on efficient communication levels within organizations and Gilsof’s (1998) study on employees views on organizational culture and structure. There also seems to be an issue with how these problems are perceived, revealing how the perceptions of these barriers might be playing a role in how each hierarchy level handles these communication issues. Management’s results seemed to portray less of a concern with the current hierarchal structure effects on effective communication compared to Associates and Administrators. One explanation for this could be differences in the skills required and the type of work each hierarchal level handles usually creates different needs for information and different abilities. Conrad and Poole (2005) discuss these differences stating that Management at the top are usually the ones creating the policies or making the decisions with everyone else expected to keep communication formal and restricted to the chain of command. This difference in what is viewed as imperative to a healthy information exchange could be contributing to the differing views on the effects of the current hierarchy system.
One of the main arguments for Adaptive Structuration Theory is that “rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction” (Giddens, 1984, p. 19). Employees are a product of their environment while also contributing to sustaining the rules and structures that already exist. As discussed earlier, the lack of understanding between departments and communication problems within the organization are a product of the policies and structures that employees choose to follow and perpetuate. Change can only occur if the employees involved in the process choose to mutually change the current systems in place. In order for this to occur, trust between employees would have to improve. The results of this study revealed that there is more trust in information relayed between co-workers, horizontally, in comparison to information relayed vertically. As discussed earlier, this could potentially be attributed to a lack of understanding in the information needed for each hierarchy. This correlates with Conrad and Poole’s assessment on how network strategies, which rely on leaders to “act as conductors rather than top-down Managers” (Conrad & Poole, 2005, p. 189) sustain organizational communication. They argue the success of this type of organizational structure relies on “mutual trust among members, member’s commitment to their work, contracts and open communication systems to hold the network together” (Conrad & Poole, 2005, p. 219).

In addition, most of the participants involved in the study agreed that the timing of information affected the effectiveness of the organizational policies. The majority of the employee group seemed to agree that the current policies have played a role in creating a barrier for information to get from Management to Administrators. Participants also agreed that the productivity of the company would increase if information was relayed quicker.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of the study was being unable to access all 50 employees within the organization since they didn’t work full time at the time of the study or the current company policies didn’t allow for their participation. Another limitation of this study was the difficulty around being able to generalize the results to other organizations since it was conducted on a small pool of respondents that may make it difficult to relate the results to other organizations. Further testing would need to be conducted in order to establish the validity of this study.

An additional limitation was not including any open ended questions to allow the participants to elaborate on their answers. This may have assisted in better understanding why employees felt the way they did for particular organizational communication issues. Face to face interviews allowed for some bias as subtle tone of voice, the wording of questions or body language could affect a participant’s response. Also, due to the time constraint all interviews had to be conducted within the employees office environment which may have affected the type or responses received.

Further Study or Recommendations

The desire to conduct this study stemmed from awareness that there is a lack of research around the effects of hierarchal structures and complex policies on organizational communication. There are a number of firms that deal with these problems around the country and hence more studies on this issue should be conducted. It should not only focuses on issues with Management, but with communication issues along different hierarchal structures and their effect on
each other as well as integrating the analysis further to provide more insight into the fundamental issues that lie at the heart of these problems.

Survey questions should also include the option for comments to gain a better understanding of the thoughts and experiences of employees who are immersed within these organizational environments. The hope will be that they can provide a deeper perspective on a common underlying theme of what may be perpetuating this issue.

Adaptive Structuration Theory explains how employees play a role in creating their environment. This study reveals issues with the accuracy of information coming from Management revealing a possible vertical communication issue and those lower on the hierarchy structure experience greater trust among their colleagues than Management. It would be interesting to analyze employees who were trained to recognize this dynamic and observe if they would change the way they interacted in comparison with an organization that wasn’t trained.

The study may benefit from including several organizations in different industries to allow for comparisons across companies in different industries. It may also prove beneficial to interview more than one member from each department to increase the validity of the interview results.

**Conclusions**

Communication within organizations is essential to healthy working relationships between employees. It also plays a vital role in the success of policies and structural setups within companies. Bottom-up type of communication, where information carries from employees to Management, is just as important as top-down communication in sustaining the flow of information between employees. As discussed with Adaptive Structuration Theory, all employees play a role in creating their environment. The intent behind conducting these types of studies is to hopefully
place focus on some key factors that contribute to the communication dynamics involved in creating the barriers and provoke the desire for change that will generate a more positive communication environment within an organization.

One way companies can improve this communication dynamic is through creating an environment where employees will feel comfortable providing feedback with one another across the different hierarchal levels. Another way to help encourage this type of dynamic is allowing all employees to be a part of the decision making process when it comes to goals and actions of the organization, since these elements are usually what shape the policies that are implemented within the companies. It is also essential that policies and structures implemented do not impede on the efficiency, time and resources of an organization as this not only minimizes growth but perpetuates misuse of information.

This study did reveal that timing of information seem to be an issue. It is imperative that information that affects employees gets relayed in a timely fashion to remain effective. This will assist in bridging the gap in communication between the levels of structure as well as improve employee relations. Transparency and openness are also key factors that will contribute to improving employee relations, specifically by increasing the level of trust between the different hierarchal groups which may help subordinates feel more comfortable with exchanging information with supervisors who are involved in policy formation.

Healthy communication between employees plays a significant role in ensuring an organization remains successful. Time and resources need to be invested in maintaining an effective communication system that encourages the transparent exchange of information between employees. This will ensure that factors such as employee morale, motivation and productivity are sustained at a point where conflict
management is minimized and mutual understanding between employees is maintained.
Reference List


The Effects of Hierarchal Structures and Complex Policies on Organizational Communication

Survey Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is to assist in analyzing hierarchal structural barriers and complex policies that may contribute to poor interpersonal communication between employees within for-profit companies. This survey will be a part of Linda Youssouf’s thesis for the Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership program at Gonzaga University. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary, confidential and your name will not be connected to any of the results. Feel free to skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering and you may stop taking this survey at any point.

Please read each question carefully and rate your level of agreement with each statement by choosing the answer that most closely represents your opinion. This survey may take up to 10 minutes to complete.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Linda at lwyousso@gmail.com

Please choose the category that best represents your job role:

- Management  - Associate  - Administration

For each of the following questions, please remember to choose the answer that best represents your opinion:

A. Sources of Information

1) I receive information to do my job directly from management
2) Information to do my job mainly comes from co-workers
3) The information I receive from management is clear and accurate
4) The information I receive from co-workers in my department is clear and accurate
5) The organization supports departments directly exchanging information with each other.

**B. Timing of Information**

6) The information I receive from management to do my job arrives in a timely manner

7) I often cannot perform my job duties because I don’t have the information I need

8) Each department receives information about what is happening in the organization at the same time

9) The current organizational policies create delays in information getting from management to subordinates

10) The organization would be more productive if information was relayed to all staff faster

**C. Relationships**

11) I trust the information I receive from co-workers

12) I feel comfortable exchanging information with co-workers

13) The lines of communication are open between co-workers

14) The communication between co-workers creates a healthy work environment

15) The organization encourages open communication between departments

**D. Channels of Information**

16) I receive most of my information within the organization from management

17) Most of the information I receive within the organization is through co-workers in my department

18) I receive the majority of my information from other departments other than my own

19) Most of the information I receive is face to face

20) Information is more effective sent through email rather than face to face
Interview Questions

1) Describe your job and the decisions you are responsible for making? What information do you need to make these decisions? What information do you actually get to make these decisions and from whom? Are there formal policies in place that dictate how you get this information?

2) Describe the formal channels through which you receive important information about/ for this organization?

3) Describe the formal channels through which you send important information about this organization

4) Please specify what the most important communication strengths of this organization are?

5) Please specify what the most important communication weakness of this organization are?

6) How often do you receive information about this organization which is of no use to you?

7) What would you like to see done to improve information flow in this organization? Why do you believe this has not been done yet?

8) Describe the way decisions are usually made in this organization?

9) Describe the communication relationship you have with your immediate supervisor, co-workers or subordinates (if applicable)?

10) How do you know when this organization has done a good or bad job towards reaching its goals?

11) What measures of effectiveness are used in this organization?