

COMMUNICATING WITH TRADE UNION MEMBERS

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Communicating with trade union members takes place on four levels -

- (1) Trade Unions communicating with trade union members; (2) Employers communicating with trade union members; (3) Government communicating with trade union members; and (4) Non-unionised workers communicating with trade union members or rather, in this case, coming into contact with them.

Before we enlarge upon this theme, it would serve us well to examine the nature of the communication process. We can start with defining the term. E. Moonman in his book, "The Man and The Organisation" published in London, 1961 defines: "Communication is the capacity of an individual or group to convey ideas and feelings to another individual or group, and where necessary, to evoke a discriminating response." A much simpler definition would be that communication in human relations is simply the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another.

Both definitions stress that communication must be a two-way exchange if it is to succeed for no communication is truly completed until that which is received is also understood. In other words, there must be rapport between both communicants so that a dynamic interaction takes place every minute on the job. With rapport, communication leads to mutual comprehension and a co-operative atmosphere is established even in the midst of genuine conflicting interests.

For effective communication serves four functions that of (1) informing, (2) instructing and directing, (3) evaluating someone or something, and (4) influencing another's thought or behaviour. Ineffective communication is not only responsible for all poor social relations but it also works to bring about industrial evils such as poor employee morale. It is for this reason that Professor Elton Mayo one of the pioneers of the human relations movement in

industry considers ineffective communication as the "outstanding defect that civilisation is facing today." In modern society where impersonal relations rule working life due to the specialised functions of men, effective face-to-face communication will go a long way in implementing in Singapore an integrated industrial relations system based upon a working community of management and workers within a framework of tripartite relationship between Government, workers and entrepreneurs.

We can briefly touch upon the mechanics of communication. There are three different media of communication - (1) face-to-face communication, (2) non-face-to-face^{oral} communication and (3) written communication. Of these three face-to-face communication is obviously ideal. Furthermore, the concept of communication must be considered as a three-dimensional one. We can have (1) Two-way communication, (2) Cross-communication and (3) Extra-organisational communication with organised unions and workers' families. Beside formal communications we have an informal communications system known as gossip or the "grapevine". By its very nature grapevine communication is not a two-way system and its existence in an industry reveals ineffective communication. Viewed from another angle, however, a "grapevine" can be described as a continuous process of mutual evaluation by its participants.

Union communication is comparatively more efficient than communication in industry. This is because a trade union is largely a voluntary society with many of its officers working freely for the union on a part-time basis. A trade union has therefore to retain their loyalty to the workers' cause. The use of communication in order to justify the social purpose of the business remains something of a luxury for a commercial enterprise, but for a union it is a condition of survival. Furthermore, there is little concept of authority in a union relationship and also little monetary satisfaction for loyal trade unionists part-time or full-time. Then a union has to maintain frequent rapport with workers or risk having a fluctuating membership. Finally inter-union communication is unavoidable.

A union can communicate with trade union members in four ways:-

- 1 through the branch officials in each plant
- 2 through trade union publications
- 3 through its co-operatives
- 4 through the NTUC which co-ordinates the activities of the various affiliated unions.

The importance of the branch official as a communicating agent with workers cannot be overemphasised for he forms the critical link in good union relations with them. Through him information can move up the structure even as far as top management in the process bypassing if need be, the various supervisory channels. A serious problem for trade unions can easily crop up around a branch official. If he is incompetent, apathetic or unenthusiastic there will be a division in the union between the top and the bottom. A branch official's job is a thankless one as he is often caught between the cross-fires of workers' frustration and management suspicion. This may gradually erode his loyalty to the union with the result that new branch officials must be continually trained.

The promotion of trade union journalism is vital for the survival of trade unions as they cannot depend on the commercial press to give trade union news enough coverage. Workers have necessarily to resort to trade union literature to have their grievances highlighted, to be educated with regard to their roles and responsibilities in society and also to be enlightened on communication from management, public authorities, industrial federations, national centres and international organisations. In putting their message across to workers trade union publications and journals face tremendous difficulties in having to contend with apathetic workers, in possessing fewer resources of their own and in obtaining advertisements from management-orientated commercial enterprises. Then trade union journalism in general lacks a streak of professionalism with the result that most trade union journals are justly considered as being deadly dull, insipid and uninteresting.

Presently, the best known trade union journals in Singapore are the Perjuangan, the Fern Toh Pau and the Afro-Asian Bulletin published by the N.T.U.C. S.I.L.O.'s Labour News is also fast becoming popular with workers. Other unions are also becoming increasingly aware of the importance of having regular publications of their own. S.A.T.U., for instance, publishes a quarterly bulletin.

A third communicating link with trade union members would be through our co-operatives, INCOME, COMFORT and DENTICARE. DENTICARE has just been established and it has still to produce results. However, the success of INCOME and COMFORT have exceeded our expectations. Recently the NTUC Central Committee passed a Resolution to establish our fourth co-operative, the Consumers' Co-operative whose role will be to supplement the role of CASE or the Consumers' Association of Singapore.

Finally the NTUC serves to unify the trade union movement in Singapore. Officials of the various affiliated unions hold various posts in the NTUC Central Committee and their unions are actively represented in our co-operative projects. The NTUC Research Unit Library to some extent co-ordinates research work amongst the affiliated unions by assisting them with information along this line.

An effective management must not consider good communication to be a waste of time for communicating is a process whereby leadership takes effect. Moreover, three elements of a manager's job, planning, organising and measuring are heavily dependent on employee communication; the fourth element, integration is almost synonymous with communication. Managers must appreciate that downward communication with the employees is essential for it provides them with the information and understanding necessary for group effort and also with the attitudes necessary for motivation, co-operation and job satisfaction. Effective upward communication gives management an insight into how downward communication is accepted by the employees. The management also receives a constant flow of valuable criticisms and suggestions from the employees providing management with more and better information for evaluation and

decision-making. Furthermore, upward communication stimulates employees' interest and participation and also encourages the management to understand the problems and attitudes of employees.

It is relevant to us to note that in the Singapore University there is a Research Paper entitled "A Study of Business Communications", submitted in 1968 by a final year business administration student who studied communication in two local firms which we shall name X and Y. X is a small manufacturing concern with pioneer status and it produces oil. Y is a large and well-known marketing organisation. Both firms project a favourable public image and both have ^{installed} comparatively good communication systems. Yet in firm X employee morale was for above the average unlike in firm Y where an executive complained "Top management is interested only in big profits". Evidently in firm Y there was no rapport between the top management and the rest of the staff including the executives.

It is regrettable therefore that a majority of employers do not communicate enough with their employees. There is little downward communication in Singapore and even less upward communication.

The bars or doors blocking communication operate in both directions. Management occupying key positions at the several levels are extremely pressurised individuals whose desks become bottlenecks of communication by virtue of the tremendous physical tasks placed upon them. It must be emphasised that management is usually unreceptive to uninhibited communication downward and that persons with a superior hierachical status often tend to be secretive and to under-rate the intelligence and sophistication of the workers. In the case of upward communication it must be granted that workers are naturally apprehensive of authority and are therefore inhibited from expressing even harmless ideas in the presence of management especially when it means bypassing their immediate supervisors.

At this juncture management must search for solutions to improve both effective upward and downward communication in industry, and, implement them.

To facilitate upward communication employers must hold regular meetings with their employees, perhaps conduct Opinion Surveys, provide some forms of Counselling and Grievance Systems and have Joint Consultation in the form of a Works Council in each plant.) There is a possibility, however, that the Works Council might fail in view of the fact that workers might be unable to voice their grievances adequately in front of their management. (More effective results can be obtained if there is non-face-to-face communication between management and workers.) In fact the Aston Chain and Hook Co. of Birmingham had recourse to such a situation when they allowed employees to hold informal meetings among themselves in the company's own time without management supervision. With the implementation of this new idea, the Aston Chain and Hook Co. experienced a flow of ideas and suggestions from workers to the management side. Prior to this, whenever management had face-to-face communication or rather confrontation with the employees, the discussion could hardly rise above the levels of tea and toilet paper, this being due to inadequate preparation on both sides for such an encounter.

It would be needless to say that an Open-Door Policy whereby an employee communicates his views to management without going through his immediate supervisors is bound to fail, not only in Singapore but elsewhere, management tendencies and employee inclinations being what they are.

Coming to possible improvements for downward communication, it must be emphasised that employers **must** communicate to their employees the facts of life of the business as fully and frankly as possible with emphasis on the human factor and on the prospects for the future. Singapore employers hardly need to fear over-communicating with their employees.

In Singapore, many personnel managers have become bottlenecks of communication. This is because top management does not keep them fully informed of their activities, provide them with sufficient training on labour matters or take their views into account in the decision-making process. On the other hand, management regards personnel managers, in the words of Mr. C. V. Devan Nair, as management's first line of defence and their glorified hatchet-boys hired to tell lies to the workers and hit them below the belt, if necessary. Here the remedy is obvious.

Singapore managers can take cognizance of the fact that more than one American industrial giant has shortened its lines of communication and improved its worker relations at the very time of its most rapid increase in numbers. The International Business Machines Corporation, for instance, reduced the levels of authority in their Endicott plant from six to four - yet during the time this change was made - 1940-1947 - the number of workers in the factory doubled.

In effecting good communication upward or downward, management must make use of training programmes. This is because employees who are being trained are very often receptive to new ideas and accept changes in industry less reluctantly. Trained workers have often more insight into management problems.

To bring about effective communication unions should also be brought in consciously into the management's communication programmes. Both management and union must communicate in a single framework with industrial harmony as their objectives. Management must accept a branch official's necessity to have direct access to top management without going through supervisory channel and union officials must assist in persuading workers to accept management-union decisions. In other words, management must accept the union's communication role, and the union must be willing and able to fulfil it.

A union's relationship with the mass of unorganised workers is mainly handled by the branch officials and the editors of our various journals who are in a capacity to influence them. Enlightened employers can also play a part as ultimately when more workers are attracted to NTUC affiliated unions, the unions can take over the supervision of the job performance of workers in addition to playing their traditional role of looking after their wage structure and other interests.

In July this year, NTUC launched a Mass Membership Campaign to bring home to workers the benefits of unionisation. By the end of the month our membership figures had jumped from 120,000 to 150,000. There are plans afoot to compel non-unionised workers to pay a sum equivalent to our membership fees to the Educational Welfare Fund which is to be managed on their behalf by a Board consisting of Government and NTUC representatives. This will rectify a situation where non-unionised workers enjoy the privileges which the NTUC affiliated unions have fought for their own members.

Finally we must review government communication with trade union members. The Singapore Government communicates with trade union members in three ways (1) through the NTUC (2) independently, by itself, and (3) by means of a tripartite arrangement with trade unions and employers. In April this year the Government handed over to NTUC the maintenance of the Changi Creek Holiday Camp reserved for workers and their families. Then through the Labour Ministry and the Industrial Arbitration Court the Government intervenes in cases of labour disputes and violation of labour legislation. An excellent example of tripartite co-operation is the National Wages Council whose function is to establish guidelines for systematic and orderly increase in workers' wages in the Republic. Through increased representation of Labour M.P.s to the Singapore Parliament, the Government has also increasingly involved labour in the decision-making machinery of the state.

In concluding I wish to offer both unions and management certain guidelines which I believe will be conducive to good, or in the case of unions, to better communication. Unions can (1) improve their public relations, (2) inject greater professionalism into their activities, for instance, a greater number of graduates are being absorbed by trade unions, (3) improve inter-union relationship by making use more and more of NTUC as a co-ordinating centre, and (4) organising training courses for their trade union officials.

Managers can observe the following rules when they plot a more effective communication programme:-

- (1) Review the defects in your old communication programme.
- (2) Establish priorities for the new programme.
- (3) Give your employees the facts about your business in a way that they can understand. This can be done by putting your company on record - its policies, organisation benefits etc. See that employees know something of their senior management. Also find out your employees' problems and attitudes.
- (4) Make full use of all existing media.
- (5) In implementing the programme widen the role of personnel managers. Also plan beforehand a swift method of communication, to deal with employees in cases of industrial strife.
- (6) Make full use of training facilities and include communication as a subject in the training course.
- (7) Introduce Works Councils in your plants.
- (8) There must be recognition of the inter-relationship of both management and union communication.
- (9) Continually check the effectiveness of the programme.