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COMMUNICATIONS IMPACT: POWER SOURCE FOR DECISION MAKERS

ROBERT R. AURNER

Those of us who are professionally engaged, on a full-time basis, in management consulting, have had an exceptional opportunity to observe some fascinating developments at the top levels of company administration.

Only within recent years has management in the real sense "discovered" the instrument of communication. Only within recent years has management realized that communication is one of its most powerful resources for operating success. At all three major levels—top management, middle management, and operating management—administrators have accepted the swiftly emerging truth that written communication is an indispensable resource for supporting the industrial process by transmitting executive decisions. Accordingly, in unprecedented degree, communication has taken on multiplied importance.

Today, in the executive suites of industry, throughout decision-making circles, there is a sweeping realization that effective executive action calls for lucid, free-flowing, and powerful communication. Every executive in the country will freely affirm the crucial importance of the subject and the hugely growing demand for the services of its trained exponents. The opportunity for trained experts in the field was never more brilliant.
COMMUNICATION BREAKTHROUGHS

We who are active in the consulting field are, by the nature of our professional appointments, constantly reminded that the 21st century is much closer than we think. For example, it may seem a bit dramatic to bring down a 175-passenger jet airliner from six or seven miles up, through a pattern of scores of other planes in simultaneous flight, by the miracle of highly sophisticated communication. But such technological triumphs are only the merest beginning.

Audio-hearing, video-seeing, and print media advances already behind us offer a tantalizing sample of the communications tools available in the approaching century. These communication tools will continue to expand man’s intellectual horizon.

It becomes immediately evident that it is part of my obligation to caution my corporate clients that the world-wide mass communications on the horizon are bound to affect our linguistic habits, and hence the posture of our international industrial commitments. In the future, automatic translating computers will overcome one of the final communication barriers — language. English is most likely to become the common tongue, or “second language” throughout the world. We will probably go into a two-language system, people holding on to their local languages for conversing in their own communities. But the ascendancy of English as the international language is already well on its way.

As for the educational process itself, management needs to know that two major fields of communication research promise acceleration in a spectacular way. Studies of programmed instruction and automated instructional devices, popularly known as teaching machines, are revealing many ways to impart knowledge more effectively. And research in the biochemistry of the brain holds the key to retaining in memory what we learn. Says Dr. John Lyman, Chief of the Biotechnology Laboratory at the University of California at Los Angeles, “Understanding the source of memory is almost at the point of a full-blown breakthrough.”

AUDIO-VISUAL EDUCATION

Audio-visual communication will dominate educational method
over the next thirty-five years. This fact, too, we who are in professional consulting work must vividly convey to our corporate clients. Students at all levels of age and background will be able to tune in pre-taped lessons transmitted by closed circuit radio and television from central libraries and universities.

There are today some 700 million illiterate adults in the world. But in the 21st century, advanced thinkers envision the final closing of this literacy gap by use of machine-to-man linkages to imprint knowledge on the brain. And of specialized and particular interest to corporate clients is the vast coming expansion of communications power through conversations between man and machine. This process of man-talking-to-machine and machine-replying-to-man, this continuous conversational exchange between man and computer — a process known technically as demand machine interphase — is already an accomplished reality.

As for communication by “total information processing,” this specialized service has now become so familiar to certain corporate officers as a specific industrial need that it has taken its place in the daily advertising appearing in The Wall Street Journal. “Now you can draw on the services of the world’s largest interconnected information processing complex,” states an announcement in the Tuesday issue of the Journal for July 25, 1967. “Direct remote-terminal access to CDC/Data Centers is now available, along with a complete library of standard Control Data Corporation software.” And coming up right behind, to make the information even more accessible, the Xerox 2400-IV System takes awkward 11” x 15” fan-fold computer print-out, reduces it to letter size 8½” x 11”, and puts it in handy little stacks, 40 copies a minute, sorted and collated, and ready for distribution. (See The Wall Street Journal, June 21, 1967.)

THE DECISION MAKERS’ POWER SOURCE

Basically, what is an effective communication? It is a package conveying a thought, a container conveying an idea, with the confident expectation that that package, that container, will be exchanged (when the situation calls for such action) for another package to be returned from the receiver. In such circumstances it is contemplated that there will be an exchange
of packages, each package containing a significant message. The emphasis is upon the word exchange. Exchange is the very essence of successful communication. Exchange calls for feedback, some evidence that the message has been received and understood.

It is right at this point that we come upon the peculiar role of semantics, which plays its part just as importantly in the corporation directors' room as it does in the university classroom. As we all know, semantics—the science and philosophy of meanings—plays an enormous part in successful communication. By way of fast, thumbnail review: actually, we must assume that words in themselves—as characters on paper or as sounds of human utterance—are meaningless. Meaning occurs within people, not within words. A word stands for, but neither is nor contains, an idea or an emotion. Hence, when you use a key word, a novel word, an unusual word, a specialized word, a difficult word, or a technical word or term, state not what the word supposedly "means" but what you mean by it. (The general area of semantics has, of course, been thoroughly plowed, furrowed, harrowed, and raked by such people as Chase, Hayakawa, Ogden, Richards, Korzybski, and others.)

COMMUNICATIONS IMPACT

The second component of the title I have selected for this discussion is the word impact. Impact is the target objective of every known form of verbal exchange. What is impact? Precisely defined, impact is a striking together, a collision, an action which communicates force. Whatever delivers impact drives something close, or fixes something firmly. Any impact exchange of thought demonstrates the systematic application of verbal intelligence in carrying out management procedures and managing human affairs.

The third component in the title of my discussion is the power source. One of the most challenging problems of top management today is how to achieve maximum power in the effective transmission and exchange of thought through the written and spoken word; how to get an idea out of one man's mind and into another man's mind without loss of meaning in the exchange. Both as an author and as a professional management consultant, I have been dealing with this problem for many years.
Invariably I find executives deeply concerned with clarifying and strengthening the channels of communication, both inside and outside their organizations. The reason for their concern is basically simple: They have found that successful decision-making depends on clear impact-communication, the exchange of thoughts and ideas within the context of maximum lucidity and precision.

And who are the decision-makers, the fourth and final component in the title of my discussion today? The decision-makers are all of us. Inevitably we make dozens of decisions in each working day. So does every company representative, every management man at every management level, whether it be top, middle, or operating.

The record shows, also, that decision-making depends heavily on verbal intelligence. My discussion today has in fact been keyed to the combined academic and practical conclusion that leaders of business have a great need for a highly trained command of clear and convincing verbal power. As Charles W. Eliot, noted educator, phrased it, "Businessmen need, in speech and writing, all the Roman terseness and the clearness of the French. The graces and elegance of literary style they can dispense with, but not with the greater qualities of compactness, accuracy, and vigor." In no other time in history is it so important to use the right words in the right place in the right way.

"Who gets promoted?" is a question often arising in my consulting conferences. The objective record will show that the individual who can write well has a significant "promotable" edge over the one who cannot. The trained writer is simply more valuable to the organization in dollars and cents. Because he can clearly and forcefully convey his thoughts and because he can persuasively and tactfully present his points of view, he will climb more rapidly to management levels. Simply because he is articulate, he is more valuable to the organization as management material. The evidence on this point is overwhelming.

What Do You Recommend That Clients Do?

It would be entirely natural for me to answer, in concluding
my discussion, some such question as this: "What do you recommend that corporate clients do?" The answer to this question hinges, of course, upon the nature of the industry, the character of its organization, and in part upon the type of problems which may beset it.

Basically, I recommend that the Executive Committee, normally composed of four or five policy-making officers of top responsibility, familiarize themselves with what other companies are doing. Over a third of the top U.S. corporations, a Fortune sampling indicates, have set up programs for "in-plant" communications training. Monsanto Chemical and Glidden are working on both outgoing and inside messages. "In our campaign to simplify communications," reports Glidden's president, "we encourage 'Yes' and 'No' answers, which in turn make for briefer, clearer questions." Sales trainer D. S. Galbraith, reviewing the program of Cutler-Hammer Corporation, reports, "Our assignment at Cutler-Hammer indicates a clear-cut responsibility in developing our new salesmen as communicators." Montgomery Ward, along with many other companies, uses slide films. Numerous banks, insurance companies, and department stores engage experts to simplify and personalize their communications. Industries like Smith, Kline and French; Jones and Laughlin; and Johnson and Johnson, schedule various in-plant communications seminars. And General Motors has encouraged more than two thousand of its management and supervisory people to develop greater word power and verbal control through special retraining courses.

Finally, in terms of specifics, I introduce throughout the client organization, and over a period of time, not less than ten recommendations, each of which has stood the rigorous test of practical application and highly successful usage.

Each of these ten tested recommendations, if treated thoroughly, could be the subject of a separate monograph.

When the contract period of the consulting retainer has been completed, these tested recommendations will have been fully implemented with company-wide application, and within the context of the overall program.

THE ROLE OF DYNAMIC COMMUNICATION

Whether in words or figures, whether in electronic pulses or
high-speed computer techniques, communications form the vital link which spreads information from where it originates to where it must go. Clearly dominating the scene is the possession of positive word control and verbal intelligence. Dynamic communication, as decision-makers at all levels have discovered, is the one indispensable ingredient of successful executive action. Upon this indispensable ingredient all successful decision-making must ultimately depend.