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Critical upward feedback in organisations:

Processes, problems and implications for communication management

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Abstract

Given that staff-management relationships are a core concern for communication management, upward feedback is emerging as a key theme in the literature. However, it is most often associated with upward appraisal. This study looks at upward feedback in a more general sense, and in particular at whether such feedback is critical or positive in its response to senior management decisions. 146 staff within a health care organisation (HCO) were surveyed, using a depth-Communication Audit instrument. 15 staff were also interviewed in detail, while 6 focus groups each composed of 6 people were also convened. Results indicated that informal upward feedback was mostly absent; that where it occurred the feedback was inaccurately positive; that senior managers were unaware of such distortions and unwilling to contemplate the possibility that they did indeed exist; that they had an exaggerated impression of how much upward feedback they received; and that they discouraged the transmission of critical feedback. Implications for the practice of communication management, the development of upward influence within organisations and general theoretical reasons for distortions in feedback processes are considered.

Introduction

'The temptation to tell a Chief in a great position the things he most likes to hear is one of the commonest explanations of mistaken policy. Thus the outlook of the leader on whose decision fateful events depend is usually far more sanguine than the brutal facts admit.'

Winston Churchill (1931)

Benefits of upward feedback

In recent years, research into upward feedback in organisations has burgeoned (Atwater et al., 2000). One survey of 280 Midwest companies in the USA found that 25% used annual upward appraisals, 18% peer appraisals and 12% used 360-degree appraisals (DeNisi, 1996). Companies such as AT&T, the Bank of America, Caterpillar, GTE and General Electric have been pioneers with this latter approach (Hargie et al., 1999). Thus, upward feedback itself seems to most often occur as part of the appraisal process, rather than through daily information communication channels (Atwater et al., 1995).

Accordingly, it has been argued that upward feedback, upward communication and open door policies deliver significant organisational benefits. These include:

- The promotion of shared leadership, and an enhanced willingness by managers to act on employee suggestions (Moravec et al., 1993).
- A greater tendency by employees to report positive changes in their managers' behaviour (Hegarty, 1974).

- Actual rather than perceived improvements in management behaviour following from feedback, beyond what could be attributed to regression to the mean (Reilly et al., 1996).

- A reduced gap between managers' self-ratings and those of their subordinates (London and Wohlers, 1991).

- The creation of improved forums for obtaining information, garnering suggestions, defusing conflict and facilitating the expression of discontent (Shenhar, 1990).

These are critical issues for communications management. In particular, much of the literature on high performance work systems, most closely associated with the work of Pfeffer (1994; 1998) stresses the importance of openness between managers and staff, the central role of good communication systems and the need to tackle such problems as status differentials between those at the top and those at the bottom of organisations. However, significant problems have been reported with the delivery of upward feedback. Research suggests that feedback tends to mainly flow from persons in authority to their subordinates (Luthans and Larsen, 1986). Moreover, the limited upward feedback that occurs tends to be flawed in the sense that positive upward feedback is a more common occurrence than negative upward feedback (Baron, 1996). Baron's study also suggests radically different perceptions between managers and their staff on this issue. The managers concerned perceived many more instances of negative feedback than their subordinates. However, both managers and subordinates perceived the same level of positive feedback. It thus appears that people are especially sensitive to negative input – what has been termed the automatic vigilance effect (Pratto and John, 1991). Intentionally or otherwise, it is therefore likely that their less than

enthusiastic response will discourage it. Thus, motivating truthful upward communication is widely recognised as a serious problem (Chow et al., 2000).

Costs of not facilitating upward feedback

Organisations that do not sufficiently utilise upward communication systems which includes positive and negative comments pay a considerable cost. In particular, it seems certain that the quality of decision-making by the top management team suffers, and this has a detrimental impact upon the whole organization. For example, Nutt (1999) studied 356 decisions in medium to large organizations. He concluded that half the decisions made within such organisations failed. Nutt's analysis suggested that among the key factors explaining such failures were a tendency by managers to impose solutions, limit the search for alternatives, and use power rather than influence/persuasion to implement their plans. Successful decisions were more likely when managers made the need for action clear at the outset, set objectives, carried out an unrestricted search for solutions and got key people to participate. However, participation was used in just one of five decisions. Of course, effective participation systems both depend on and enhance upward feedback (Dachler and Wilpert, 1978; Krone, 1992; Stohl and Cheney, 2001).

Such research is consistent with work conducted into what has been defined as groupthink (Janis, 1982). This has found that groups insulated from critical outside feedback develop illusions in their own invulnerability, excessive self confidence in the quality of their decision-making and an exaggerated sense of their distinctiveness from other groups. It follows that a group so inclined will also have a tendency to disparage

criticism from outside its own ranks, since it will conflict with the group's ideal self-image and depart from its well-entrenched norms.

The absence of feedback may become a vicious cycle, in which poor decisions result; the group responds by belittling or denying the existence of crisis; feedback pointing to the crisis is disparaged as coming from tainted sources outside the magic circle of key decision makers; and those attempting to offer feedback respond by minimising much needed future critical feedback. In turn, this is likely to further reinforce the conviction of those at the top that (rogue indicators aside) things are actually much better than they are, and that the group does not require additional outside input.

Problems of ingratiation

One of the most potent explanations for difficulties with upward feedback can be found in ingratiation theory. This proposes that those with a lower level of status habitually exaggerate the extent to which they agree with the opinions and actions of higher status people, as a means of acquiring influence with them (Jones, 1990). Studies conducted with students in hypothetical situations indicate that decreased power among subordinates is accompanied by an increased tendency to employ some form of ingratiation (Michener et al., 1979) and an increased use of 'politeness' strategies (Baxter, 1984). The implications for the practice of management are considerable. For example, a culture of sycophancy has been identified as a key factor in the profits collapse that afflicted one of the UK's best-known businesses, Marks & Spencer, in the late 1990s (Bevan, 2001). The company chairman's direct reports have confessed that they actively avoided bringing bad news to his attention, fearing his wrath. However, as De Vries (2001: 94) has put it: 'Effective organisational functioning demands that

people have a healthy disrespect for their boss, feel free to express emotions and opinions openly, and are comfortable engaging in banter and give and take.'

Thus, particularly when contemplating dissent, employees consider whether it will result in retaliation, or whether it will be perceived as constructive (Kassing, 2001). Trust, or its absence, is therefore a key issue in determining the availability and efficacy of upward feedback. Without trust, such communication is limited. Moreover, the frequency and openness of inter-organisational communication is a vital precondition for the development of trust (Sydow, 1998) - a construct which is itself increasingly acknowledged as a positive contributor to business effectiveness (Sako, 1998; O'Brien, 2001). It has been noted that 'subordinates who do not trust their superior are willing to suppress unfavourable information even if they know that such information is useful for decision making' (O'Reilly *et al*., 1987: 612). The result is yet more ingratiation behaviour, and a further weakening of critical upward feedback.

In addition, self-efficacy biases suggest that most of us imagine we are better on various crucial dimensions of behaviour than we actually are (Myers, 1996). Accordingly, researchers have generally found that managers view the defective and uncritical feedback they receive from subordinates as accurate, sincere, and well meant (Rosenfeld et al., 1995) – it is in line with their self-efficacy biases. Since they are therefore inclined to think that the inaccurate and ingratiating feedback they receive daily is accurate, they grow even less inclined to seek mechanisms that institutionalise critical upward feedback into the decision-making process.

The effect is to distort both downward and upward communication processes. To deny fault and avert the possibility of blame, senior managers sometimes conceal negative organizational outcomes (Abrahamson and Park, 1994). People suppress information (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990), they cover up negative financial data (Whetton, 1980), they deny failure (Sutton and Callahan, 1987), and they have been shown to 'launch propaganda campaigns that deny the existence of crises' (Starbuck et al. 1978: 118). It has also been argued that the unidirectional nature of feedback systems in many organisations has been codified into much of the theory associated with transformational leadership (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002). Clampitt (2001, p.17) summarises the problem as follows: 'The law of gravity does not apply to information flow in organizations. Information held at the top of the organizational hierarchy (e.g. financial results, pending mergers etc.) does not always filter down. And some information, such as major success stories, held in the lower echelons show exceptional buoyancy in reaching the top, almost as if defying the laws of gravity. Effective managers know that the hierarchy inherently filters information… Sending the good news up is only natural for those who wish to get ahead in the organization.'

It appears that '…we are left with a paradox: the most successful leaders appear to be those who cultivate the least compliant followers, for when leaders err – and they always do – the leader with compliant followers will fail' (Grint, 2000, p.420). Clearly, followers who are less compliant are more likely to deliver upward and critical feedback. Unfortunately, managers oblivious to the workings of ingratiation dynamics may be more likely to fire such recalcitrants than they are to encourage them.

Research questions

Based on the above literature review, three major research questions were formulated as follows:

1. *We wished to explore the extent to which people enacting different roles within the organisation felt they communicated information in an upward direction.* Previous research has found a widespread assumption amongst many staff that senior managers are more informed about key change issues than such managers feel themselves to be (Hargie and Tourish, 1996). Building on this, we wished to explore here how much information different levels of the organisation, including managers, actually sent rather than received. It is reasonable to assume that key professional groupings within the health sector, such as doctors, would be regularly transmitting information. However, in an organisation bereft of robust upward communication devices such an expectation may well not be likely to be fulfilled.

2. *We wished to explore gaps in perception on the part of managers and staff on the extent to which upward communication was welcomed and facilitated.* Our working assumption was that senior managers would be more likely than junior staff to imagine that upward feedback was a regular feature of organisational life. However, overt discouragement is unlikely. Thus: do senior managers believe that upward communication is a regular feature of organisational life? If so, and this conflicts with reality, how, precisely, do senior managers either facilitate or obstruct upward feedback? What rationales, practices and stories help them to make sense of and hence reinforce these practices?

3. A further research question was suggested by the observation that there is always a gap between ideal and actual practice (Hargie et al., 2002). For this reason, communication audit studies have invariably disclosed a gap between such dimensions of communication behaviour as how much information people currently get and what they ideally would like. We assumed in advance that this HCO (healthcare organisation) would be no different, and that, at a minimum, modestly critical findings would have to be presented to the organisation's senior management team. *The research question here is their reaction to such feedback and what it might imply for wider organisational functioning.*

Methodology

Organisational communication research has been dominated by three major paradigms – interpretative, positivist and critical, with postmodernist approaches now also gaining increasing ground (Corman, 2000). Although it has been argued that such paradigms are incommensurate with each other, researchers are increasingly looking for common ground, in the hope that an overlap of perspectives and methods is permitted (or even required) to answer particular problems (see contributors to Corman and Poole, 2000). Such approaches seek to step beyond what has often become a sterile debate between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, in which protagonists frequently assert that only their preferred orientation sheds light on complex social phenomenon (see Cooper and Stevenson, 1998; Morgan, 1998). This paper is rooted in approaches that seek what has been described as 'crossing' rather than incommensurability between paradigms (Schultz and Hatch, 1996).

Multiple methods of data collection are therefore utilised. As the story of their use

unfolds we position data and analysis alongside each other, to present a coherent narrative of internal communication processes concerned with critical feedback. For example, utilising this approach, we report management reactions to the issues raised as we outline the procedures that were utilised for the study, since this represents an early form of data and in turn helped shape subsequent lines of inquiry.

The Organisational Context

Data were collected from staff at a major European HCO undergoing significant internal reorganisation. The HCO employs 3500 staff, has a budget of over 300m Euros per annum, and offers a wide range of services to a population of 350,000 people dispersed across a large geographical area. Internally, its structure could be characterised as a form of matrix structure (Mintzberg, 1983), in which unity of command has been sacrificed in an effort to compel greater interpersonal communication and shared decision-making among top managers – See Figure 1. It should be appreciated that the organisation's structure is too complex to be reduced to one Figure, and that the version here is a much-simplified version of the reality. Thus, the HCO is composed of 7 main care groups (including acute illness, primary care and mental health), in four main geographical areas. (We have indicated only four care groups in Figure 1, for reasons of space). Within each group, a General Manager (GM), all male, had been appointed in the previous eighteen months, charged with the task of co-ordinating activities across the care groups within the locality. Thus, the essential point of the management structure was to be that clinical governance responsibilities lay with the care group director across all locations, ensuring consistent patterns of care. However, service co-ordination would be the responsibility of general managers within each locality, who were accountable to the

senior management team. This was an extraordinarily small body, composed only of the CEO and the seven care group Directors. Unusually, the finance director, human resources director and director of public health were not regularly invited to meetings. The Figure illustrates how this was meant to work with special emphasis on Area 1. Thus, each care group simultaneously reported to the GM, plus its own care group director (who had responsibilities across all major areas). Meanwhile, the GM had to co-ordinate the activities of seven care groupings in his area, while simultaneously dealing with seven care group directors - each of whom also directly interacted with the care group managers and subunits in the areas. Responsibility was thus highly diffused.

The Sample and Procedures

A Communication Audit was carried out in the HCO. This has been defined as '…a comprehensive and thorough study of communication philosophy, concepts, structure, flow and practice within an organisation' (Emmanuel, 1986, p.50). As preparation for this Audit a meeting was held, between the authors and the HCO's Senior Management Team. In line with normal practice (Hargie et al., 2002*)* this reviewed the general principles of Communication Audits and the likely timescale for the implementation of a Communication Audit within the organisation. Audit materials were distributed to a randomly selected, stratified, cross section of staff. Respondents had been invited to attend a variety of venues within the HCO during this time, where the materials could be completed under supervision. During this period, a total of six focus groups, attended by 23 people, and fifteen interviews were also conducted. These involved a broad range of randomly selected staff within the HCO, including a number of General Managers and members of the Senior Management Team.

The Sample

146 respondents eventually completed the Questionnaire, approximately 3.3% of all staff within the HCO. Respondents were randomly elected from a computer print out listing all employees, their professional designation, managerial rank and work location. They were selected utilising a sampling frame proposed by Hargie and Tourish (1993), and which has proven sufficient to yield valid and reliable numbers in exercises of this kind. Respondents were written to by the CEO, while line managers were requested to make those concerned available at the designated times and locations when the survey was due to take place. Two follow up letters were dispatched, to secure increased participation rates. The final total was composed of 43 staff from management and administration, 7 from medical and dental, 54 from nursing, 17 from paramedical, 20 from non-nursing support and 5 from technical and maintenance. Respondents also came from all the main locations with the HCO: 102 from Area 1, 25 from Area 2, 15 from Area 3, and 5 from Area 4. The sample also included 18 middle managers and senior managers, 31 first-line managers, and 94 without supervisory responsibilities. The majority of the respondents (some 81%) worked for the HCO full-time. The sample was also comprised of 111 females and 35 males. Confidentiality was repeatedly assured, in initial contact letters and when the data was being collected. The eventual report was written in such a manner that individual respondents could not be identified.

Measures

The Questionnaire survey consisted of an instrument designed to measure general communication processes. This was adapted from a Communication Audit survey

developed by the International Communication Association during the 1970s (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979), and widely regarded as a breakthrough instrument in the field (Clampitt, 2000). It was subsequently developed with special application in the healthcare sector by Hargie and Tourish (2000). The instrument consists of 77 items clustered in nine factors, including measures for information received, sources from which information is received, channels through which it is received, information sent, and the quality of working relationships. The questionnaire also has a number of open questions, including a critical incident sheet, asking respondents to record examples of a communication episode which for them most summed up communication in the organisation concerned. Some doubts have been expressed about the validity of this tool and the usefulness of the difference scores that it produces (e.g. DeWine et al., 1985). Later revisions of it have attempted to resolve these problems (e.g. DeWine and James, 1988). However, it is generally accepted that 'this instrument is one of the boldest and most comprehensive attempts to measure all aspects of an organisation's communication system' (Clampitt, 2000, p.50).

Data from the interviews and focus groups was content-analysed for main themes. Consistent with much current practice, both focus groups and interviews were conducted in the light of a priori thematizing (Lee, 1999), in which reference is made to existing theory, literature and the researcher's insights. Thus, questions were constructed based on the project research questions. Comments from respondents were then content analysed around the main themes, as determined by frequency counts of the main comments received. Content analysis involved following protocols recommended by Clampitt (2000), in which:

- One researcher read all the responses to a given question and identified recurring themes. For example, we already had a theme of upward communication. Responses relating to these issues were initially divided into positive and negative categories. Further sub-divisions then emerged, depending on whether the experiences related to middle or senior managers, co-workers, channels of communication etc.

- A second researcher, unaware of the classification system employed by the first researcher, repeated these steps.

- Results were then compared and discussion ensued until an agreed classification system emerged.

- The process was repeated twice, until agreement on coding that covered over 90% of the responses was obtained.

Results, outcomes and resistance points

The data in Table 1 reinforces the conclusion that mechanisms for ensuring adequate upward communication within the HCO were indeed weak. Overall mean scores for the amount of information sent and needed to be sent on important issues were 2.8 and 4.0 respectively. The difference between the scores for information sent and those that indicated the amount of information that people wished to send was statistically significant for all items. Again, this is evidence to suggest that mechanisms to ensure consultation, involvement and participation needed strengthening.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Clearly, there is more to feedback than sending information. However, we view 'information sent' as useful general proxy for this issue. During the research project, we expressed this interpretation to participants before they filled in our questionnaires, to further ensure that we gained responses consistent with what we were seeking to measure.

The most serious problems appeared to be with sending information on:

- Public confidence and trust in the service

- Funding for services, and

- Service equity

Cross-tabulations between these data and background factors found significant relationships between satisfaction with information sent and supervisory responsibilities, care group and occupational grouping. To take these in turn:

- First-line managers had the greatest desire to send more information (4.2, compared to 3.8 for those without supervisory responsibilities, and 3.9 for middle and senior managers). This suggests that a crucial decision-making layer within the HCO felt more excluded from involvement and consultation than anyone else. It is particularly striking that this significant difference emerged in relation to important issues of general strategic importance. It suggests that ownership of such issues was not widely shared among even fairly senior people, in the sense of them feeling genuinely empowered to

influence decision making, act to solve problems and communicate about what was going on.

- Staff in the acute hospital service, services for older people and mental health services were significantly less likely to be sending information than those in other care groups, all with scores of 2.6 for the amount of information they now sent. Thus, staff in these areas again felt less involved than those elsewhere.

- Finally job category emerged as a significant factor. Paramedical staff and management/administrative staff felt themselves to be sending less information than other staff groups, with scores of 2.3 and 2.6 respectively for the amount of information they sent. The latter staff group, in particular, included many people in corporate services working in the organisation's headquarters building, in close proximity to the SMT. They were therefore in a pivotal position, and crucial to the overall communication and cultural climate within the HCO.

Respondent comments from focus groups and interviews

- When people were asked, during interviews and in focus groups, to give their overall impressions of communication within the HCO a few responded positively. Examples were given of approachable line managers and an adequate flow of information on key issues, from these managers. A significant number of people, even when critical, felt that a genuine effort was being made to improve communication. However, positive comments about

the current situation were extremely rare. Most people, at all levels of the organisation, felt that the HCO's internal communications were in a very poor state (Box 1). Much of this feeling revolved around the need for more communication. It is particularly noticeable that a disproportionate number of such comments related to the CEO, suggesting that the holder of this office tends to be perceived as setting the tone on this issue, as on most others (Box 2). Nor were negative perceptions confined to the issue of information being transmitted from managers. A number of respondents, across the spectrum of staff groupings, locations and level of managerial responsibility felt that bottom up communication needed further development within the HCO.

INSERT BOX 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

Senior managers' attitude towards critical feedback

1.   Reactions at introductory seminar

As discussed above, a seminar was held for members of the SMT, looking at key issues likely to be raised during Communication Audit exercise. Given the focus of this study, special attention was paid to outlining problems with upward feedback and the key principles of ingratiation theory. Interestingly, all members of the SMT commented on the importance of upward communication, the direct relevance of ingratiation theory, their absolute determination to avoid it within their own organisation, and their conviction that people felt free to openly express their opinions to senior managers.

At this meeting, and in subsequent interviews held with each member of the SMT, a further key theme emerged in their discourse. This was that the major problem in their organisation was one of 'competence' on the part of the General Managers located immediately below them in the organisational hierarchy. Repeatedly, members of the SMT asserted that the GMs were 'not up to the job'; 'not doing their job', 'refusing to make decisions', 'failing to transmit information either up or down', and 'not co-ordinating services in the manner now needed.' The possibility that the job could have been inherently impossible was never expressed at this level. However, it emerged routinely in interviews with people at other levels of the organisation. Typically, those immediately below the GMs shuddered at the possibility of doing the job, describing it as 'impossible', 'terrible', 'a nightmare', and said they felt (as one interviewee put it) 'completely unclear as to what they are supposed to do, and how they are supposed to do it.' A senior administrative person said: 'Would I take on a General Manager's job in this organisation? You must be mad. In fact they must be mad to try it.' Here, also, members of the SMT seemed to hold diametrically opposed views to those of the rest of their staff, including people who were in key positions and therefore essential to the achievement of the SMT's key operating and strategic objectives.

During subsequent interviews and in focus groups, unprompted by the research team, the expression 'control freak' recurred again and again when people discussed the SMT. This was particularly noticeable in interviews with administrative staff in support functions located within corporate services that worked in close liaison with the SMT. In essence, there was a huge gulf between how senior managers viewed themselves, on the question of their openness to feedback, and how they were viewed elsewhere – even by staff who had the closest working relationship with them.

2.   <u>Reactions at feedback seminar</u>

A detailed written report was prepared for the SMT, outlining some of the findings indicated above. Thus, the results had been circulated amongst the SMT, and were also discussed on an individual basis with several key people. In particular, this was distilled into ten major findings and associated recommendations. These looked at the major strengths revealed by the quantitative data; aspects of communication where action was required; results from focus groups and interviews; and results from the qualitative section of the main questionnaire. A short table, utilising basic descriptive statistics, summarised the main quantitative findings. These points were then verbally presented in an interactive workshop, in which the intended focus was how the SMT could respond to both the opportunities and problems that had been identified. How did they react to this challenge?

Three responses predominated. The first was a universal refusal to accept that the data in any way represented the actual mood of people within the HCO. Interestingly, this view was based on the erroneous assumption that larger populations required ever higher rather than lower sample sizes to generate valid data. The SMT was so convinced of this that it showed the report to a statistician, who confirmed that the sample size was indeed sufficient and the data looked robust. In a further interesting demonstration of eliminating feedback inconsistent to what is preferred, his assurances were disregarded. Typical questions raised (and constantly reiterated) are cited in Box 3.

INSERT BOX 3 ABOUT HERE

Other researchers have reported similar difficulties, although perhaps not in such a

sharp form. As Quirke (1996, p.203) comments:

'It is remarkable how… senior managers suddenly become experts in research
methodology, asking questions about statistical validity, phrasing of questions in the
questionnaire, individuals selected for interview, five-point scales and false positives.
Resistance to uncomfortable findings is expressed in questions about the way the
research has bee conducted. The findings are then talked out of court without any real
discussion or acceptance of their validity, and hope of commitment to action
disappears.'

The reaction reported here was an extreme case of precisely this phenomenon. A

dominant mood seemed to be one of intense fear at the twofold possibility of admitting

to their staff that problems existed with internal communication, and that such a

dialogue might find itself into the wider public domain. The point was made that the

data presented summed up the mood of the organization's employees, who were

therefore unlikely to be surprised by any of it. Moreover, research has found that

managers who are seen to seek out negative feedback on their performance find their

stature increasing, while those who seek only positive feedback find it declining

(Ashford and Tsui, 1991). Such input failed to overcome the SMT's inbuilt resistance

to acknowledging that people genuinely felt as they did, and to then engage in a

dialogue with them about the difficulties concerned.

Secondly, the response of the SMT suggests that senior managers may have a tendency

to subject critical feedback to intense scrutiny, demanding that it meets standards of

evidence and proof that they rarely require from positive feedback. It is questionable,

for example, whether the research team would have faced the same barrage of questions

about their research methodology had the data presented a glowing picture of internal

communications. Thus, any positive comments about communication (such as a finding

that ground level staff had high levels of trust in their immediate managers) were nodded through without discussion. In effect, the data was simultaneously regarded as prescient - and fatally flawed. The effect of this approach is inevitably to discourage and eventually eliminate critical feedback, while ensuring that more and more positive feedback finds its way into the deliberations of the SMT. In this way, it is possible for senior managers to acquire an extremely lop-sided view of their own organisation, while being unaware of the dynamics that produce it, and hence feeling all the more certain that their image of its internal functioning is accurate. We would describe this process as one of *unconscious feedback distortion*.

Thirdly, there was a tendency to reinterpret negative feedback as positive. For example, the SMT was told of the large number of people who had described them as 'control freaks.' To general approval, one of them immediately responded: *'I see that as a compliment. All it means is that we have high performance standards, and that is being recognised.'*

Outside the feedback forum, evidence also emerged of internal tensions, masked by the tendency of people in a group to publicly over-conform to its emerging norms (Brown, 2000). Thus a new member of the SMT who had earlier indicated that she viewed her new colleagues as 'a bunch of control freaks' approached the research team to say she had disagreed with the tone and approach of these colleagues in the face of the report. However, during the meeting in which they were present, she was unwilling to do other than echo the dominant view being expressed – sometimes as stridently as her colleagues. It is of course likely that this further added to the spectacle of people agreeing whole-heartedly with each other, and therefore strengthened the illusion of

participants that their approach made sense – a process that has been termed *consensual validation* (Zebrowitz, 1990).

The group's eventual decision was to suppress the report and take no further action on its contents.

Conclusion

A number of main themes stand out in the case study discussed here. In line with our research questions, these are as follows:

1. This paper reveals fundamental problems with open communication, and illuminates some of the mechanisms whereby it is obstructed - key issues raised in our first and third research questions. The issues raised are fundamental to the theory and practice of management in general and communications management in particular. No one individual or any one group has a mastery of organisational problems, as a result of organisations' inbuilt interdependence and complexity. Thus, the search for solutions to problems that are multi-causal in nature involves creative input from different disciplines, departments and from people of varied managerial rank. Openness is therefore critical to organisational learning (Senge, 1990). The data in this paper illuminates many of the means by which managers refuse to be open, even to themselves, about their organisation's problems and hence how they inhibit the transmission of basic information. Without a willingness to even acknowledge the existence of problems, it would seem unlikely they can

engage a wider debate with their employees on the search for solutions. Thus, the difficulties discussed here are a recipe for chronic organisational decline.

2. Upward feedback, the central issue of our first research question, emerged in this study as inadequate, particularly when such feedback is of a critical nature This finding is consistent with the observations of Heller (1998), who reported on two 12-country studies on industrial democracy and a 5-year longitudinal program in seven companies in three countries. The conclusion is that: '… organizational influence sharing appears to have made only limited progress during the last 50 years' (p.1425). Our study suggests that even the minimal influence that comes from being able to articulate different perspectives is often lacking. Evidently, those with power hang on to it, while frequently lamenting the reluctance of subordinates to exercise more initiative. In this study, for example, senior managers complained frequently and bitterly about what they referred to as 'delegation upwards.' It did not occur to them that they needed to relax control mechanisms and develop a less punitive climate, in order to ensure that a real culture of empowerment could take root.

3. The study suggests rather more than that upward feedback is hard to come by. It is systematically distorted, constrained and eliminated. The issue of management responses to critical feedback was a critical element of our second research question. We found a strong interaction between employee responses to upward communication opportunities and the facilitative/ constraining role of management, creating major paradoxes. A number of studies have explored how social actors discursively develop organizational

identities that are simultaneously constraining and enabling, debilitating and empowering (e.g. Collinson, 1988; Trethewey, 1997). Likewise, we see here a simultaneous affirmation by senior managers that they want an empowered staff to take decisions and feel liberated to transmit upward feedback. This co-exists alongside the elimination of dissenters from the ranks of the senior management team; fear by new members to openly express their critical views (which the evidence suggests will either wither, or see the person leave the ranks of the group); and a number of management behaviours widely perceived as punitive. It has been pointed out that 'Relinquishing power and control does not come easily for many leaders' (Kirkman and Rosen, 2000, p.55). Our study suggests that the first steps in such a direction (e.g. the acknowledgement of problems; an open transmission of mildly critical information) are frequently never taken.

4. This study also illuminates some of the processes whereby managers explain and excuse this situation to themselves, and hence raises issues of irrational belief systems. Many irrational beliefs (i.e. unfounded assumptions about the nature of the physical and social world) take deep root because people construct plausible sounding stories that posit causal relationships between what are actually unrelated variables (Dawes, 2001).

In the case of the HCO, a main narrative on the part of the management team was the alleged incompetence of the GMs they themselves had recently appointed. Without exception, all were deemed to be failing. In line with what has been described as the ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979), which

posits a tendency to over-ascribe the behaviour of others to their personality while explaining our own problematic behaviours to the situation in which we find ourselves, this was viewed exclusively as a personal failing. The possibility that it reflected an inherently impossible job description or unsupportive management structure was not considered. The constant repetition of this narrative, in both group management sessions and in individual interviews with each member of the management team, was striking. It suggests a tendency on the part of busy managers to look quickly for causal explanations of organisational problems, to construct such explanations through the dynamics of story construction rather than empirical exploration, to create such narratives with minimal awareness of attribution processes (and thus with a strong tendency towards error), and to do so in an environment characterised by extraordinarily limited feedback from outsiders. This further strengthens the alluring power of a narrative that both explains and exonerates the managers themselves from responsibility. We would suggest that a *blame alignment theory* could be posited as shedding further light on this dynamic – a possible tendency of people in a failing or difficult situation to realign blame in such a manner that it is placed on others rather than the self. Such a dynamic may underlie much of the attribution difficulties discussed here. It also seems likely that this misdirects management attention from the real sources of their problems and so intensify the spiral of crisis. For example, managers in this HCO were unwilling to contemplate the possibility that their organisational structure created impossible expectations of those in the role of GMs; that systems for upward feedback were lacking; that greater diversity within the SMT would be helpful.

5. The response to the findings of the Communication Audit by senior managers suggested a tendency to over-critique negative feedback, while instantly agreeing with positive feedback. In reality, unless senior managers adopted an equally rigorous approach to both forms of feedback ingratiation theory suggests that will inevitably acquire a lop-sided view of their own organisation. The consequence is likely to be that the only people surprised by critical results from research investigations are a SMT, nominally the people best placed to have an overall view of their organisation.

6. The data here also lends empirical support to the claim by Young and Post (1993) that in organisations that communicate well or badly the tone is set by the CEO. The volume of comments aimed at the behaviour of the CEO confirm that organisational actors keenly observe such a person's behaviour, draw many conclusions from it about an organisation's culture, and use the CEO's behaviour as a strong guide as to which direction they are moving in. Beyond this, high expectations are also held of the SMT. The role of senior managers critical to setting the tone, and imposes inescapable obligations.

Implications for the practice of communications management

Consistent with the central thrust of this project, recent research into organisations deemed to have made the transition from being merely good to the achievement of sustained 'greatness', has suggested that a culture of confronting the brutal facts is essential. As with Nutt's (1999) research into decision-making, and the work of many into group dynamics, the conclusion is clear. Open communication and the frequent

upward transmission of critical opinion is a vital ingredient of organisational effectiveness (Tourish and Vatcha, 2003; Tourish and Hargie, 2004).. We have illuminated many of the barriers that get in the way. Tentatively, among the implications for practice, we would identify the following:

- *Managers still appear to be largely unaware of groupthink, ingratiation processes and the distorting power of self-efficacy biases.* At a minimum, intense training in these issues by communications professionals would appear useful.

- *Managers also need trained in how to facilitate, receive and respond to feedback.* We have identified, here, the processes whereby positive feedback is nodded through by managers, but negative feedback is over critiqued. Again, wider awareness of such dynamics would be helpful.

- *Systems for upward feedback need strengthening.* In the organisation where we conducted our fieldwork, and in many others we have researched, we found that even the minimal influencing mechanism of suggestion schemes was absent. More advanced approaches, in which senior managers routinely monitor the amount of specifically critical feedback that they get, also appear to be required.

- *Regular reviews of communication issues should also measure the upward transmission of ideas, particularly of those that are critical.* To our knowledge, the need for upward communication of a specifically critical nature is not something that has yet been widely acknowledged in the literature. Similarly, its effects have been under-researched.

- *Those conducting communication assessments need also to consider how critical findings can be presented to senior managers.* The temptation is to downgrade the significance of critical data, and produce findings that may be consistent with what senior managers wish was the case but which depart from what most people in the organisation actually feel. In this case study, and considering our experiences elsewhere, the SMT did have a particular horror of what it perceived as negative information, and which made the research task harder. Nevertheless, the key appears to be to strike a balance between the negative and the positive. We would suggest that part of the answer is to shift from the importance of communication assessments in themselves, and place more stress on the preparatory work with SMTs, involving a stronger focus on their vision, values and communication principles.

Internal communication is indispensable for organisational learning, corporate cohesion and the achievement of many business objectives. Its promotion and research into its effects needs to become core concerns for communications practitioners and researchers. The data in this paper suggests that many of the obstacles to the emergence of good internal communication do not arise from external environmental considerations, but rather from the approach which many senior managers display towards critical feedback. The practical and theoretical challenges posed are considerable.

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TABLE 1: INFORMATION SENT ON IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING THE ORGANISATION

KEY FOR SCORING ITEMS: 1=VERY LITTLE;   2=LITTLE   3=SOME;
                              4=GREAT;   5=VERY GREAT

[a], [b] , and [c] **Denotes all differences between scores which are statistically significant, at 0.01, 0.05 and 0.10 level, respectively.   Ranking based on computed difference between mean for information sent and needing to be sent.**

TOPIC AREA	Amount of information sent	Amount of information needing to be sent	Rank
Public confidence and trust in the service	2.6	3.9 [a]	1
Funding for Services	2.5	3.8 [a]	1
Service Equity	2.6	3.9 [a]	1
Public expectations	2.8	4 [a]	4
Service Quality	2.9	4.1 [a]	4
Personal responsibility	3.2	4 [a]	6
MEAN TOTAL	**2.8**	**4.0** [a]	

Insert Figure 1

Box 1: Respondent comments on information dissemination

'There is a lack of communication. We don't know what's going on. We hear things on the grapevine rather than from supervisory staff.'

'I suspect an organisation this size is always on to a loser with internal communications. Every week I get constant gripes that communication is inadequate. But I don't think it is significantly worse than anywhere else I have been. There is just never enough time to manage it.'

'Communication is not good. Sometimes there is no communication on very major things. Major decisions are made without consultation. I don't blame senior managers. They are under pressure from (the Government) to do various things, sometimes far too quickly. But for example new appointments were being rapidly organised in Area A and no one was asked for their opinion about it. This sort of thing does not engender trust.'

'Communication is haphazard. We rely a lot on informal communication.'

'There is no formal strategy for communication, no policy document or anything else. This could set out a process for everybody. This would assign and clarify roles relating to communication. It would help with understanding and clarify for people what the role of GMs etc is.'

'Upward feedback is also ad-hoc. There is no system for it.'

'We are definitely not involved in decision making, except to some extent in your own area.'

'Communication here is reasonable, approaching adequate.'

'Communication is very poor from management down. I sent about X letters last year to senior managers and did not get a reply to any one of them.'

'I don't see senior managers; they never come near you.'

'In the last 4 years communication has gone down hill. The organisation is larger and more disparate. With big sorts of issues it is only by chance that you hear about what is going on. I am often taken by surprise when I find out about important issues.'

'I pick up lots of information informally in the canteen. I would love a leaflet of some kind when I started about who's who – the role of the CEO etc.'

'I wouldn't recognise X (a senior manager) if he walked into the room.'

'I only came here recently, to a management role. My first impressions are that the organization is very technologically based. There are emails everywhere for example, instead of face-to-face communication.'

Box 2: Respondent comments on communication from the CEO

'I think I understand the CEO's vision: he appears to be trying to make things more people centred.'

'Sometimes directives come from management (e.g. CEO's office) and they may be communicated adequately in that you know what to do, but the rationale behind them is not clear. Sometimes this undermines the idea of consultation.'

'I have to concentrate hard to follow what the CEO is going on about, and feel that if I get 50% of the drift I am doing well.'

'The CEO has a vision, but he thinks that only he has a vision. His vision is not widely understood. He is so verbose. I don't understand him. He has to pick out clear themes.'

'I think that top managers should meet with people at various levels in the acute facility. The (top team) do not meet regularly with key people. The CEO is generally unavailable to meet with the consultant body.'

'There is a clear vision by the CEO and I share it and can buy into it. What I'm not sure is whether it is the product of a collective thinking process. There must be bottom up communication, otherwise there will not be buy in and I'm not sure of how much of that there is in the HCO.'

'I'd like the CEO to listen. He is so sure of his vision that he does not listen to alternatives.'

'The CEO is not good at flattening. Decision-making is far more centralised than ever despite the talk. What the CEO does is far different from what he says. There is a huge discrepancy. I don't think the CEO listens. He got very shirty with one of our people at a meeting when she raised a minor objection to something he was presenting.'

'A lot of communication can emanate from the CEO, but most of it is impenetrable. I have no idea most of the time what he is on about. Recently a new structure was announced for the hospital. Again this was just presented to us without our input. After five minutes my eyes glazed over. I don't understand it and cannot relate to it. There is a huge level of distrust among medical staff. People believe that the CEO has no respect for consultants and thinks they are part of the problem. We have the perception that the senior management team has very little experience in the acute sector. They lack credibility. They don't understand the sector, they have no feel for it.'

'The CEO's vision seems to make sense if it works. But part of it is this idea that we are all one big happy family. The reality is that people on the ground feel they are struggling on their own. You only know people in your own immediate area.'

Box 3: Senior management comments in feedback seminar

- *'How representative is this data?'*
- *'Surely in an organisation this size you would need to survey at least half the staff to be sure you really knew what they thought?'*
- *'I can't believe results from anything like this can be accurate unless you survey everybody. Otherwise you just get feedback from those with gripes.'*
- *'Surely communication isn't any worse here than anywhere else. Can it ever really be any better?'*
- *'People just like to moan. They'll do it whatever we do.'*
- *'This can't be accurate – no one has ever made the type of comments to me that you have in this Report.'*
- *'We cannot possibly publish this sort of stuff, or even circulate it internally – what if any of it got into the press?'*
- *'Maybe we should just burn this Report and hope no-one else has a copy.'*