

AN ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION  
AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COMMUNICATION NETWORK  
AT CPC FLINT ENGINE

by

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## Chapter 1

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper is an examination of the communication network at the General Motors Chevrolet, Pontiac, Canada (CPC) Engine Plant in Flint, Michigan. In this thesis an attempt will be made to reveal what the communication network at Flint Engine is designed to do and discover what it, in fact, actually accomplishes in keeping employees informed with truthful, accurate information. The stated objectives of the communication network provide an idealized set of goals that appear to satisfy the needs of the plant if implemented. As stated in the General Motors guidelines for editors, the communication objectives have five major goals:

1. To provide employees with a better understanding of the business so they will make a greater effort to improve productivity, quality, and efficiency.
2. To stimulate increased ideas from employees to help run the business more efficiently.
3. To contribute to improved employee morale.
4. To encourage employees to buy and sell General Motors products.
5. To help develop an action oriented constituency among employees by providing them with understandable company

positions on public issues of importance to the business (TMs [photocopy], 1986, p. 1).

In a summary of the editorial guidelines the need is stressed for three major categories of news. The first category is news about business matters. The second is news about General Motors and the auto industry. The third category is news and features about the people in the organization, including coverage of legitimate, newsworthy events and activities concerning employees.

For the most part, these objectives are pretty much in line with the communication objectives at other large companies. However, management determines what is legitimate and newsworthy and there are few provisions for production workers to communicate upwardly within the plant. Communication from hourly workers to the plant manager's staff seldom get further than an employee's immediate supervisor. The result is often a general feeling among production workers that any information in a company publication is in the best interest of management, with little concern for issues important to the worker.

Some guiding principles of a few companies are helpful in evaluating the communication strategy at Flint Engine. Dr. Howard Hess, corporate psychiatrist for Western Electric Company, said in addressing the International Association of Business Communicators, "As we move from the industrial age

to the information age, management must realize that survival depends on more democracy and better communication in the workplace" (Ruch, 1984, p. 107).

The manager of communications at Atlantic Richfield said his company has long maintained the belief that informed employees who take pride in their company, their jobs, their fellow employees, and themselves are better workers, more loyal spokespersons for the company and the industry, happier human beings, and better able to contribute to the profitability of the company (Ruch, 1984, p. 121).

The director of internal communication at IBM said his company's communication philosophy is guided by a basic management belief in respect for the individual. Managers there believe each person is entitled to timely, accurate information about the company, and every effort is made to give people the opportunity to offer their opinions, complaints, and suggestions about management actions. The best form of communication, he believes, is person to person. The company supplements this with a wide variety of media, including posted news bulletins, publications, and videotapes. Managers feel upward communication is equally important, and to accomplish this, they encourage open discussion between managers and employees (Ruch, 1984, p. 122).

Communication managers at Xerox believe that open communication among all levels of employees is essential to the effective operation of the company. The basic intent at Xerox is to provide people with the information they need to perform their jobs effectively and to understand the mission and direction of the company and their operating unit. Xerox also guarantees employees the freedom to express ideas and concerns about their jobs and work environment to management without fear of any adverse effect on job status and working relationships (Ruch, 1984, p. 123).

It is apparent that the communication policies of these large companies are aimed at increasing efficiency and profitability. However, they also recognize the need for two-way communication to increase employee morale and a sense of pride in their work.

It is understandable why corporations have a sudden interest in employee communications if it will increase efficiency and profitability. What is more interesting, though, is whether these companies value formal communication merely as a tool to make another dollar, or if they truly recognize and value the need for employees to have an active voice in company matters and a knowledge of all aspects of the business that affect their lives.

One indication that Flint Engine has begun to recognize the need for employee involvement is the development of joint

programs in which union members and members of management work together. The communication office at Flint Engine is a joint effort to develop an information network to keep employees informed and give them the means to offer suggestions and opinions about how the business should be run.



## Chapter 2

### A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Although effective communication is crucial to organizational life, its importance has been all but overlooked until recently in the history of organizations. The philosophy of the scientific school of management, which began around 1900, turned human operators of machinery into just another interchangeable part. The employees' humanness was ignored, an attitude that unfortunately remains in many American corporations today.

But superior-subordinate communication is very important to the organization's overall communication effectiveness. Research has shown that between 50 and 90 percent of a manager's time may be spent communicating and much of this time is spent in face-to-face communication with subordinates (Mintzberg, 1973).

In 1927, some Harvard University researchers went to the Hawthorne Works of Western Electric Company in Illinois to test some of the tenets of the scientific school of management. They increased the lighting in a room into which some workers had been moved, and, as expected, productivity increased. They increased the number of breaks in the day, and productivity increased. They lengthened the lunch break,

and productivity increased. They were pleased with the results.

Then something strange happened. When they reduced the lighting in the room, productivity increased. When they reduced the number of breaks in the day, productivity increased. When they shortened the lunch break, productivity increased. Some part of the job, other than the controlled variables, was making the difference. They decided, after much study, that it was the human factor. For the first time the employees were being attended to like human beings and it didn't matter that the changes were negative (Ruch, 1984, p. 102). The human relations school of management thinking began from this study.

The human relations school focuses on the human element rather than the mechanical operations of the plant, on interrelationships of people rather than machines, on human needs rather than job requirements.

Douglas McGregor (as cited in Ruch) applied the term "Theory X" to the scientific management school and "Theory Y" to the human relations school. The following is taken from Ruch, 1984:

Theory X assumptions are:

1. The average human being has an inherent dislike of work and will avoid it if he can.
2. Because of this human characteristic dislike of work,

most people must be coerced, controlled, directed and threatened with punishment to get them to put forth adequate effort toward the achievement of organizational objectives.

3. The average human being prefers to be directed, wishes to avoid responsibility, has relatively little ambition and wants security above all.

Theory Y assumptions are:

1. The expenditure of physical and mental effort in work is as natural as play or rest. The average human being does not inherently dislike work.
2. External control and the threat of punishment are not the only means for bringing about effort toward organizational objectives. Man will exercise self-direction and self-control in the service of objectives to which he is committed.
3. Commitment to objectives is a function of the rewards associated with their achievement. The most significant of such rewards, the satisfaction of ego and self-actualization needs, can be direct products of effort directed toward organizational objectives.
4. The average human being learns, under proper conditions, not only to accept but to seek responsibility. Avoidance of responsibility, lack of ambition and emphasis on security are generally

consequences of experience, not inherent human characteristics.

5. The capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity and creativity in the solution of organizational problems is widely, not narrowly, distributed in the population.
6. Under the conditions of modern industrial life, the intellectual potentialities of the average human being are only partially utilized (Ruch, 1984, p. 103).

In the 1960s and 1970s, it became apparent that in certain situations the scientific management approach worked well; in others, the human relations approach was best. So a new system of thinking emerged. The "system school" viewed the organization as a system of interacting and interdependent parts of a whole. It is concerned with the parts only insofar as they affect the whole. Systems theory is basically concerned with problems of relationships of structure, and of interdependence rather than with the constant attributes of objects. Communication in the systems school is recognized as an important function in the coordination of the independent parts of the system (Ruch, 1984, p. 104).

Before World War II, very little attention was paid to communication problems in organizations. In the 1940s, books were written recognizing the value of two-way communication

and extensive communication research studies on the subject were conducted. In the 1950s, attention turned to choice of effective media, written or oral, and the respective advantages and disadvantages of each. Particular methods began to be recommended for communicating information from management to employees; employee handbooks, company newspapers and magazines, and bulletin boards. Some experts recommended supplementing these written forms with oral channels, particularly those involving first-line supervisors, who were seen as key communicators in the organization.

Also in the 1950s, methods of upward communication received great attention: attitude surveys, suggestion systems and interviews were a few. Management began to realize that employees have ideas for improvement of their own work methods, the basis for the quality circle, which is growing in use and popularity today.

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing until the present there has been an explosion of material on organizational communication from the point of view of numerous other disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, social psychology, communication theory and information technology. These discuss communication not as a linear process but in the context of a changing environment in which communication is an interactive series of behaviors.

Special attention began to be paid to informal communication, communication barriers, nonverbal communication and international and intercultural communication. In the 1980s, communication is taking on an ever-increasing importance.

### THE BASIC ISSUES

It is evident from the literature that the basic issues in corporate communication today are:

1. The importance of communication.
2. The purpose of communication.
3. The direction in which communication flows.
4. The communication problems thought to exist.

Initially, it is helpful to view these basic issues as they relate to the three schools of organizational behavior, namely, the scientific management school, the human relations school and the systems school.

Those who hold to the scientific management school view communication as relatively unimportant, and largely restricted to downward communication from management to workers. They see the purpose of communication solely as a means to relay orders and information about work tasks, and to achieve obedience and coordination in carrying out the work to be done.

The direction of communication flows downward (vertical) from management to workers, in order to persuade or convince them to follow instructions. Breakdowns in

communication are felt to be due to bypassing a hierarchical level and a span of control that is too large.

The human relations school of management, on the other hand, views communication as relatively important, but mainly limited to peer communication, with only a small amount of attention to communication of needs from workers to management.

To the human relations school, the purpose of communication is to satisfy workers' needs, to provide for lateral interaction among peers in work groups, and to facilitate the participation of members in organizational decision making.

The direction of communication is a horizontal flow among peers who belong to informal work groups. It is a vertical flow between workers and management to assess the needs of the worker and to make possible participatory decision making.

The main communication problems, according to the human relations school, are rumors, which are communicated through the "grapevine," an ineffective formal communication structure that is supplemented by informal communication.

The systems school of management believes communication to be very important. Communication is considered the cement that holds the units in an organization together. To the systems school, the purpose of communication is to control

and coordinate, provide information to decision makers and adjust the organization to changes in its environment.

Communication flows in all directions within the system, including downward and upward across hierarchical levels, and across the organization's boundary with the environment. Problems seen by the systems school are overload, distortion, omission and unresponsiveness to negative feedback (Ruch, 1984, p. 110).

#### THE CENTRAL DEBATES

Among corporations there is considerable debate over how each of the basic issues should be dealt with and how they should be incorporated into the total communication network.

Although management personnel agree that communication is important, some give it more importance than others. There are many debates within the basic issues. Four questions are prominent in the literature: Whose communication system is it, the employee's, management's, or both? What kinds of information should be communicated? What media should be used? What kind of review or approval system should be in place?

One reason for the growing importance of corporate communication is the interdependence of tasks assigned to a rapidly changing work force that brings new skills and expectations to the work place. These factors generate new kinds of information that companies want to communicate to



their people. Another reason is that new data processing technology means companies can communicate efficiently more information to their people. A third reason is that federal laws now specify new kinds of information that companies must communicate to their people.

From management's point of view, effective communication has several advantages. It ensures the flow and understanding of necessary and relevant information, motivates, builds satisfaction and loyalty, improves relationships between employees and management, lowers employee turnover, increases understanding of and support for the company, and it attracts good job applicants (Micheli, 1984, pp. 231, 232).

But effective communication must not be viewed as a one-way flow of information, from management to workers. The workers must also be able to communicate to management and among themselves. Workers often feel they should be able to assist in elevating the prestige, effectiveness and usefulness of communication within the company, improve standards of disseminating information pertaining to worker policies and programs, improve communication between their company and other companies, and help plan education programs to improve publications and other communications.

Another current debate in corporate communication concerns the kinds of information that should be

communicated. Companies often use their communication system to communicate policies, plans, and directions to employees. As a result, employees regard any company publication as a means to exploit their labor and win their confidence.

In recent years many companies have realized that an effective communication network should include all employees, not just members of management, and have adopted joint programs in which workers also have a voice in the kinds of information to be communicated.

Although not as contested, there is also debate as to what media should be used in communicating information to employees. The most pertinent information might not be received by the target audience if the media selected is not reaching everyone.

A few years ago, annual reports were a product of a company's financial department, reaching only stockholders, or owners, of the company. Today, the annual report is presented by many companies to employees, giving a narrative of the company's progress.

One of the most common forms of communication in American corporations is a magazine or newspaper. They are usually carefully prepared, professional publications containing messages from company executives, company news, feature stories and general information about employees—marriages, engagements, births, retirements and vacations.

For smaller groups or departments, many companies publish newsletters to communicate local news items, case studies, features, new developments and quality messages.

Bulletin boards are an inexpensive and highly visible form of communication, supplementing other media. They enjoy high credibility among employees because information posted on them is usually timely and accurate. From management's standpoint, bulletin boards are desirable because they are flexible and easy to maintain. More importantly, notices placed on them are read. More than any other medium, the bulletin board allows the company to announce news in printed form quickly (Micheli, 1984, p. 241).

Given all the advanced information technology, we tend to forget the value of social networking, the informal gossip channels, and verbal and written grapevines that persist in all organizations. Stamping out these informal channels is not possible, nor should it be a goal. Actually, grapevines can provide a check and balance on poorly conceived plans, the rise of favoritism, and emotional situations and decisions. Grapevines provide management with uncontrolled feedback about the climate, morale, and social health of the firm, and about what is really happening in the organization.

The employee grapevine is often harvested during periods of excitement, change, and insecurity. Grapevines flourish whenever a firm's communication policy and practices are not

in good shape, when there is little company news, and formal communication channels are too rigid or adhered to too narrowly. Managers often know which individuals serve as grapevine links and can assist them in influencing the direction of informal communications which supplement the formal channels (Mueller, 1986, p. 79).

Both the oldest, the newest, and, some feel, the most exciting techniques of communicating are electronic. The growth of the telephone paralleled that of the corporation in America. Modern methods of film making and teleconferencing are rapidly revolutionizing corporate communication today.

Older methods of "talking to" employees through primarily print media have become inadequate. More and more companies are using audiovisual techniques to achieve the same thing more quickly and cheaply. Other methods of electronic media include closed circuit television, teleconferencing, film, videotape and electronic mail.

Modern companies usually use a combination of media to communicate to employees. The information employees are requiring to know from management is changing rapidly because they are a younger, better educated work force. The day is past when companies depend on only one means of communication to provide information to employees.

The approval of articles for publication is one area that is continually under debate. All editors have one thing

in common--they are responsible to the organization which employs them and its management. If he or she is to do the job effectively, the editor should be allowed considerable freedom in interpreting and presenting management decisions to his readers.

In many companies the house magazine is becoming increasingly the medium of two way-communication between employees and management. Not only does this enable many resentments to be aired, but also in a suitable environment a two-way discussion and presentation of issues can result in greater understanding and the promotion of goodwill within an organization.

The establishment of reader confidence is a necessity of any publication if it is to establish credibility. If it does not succeed in this, there is no point in publishing at all. Many employees believe that modern communication technology manipulates and distorts; a belief that the technology has brought with it a marked decrease in human freedom. Probably no previous culture has been as significantly shaped by the available communication technology. New cultural forms previously unknown have developed and those that continued have been reshaped repeatedly. At the same time, no other culture has expended so much of its energy and resources discussing and analyzing communication and its problems. It has become a

characteristic of the culture itself. Some observers have begun to wonder whether anyone can really communicate at all (Susman, 1984, p. xxi).

One of the most important results of this communication revolution was its role in creating a new social order. Some historians and social scientists have spoken of an "organizational revolution," and there is a vast literature on the American tendency to organize and its effects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Social scientists have analyzed effectively the bureaucratization so characteristic of the period. Yet such organization (especially over national and even international areas and markets) could never have been possible without transformations in communications. In large measure, the office and the office building are products of the new communications; they are unthinkable without the telegraph and telephone, the typewriter, word processor and computer (Susman, 1984, p. xxi).

Many of the problems in organizations can be solved by carefully considering the organizational structure's impact upon its managers and employees. Some organizational problems arise because mature employees are required to work in situations that force them to be dependent, subordinate, and submissive; they are not allowed to demonstrate their full adult potential and interact as an adult. The result is

frustration and tension, leading to possible conflicts and breakdowns in communication.

Organizations are usually created by setting up formal systems of responsibility and explicit delegations of duties in the form of implicit statements of the nature, content, and direction of communication that are necessary for the performance of the group. Consequently, formal communication is required by the organization and follows the accepted pattern of hierarchical structure. Delegated authority and responsibility determine the path communication should take, whether upward or downward.

Most managers prefer a formal system, regardless of how cumbersome it may be, because they feel they can control it. Such organizational charts are common in American businesses. The representations of positions on the chart impose a relative worth on those lower in the hierarchy and those higher. If taken at face value, organization charts also lead to the idea that the lines of authority and communication are absolute. Formal organizational charts present a static picture of the human processes, have little relation to informal and impromptu interpersonal interactions, and tend to inhibit the thinking of those who rely on them.

The moving transaction identified as organizational communication can occur on several levels and can result in

understanding, agreement, good feelings, and appropriate behavior. Unfortunately, the opposite also may be true. Communication can also result in misunderstanding, disagreement, hard feelings, and dysfunctional behavior. On occasion the formal organization assists in the creation of such unfortunate incidents (Lewis, 1987, p. 11-12).

The literature suggests that many of the basic issues in corporate communication today are being addressed at CPC Flint Engine. Management is beginning to realize that employees have more to offer than just physical labor, and communication efforts have increased.

It is important, therefore, for all managers to understand the basic fundamentals of communication. They must be able to define not only the concept but also to (1) recognize the levels of communication - intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and technological; (2) convey information so the listener will hear, understand what is said, agree and accept the message, and react as intended; and (3) select the best method for communicating - telephone, face-to-face, meetings, memorandum, formal report, or teleconference.

It is equally important for all managers to understand the basic characteristics of organizations. They must be able not only to define the concept of organizing but also to (1) conceive the organization as a logical entity designed to



achieve goals; (2) recognize the difference between formal and informal structure; and (3) recognize the differences in the flow of information through the formal and informal organizations (Lewis, 1987, p. 17).

Those managers who do acknowledge the importance of the basic characteristics and attributes of communication in the organization, who do recognize that communication occurs either in a formal or an informal organization, and who know the best methods for getting their messages understood, will know how to deal with the constant problems facing them.

Given the fact that power (organizational or interpersonal) is a cultural artifact emerging from the value base of the culture in which it operates, those who gain control of organizations of the future may or may not occupy the highest levels on the organization chart. For our Western industrialized (and emerging postindustrial) culture values democratic social structures, resulting in a free-information economy accessible to all who desire exposure to it. Thus, more and more, information and organizational power will become synonymous, and those who can refine bits of information into the currency of intelligence with which to affect decision making processes will be those who become the most powerful of all (Goldhaber, 1979, p. 37).

Flint Engine has one of the most successful communication offices in the CPC group. Communication is

important to members of management, but they are still addressing problems facing most corporations today. Communication flow and approval are still major areas of concern.

The literature is not at all conclusive. American corporations are still not sure how to share information with employees, although management realizes it is becoming increasingly important to do so. The following chapters will reveal the efforts at CPC Flint Engine in that endeavor.

## Chapter 3

### DIRECTION OF INQUIRY

In evaluating the communication network at CPC Flint Engine, five basic questions were addressed; What is the communication network at Flint Engine designed to do? What kinds of information should be communicated? What methods should be used to communicate information? Whose communication system is it? What does the communication network at Flint Engine actually accomplish in keeping employees informed with truthful, accurate information?

#### WHAT IS THE COMMUNICATION NETWORK DESIGNED TO DO?

The communication network at Flint Engine is a joint endeavor. There are two communication coordinators assigned to the communication office, one representing management and one representing the union. In March, 1988, a list of communication objectives was proposed to leaders of management and the union. The objectives stated in the proposal were to:

- Inform employees about business issues within and relating to CPC and the corporation.
- Build trust between union and management.
- Build mutual respect among employees.

- Build credibility with the UAW leadership and with CPC management.
- Demonstrate a "team" concept.
- Deliver balanced union and management information.
- Describe the progress and accomplishments of the business plans.
- Deliver consistent messages (UAW/CPC Group Joint Communication Process Proposal, March, 1988. p.1).

The scope of the proposed joint communication process was a multifaceted, integrated plan. The plan would communicate information to employees using the following media:

- Print medium
  - Monthly plant magazine
  - Bi-weekly newsletter
  - Department newsletters
- Face-to-face
  - Roundtable discussions
  - Business meetings
  - Internal "press" conferences
  - Leadership forums
- Electronic
  - Teleconferences
  - T.C. Units (touch-screen telecommunication units)
  - Electronic news service (CPC, UPI, AP)
  - Phone newsline (1-800-CPC NEWS)
  - Videotape
  - Audiotape
- Developmental
  - Assessment and strategy counseling
  - Communication skills training
  - Small group exchanges and experience sharing
  - Inter-group information sharing (other General Motors units)

- Measurement and evaluation
  - Trust surveys
  - Telesurveys
  - Readership surveys
  - Effectiveness of the different media (Joint Communication Proposal, p. 2).

The following were agreed upon as guiding principles of the plan:

- Top level commitment from union and management
- Publish constructive, positive, realistic information
- Jointness from conceptualization through planning and delivery (Joint Communication Proposal, p. 3).

It was agreed one of the most critical elements to the plan was content, and the proper balance of union and management articles. This meant that, along with news about business matters, focus also had to be placed on employees and their events and activities. It was also agreed all of the business news shouldn't be just about GM. Anything about the economy, competitors, business in general, or government that could affect operations and the people in the plant was to be included in the news.

What the communication network is designed to do, then, is provide a two-way information system that offers factual information, using as many media as appropriate, with a genuine commitment from the union and management.

#### WHAT KINDS OF INFORMATION SHOULD BE COMMUNICATED?

Before the communication network at Flint Engine was conceived, about 1,500 survey questionnaires were given to

employees in nearly every area of the plant, asking them what kinds of information they wanted to receive. Of the 1,500 questionnaires distributed, 341, or about 23 percent, were returned. The results of the survey indicated employees wanted to read information in fifteen general categories, in the following order of preference.

- Layoffs and new hires
- Scheduling of overtime
- Retirements
- Quality reports
  - Plant audits
  - Department audits
  - Discrepant items
  - Engine pulls at assembly plants
  - Stop buttons
  - Construction in the plant
  - New projects
  - Results of earlier projects
- Outside news affecting the plant
  - Local
  - State
  - National
- Visitors touring the plant
- Special events in the plant
- Employee recognition
- New machinery
  - Cost
  - Reason needed
  - Advantages
- Deaths
- Who's who articles
- Engine warranty problems
- Graphs and charts
  - Productivity
  - Cost
  - Quality
- Sports

If the communication network could supply information in these categories it would satisfy the needs of the majority of employees in the plant.

#### WHAT METHODS OF COMMUNICATION SHOULD BE USED?

The joint communication committee decided the most effective communication method would be in printed form. It was also decided that, in addition to a plant newsletter, two electronic telecommunication units would be installed in areas where they would be easily accessible. Meetings at all levels would be called when necessary and surveys would be used to evaluate the entire communication network.

The first thing needed in building a communication network, even before a publication, was support. Management and the union must provide a strong communication policy and a timely flow of information to build an effective network. Editors must continually sell management and union officials on the benefits of good communication.

#### WHO DOES THE COMMUNICATION NETWORK BELONG TO?

Since the communication network was to be a joint effort, it was decided that control and editorial responsibilities would be shared by a communication coordinator representing management and one representing the union. Communication in the plant would not be solely a method of distributing plant or corporate directives and policies, nor would it be a means to publicize union grievances.

## DOES THE SYSTEM WORK?

The primary question in this analysis is, "Does the system accomplish the specified objectives in keeping employees informed with truthful, accurate information?" In other words, does the system work?

## METHODOLOGY

To answer the questions addressed earlier, three primary sources were used. (1) Existing documents from CPC Flint Engine and the Public Affairs office at CPC Headquarters in Warren, Michigan, were used to obtain information concerning communication objectives, readership surveys, and information strategies and employee attitudes. (2) Interviews were also conducted with members of management at various levels, union officials, and production workers. (3) In addition, much of the information in this paper was recorded from observations as an employee of 25 years and as assistant editor of publications at Flint Engine.

In a 1986 communication survey conducted by CPC Public Affairs, employees at Flint Engine were asked questions relating to the kinds of information they wanted to read about, current sources of information and preferred sources of information.

Also in 1986, Flint Engine conducted a survey of its monthly publication, *People 'N Pride*. The purpose of the survey was to assess the magazine's audience and monitor the



difficulty of reading. The survey asked questions relating to how often the magazine is read, how much of it is read, how readers evaluate the information it provides and how it could be improved. Another survey conducted by the CPC Public Affairs staff measured communication effectiveness at Flint Engine.

Much of the information in this paper was gathered from notes and observations within the Flint Engine plant. Surveys, company policies and formal interviews do not always reveal employees' true feelings in their responses to questions. Employees are much more likely to be candid talking with peers on the job and during breaks. The information collected during these times has been invaluable in the preparation and writing of this paper.

Interviews were conducted to understand the *official* communication policy and objectives of management and union officials and to hear hourly workers' opinions of the communication network at Flint Engine. Without the interviews the comparison between what the communication network is designed to do and what it actually accomplishes would not have been possible.

The surveys were conducted by the CPC Public Affairs and Flint Engine personnel. The notes from observations and interviews were gathered while working as assistant editor of publications at Flint Engine.

## Chapter 4

### COMMUNICATION... FAILED

Several studies have looked at the relationship between various facets of communication and measures of job satisfaction. Surveys of communication in 16 organizations involving nearly 4,000 employees indicated consistently strong relationships between communication and job satisfaction. Across organizations, the most important contributor to job satisfaction was organizational communication relationships. In particular, the quality of supervisor-subordinate relationships and the degree of involvement in the system were the most important factors used to characterize organizational communication relationships (Klauss and Bass, 1982, p. 30).

An evaluation of any communication system must necessarily reveal the kinds of information employees want to receive. A 1986 survey conducted by CPC Public Affairs revealed that employees at Flint Engine wanted the following kinds of information:

- Strategies for improving quality at Flint Engine
- Future production plans at Flint Engine
- General Motors' plans and outlook for the future
- How Flint Engine products will stand up to the competition
- Changes in GM employee benefit programs
- Ways of improving job security at Flint Engine

But the information provided in the various publications at Flint Engine is hardly reflective of the kinds of information employees actually want to receive. Future production plans are not shared with employees. For example, when production of the four-cylinder engine for the Chevette was being phased out in 1985, no information was provided by management or the union. There were many rumors as to what date would be the last day of production and to what department employees would be reassigned. Those rumors began to emerge six to eight months before the last engine rolled off the assembly line. It wasn't, however, until the final day of production that employees were informed as to which departments or shifts they were assigned.

The survey also indicated that employees at Flint Engine have the least interest in:

- How GM is competing in overseas markets
- Outside factors that affect the corporation
- Retirements, service anniversaries, etc.
- Management views on public issues

Again, the information communicated to employees does not appear to be responsive to the survey. The Flint Engine communication office receives daily the *GM Newsline* by electronic mail from the Warren office. Management at Flint Engine wants the information in the newsline to be included in its plant publications. But the majority of items in the newsline deal with overseas operations and management views and positions on public issues, such as air pollution and

vehicle safety.

To obtain the information they desire employees ranked the following as primary sources:

- Local management
- The grapevine
- Outside sources (news media)
- Corporate management
- The union

However, when asked what sources they preferred, employees listed (from most preferred to least):

- Plant publications
- Corporate management through in-plant visits, publications and video tapes.
- Union representatives and publications
- Outside media
- The grapevine

Neither management nor the union apparently trust the survey results. The information employees want to hear are often not approved for plant publications. Many executives visit the plant each year but editors are seldom allowed to interview them and management seldom reveals comments or recommendations by them.

The survey shows that the majority of employees at Flint Engine want information that affects them personally or the plant in which they work. They don't particularly care to read information about corporate policy or national and international corporate activities, including those with the government. Employees want the information to come from the leadership in the plant, not through the grapevine or outside sources.

The communication office at Flint Engine is a joint effort and has existed since 1986. There are two communication coordinators; a salaried employee, representing management, and an hourly employee, representing the UAW. Neither coordinator has any prior writing, editing or photography experience. They were selected by seniority and their willingness to follow management and union directives. Yet, they are the editors of all plant publications. In addition, there are two full-time hourly employees. One is the office manager. Among other duties, she services the plant information boards and writes for the plant magazine. The other hourly employee is the assistant editor. In addition to editing, his duties include writing, photography (including film processing) and the telecommunication system. These four people are responsible for all communication within the plant.

One of the most consistent problems of the employee publication editor is obtaining speedy approvals of editorial content. Corporate materials supplied by the GM public relations staff are fully approved. But many stories at the local level need to be approved as an integral, day-to-day part of editing an employee publication. This is particularly important if the subject is of a technical nature or pertains to labor relations, personnel matters or other sensitive areas.

All communication methods at Flint Engine require the approval of management and the union before publication. A designated member of the plant manager's staff reviews all material for content and appropriateness. The chairman of the shop committee reviews the material for the union.

The approval system assures that the information is factual, accurate, and timely. At the same time, it is a form of censorship because either side can "kill" an article for any reason. Sometimes the reason is political and sometimes an article is killed so that one side or the other is not given an unfavorable image. The approval system can, and often does, undermine the very purpose of the communication network. It is a perpetual conflict against "the other side." The antagonistic relationship between management and the union undermines the entire communication process.

For example, Flint Engine held an open house for employees and their families. The theme of the open house was, "Buy American" and employees were urged to buy products made in the U. S. A. The union had a large display promoting the theme. The week after the open house management issued new shirts for supervisors. The labels all read, "Made In Taiwan." It was a slap in the face to employees. The assistant editor of publications wrote an article explaining the displeasure of the workers. The article was killed by

the editor, a UAW member who helped plan the open house, because it might cause "bad feelings." It was clearly a lack of editorial tenacity.

In another example, the plant has an employee assistance program in which people can enroll for counseling on alcohol and drug abuse, but a picture of employees at a bowling banquet was edited because there was a beer bottle on the table. These were "sensitive" issues.

A typical "fully approved" article from the General Motors public relations staff usually contains corporate directives and policy statements. In one newsline item, GM President Robert Stempel was quoted as saying, "Air quality is improving, thanks to the auto industry," and the article went on to explain how automobiles are compatible with the environment.

These examples help demonstrate how the approval system can, in fact, hinder the effort to provide factual, accurate, and timely information.

#### MEDIA CURRENTLY IN USE

Keeping in mind that involvement in the communication process has a considerable effect on job satisfaction and a general trust of the system, it is interesting to look at various media in use at Flint Engine. Other than meetings and telephone communication, the basic communication methods in use at Flint Engine include department newsletters, plant

information (bulletin) boards, the plant magazine, telecommunications, and electronic display boards.

**Newsletters** - The first plant-wide publication was the *Flint Engine Observer*. This organ was written and edited by a member of management and distributed throughout the plant. The Observer provided business related information, including sales reports, GM stock prices, promotions in the corporation and in the plant, and safety items. The Observer recently became a joint publication and the name has been changed to *Power Builders*. In addition to business related information, the joint, semi-weekly publication includes union news, community activities, and general information useful to hourly employees in the plant.

Sources of information for *Power Builders* include the GM news line, which comes via electronic mail from Detroit, newspapers, press releases, publications from other plants, events within the plant, and UAW news releases.

In addition to *Power Builders*, there are two departmental publications in the plant, with others in the planning stage. Of the two newsletters currently in existence, one is published weekly in the engine assemble department and one is published bi-weekly by Area Five, which produces flywheels and water pumps.

Information for the engine assembly newsletter is gathered and written by six writers. One person does all the



editing, graphics, layout, photocopying, and distribution. Despite the number of people involved, the engine assembly paper suffers from a lack of organization. Nearly everyone challenges the editor's decisions, writers fail to conform to style, and they often attempt to ignore the approval system.

The Area Five newsletter is written by employees and supervisors in the department. The editor also does the graphics, layout, photocopying, and distribution. Because the Area Five editor has been released to work as a full-time communicator for his department, that newsletter enjoys a reputation for accuracy, editing, and general appearance.

In a survey that asked what kinds of information they would like to see in a newsletter, employees indicated they would like news about the plant, their department, human interest articles, and the industry in general. Management, however, wants strictly positive, business related articles in the newsletters and many attempts to publish non-business articles concerning the department are discouraged. Management encourages each department to publish a newsletter, but employees are reluctant to start one if they feel they are not free to write about a variety of interests among employees.

Although there are limitations on the usefulness of newsletters, they can be an effective tool in the communication network. Some of the advantages of newsletters

include: (1) they are relatively inexpensive to publish because they can be produced in volumes geared to the number of intended readers; (2) they can be distributed economically. Supervisors can distribute them to employees, or employees can pick them up; (3) uniformity and timeliness of message to a large readership can be assured (Vardaman and Vardaman, 1973. p. 37).

Plant Information Boards - There are two large information boards in the plant on which information is posted. Although these boards are not subject to the approval system, either management or the union can have objectionable items removed and both have done so in the past. From a communication standpoint the reasons given for removal of an item are not always valid.

After spending a considerable amount of time gathering information for the boards one week, the person responsible for posting the information was told by the plant manager that she would have to remove an item. The article in question, submitted to the communication office by the plant manager's secretary, was taken from the opinion column of the *Washington Post* (McLucas, 1988). It urged readers to limit their purchases of Japanese products. The plant manager felt it was contrary to free trade legislation and ordered its removal. The chairman of the shop committee thought it should be posted, since he felt Japanese products

reduce the number of American jobs.

However, in spite of union and management views of what is newsworthy, information boards can also be effective communication tools. Information about products, scrap reports, expenses, audits, and general interest items are posted and information is updated each week. Both boards are in high traffic areas and, if creatively done and changed weekly, nearly everyone passing by reads at least some of the information.

The Plant Magazine - The Flint Engine plant publishes a twelve-page monthly magazine that CPC Headquarter has judged one of the best in the Chevrolet-Pontiac-Canada group. Neither editor had experience before being appointed to the position by the union and management. The assistant editor is a freelance writer and a graduate student at the University of Michigan-Flint. Writers for the magazine include supervisors, salary personnel, and hourly production employes.

Photography for the magazine, including film developing and photo printing, is done by the editors. The only step in the publication process that is not done in the plant is the typesetting and printing, which is done by an outside commercial printing company.

An attempt is made in each issue to balance the magazine in regard to text and photos, management and union

perspectives, business information, and human interest articles. Two pages are reserved for "Keeping In touch, " a column that gives a management and union representative an opportunity to speak on a particular subject chosen by the editors.

Another page, called, "Our People In Focus," is reserved for articles that recognize an employee for an activity, interest, or accomplishment, either in the plant or in his or her personal life. The remainder of the magazine contains a mixture of business related articles, general interest stories, and practical information.

Controversial articles are seldom published, as the magazine is submitted to the plant manager and the chairman of the shop committee for content approval. Nevertheless, most employees said *People 'N Pride* is a valuable publication and should be continued with few, if any, changes. They are impressed with the layout and photography in the magazine. Ten employees interviewed said they read every issue of *People 'N Pride*. Another three in ten said they read most issues. This 70 percent rating of readership of all or most issues is very favorable. The clear majority of employees who say they read the magazine routinely indicates that the publications merit and importance to them. There was no significant difference in the reading habits of hourly compared to salaried employees.

Telecommunication- On the engine assembly line and in the cafeteria there are television monitors that provide information to employes. Employes access the monitors by touching the screen, on which headlines appear. Four of the news articles are business related items that are transmitted to the monitors from CPC Headquarters. Four additional news articles are transmitted from the communication office at Flint Engine and are items of plant or community interest.

In addition, "hot news" items can be programmed to appear on the screen. Those items do not require employee access and are reserved for storm warning, parts shortages, and items too urgent to be held for publication. The telecommunication units are popular with employes and are accessed about 300 times daily.

The telecommunication units also have a graphics program that can display line, bar and pie charts. However the program is very limited in the amount and kinds of information it can accept. It is also very difficult to program and for those reasons the graphics portion of the units is seldom used or updated.

Electronic Display Boards- There are four electronic display boards throughout the plant that display short messages of interest to employes. The messages include stock quotations, production figures, notices of meetings, sports scores, weather, and general information.

The electronic display boards are programmed from the communication office and the messages are changed as information is received throughout the day. These signs are the latest addition to the communication office and there are plans to have them in every department. Of the communication methods used at Flint Engine, the electronic display boards are probably the least effective. The computer program that runs them is very difficult to learn and the time it takes to program the signs does not justify the short messages they display.

## Chapter 5

### SUMMARY

This examination of the communication network at the Flint Engine plant was conducted to determine what the communication network was designed to do and if the network is successful in meeting its objectives.

The stated objectives of the network are to provide employees with a better understanding of the business, stimulate ideas, contribute to employee morale, encourage employees to buy and sell General Motors products and help develop an action oriented constituency among employees by providing them with understandable company positions on public issues.

Although these objectives are in line with communication objectives at other large companies, management at Flint Engine determines what is newsworthy and there are few provisions for production workers to communicate upwardly within the plant. There is a general feeling among production workers that any information in a company publication is in the best interest of management.

As with other large companies, the communication policies at Flint Engine are aimed at increasing efficiency and profitability. However, other companies recognize the need for two-way communication to increase employee morale.

But it is uncertain whether these companies value communication as a tool to increase profits or if they truly recognize the need for employees to have an active voice in company matters. One indication that management at Flint Engine values employee communication is the establishment of a joint communication office.

Although effective communication is crucial to any business, its importance has been all but overlooked until recently in the history of organizations. Beginning in the 1960s, there has been an increase of material on business communication as viewed from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, social psychology, communication theory and information technology. These disciplines discuss communication in the context of a changing environment in which communication is an interactive series of behaviors. The basic issues among these disciplines are the importance and purpose of communication, the direction in which communication flows and contemporary communication problems.

Among corporations there is considerable debate over how each of the basic issues should be dealt with and how they should be incorporated into a communication network. It is generally agreed that effective communication cannot be viewed as a one-way flow of information, from management to workers. The workers must also be able to communicate to



management and among themselves.

Although Flint Engine has one of the most successful communication offices in the CPC group, management is still addressing problems facing most corporations today. Communication flow and approval are still major areas of conflict at Flint Engine.

One of the most important principles of communication in business is to make the reader feel important. This principle offers the best possible guide in business communication because it places the receiver's concerns first (Christen, Stoll, and Goodsell, 1981. p. 9).

At CPC Flint Engine there are many communication tools in use. Most, if not all, of these tools are intended to provide information to employees, not for them. Most of the information is business related information that has little direct bearing on an employee's daily activities in the plant.

Anything negative or controversial, even if it is factual and openly discussed in outside newspapers and throughout the community, cannot be published in the plant publications. Electronic computers and satellites have solved many communication problems and they have led to the development of communication systems involving tremendous amounts of data. Although both the union and management are making efforts to communicate, employees are receiving a

small amount of the available information and are given a polished and distorted view of that information.

Communication efforts in the plant do not place the receiver's concerns first.

According to at least one authority, the least effective communication occurs at a one-way level, where immediate feedback is not possible, or desired (Himstreet and Baty, 1977. p. 15).

At Flint Engine it appears that management and the union have control over the communication network and use it to their advantage. The employees break even, at best. They gain some information, but the only opportunity they have to express their own views is in a department newsletter that requires the blessings of management and the union.

Management and the union can effectively get their messages published, but there is almost no way in which employees can publish their concerns with management, the union, or even among themselves. It is difficult to describe the communication network at CPC Flint Engine without using the terms "censorship" and "propaganda."

In evaluating the communication network at Flint Engine, five basic questions were addressed, including purpose, kinds of information, methods of communicating, ownership, and results achieved.

Surveys revealed that Flint Engine employees want information that affects their job and the Flint Engine plant. They aren't particularly concerned with information about the auto industry in general or with management views on public issues. According to the survey, employees want the information to come from plant publications rather than outside media or the grapevine.

The greatest obstacle in providing employees with the information they want is the approval system. Editors do not have the authority to say what articles get printed. They read news items for clarity of writing and accuracy of information, but do not decide what news should be published. The approval system has become an effective form of censorship.

Newsletters are the most widely used media in the plant. They are very effective in getting management and union information to the employees, but the approval system often prohibits the publication of information relevant to the employees' jobs or work areas.

The plant information boards are a source of current information. They display photographs, charts graphs and news items. However, the information boards are subject to the same restrictive controls as the newsletters in that management and the union decide what information employees should receive.

The plant magazine suffers the same controls. Controversial articles are seldom published, as the magazine is submitted to the plant manager and the chairman of the shop committee for content approval.

The telecommunication (TC) units are used frequently by employees, but most of the news items on the units are company oriented and do not directly concern the employees or their job assignments.

Management wants scrap, quality and sales information put on the TC units in the form of line, bar and pie charts, even though employees have indicated they do not particularly care to receive this type of information. The units are capable of displaying this type of information, however, the program is very limited in the amount and kinds of information it can accept. It is also difficult to program the information in graph form and consequently the graphics portion of the TC units is seldom programmed or updated.

The electronic display boards are used to display a wide variety of information, most of which is not among the news items employees have indicated they would like to receive. As a result, the electronic display boards are the least effective means of communication in the plant.

Although management and the union are making extensive efforts to improve communication within the Flint Engine plant, very little progress has been made. The first

priority of management is to bombard the employes with company policy, directives, scrap reports and production figures. The union is primarily concerned with publishing articles about current bargaining and contract issues.

Both sides know the kinds of information the production workers want, but they are reluctant to provide this information if it is not of current concern to their leadership. Until this approach to providing information is modified, production workers will continue to receive information for which they have little use and the communication network will remain a tool of management and the union.

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