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A Framework for Surveying Communication Effectiveness in Institutions of Higher Education

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COMMUNICATION professionals frequently advise those in business to analyze periodically the communication in their organizations (Goldhaber & Krivonos, 1978; Greenbaum, 1974). Academic institutions and their units are complex organizational systems which can also benefit from systematic evaluation of their communication activities (Goldhaber, 1978). Yet, a survey of the literature suggests that communication professionals in academia frequently do not follow the advice they give to business, in that communication assessments of departments or entire institutions appear to be rare. Indeed, those interested in assessing communication in the academic institution will find a paucity of published reports specifically focused on higher education. Assessment literature targeted for business and industry is helpful but fails to address the unique concerns of the academic environment (e.g., Walter, 1988), and assessment literature targeted for higher education typically focuses only on assessment of instructional programs (e.g., Bogue & Saunders, 1992; Erwin, 1991; Nichols, 1991).

Although assessments of communication effectiveness appear to be uncommon in higher education, they are valuable to departments, schools and entire institutions for a number of reasons. Firstly, in today's very tight financial environment where units are held accountable for results, an assessment can provide information to both funding and accrediting agencies to show that the system (in whole or in part) is operating effectively to meet educational goals (Brown & Reichard, 1991). Simply conducting the assessment sends a message that administrators and unit members are concerned about system effectiveness.

Secondly, when financial resources are tight and/or shrinking, assessments can help decision makers determine the extent to which resources are being used effectively; for example, by indicating whether the money and talent spent to produce a newsletter are having the intended result (Brown & Reichard, 1991). Thirdly, communication assessments can be used to identify existing strengths in communication activities (such as a widely hailed "open door" policy) so that the strengths can be used to greatest advantage. Assessments can also be used to identify specific problems (insufficient communication with adjunct faculty) and suggest strategies for managing them. Such information is essential to effective problem solving. Finally, communication assessments can provide feedback to administrators, including department chairs, deans, and chancellors, and can thus serve as a catalyst for change by clarifying roles and providing important information to unit members on prevailing attitudes and perceptions (e.g., Pood & Jellicorse, 1984). In sum, periodic analysis of communication effectiveness is an important activity in the current academic climate.

The purpose of this article is to address the practical concerns of the administrator who seeks to use a survey to assess communication effectiveness in the academic realm. This assessment could be conducted at the university-wide level, or it could be limited to departments or schools. This discussion of the assessment process is drawn from the relevant literature and from personal experiences conducting a university-wide communication assessment at a small public university. For the reader's ease, an outline format is used to highlight key concerns in using a survey to conduct an assessment and to identify steps involved in the survey process.

CONDUCTING THE COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT

Should Internal or External Experts Conduct the Assessment?

The use of external expertise has certain advantages:

- Outsiders may have extensive expertise in assessment, thereby having credibility.
- Outsiders may complete the job faster than insiders who typically must continue with other responsibilities.
- Outsiders bring objectivity to the process (Emanual, 1985).
- Outsiders have less to risk and may be more open in discussing assessment results.

There are also disadvantages to consider:

- Outsiders lack history with the institution and may have difficulty interpreting results contextually.
- Outsiders may be viewed as agents of top administration.
- Outsiders may be unable to adequately tailor instruments to meet specific unit or institutional needs.
- Outsiders may cost too much, which is perhaps the critical issue for most academic institutions (Bridger & Wolff, 1991).

In light of cost concerns, most colleges and universities will opt for using internal expertise. This option is particularly feasible for post-secondary institutions in that they are likely to have available in-house the expertise needed to conduct an effective assessment. If the choice is made to use internal experts to conduct the assessment, then steps need to be taken to safeguard the objectivity of the process and to lessen the difficulties encountered by internal assessors.

How Can the Integrity of the Process be Protected?

The following procedures can help protect both the process and the people, particularly when using internal expertise.

First, identify available expertise from communication and other appropriate units, such as social science, business, and offices of assessment or institutional research. This step is needed to gain broad expertise and multiple perspectives, avoid attributions of private agendas, and encourage units under analysis to view the process as a "community effort" (Bridger & Wolff, 1991).

Second, establish an assessment committee consisting of the internal experts and a cross-section of people from the unit being evaluated. Involving representatives from various groups (e.g., faculty, staff and students) helps ensure input from affected groups and promotes acceptance of the assessment process and results.

Third,clearly define the activities of the committee, such as:

- setting goals in conjunction with those who will be assessed or who might benefit from assessment.
- deciding on procedures for designing the assessment instrument(s) to avoid charges of personal agendas or bias.
- setting guidelines and procedures for analyzing the data.
- describing the results rather than drawing conclusions or making interpretations of the results (Sincoff & Goyer, 1978). This is an important mechanism for safeguarding both the committee members and the assessment results from political fallout.
- sharing results with appropriate individuals and committees.
- offering recommendations for change or deciding who will have this charge.

Once the committee is established and its charge is clarified, attention can focus on the assessment itself.

What Should be Assessed?

The committee will want to:

- Set specific goals related to unit and institutional concerns, such as recruitment and retention (faculty, staff, and student), interdepartmental coordination, or accreditation efforts.
- Set time frames for the assessment process.
- Select the elements of the communication process to examine. Some common com-

munication characteristics to consider include communication climate, communication flow, communication content and channel efficiency (for other characteristics, see Greenbaum, Clampitt & Willihnganz, 1988).

> *Communication Climate.* In assessing communication climate, one is examining the degree of satisfaction with the prevailing communication environment; the level of satisfaction with interpersonal relationships with supervisors, subordinates, and peers; and levels of motivation to communicate. Sample Likert-type items might include "There is a sense of teamwork between faculty and staff here," and "In general, my relationships with other faculty are satisfying."

> *Communication Flow.* This deals with the formal and informal sources of and channels for information, and includes such topics as directionality (upward, downward, horizontal) and gatekeeping. Respondents might be asked to rate the effectiveness of communication flow from supervisor to subordinate, administration to department chairs, faculty to administration, or between peer groups (see section I of the sample survey in the Appendix). A Likert-type item might read, "Information flows effectively from one level to the next here."

> *Communication Content.* In assessing communication content, one is addressing the timeliness, the adequacy, and the clarity and accuracy of information sent and received, including performance feedback. Sample Likert type items are, "The job-related instructions I receive are usually clear." and "I often receive needed information at the last minute or not at all." See section II of the sample survey for one approach to assessing communication content.

> *Channel Efficiency.* This element deals with the efficiency of specific channels of communication used by a unit or campus, such as the school newspaper, weekly newsletters, electronic mail, meetings, and so on. Likert-type items assessing media efficiency include, "Meetings here last longer than necessary," and "E-Mail is an effective means for getting information at State U."

Once the committee has made decisions about goals and has determined what to assess, committee members can turn their attention to the next set of decisions.

Who Should be Surveyed?

- Decide on the target audience and units; for example, based on the goals, would the audience include faculty and/or staff, full and/or part-time employees, graduate and/or undergraduate students.

- Decide whether to survey the entire target population or a sample of that population. Although surveying the entire target population is more costly, there are two important disadvantages associated with surveying only a sample. First, when assessing attitudes about communication, the wrong message may be sent if each member of the unit or institution is not given a voice. Second, those unfamiliar with "sampling" may feel ignored and isolated, and the net result may be to create damage rather than avoid or repair damage.

How Should the Survey be Designed?

Avoid using the available instruments which are targeted for business and industry rather than academia. First, language may be inappropriate for the academic setting; for example, some faculty might take offense at department heads being referred to as "superiors." Second, off-the-shelf surveys may not adequately address all the critical concerns of the institution or unit. Finally, when norms exist, they are likely to be inappropriate for comparison because they are for business and industry. In designing a custom survey, the following activities are recommended:

• Obtain copies and critiques of available assessment instruments for review information (e.g., DeWine & James, 1988; Downs, 1988; Goldhaber, Dennis, Richetto, & Wiio, 1979; Greenbaum et al., 1988). Such a review can help survey developers generate ideas for areas to assess, can suggest strategies for format and layout, and can highlight the advantages and disadvantages of different survey strategies. Portions of the survey used in one in-house communication assessment are displayed in the Appendix. A few aspects of that survey were adapted loosely from the ICA Communication Audit Survey, as discussed in Downs (1988).

• Involve all committee members in developing a draft instrument targeted to the goals defined previously.

• Design the survey to be of minimum threat to respondents. Use non-judgmental language when possible. For example:

Judgmental item

Does my supervisor provide me with adequate information on how I am being evaluated?

Less judgmental item

Circle the number which best indicates (1) the amount of information you currently receive about the topic, and (2) the amount of information you need or would like to receive on the topic.

	Amount I receive now					Amount I want to receive				
	Very	Little	Some	Very	Much	Much	Less	Some	Much	More
How I am being evaluated	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

- Determine if separate surveys are required for different target groups (e.g., staff versus faculty), and adapt the survey accordingly.

- Be sure demographic information requested on the survey will not compromise confidentiality.

- Consider issues of readability and time to complete.

- Review the instrument with representative members of the targeted population to obtain feedback and input.
- Revise the survey.
- Pretest the survey.
- Arrive at the final instrument.
- Have the survey laid-out and printed to look professional and easy to complete.

How can Participation in the Survey Process be Encouraged?

- Enlist the support of administrators at all levels. Ask them to stress the significance of the process and encourage participation (Downs, 1988).
- Publicize assessment activities in campus media.
- Consider the timing of survey distribution (e.g., don't send surveys to faculty at the end of a term).
- Send surveys to individuals by name, but ensure anonymity by not having any ID numbers, code numbers or names on the survey itself.
- Include a cover letter indicating what the survey is for, how information will be used, and how anonymity and confidentiality are ensured. Include a due date.
- Include self-addressed envelopes or provide convenient drop boxes.
- Remind respondents to participate with announcements and memos.

How Should the Data be Analyzed and Reported?

- Calculate means, standard deviations and percentages. More sophisticated analyses will depend on the data collected, the assessment goals, and time constraints.
- Set reporting procedures. For example, decide what and how much to report, ensuring that anonymity and confidentiality are protected; decide how extensive to make the report (brevity is advised); and decide to whom and in what order to present the results.
- Report the data clearly and objectively, relating results to the goals of the survey.
- Use clear yet diplomatic language (Hamilton, 1987).
- Focus on issues not individuals.
- Prepare and present the report as a committee document in order to protect the integrity of the process.

CONCLUSION

Even though conducting a communication assessment is a time-consuming process which requires thoughtful planning, the information obtained can be extremely useful. It can help an administrator make informed decisions about which communication processes are effective and should be continued, which are unproductive and should be stopped, and which are inefficient and should be modified. The administrator can work with unit members to implement practical and timely changes that are based on the survey results rather than on less objective factors. Once changes are implemented, communication assessments offer a mechanism for ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the changes. In addition to guiding decision making, results of a communication assessment can be used by administrators to demonstrate a unit's ability to meet educational goals or to show a unit's concern for improving effectiveness. By undertaking a communication assessment, departments, schools and entire institutions can benefit from a better understanding of their communication strengths and weaknesses.

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APPENDIX

Sample Survey Items

1. In the section below. please circle the number which reflects how you would rate the effectiveness of communication flow between the following.

	Poor		Good		Excellent
1. From Administration to Faculty and/or Staff	1	2	3	4	5
2. From Faculty and/or Staff to Administration	1	2	3	4	5
3. From my Supervisor to Me	1	2	3	4	5
4. From Me to my Supervisor	1	2	3	4	5
5. Within my Department	1	2	3	4	5
6. Between Departments	1	2	3	4	5

II. For each topic below, please circle the number which best indicates: (1) the amount of information you currently receive about the topic, and (2) the amount of information you need or would llke to receive on the topic.

	Amount I receive NOW					Amount I WANT to Receive				
	Too Little		About Right		Too Much	Much Less		The Same		Much More
Topic										
1. Policies & procedures	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
2. Goals & priorities	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
3. Pay and benefits	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

4. How I am being evaluated	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
5. How well I am doing	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6. Promotion procedures	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

III. Please respond to the items below by circling the number which bests reflects your level of agreement wlth each statement.

1. I spend too much time in meetings.
2. There is a sense of teamwork between faculty and staff at this university.
3. I feel free to express my opinion In most meetings 1 attend.
4. Decisions are often made here without consulting the people affected by them.
5. My supervisors know and understand the problems I face.
6. 1 often receive needed information at the last minute or not at all.

IV. For each information source listed on the left below, please circle the number which best indicates (a) if the source listed on the left is available to you, and then indicate the estent to which you find the information contained in the source (b) timely and (c) useful.

	Readily Available			Information is Timely					Information is Useful				
Source of Information Information	Yes	No	Not Applicable	Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree
1. Faculty Manual	Y	N	NA	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
2. Policy Manual	Y	N	NA	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
3. Student Handbook	Y	N	NA	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
4. College Bulletin	Y	N	NA	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
5. Bulletin boards	Y	N	NA	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5