Module 1
Communication in Organizations

Introduction
This is the first module for the course English 1005 ‘Writing for Organizations’. The purpose of this first module is look at how large and complex organizations communicate internally and externally. In particular, we investigate the ways and directions in which people within organizations communicate and the barriers to effective communication.

You will find some short learning activities and self-assessment questions for you in this module. These are NOT for assessment and you are not asked to hand them in. They are intended just to give you opportunities to apply the material in the module. However, if you want some comments or feedback on the work you have done, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the instructor by phone at 613-234-5154, or email at catherine.waters1@gmail.com.

A video lecture of approximately 30 minutes accompanies this text. You should try to read this text and try the activities and self-assessment questions before you watch the video. If you need any extra advice or support, please get in touch with the course instructor or course coordinator.

Assignment
There is no assignment to be handed in for this module.

Study time
This study session should take you about 3-5 hours to complete.

Learning objectives

By the end of this module, you will understand:
- the context of organizational behaviour for studying communication
- modes of communication – written, verbal and non-verbal
- a model of interpersonal communication: coding and decoding
- barriers to communication
Organizations are networks of people with a common goal or set of goals. The organization’s performance depends on the people working within it and their abilities, skills and dedication. Within any organization, whether it is large or small, a public sector institution, government department or Crown corporation, or a private sector business or charity, communication is of critical importance to its performance. No organization can succeed without effective communication, internally between the leaders and the employees and externally between the organization and its customers or clients. Most large organizations have whole departments dedicated to communication; they spend large amounts of money on people and technology to try to make communication effective.

Why then do so many organizations find effective communication so difficult? Why are many organizations constantly trying to improve their communication? And what skills does this require of people working in large organizations?

The problem we encounter when we try to answer these questions is that the terms ‘communication’ and ‘organization’ are both abstract terms, and yet the skills and outcomes involved are very practical and concrete. We have to start by defining what we mean by both terms in order to understand the importance of communication and analyze how it is done.

1. What is communication?
One of the first questions to ask is what we mean by communication. When we think of work in large organizations and the many jobs and tasks people do, so much of the work involves talking and listening, writing and reading, explaining and persuading, negotiating, analyzing and reporting, recommending and advising. Individuals spend nearly 70 percent of their waking hours communicating (Langton, page 251), which underlines the centrality of communication to everything we do. So much of our personal and organizational effectiveness is dependent on our capabilities and skills in communicating.

Communication involves an exchange of meaning, achieved through the processes of formulating, transmitting, receiving and understanding. Communication can involve a one-way direction of a message or a two-way exchange. In an organization, communication can be ‘top-down’ (from the management down to the subordinate employees), ‘bottom-up’ (from subordinate employees up to management), or ‘lateral’ (within the same organizational level).
From the many ways we communicate, we can identify three basic forms:

- **verbal communication** (oral) – spoken words and language to communicate meaning and convey information
- **non-verbal communication** – physical body language
- **written communication** – written words and language

Within each of these basic forms, there are a number of different aspects that influence communication, including the degree of formality or informality, direct or indirect communication, direction of communication, and degree of interaction.

**Verbal communication**
This includes everything from relaxed chats or gossiping, informal conversations, debates, formal meetings, negotiations, speeches and presentations, and may be directed at an identified, targeted audience, or at a more general, unspecified audience. Verbal forms of communication may be two-way communication or one-way. Two-way verbal communication, such as a conversation, interview or negotiation, occurs when people exchange information, opinions and ideas with an immediacy of direct communication, seeking feedback and response. One-way communication, such as a speech or presentation, may be intended to motivate and inspire, to deliver information, or to persuade, without seeking an immediate response or feedback, if any.

**Non-verbal communication: Physical / body language**
Verbal communication is often combined with non-verbal communication (body language), where information, attitudes and meaning may be conveyed using words or physical gestures or expressions. If the audience can see the speaker, either directly through physical presence with the audience, or via television or video, the audience makes judgements about the speaker and his or her message based on their body language and facial expressions. Very often, the audience’s reactions to the verbal message are shaped by the physical messages that they discern: is the speaker telling the truth? Is the speaker sincere? Can he or she be trusted?

Body language includes the many gestures or expressions that convey meaning to the audience. Body language is very important – often, in interviews, those conducting the interview consider body language when deciding on the suitability of a candidate for a job. The way a person shakes hands, leans forward or back in their seat, holds their arms and hands, and shifts their gaze conveys different impressions of character, competence and trustworthiness. These impressions may not always fit with the verbal message being conveyed with words.

We could include silence as a form of body language. If a person declines to respond to a communication when a response is expected, or pauses before offering one, the silence or hesitation conveys meaning and can forcefully undercut or reinforce the actual words spoken.
Written communication
The biggest difference between the communication described above and written communication is the absence of the physical person, both in voice and in body, from the written form of communication. The whole message is conveyed via the written words and the layout of the communication on a page or screen. In brief, everything you might want to convey with enthusiastic and impassioned speech and/or physical gestures such as a warm smile, a laugh or a direct gaze, must be conveyed only with words.

In modern, large, complex organizations, we rely more and more on written communications, including memos, executive briefings, reports, and recommendations to senior management. Increasingly, we use electronic forms of communication, especially email and other immediate forms of written ‘dialogue’ such as on-line ‘chats’ and blogs. Often, in large bureaucracies, employees are called upon to write reports for senior staff and political leaders setting out particular policy options and recommendations. The language, style, structures and appearance of written communication are fundamental to getting work done and, increasingly, we are judged (as workers) on our ability to write.

This course is designed to develop your ability to write. The course does not focus on academic writing, but rather on writing in organizations. Unlike many courses of this nature, it does not deal with spelling or grammar, but rather with the choices you make in terms of style, structure and language that convey the message – what you want to say.

The following chart summarizes many of the ways in which we communicate and convey meaning to each other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORM</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
<th>MEANS / MEDIUM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>- Direct with feedback</td>
<td>Conversations / dialogue</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- No physical presence</td>
<td></td>
<td>Talk-radio</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Person-to-person</td>
<td>Informal chats / gossip</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Direct with feedback</td>
<td>Conference calls</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- With physical presence</td>
<td>Informal chats / gossip</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Face-to-face</td>
<td>Conversations / dialogue</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Direct, no feedback</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Physical presence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-verbal</td>
<td>Physical (dependent on seeing the</td>
<td>Body language, gestures, movement,</td>
<td>Face-to-face exchanges</td>
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<td></td>
<td>other person)</td>
<td>attention</td>
<td>TV / internet</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As is evident in the chart, every time a person communicates, he or she makes many subtle and often instinctive calculations about how and what to communicate. The three key elements of these calculations are:

1. **target audience** – who are you talking to/communicating with?
2. **style and structure** – how do you get your message across?
3. **content** – what is the goal?

Every time you communicate, either in verbal or written form, you make a judgement about **your audience**: how many people, their knowledge of the subject, their interest in the subject, and/or their importance or status. You tailor your message to be appropriate for the audience.

The audience could be your manager or boss, or the Minister in your department – speaking to a more senior person at work requires you to think about their power, rank and position, what they need to know, and potentially the politics of the situation. If your audience is a group of fellow-workers at the same level as you, you might consider how much you feel part of the group, whether they are friendly or not, what the work environment is.

You make a judgement about **the style** you will adopt in conveying your message: should you aim to be funny or serious? Will you be informal or formal? Will you present lots of evidence or will you keep it brief and to-the-point? Will you aim to be friendly and chatty in style, or professional and formal?

You also make a judgement about how to **structure** your message, ensuring that you grab the attention of your audience, that you keep their attention with to-the-point information or an interesting account of the story. You make a judgement about their interest in what you are communicating, how much time they may have, and how to engage and keep their attention.

You also aim to focus your audience’s attention on the main message of your communication, the central **content** of your communication. You decide what action you want from your audience and use the form of communication – whether verbal or written – to achieve that goal.
These many, many judgements that you make as a communicator, whether in verbal, non-verbal or written form, constitute the difference between information exchange and communication. The many signals that you, as a communicator, give, receive and interpret are complex and often intuitive. Although some communicators, including some political leaders, community elders, managers and spiritual leaders, may be naturally very talented at communicating, these skills can be learned, and you can become a better communicator.

2. What is an organization?

The focus of this course is not on communication in all areas in life, but specifically on written communication in organizations. So, before we go on in the later modules to look at how to improve writing skills, let’s take a good look at what we mean by an organization.

Organizations have been studied by academics and practitioners in many ways, such as a system, a machine or even a living organism. For our purposes, and for many people working in organizations, the most useful and practical way of thinking about the organization is as a complex network of people, working both as individuals and as part of groups, large and small. The behaviour, attitudes, culture and values of the individuals and of their groups within such an organization make up the study of organizational behaviour (OB). OB looks at organizations as complex structures, processes and practices, and at the people working within from both an individual and a group perspective. It is an inter-disciplinary body of knowledge and field of research, involving sociology, psychology, human relations, management, and even economics. It combines a conceptual approach, examining the theories of individual and group behaviour, with the practical approach of business or public administration studies, focusing on the practice of modern leadership techniques and management processes.

The key difference between OB and most management or business administration programs is the emphasis in OB on the psychology of individuals and groups that underlie management policies and practices. For example, where a course on human resource management (HRM) might focus on organizational structure and job design, an OB course would look at the power relations and control issues that underlie these subjects.

For many academics, OB goes to the heart of how people work, communicate and interact together. The study of OB is primarily focused on work environments, usually in large organizations where many employees interact at different levels. However, the concepts and theories in OB also can be applied to other types of organizations, such as universities and schools, hospitals, union, and charities. OB can provide insights into organizations of many different types and shapes.

One useful definition describes an organization as “a social arrangement for achieving controlled performance in pursuit of collective goals” (Huczynski and Buchanan, page 5). If we take a closer look at this definition, we see that there are three key terms:
• **Social arrangements** – this characteristic would be applicable to all groups of people, including formal and informal organizations, where the members interact with each other. It refers to the relationships and networks between people and groups, and the way in which these arrangements are shaped by the organization’s purpose.

• **Collective goals** – this characteristic suggests the shared objectives of all the members, where an individual sees advantages to working with others over working alone. The success of an organization may depend on the ability of the people within it to identify and agree on their collective goals. This again applies to many organizations, including loose groupings, like groups of hunters, or formal, complex organizations.

• **Controlled performance** – this characteristic emphasizes the formal structures and relationships of formal, complex organizations such as large business enterprises or government departments. It underlines the importance not only of agreeing about collective goals, but also of achieving them through the concerted actions of the people in the organization. The term ‘controlled’ also tells us that some power is exercised in organizing the actions of many people and of determining the performance of the group. The exercise of power and the resulting politics of human interaction are key characteristics of large organizations, where hierarchical structure and ranking produce a framework for control and authority.

Large complex organizations, including large private and public sector organizations, require individuals to behave differently in the group context than they might on their own. One writer, William Foote Whyte, writing in 1955, said:

> “The group is a jealous master. It encourages participation [by the individual], indeed it demands it, but it demands one kind of participation – its own kind and the better integrated with it a member becomes, the less free he is to express himself in other ways.” (quoted in Huczynski and Buchanan, page 344)

Organizations are very effective ways of getting things done, by coordinating, controlling and synchronizing many individuals’ actions into group action. Groups have the power to affect the behaviour of their individual members through group norms (the accepted behaviours and standards within a group), socialization (the shared beliefs and values of the group) and sanctions (punishment for not adhering to the group standard).

Leaders in large organizations are constantly striving to manage their employees in such a way as to empower individuals to be creative and to use their talents and skills to the full, while at the same time to control individuals to work within the disciplines, timeframes and parameters of the collective goals.
Part of the success of the leadership of an organization in managing its employees lies in its ability to communicate – which allows to employees to understand the collective goals, feel that they share these goals not just as group members but also as individuals, accept the disciplines of the group norms, and contribute to the group’s performance.

As we move on within this first module, we will explore how communication works and why, sometimes, it does not work.

Learning Activity 1.1

This learning activity is not an assignment for handing in. It is just for you to consider the material in this section and apply it to your own experience. Please take some time to write out your responses – they will be useful to return to at different times during the course or even during your work. Please email the instructor if you would like to share any of your thoughts at catherine.waters1@gmail.com

Look at an organizational chart for your department or section. Identify groups and teams within the organization and consider these questions:

1. Can you identify formal groups / teams (organized as part of the structure of the organization) and also informal groups (perhaps loose, social groups)?
2. How does communication happen within a formal group? How does it happen in an informal group?
3. Does the organization chart give you an accurate picture of who is in charge and who holds power?
4. Do you feel that you are able, in your job, to act as an individual? Do you feel constrained by being managed as part of a group?
5. How do your managers communicate with you about the collective goals of your department? Do you feel that this is done well? What would you do differently?
The way we communicate – the way we convey a message and the way we receive a message – is unavoidably linked to what we are and how we think. Communication skill is in part the ability to understand the audience for the communication and shape the form, style, language and structure to fit that audience.

How you might hear or read a communication and the message you derive from it, and how another person might hear or read the same communication and derive a message could be very different depending on various characteristics that make up different individuals. These are known as perceptual filters, characteristics of the individual that interfere with the effective transmission and receipt of messages.

We can see that, when we think about the characteristics of the individual that influence the way he or she communicates, we can also consider how these and other characteristics act as barriers to communication, making individuals resistant to messages or unable to understand them fully.

We will consider both perceptual filters and barriers to communication more fully in a moment. First, we will take a look at a useful model of the communication process which demonstrates the active roles of both the sender and the receiver of a message.

Coding and decoding: a model for studying communication

A model of communications between people that is often used to study the communications process is based on the concepts of coding and decoding. Messages are encoded (turned from a thought or instruction into symbolic form, such as words, sentences etc.) by a sender, and then decoded (interpreted) by the receiver. So, for example, the sender will write the message (encode it), and the receiver will read it (decode it). The success of the communication depends on the skills, abilities, attitudes and knowledge and socio-cultural beliefs of both the sender and the receiver.

The message is the actual physical product when we are sending a message. In a face-to-face conversation, the physical product is speech and the words, sentences, expressions, gestures and pauses that go with it. In a written communication, the physical product is the writing, the paper or the electronic delivery, and the layout on the page (including headings, spacing, colours, graphics etc.).

In the model in the box below, you can see how the sender is the one who codes the communication, and the receiver decodes it to derive its meaning. The channel carries the message – and the channel can be one or more of a number of different media. The
sender must make a number of judgements to try to maximize the chances of the receiver(s) decoding the message as the sender intends. These judgements include:

About the audience:
- Who is the receiver? Is there one receiver or many?
- How well does the receiver understand the subject?
- What possible perceptual filters will the receiver bring that I need to think about?

Content:
- What do I want the receiver to do when they decode the communication?
- How can I make sure that the main message is clear in my communication?
- How can I get the receiver to agree with me and do what I want? What information do I need to provide?

Style and structure:
- How can I make sure the receiver pays attention to my communication (that is, listens to me or reads what I write)?
- Should I be formal and serious (for example, for a senior manager or a minister) or would it work better if I were informal and more relaxed?
- How can I structure my communication to make sure it is clear what my main message is?
- Should I include an executive summary with a written report?

Channel:
- What physical product should I use to get the message through? Email / internet? Paper copy? Speech – face-to-face or by telephone?
- How comfortable is the receiver with the technology I want to use?

Feedback:
- Do I want feedback?
- Does the receiver understand what I want feedback on (action, comments, a decision) and by when?
- What will I do with the feedback?
- How will I get back to the receiver with my own feedback (if the exchange is to continue)?

The chart below shows how the perceptual filters that both the sender and the receiver bring can block or change the way the message is coded and then decoded.
Perceptual filters

The communication process shown above demonstrates how many judgements are made by the sender to send a message. Both the sender and the receiver bring their individual perceptual filters to the communication process which can facilitate communication but also act as a barrier.

The receiver decodes the message with the filters of their own background, experience, needs and motivation. The receiver interprets the message through these filters, creating the ‘reality’ of what he or she hears or reads through their own perceptions. If the sender does not consider the possible perceptual filters, the communication is likely to fail to achieve the understanding, support or compliance they may be seeking.
Some of the perceptual filters that the sender must consider:

**Culture**
- Each individual has his or her cultural background, with language, traditions, values and expectations. Communication is an important part of culture – storytelling, song, dance, theatre, poetry, written language – so it inevitably shapes the way people sharing that culture receive and impart meaning. Being sensitive to the cultural sensitivities of the receiver, and being conscious of your own, is important to successful communication.

**Nationality or ethnic background**
- Each individual brings his or her nationality or ethnic background which influences their understanding of the world, their expectations and aspirations and their world view. A practical consideration in successful communication is of course using the correct language – both in terms of achieving understanding (does the receiver understand and speak English well enough to decode the message?) and also of showing respect for national, ethnic or cultural heritage.

**Gender**
- Men and women see many issues differently, depending on their own experiences and responsibilities outside of work in the family and the community. Also, there are political issues of power and control that have been associated in the past with men holding positions of greater authority and women concentrated in the lower paid, lower prestige positions in the workplace. Although this is changing and many women are achieving high office, sensitivity to the issue of gender remains important to successful communication.

**Personal history and education**
- The receiver’s personal history and education will shape how they perceive a message. The sender’s understanding of the receiver’s skills, ability, knowledge about the subject, and education level help in them encode the message.

**Confidence and self-esteem**
- The receiver will interpret the message through the filter of their own confidence and self-esteem. For example, a communication with feedback about work will be received differently by someone who is confident and feels positive about their work, compared to someone who lacks confidence and self-esteem and is likely to feel threatened and dejected by feedback.

**Rank within the organization**
- Within a work environment, this perceptual filter is very important. Where does the receiver fit into the hierarchy of the organization? How much power or influence do they have? Is the receiver a public servant or a politician? What do they need to know?
Barriers to communication

These perceptual filters listed above, and others you may want to add, are part of the psychology of communication, where messages are interpreted subjectively and personally by the receiver to create their ‘reality’. Perceptual filters do not necessarily block communication. However, if the purpose of the communication is lost, and the message is misunderstood or missed as a result of these filters, then this constitutes a barrier to communication.

The responsibility falls on the sender to *consciously* and *deliberately* consider the perceptual filters that may apply in each communication exercise. Methodically going through a mental check-list of possible barriers increases the likelihood of avoiding the barriers.

In addition to avoiding the perceptual filters that may block the accurate decoding of a message, the sender also needs to consider the following familiar barriers to communication:

**Access to and familiarity with the communication technology**
- Much communication is now achieved through electronic media that speed up and increase the flow of information. Both the sender and receiver must have access to the necessary technology and the skills and confidence to use it, to allow effective communication to take place.

**Power differences**
- Differences in authority and power between the sender and the receiver in the workplace change the way a message is coded and decoded. The way power and authority are used to control people in the workplace – whether the organizational culture is controlling and authoritarian, or cooperative and team-based – changes the climate for communication.

**Information overload**
- In a modern workplace, employees receive information through face-to-face meetings, emails, telephone, internet and paper at a rate that can be overwhelming and detrimental. Too much information and overwork increase stress and blocks the receiver’s ability to absorb communication.

**Defensiveness**
- If the receiver feels threatened by the communication (for example, if the message contains criticism or bad news about a promotion), the receiver may react defensively, verbally attacking or criticizing the sender, effectively blocking out some or all of the message.
Communication climate

- This is explored more fully in the final section of this module. The communication climate is related to the organizational culture, and the atmosphere of openness, trust and respect that may or may not exist in the workplace.

Physical setting

- In a work environment, some employees may not have the time, privacy and tranquility to decode messages in a constructive manner. If you work in a busy, noisy office with little private space and time, then it is more difficult to be open and receptive to communication.

Stress

- Communicating under stress is very difficult. If the receiver is getting bad news which causes stress and emotion, the sender must be clear and calm in the encoding of the message, and be sensitive to the stress of the receiver.

Learning Activities 1.2

This learning activity is not an assignment for handing in. It is just for you to consider the material in this section and apply it to your own experience. Please take some time to write out your responses – they will be useful to return to at different times during the course or even during your work. Please email the instructor if you would like to share any of your thoughts at catherine.waters1@gmail.com

Think about your own perceptual filters and how you react to certain communications at work.

1. Make a list of your characteristics using the list in this section that a sender would need to understand if they wanted to communicate effectively with you.
2. What would be barriers to communication for you?
3. Write a letter telling an employee who works for you and who suffers from low self-esteem and stress that they have to improve in their work performance. What considerations about the barriers and filters will you make?
In this last section of the first module, we look at different types of organizations and the different ways they may communicate. The three main issues we will look at are:

- The organizational structure, in particular the bureaucratic structure
- Different directions of communications within a bureaucracy, and
- The communication climate

Organizational structure

There are three broad types of organizational structure. Organizational structure is the way in which jobs and authority are ordered in an organization in order that it achieves its organizational goals. There is nothing inherently good or bad about each type; it is a matter of contingency – you need the right organization for the type of work, the type of workers, and for the circumstances (for example, an emergency might require a more controlling top-down model).

- **Bureaucracy**: a traditional model of a top-down hierarchy, with clear lines of control and management. This model is generally seen as a means of institutionalizing control, so that power and authority are attached to the office, and not to a person. It is also a way of keeping controls over work, work flow, finances and human resources. Because of the emphasis on strong control, virtually all large, complex organizations with a large, skilled workforce are structured as bureaucracies. This includes large companies such as Bell Canada, IBM and Shell, and public administrations (federal, provincial, territorial and municipal).

  The shape of a bureaucracy is depicted as a steep triangle:

![Steep Triangle](image)

- **Flat**: This is the model of organizations which have a lot of people working to a few managers, often in a professional or highly specialized capacity. An example could be a medical research lab, or a high tech company. Another example could be a retail organization, with many retail salespeople at the same level reporting to a very few managers. This organizational structure is depicted as a flat triangle.

![Flat Triangle](image)
Boundaryless: This is a more modern conception of an organization, which depicts people being drawn from different organizations into ‘virtual teams’, usually on temporary, project-based work. Members of the group may come from different organizations, consultants, or fixed-term. The emphasis is on flexibility, low controls and evaluation on the basis of work output. It is depicted as a number of interacting circles.

(adapted from Dessler, page 68)

The structure of an organization contributes to the organizational culture and internal communication flows. Bureaucracies are organizations where the leaders at the top of the organization exercise considerable control through the organizational chart of managers and supervisors that branch out throughout the organization. Bureaucracy is a very effective organizational design to achieve the following:

- **Organization of jobs**: the literal organizational plan of a group of people working within a single organization into different levels and occupations;
- **Organization of authority**: spans of control within a top-down hierarchical structure;
- **Organization of work**: the power and authority of office is attached to the position (or bureau) and not to the person who occupies it;
- **Organization of accountability**: the accountability for public decisions follows the lines of authority, with accountability lying with the political executive at the apex of the bureaucratic hierarchy.

The characteristics of organizations which adopt a bureaucratic model are their large size, diverse and complex work organization, many responsibilities and occupations at different levels, and formal hierarchy.

**Directions of communication flow**

In a bureaucracy, as in any organization, communication flows from one level or group in different directions: top-down, bottom-up, and lateral.

Top-down communication flows from higher levels to subordinate levels, from the executive leadership or group managers down to employees. These communications often provide one-way information on the organizational goals, policies and performance, or job instructions. Most organizations rely on this direction of information for direct
communication with employees and cascading information through teams and work groups.

Bottom-up communication flows from subordinate levels upward to higher levels. This direction of communication tends to be used less, and is chiefly designed for management to get information from subordinate employees. Reports on work performance are prepared at lower management levels for senior managers. Many organizations also put in place mechanisms for ‘upward feedback’ from subordinate employees to identify and manage human resource problems. These mechanisms are designed to give lower-ranked employees a secure way of lodging complaints or criticisms without fear of reprisals, and often take the shape of employee attitude surveys, grievance procedures, suggestion schemes, and round table ‘chats’ with management.

Lateral communication occurs when people at the same level within the organization communicate with each other. Usually this takes the form of informal social conversation or gossip and is not sanctioned in the formal organization. Within a unionized workforce, the union acts as a mechanism for lateral communication between members of the same bargaining unit, or between members of an aggrieved group. Occasionally, management may encourage and formalize lateral communication among team members to facilitate problem-solving and performance improvement.

(Langton and Robbins, page 259)

**Communication climate**

The concept of communication climate is closely related to the concept of organizational culture, that is, that different organizations have characteristics that shape the behaviours of the people who work in them. The idea of a ‘communication climate’, which was developed by Jack Gibb in 1961, is that organizations are either ‘open’ or ‘closed’, determined by the attitudes, style and beliefs of the leadership. An open climate is one where employees develop a sense of self-worth and value within the organization, feel confident to be innovative and take risks, and feel trusted and secure in their jobs. In such a climate, the perceptual filters are reduced and communication is decoded with an attitude of openness and trust. Employees are inclined to believe management communication and to trust that information is shared.

In a closed climate, information is controlled and restricted and employees are likely to feel suspicious that management communication is manipulative and secretive. Employees are likely to look to other sources for information on the organization, such as a union or the media.

The chart below sets out the key characteristics of open and closed communication climates. These are extreme situations, with many organizations falling between the two. Sometimes organizations change from being open to closed and vice versa, depending on circumstances; for example, a strike changes the climate of an organization and can raise hostility levels, which returns to a more balanced and positive climate later.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open, supportive communication climate</th>
<th>Closed, defensive communication climate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive: informative rather than evaluative communication</td>
<td>Judgmental: emphasis on apportioning blame, making people feel incompetent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution-oriented: focus on problem solving rather than on what is not possible</td>
<td>Controlling: conformity expected, inconsistency and change inhibited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open and honest: no hidden messages</td>
<td>Deceptive: hidden meanings, insincerity, manipulative communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring: emphasis on empathy and understanding</td>
<td>Non-caring: detached and impersonal, little concern for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian: everyone valued regardless of role or status</td>
<td>Superior: status and skill differences emphasized in communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiving: errors and mistakes recognized as inevitable, focus on minimizing</td>
<td>Dogmatic: little discussion, unwillingness to accept views of others or compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback: positive, essential to maintaining performance and relationships</td>
<td>Hostile: needs of others given little importance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Huczynski and Buchanan page 204)

**Learning activity 1.3**

This learning activity is not an assignment for handing in. It is just for you to consider the material in this section and apply it to your own experience. Please take some time to write out your responses – they will be useful to return to at different times during the course or even during your work. Please email the instructor if you would like to share any of your thoughts at catherine.waters1@gmail.com

Do a web-search on “bureaucracy” and the sociologist who first described this structure “Max Weber” to find out more about the formal structure of large, complex organizations.

1. Is a negative term?
2. What are the main characteristics of the ‘ideal type’ bureaucracy?
3. Why are virtually all large companies and government administrations organized in the form of a bureaucracy?
4. How does communication flow in a bureaucracy?

**Suggested web link**
Summary

This first module introduces the course by focusing on theories and concepts from the study of organizational behaviour that help us understand the communication process. In particular, we looked at the role of communication within organizations, the communication process and the perceptual filters and barriers that can block it, and finally the issues of organizational structure and communication climate and how this influences communication.

Self-assessment questions – module 1

These questions are not an assignment and are designed to give you some model questions to focus your thinking about the material in this module. Please take some time to write out your responses – they will be useful to return to at different times during the course or even during your work. Please email the instructor if you would like to share any of your thoughts at catherine.waters1@gmail.com

1. Why is an understanding of the study of organizational behaviour and the nature of the bureaucratic organization important to communication?

2. How does the psychological and socio-cultural make-up of an individual shape the way they send (encode) or receive (decode) a communication?

3. Consider your own organization. First, describe it in terms of the bureaucratic organizational form and then provide explanations (and give examples) of the way(s) communication flows within it.

References

