Communication as a management perspective

Summary

Considering the dynamics in the environment, and the growing interdependence and complexity in society the field of communication for organizations needs to review its priorities. Communication is a functional area of organizations, a management perspective that contributes to the functioning of organizations and to solving or preventing organizational problems. It has a boundary-spanning function. In this paper a range of tasks of communication are defined that are of vital importance for a responsive and proactive organization.

The organization might anticipate or react to chances and threats in the external environment in various ways. It may decide to change its own operations and in this case communication can support change management. It may also try to change the conditions for its functioning and that case communication can arrange participation in the public debate about related topics. Legitimacy can be created by focussing on accountability.
Organizations operate in a complex field of power. Communication experts monitor public perception and need to understand the nature of the public debate, and processes such as framing.

Introduction; a dynamic environment

In society power balances shift continuingly. The only certainties are change and the need for cooperation. Organizations function in many networks and none of these are stable these days. Environments are characterised by their *dynamics*. Developments might make some parties more important and others less. This changes who are dominant in a network. Some parties might become more interesting to cooperate with and others less. The market changes and new needs and preferences of civilians and consumers occur. Issues develop and these issues might be more or less related to the organization. The internal environment is dynamic also. Change management needs attention.

A changed environment may call for a change in organizational behaviour, it also calls for a change in the kind of support that communication brings the organization. Or one could say, a challenging environment also brings chances for communication to prove its surplus value to the organization. The developments mentioned might fit very well with what communication could offer, although these views are not yet reflected in full in practice. We will elaborate on the functions that communication might fulfil for organizations in a turbulent environment.

Communication as a functional area

Communication is one of the *functional areas* of organizations, just like finance, marketing, human resource, R&D and production (1). It depends on the organization and its context which functional areas are particularly important for its functioning. This may explain why communication has developed only relatively recently as a functional area, when the environment of organizations became more turbulent. The organizational policies have

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consequences for the priorities set in the functional areas. On the other hand, impulses are given from within the functional areas to the organizational policies.

Communication is a management perspective, a way of looking at things, as managers need sets of different glasses to better understand the internal and external environment. Communication stimulates a sustainable interaction with public groups (2). By looking at organizational problems from the perspective of communication, managers focus at information channels in networks and relationship management. This way communication can be seen as a management perspective.

Key tasks of communication

Communication has a boundary-spanning function operating at the interface between the organization and its environment – to help, gather, relay and interpret information from the environment as well as representing the organization to the outside world (3). Communication can help organizations to be more *responsive and proactive* with regard to the dynamics in the social environment. For a responsive and proactive organization many tasks of communication can be considered of vital importance.

We can distinguish information flows with a diverse focus: outside in, inside, and inside out. This clarifies the contribution of communication to the organisation. What are the key tasks that communication can offer? These tasks may not yet be reflected in full in practice.

Outside in
a. It can *monitor* the public debate and current issues
b. It can help monitor changes in the market, by identifying changing needs and preferences
c. It can help organize *exchange* of information between boundary spanners and decision makers in the organisation
d. It can enhance a *clear view* within the company on external developments and make employees more aware of these developments.

Inside
e. It can facilitate decisionmaking within the organisation by arranging *dialogue* situations
f. It can help to establish a clear *identity*
g. It can support the primary (production) process, *throughput,* within the organisation
h. It can facilitate *change* management: by strengthening involvement and supporting turn around processes.

Inside out
i. It can support *output* processes by implementing marketing communication activities with (business) clients
j. Also it can support *input* processes by e.g. financial communication and public affairs, and strengthening the reputation of the organisation in the public debate.

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    k. It can help strengthen the *position* of the organisation in the networks in which it operates; the organisation needs to express a clear identity to be distinguished from others.

    l. It can support *cooperation* processes with external parties, and support *problem solving* through information exchange and cooperation

The tasks listed above need an explanation. Information flows outside in can be optimised. Monitoring the public debate is crucial to understand the development of current issues. Changes in the market also need to be identified and interpreted. Needs and preferences of stakeholders change.
Communication can arrange an effective exchange of information between boundary spanners in the organisation (who have much contact with outside groups) and decisionmakers within the organisation. Often the information that boundary spanners have is not made use of and reported in a way that connects to decisionmaking processes. Communication can stimulate that within the organisation there is a clear view on external developments and it can make employees more aware of these developments. The tasks listed as a – d are considered relatively new tasks for communication that can enhance its strategic significance for organisations.

Inside the organisation communication as a functional area can facilitate decisionmaking processes by arranging dialogue situations (task e). It can help create a clear identity (task f) by clarifying mission statements and policies and by increasing involvement of employees. Communication can support the primary process in the organisation, the throughput. Whenever tasks are divided, communication is needed for coordination and exchange of work-related information (task g). It also supports change management (task h).
The tasks e – h have been mentioned as tasks for communication for some time but not all communication departments are able to provide these on a strategic level. Task e is often considered a task of general managers. Task f is much advocated in corporate communication literature but not all communication managers participate fully in this. Task g is often only fulfilled to the extent of providing in communication means. Task h is often outsourced especially when the communication department is also part of the changes.

Information flows inside out can be taken care of. This supports output by communication with (potential) customers and business clients, also including branding. Also it supports input processes by communication with preconditional relations like financial publics, politicians and governments etc. The tasks i – j might be considered traditional tasks of the communication department, although elements of these are considered of strategic value. Communication can strengthen the position of the organisation in the networks in which it operates by expressing a clear and strong identity (task k). And communication can support problem solving in which the organisation participates and other activities of the organisation that need cooperation with other parties (task l). Task k is emphasised in current literature about corporate communication, while task l might be considered new and part of management responsibilities.

A dynamic environment calls for a renewed approach of communication. The key tasks described above, might seem logical, but the overview mentioned is quite different from traditional tasks of communication professionals.

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Alternative strategies and the need for a balance

The organization might anticipate or react to chances and threats in the external environment in various ways. It may decide to change its own operations and in that case communication can support *change management*.
Being responsive doesn't restrict the organization to a strategy of adaptation. The organization may also try to change the conditions for its functioning e.g. by venturing into negotiations or public affairs activities. In that case communication can arrange participation in the *public debate* about related topics.

Some of the key tasks of communication described above may appear to be contradictory. The organization can decide to *adapt* to developments or to *influence* the preconditions in the networks in which it operates. Also a middle way or combination of strategies may be found, of adapting to some developments and actively influences others (4). The choice or outcome will depend on the situation, feasibility and policies of the organization.
Next to being responsive to developments in the social environment, an organization also needs to be *self-conscious*. It needs a clear *identity* that distinguishes it from others (5). This is a precondition to hold its position in the networks in which it operates and be an appealing partner for others. A strong identity keeps the organization together and gives it a head start in the public debate. Here a balance needs to be found in inner-directedness and outer-directedness. This is also referred to as closeness and openness, that should be seen in dialectical interdependence (6).

Accountability

The main goal of organizations is viability. Next to legal viability, economical and social viability can be distinguished (7). Communication can support economical viability by supporting exchange transactions (marketing communication). And communication can support social viability by supporting internal and external *acceptance*. The latter is sometimes referred to as 'a license to operate' or legitimacy. This can be created through accountability, the willingness to take responsibility, to render an account and explain. This creates an open channel though which other parties can reach the organization. Accountability is important now, considering the growing dependence of organizations on other parties in the social environment.

The expectations of publics may vary in time. What was deemed a high level of corporate social responsibility once, may have set the standard by now. Expectations and regulations are dynamic, they may be adapted to a higher level. Accountability is a more constant requirement. Organizations have become glass houses where much is visible and reported on e.g. environment and labour conditions.

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A complex field of power

Organizations operate in a complex *field of power*. It constitutes of multiple senders competing for attention of multiple audiences. The societal context of these interactions is complex and dynamic. Organizations participate in the public debate with groups and other organizations, also influenced by the media and journalists. Shifting power balances are shown here or they may partially be the result of the public debate.
Ethics provide basic rules for the roles of the various participants in the public debate. Many of the key tasks of communication mentioned before, have to do with the *public debate* in the media. Habermas analyses the transformation of the public sphere (8). Nowadays the public debate is mostly mediated, shaped by mass media (9). One might say that in a complex large-scale society mediated communication is unavoidable (10). Citizens and decision-makers do not have equal access to it. And actually there are various media platforms rather then one. Understanding the nature of the public debate is vital to the approach of communication as a management perspective. This includes concepts like framing and positioning. We will further explain both concepts and how they are related.

In order to give meaning to information people place it in a context, this is called *framing*. A frame is an interpretation scheme that provides a context to understand information and to define the situation (11). A frame causes us to see behaviour in a certain light. As a result some aspects seem more important than others (12). They become the key-aspects in this context, and causes and consequences may be attributed accordingly. All parties are consciously or unconsciously involved in framing. This happens at the level of interpersonal communication when individuals meet and in groups, but also in between groups in society, so in the public debate.
In the public debate the media may reinforce these processes. This is called priming, emphasizing certain aspects. The logic of the media shapes the course of the public debate (13). The media are actively involved in constituting the social world, by making images and information available. Once interest in a theme is created, the threshold for new media items becomes lower. A media hype is a self-reinforcing wave of news items about a certain theme. The news items may cause new events to happen that also become news (14).

Communication experts must be able to understand framing as a process and how other parties in the public debate use framing strategies to enhance their interests. They must also understand how various activities of their organization attribute to framing and how this might serve long term goals like future cooperation in the network. Within the organization many players, e.g. top managers, have a role in these processes. The communication experts have to be able to facilitate the internal understanding and *internal dialogue* about various activities that influence framing.
The public debate is about agenda-setting. The amount of news about an issue determines the salience of the issue; and issues might be downplayed or emphasised to enhance the reputation of organizations (15). Effectively influencing agenda-setting, however, is not easy nowadays considering that audiences are fragmented. The dominance of the major media is decreasing now that various cultural groups turn to various media. Also, the amount of information on the internet has grown and localising all content related to an organization is hard, let alone influencing it.

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Positioning has to do with characteristics attributed to the organization and its products or services. Framing creates the context in which these processes happen, it influences which characteristics are seen as dominant. Framing might have a different purpose for the various communication domains. In marketing communication brand appeal might be most important, in internal communication the main aspect might be motivation. In concern/corporate communication it can be credibility.

Some activities of communication managers are focused at implementation of communication strategies that are quite within their scope of influence, e.g. the content of communication campaigns. Other activities involve top managers and managers of other disciplines who also greatly influence communication outcomes. Then communication professionals need expert knowledge as well as listening and *advice skills* to be able to contribute to the work of other decision makers in the organization.

Priorities

Reputation originally was primarily a *reactive* approach to criticism. When criticism arose organizations ventured into research and tried to influence the public debate. This approach was mainly geared towards needs of the organization and its primary target groups such as shareholders and consumers. Nowadays a *more open* monitoring of public perception of organizations is advocated, to identify developments that might not yet be related to the organization but might point out future chances or threats (16). The Delphi method might be utilized to find different developments mentioned by experts, interviews and panels can be used, and analyses of conversations in face-to-face situations or e.g. chat platforms.

Proactive communication means to precede environmental stimuli. Response might be to adapt the organizations strategy and/or to influence the social conditions. The latter means becoming involved in the definition and construction of reality and this way proactive behaviour might still be quite self referential (17). On the other hand, one might find win-win solutions in which the general well being of society is also taken into account.

Monitoring may have consequences for the communication policy but it may also lead to advice about organizational policies. This is one of the ways in which communication can support the functioning of the organization and the interaction with the social environment.

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Notes

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