

# **Communication Audits: The Key To Building World Class Communication Systems**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Effective internal communication is a vital pre-requisite for the functioning of all organisations. Yet it is a commonplace that communication is poor in most.

Employees complain that they neither know nor understand corporate priorities, while frustrated senior managers insist that they have invested a great deal of time in explaining them. There is additional evidence that information transmission from the bottom to the top is also defective, with employees and even managers fearing to articulate their true opinions to those further up the hierarchy (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). Thus, senior managers often have a very limited understanding of the communication dynamics within their own organisation. In our own research in this field, we have frequently found that the people most surprised by audits which point to problems are the senior management team (Hargie and Tourish, 2000). The result can be a climate of mutual suspicion rather than trust, with energies that should be focused on beating the competition squandered in internal struggles. In this chapter, we suggest that the key to building a world-class communication system lies in managers having an accurate picture of how well they and everyone else are actually communicating. In a nutshell, we advance a twofold argument:

1. All organisations need a focused communication strategy, designed to build a world class system for sustaining internal communications.
2. The first step in implementing the above is that current practice must be rigorously and honestly evaluated, utilising communication audit techniques.

We then discuss in-depth how audits can be implemented, and the data collection options available. While the main focus of this chapter is upon internal communications, audits are also of importance for external communications, and so we raise issues of relevance to the latter area as well.

### **The nature of a communication strategy**

It is a truism that organisations seeking a competitive advantage must design their systems to at least match, and then exceed, world best practice. Organisational communication is no different. It has been suggested (Clampitt and Berk, 2000) that a world-class communication system has five key attributes:

- The leadership team has a strategic commitment to effective communication.
- Employees at all levels have the appropriate communication skills.
- There is a proper infrastructure of channels to meet organisational objectives.
- There are proper communication policies and procedures to meet organisational objectives.
- Information is managed in a way to meet organizational objectives.

Few organizations have systems in place that are consistent with these attributes.

Often, the sad reality is that communication is (Hargie and Tourish, 2003):

- widely touted as a panacea for organisational ills, but allocated minimal fiscal or functional resources.
- all pervasive, but often unplanned; it is often the case that communication is what happens to companies when they are busy doing other things.
- hailed as being of central importance in terms of what managers actually do, but rarely investigated with the same rigour as is reserved for such other functions as finance.
- still regarded as something that managers do to their subordinates; they drop information like depth charges on to those employees submerged in the organisational ocean but make it very clear that they do not expect to receive any feedback torpedoes in return.

The result is a disabling gap between theory and practice. This is clearly dysfunctional, and can impact adversely upon the workforce, resulting in reduced employee motivation, lower rates of production, greater industrial unrest, increased absenteeism, and higher staff turnover (Hargie and Tourish, 2000).

The schema proposed by Clampitt and Berk (2000) suggests that senior management is not solely responsible for the effectiveness of the entire communication system. All employees have responsibilities in this area. For example, while our own work with communication audits (e.g. Tourish and Hargie, 1998) has often found people clamouring for more information, it has rarely found

them insisting that they have any responsibility for transmitting it. A communication strategy built around the five assumptions outlined above will fundamentally challenge such mindsets.

Communication strategies are all about strengthening relationships, sharing ownership of key issues and relating communication priorities to key business issues. If an organisation does not develop and implement a coherent strategy to manage its communication, ad hoc and often dysfunctional methods will develop. A strategy provides both a path along which communications can be guided, and a structural set of processes and procedures to ensure success in this field. We have therefore suggested that a communication strategy can be defined as

‘A process which enables managers to evaluate the communication consequences of the decision making process, and which integrates this into the normal business planning cycle and psyche of the organisation.’ (Tourish and Hargie, 1996, p.12)

Flowing from this, what concretely must managers do to develop a communication strategy and implement an audit process that will evaluate its effects? A number of excellent reviews are now available (e.g. Clampitt et al., 2000). Drawing upon this research, we suggest the following process:

1. Secure senior management commitment
2. Identify current practice (i.e. audit)
3. Set standards to measure success
4. Develop an action plan to achieve the standards
5. Measure the results (i.e. audit again)

We now discuss these steps in the context of outlining a robust communication audit process.

## **A COMMUNICATION AUDIT PROCESS**

In broad terms, the key steps in measuring communication can be summarised as follows:

- Audit current levels of performance.
- Disseminate the results of the audit widely across all levels.
- Implement an action plan tailored to rectify identified deficits.
- Conduct a follow-up audit to evaluate the effects of the action plan.

Accurate information about the state of internal communications can best be obtained through the implementation of a communication audit. The main advantage of an audit is that it provides ‘an objective picture of what is happening compared with what senior executives think (or have been told) is happening’ (Hurst, 1991: 24). The findings provide reliable feedback and this in turn allows managers to make decisions about where changes to existing practice are required. A communication audit sheds light on the often hazy reality of an organisation’s performance, and exposes problems and secrets to critical scrutiny. It enables managers to chart a clear course for improved performance.

The term 'audit' is ubiquitous. Financial audits are well established, and clinical audits, medical audits, and organisation audits are also now widely employed. Three characteristics are, in fact, common to all audits (Hargie and Tourish, 2000):

1. *The accumulation of information.* This is the **diagnostic** phase of the audit. In communication terms, managers need *information* about the quality and quantity of communication flowing between different sectors of the organization.
2. *The creation of management systems.* This is the **prescriptive** phase of auditing. Once information has been gathered, *systems* must then be put in place to further develop best practice, and to remediate identified deficits.
3. *Accountability.* This is the **functional** aspect of the audit process. Specific individuals should be made *accountable* for different aspects of internal communication, so that when problems are highlighted someone is specifically tasked with ensuring these are swiftly dealt with. If a problem is everyone's responsibility it is usually no-one's responsibility.

This chapter argues that assessments of communication effectiveness should match the seriousness of intent evident when such functions as finance are audited. As such, a communication audit has been defined as: 'a comprehensive and thorough study of communication philosophy, concepts, structure, flow and practice within an organization' (Emmanuel, 1985: 50). Various techniques exist to achieve this outcome (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979; Downs and Adrian, 1997; Hargie and Tourish, 2000; Dickson *et al.*, 2003), and these will be summarised in the next section. Typically, data emerges on information underload and overload, bottlenecks

within the organisation, examples of positive communication flow, and pressing communication concerns at all levels. For example:

- Do management and staff perceive the organisational world differently?
- What must be done to achieve and sustain significant improvements in communication?
- Where are the greatest threats and the greatest opportunities?
- When, how, and in what way, will future progress be monitored?

A key goal in all of this is to gauge the accurate views of employees. Thus, as noted by Furnham and Gunter (1993, p.204), 'A communication audit is a positive and motivating exercise, being in itself an internal consultation process'.

### **The audit sequence**

Relating this to the discussion of communication strategy with which we began this chapter, and based upon the findings of previous audit investigations across a wide variety of sectors (Hargie and Tourish, 2000), we would suggest that the following sequence be adhered to. Auditors who depart from it should have compelling reasons for doing so. Thus, the process of audit implementation should encompass these key stages:

1. *Engage senior management commitment*

A variety of studies has suggested that unless senior managers, and especially the CEO, are actively involved in any change process, and passionately committed to its success, it will fail (e.g. Spurgeon and Barwell, 1991; Pettigrew *et al.*, 1992). The buck usually stops with the CEO as captain of the ship. But the captain also decides upon what voyages will be undertaken and in what ways. Without the CEO on board the audit ship will not sail. New tools designed to assist organisational development will usually appear threatening to some. They require an intense level of senior management involvement, if their use is to yield positive dividends. At the outset of the audit process a problem focused workshop between senior management and the auditors should therefore be held. Such an event serves to:

*(i) Improve the management team's understanding of what can be achieved by audits, of how a world-class communication system can be built, and what it might look like in this organisation.* It will therefore raise the following questions:

What are the key business problems that arise through poor communication?

It should be noted that this is a different proposition to the identification of communication problems, important as this is. Rather, it is to suggest a focus on the deeper business problems that are caused by the organisation's communication difficulties. This ensures that the underlying thrust of a communications review (*to improve business performance*) remains in focus.

Flowing from this, what are the organisation's major communication problems? The audit can then seek to determine whether such problems exist, chart their exact nature, how deep they are, what has caused them, and what can be done.

□ What changes in behaviour are required to eliminate these problems? How specific can we be about these changes? How will we know when they have occurred? At the outset, this sets an agenda for action, and primes managers to anticipate that changes in their own behaviour as well as that of others is likely to follow from the audit process.

*(ii) Clarify in-depth the value of audits, their role in this particular organisation and the commitment required from management if maximum advantage is to be obtained.* For example, the following issues should be addressed:

- What time-scale best ties in with the business planning cycle?
- Will other organisational development issues need to be rescheduled?
- How can evaluating communication channels with customers support the marketing strategy?
- What plans can be made to circulate the audit results as widely as possible?

*(iii) Identify the top half dozen issues on which people should be receiving and sending information.* An audit cannot examine every conceivable issue, in-depth. Our own research has generally found that information flow on a few key issues tends to be typical of the overall communication climate (Tourish and Hargie, 1998). Restricting the number of issues to be explored in this way is sufficient to provide valid data, while ensuring that the audit remains practicable. For example, if the audit is concerned with external communication, what are the most important issues which the company wants its customers to be aware of? Conversely, what

does it want to hear from its customers about? These data can then be incorporated into the materials being used during the audit exercise. If questionnaires are being employed, a section should explore information flow on the key issues identified.

This also offers a good opportunity to delineate the extent of the audit exercise, and therefore clarify managers' conception of the communication process. It is essential, at this stage, to establish both what audits can and cannot do. Managers must have realistic expectations about what can be achieved. Like parents' expectations of a child, it is not good when too much (or too little) is envisioned. The audit will be less likely to achieve its full potential, as a tool for facilitating organisational development if expectations are unrealistic. For example, it is difficult to use data obtained from focus groups to set statistical benchmarks. If the focus group is the only tool which the organisation can use, and there are many circumstances under which this is the case, it is unrealistic to think that future audits will be able to measure precisely the extent of any progress that has been made. Novice auditors may be inclined to promise more than they can deliver, thereby undermining the credibility of the whole process.

(iv) *Discuss the communication standards the management team believes they should adopt and live up to.* For example, in the UK, the National Health Service Management Executive published standards for communication in 1995, and circulated them throughout the main management tiers of the organisation (NHS Executive, 1995). This was a summary of best general practice, recommending that commitments be made to:

- Board level discussions
- Regular audits
- Upward appraisal
- Training for effective communications
- The consideration of communication during the business planning cycle, and
- The identification and reward of good practice

Having established standards, answers must then be formulated to a number of key questions:

- What do they mean in practice?
- How will every organisational unit be transformed if they are implemented?
- What has stopped such implementation in the past?
- How much can be agreed and how much will remain in dispute for the foreseeable future?
- How quickly can change begin?
- What training needs are essential to carry this change?

The audit can then reveal the extent to which the standards are being implemented; stimulate further discussion on the gap between current practice and the characteristics of a world class communication system; and encourage overt commitments to the key publics concerned, internally and/ or externally.

*(iv) The identification of a senior person or persons prepared to act as link between the organisation and the external audit team. If the audit is being*

conducted in-house, a link between those handling the project and top management is still vital. This is not to suggest that auditors should surrender their independence. However, ongoing contact with key people is vital to keep doors open; prevent sabotage or obstruction; ensure that the audit timescale remains on track; and provide essential information on the organisation's structure, history, internal politics, business challenges, main priorities and climate.

## *2. Prepare the organisation for the audit*

Usually, a simple letter is sufficient to inform staff of the nature of the audit process, and the timescale which is envisaged. We would recommend that it be issued by the Chief Executive, thus putting the authority of this office behind the audit. This helps to ensure that managers facilitate access to audit participants, and generally engage with what is going on. It also binds the top management team into the audit exercise, by publicly identifying them with it. This makes it more likely that the results of the audit will be taken seriously and used to effect improvements in performance. In the case of external audits, a sample of customers or supply businesses can be addressed in a similar manner. Alternatively, internal or external newsletters, videos or team briefing mechanisms can be employed.

Recurring worries which tend to arise at this point include confidentiality, how widely available the results will be, and the time commitment required of audit respondents (Tourish and Tourish, 1996). The most difficult of these issues is confidentiality. Respondents are often wary of honestly expressing their views, in case what they say will be used against them at a later stage. It may be necessary to

address these issues during initial communications with audit participants. The following general rules help:

- *Participants should be assured, orally and in writing, that their responses will be treated confidentially.* Research shows that the more often a message is repeated the more likely people are to accept that it is true (Cialdini, 2001). Accordingly, these assurances should be reiterated on a number of occasions - the more publicly, the better. The steps proposed to ensure confidentiality should be explained in detail.
- *Wherever possible, participants should be selected randomly.* This reinforces the message that the aim of the exercise is not to single people out with a view to imposing sanctions. There are hazards to this. When administering questionnaires to a group during one of our audits, one of the people present approached us to remark that it was the third time in six months he had been 'randomly selected' to complete questionnaires, dealing with a variety of organisational development issues. Intense persuasion was required to convince him that we were not part of a management plot against him!
- *Only the audit team should have access to questionnaires, tape recordings or anything else which might identify individual respondents.* All such materials should be destroyed at the conclusion of the audit.
- *Care should be taken, in writing the report, to ensure that it does not inadvertently enable readers to identify particular respondents.* For example, if

only one person works in the payroll department the report should not cite comments, good or bad, from ‘a payroll respondent.’

- *Audit instruments should be administered well away from the gaze of managers.* Again, during one of our audits, we had just spent some time explaining the confidential nature of the exercise to a group of questionnaire respondents, when a member of the senior management team dropped by simply to see how many people had turned up. Unfortunately, the effect was to discredit our assurances of confidentiality with the people concerned.

Normally, these procedures are sufficient to ensure that this problem is eased.

However, it remains one of the strongest arguments in favour of using external rather than internal auditors. If a top manager turns up to administer questionnaires or conduct interviews, or if the person concerned is viewed as being close to managers, confidentiality assurances have low credibility.

### 3. *Data gathering*

This normally proceeds in two phases. A small number of preliminary first round interviews familiarises the audit team with staff or customer views, as well as management concerns. Typically, respondents will be randomly selected. Feedback obtained by this approach helps in the design of final questionnaires, if this is the main method to be used. A number of issues have been suggested which should be explored in preliminary interviews (Tourish and Tourish, 1996). The bulk of these are applicable to both internal and external audits:

- How decisions are made
- Communication channels
- Communication relationships
- Communication obstacles
- Organisational structure
- Responsiveness (e.g. the quality of information flow during a crisis)

Finally, the main audit exercise is embarked upon. A pilot test is vital. This makes it possible to detect shortcomings in the design and implementation of questionnaires (Emory and Cooper, 1991), or other approaches being employed. However, as Remenyi *et al.*, (1998, p.174) pointed out, ‘in business and management research there is usually time and considerable financial pressure to get the project started.’ Pilots are therefore often selected opportunistically, on grounds of convenience, availability, proximity or cost. We do not view this as a major problem. A pilot is a test case, undertaken to double check the viability of the approach chosen. It should not, even under ideal circumstances, become so elaborate that it develops into a main study in its own right. However, once the pilot is complete, the main study can proceed.

#### *4. Analysis and action phase*

A report is now prepared, which comprehensively describes and evaluates communication practices. Among the key questions that arise, we think that the following are particularly important:

- What targets can be set to eliminate the problems that arise from communication failure?
- What targets can be set to eliminate communication failure itself?
- What behaviours are the senior management team now willing to change, in order to demonstrate a symbolic commitment to improved communication?

For example, targets can be set for:

- Increased and sustained knowledge
- High levels of goodwill and credibility
- A regular flow of communication (e.g. how much information will flow, on what topics, to what sources, utilising what channels)
- Accurate expectations about future milestones in organisational development (i.e. fewer toxic shocks), and
- Satisfaction with levels of participation.

Ongoing audit research tracks the progress of all these factors.

It should be noted that this period presents both opportunities and dangers. Audits arouse increased interest and expectations. As a general rule, people recognise that everyone likes to sing loudly about their successes, while remaining mute about their mistakes. Thus, if an audit is followed by silence it is likely to be widely assumed that managers are either busy burying dreadful secrets in the basement, or meeting in a cabal to plot revenge on certain thankless employees who have criticised them. A key principle when confronted with bad news, if this is what

emerges, is that it should be shared openly and quickly, thereby enabling those involved to at least gain credit for their honesty (Payne, 1996).

The results of the audit are, in the first instance, presented to the top management team, orally and in writing. The results then need to be circulated widely, by whatever means are most appropriate. Action plans should also be publicised. In this way, the process of audit, as well as whatever changes to which it gives rise, helps achieve significant strides forward in open and clear communication.

## **METHODS USED IN THE AUDITING PROCESS**

There are a wide variety of alternative approaches, and the ones selected should be the 'best fit' for the organisation concerned. The methods used should be tailored for the corporate body under analysis, as 'off-the-peg' systems, like cheap suits, are rarely attractive and inevitably fail to fit along some of the required dimensions. Furnham and Gunter (1993) used the term 'organometrics' to refer to the methods used to measure the various dimensions of organisational functioning. We will now briefly review the alternative organometric tools relevant to communication audits.

*Survey Questionnaires.* This is the most widely used approach to auditing. Indeed, Clampitt (2000) pointed out that organisational surveys are now as commonplace as weather forecasts. This was confirmed by Goldhaber (2002: 451), who noted 'The survey, however, has become the dominant method chosen by academics and consultants – mostly due to its ease of development, administration, and interpretation – both for clients and for research publication'. There are several validated audit

questionnaires that can be tailored for specific organisations. The two main ones are the *Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire* (Downs and Hazen, 1977) and the *International Communication Association Audit Survey* (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979; Hargie and Tourish, 2000). The Questionnaire method allows the auditor to control the focus of the audit, enables a large number of respondents to be surveyed, and produces benchmark rating scores for various aspects (e.g. ‘communication received from senior managers’) against which future performance can be measured. The main drawback is that it is limited in the extent to which it can gauge the deeper level thoughts and feelings of respondents.

*Interviews.* Another popular audit approach is the structured interview. Indeed, in his text in this field Downs (1988) concluded that if he had to select just one audit method he would choose the interview. This is because it allows for communication experiences to be explored in detail, and as such can often produce interesting insights that surveys may miss. Researchers have increasingly recognised that people form different impressions of the same events, and that chronicling the stories that typify organisational life is a key means of understanding what sense people are making of their environment (Gabriel, 2000). Interviews, and focus groups (discussed below), are an invaluable means of tapping into the stories, folklore, myths and fantasies that people develop as part of the organisational sense-making in which we all engage. On the down side, it is time-consuming and expensive. Interviews, which can last up to two hours for managers and one-hour for non-managers (Millar and Gallagher, 2000), have to be recorded and transcribed for analysis. As such, it does not readily allow for large numbers to be involved in the audit. Furthermore, unlike surveys, interviews cannot be anonymous and so may be vulnerable to social acceptability responses.

*Focus Groups.* These are ubiquitous, and have permeated all walks of professional life, from politics to marketing. They can be used to develop insights at a macro level (such as the impact of strategic decision-making) or on a micro level (such as detailed responses to particular communication messages) (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). In their comparison of audit methodologies, Dickson *et al.* (2002) argued that the open-ended and interactive nature of focus groups produce insights from respondents that are difficult to obtain through other methods. Participants spark one another into action by sharing and developing ideas. Two main disadvantages are that more

introverted staff are reluctant to participate, and some staff may be unwilling to express honest views in the presence of colleagues.

These are the three most widely employed organometric audit tools, although there is a range of other approaches, such as critical incident analysis, ECCO, data collection log-sheet methods, constitutive ethnography, social network analysis, and undercover auditing (for a full analysis of these see Hargie and Tourish, 2000; Dickson *et al.*, 2002).

For those who conceptualise organisational assessment as a form of collaborative or employee-centred enterprise the two main methodologies employed (Jones, 2002; Meyer, 2002) are:

1. *ethnomethodology*, which seeks to understand how employees construct their interpretations of the organisational world through interaction
2. *textual analysis* (or hermeneutics), which involves the thematic analysis of written documents of all kinds (brochures, minutes of meetings, mission statements, etc.) as well as transcripts of interviews or group meetings.

In interpretive audits, three main types of data are collected: naturalistic observations, transcriptions of relevant texts, and recorded responses to researcher questions. These are, in turn, analysed using thematic analysis, metaphor analysis or narrative analysis, in order to achieve a symbolic interpretation of organisational communication (Meyer, 2002). The report produced from an interpretive investigation is also different

from a traditional audit report, being more in the form of a narrative ‘tale’ of the researcher’s experiences in the organisation (Van Mannen, 1988; Gabriel, 2000).

## **WHAT AUDITS TEND TO FIND**

There is no substitute for completing an individual audit. Every organisation is different and will have specific needs. These can only be identified through a specific, tailored assessment. It is possible to predict certain recurring themes, and a number have been identified in the literature (e.g. Hargie and Tourish, 2003). In general, we have found that

1. *Immediate line managers are crucial for effectiveness.*

In essence, people want supervisors who:

- take a personal interest in their lives
- seem to care for them as individuals
- listen to their concerns and respond to these quickly and appropriately
- give regular feedback on performance in a sensitive manner
- hold efficient regular meetings at which information is freely exchanged
- explain what is happening within the company.

In terms of shaping a strategy to deal with such problems, it is therefore important for organisations to disseminate information swiftly to first line supervisors. They should also provide them with comprehensive communication training so that they can optimise the impact they have upon the workforce. Unfortunately, we have often

found that many organisations are reluctant to do this, assuming that their managers should be innately capable of sustaining a world-class communication environment. Such assumptions are baseless.

2. *Change is more likely to occur, and will be based on a clearer perception of organisational needs, if the views of employees are regularly and systematically obtained.* Employees appreciate a climate in which bottom-up communication is encouraged. This means that systems must be put in place to allow vertical transmission of information and opinions up the hierarchy. Such data must also be acted upon and feedback given on its worth. Thus, Kassing (2000) showed that employees in workplaces where feedback is encouraged have a high level of identification with the organisation and openly articulate dissenting views, knowing that these will be welcomed. By contrast, where feedback is discouraged employees have a low level of identification with the organisation and are less likely to openly express their views. Repressed dissent leads to resentment and a desire for revenge. Employees are then more likely to try to sabotage management initiatives. Put simply, those organisations that have the most effective communication strategies are open to employee feedback, and spend both time and money in obtaining it.

3. *Information should be widely shared.* Staff want to be ‘in the know’ rather than being ill informed. In their study of over 2,000 employees across 21 organizations in seven different countries, Shockley-Zalabak and Ellis (2000: 384) found that: ‘information reception has a stronger relationship to effectiveness and job satisfaction than other measured communication activities. This supports the importance of planning and monitoring the frequency of messages about

organizational performance, practices, policies, and a variety of job-related issues'. In other words, audits are essential tools for measuring and monitoring this pivotal aspect of information flow.

4. *Maximum use should be made of face-to-face channels.* It is perhaps a reassuring finding that in our ever-increasing technological world (and indeed even because of it), humans still prefer to interact with one another in person. Employees especially want to meet and talk with senior managers. Interestingly, our findings show that their expectations tend to be very realistic (Hargie *et al.*, 2002). They know that senior managers are busy people and do not expect huge amounts of interpersonal contact with them. However, they do want to see them from time to time. In all walks of life, individuals value being with powerful or famous people (Hargie and Dickson, 2003). The work setting is no different. Thus, managers who hide permanently in their bunkers, and run their operation by firing out salvos of e-mail directives, are missing out on a potent influencing opportunity. Management by talking with staff is eminently preferable.

5. *Employees value communication training.* This finding has two sides. Firstly, employees report that they personally wish to receive systematic training in the communication skills that are central to their work. Secondly, they want their managers to be trained in the appropriate skills to enable them to manage effectively. Communication skills training has been shown to be effective across a range of professional contexts (Hargie, 1997), yet many organisations fail to realise the full potential of their staff owing to a lack of investment in such training.

## CONCLUSION

Organisations are fundamentally systems for facilitating human interaction. How well people exchange information is often the most critical factor in determining whether a business lives or dies. It is impossible to imagine a highly innovative, customer centred organisation coming into existence, or sustaining its pre-eminent position, without its managers, and employees, paying the closest attention to how well they all communicate with each other. Yet, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, it is often easier to find instance of poor communication than it is to highlight examples of communication excellence.

There are many reasons for this. For example, it is clear that most of us tend to over-rate how well we communicate. As with car smashes, communication bumps and collisions are invariably held to be the fault of someone else. We have a vast armoury of self-serving biases, which distorts our perception of the wider social world (Dawes, 2002), and of how well we perform in our roles as managers (Tsang, 2002). Without a system for objective evaluation, people are unlikely to realise that such self-satisfied perceptions are most likely to be distorted illusions. In addition, unless a proper strategic framework is adopted to evaluate and monitor what happens, during difficult times organisations move towards a feeling of helplessness.

We have encountered some managers who shrug aside the view that the prevailing systems could be improved. Their view is that communication is like the weather - we would all like it to be better, but can't really do anything to bring about such a state of affairs. It is therefore an unfortunate paradox that, while most people admit that

communication is vital to the building of successful organisations, most organisations allocate precious few resources to improving it. Some managers convey the impression that they are willing to do anything humanly possible to improve communication - except devote time, energy and resources to it. Few other functions are expected to manage themselves on a similar basis.

This chapter has proposed that it is possible to build a world-class communication system and a front rank communication strategy. As always, evaluation is critical to success. What gets measured gets done. Organisations that integrate audits into their regular communication planning process, who take the results seriously, and who base their communication strategies on hard data rather than vague hunches are much more likely to succeed than their rivals.

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