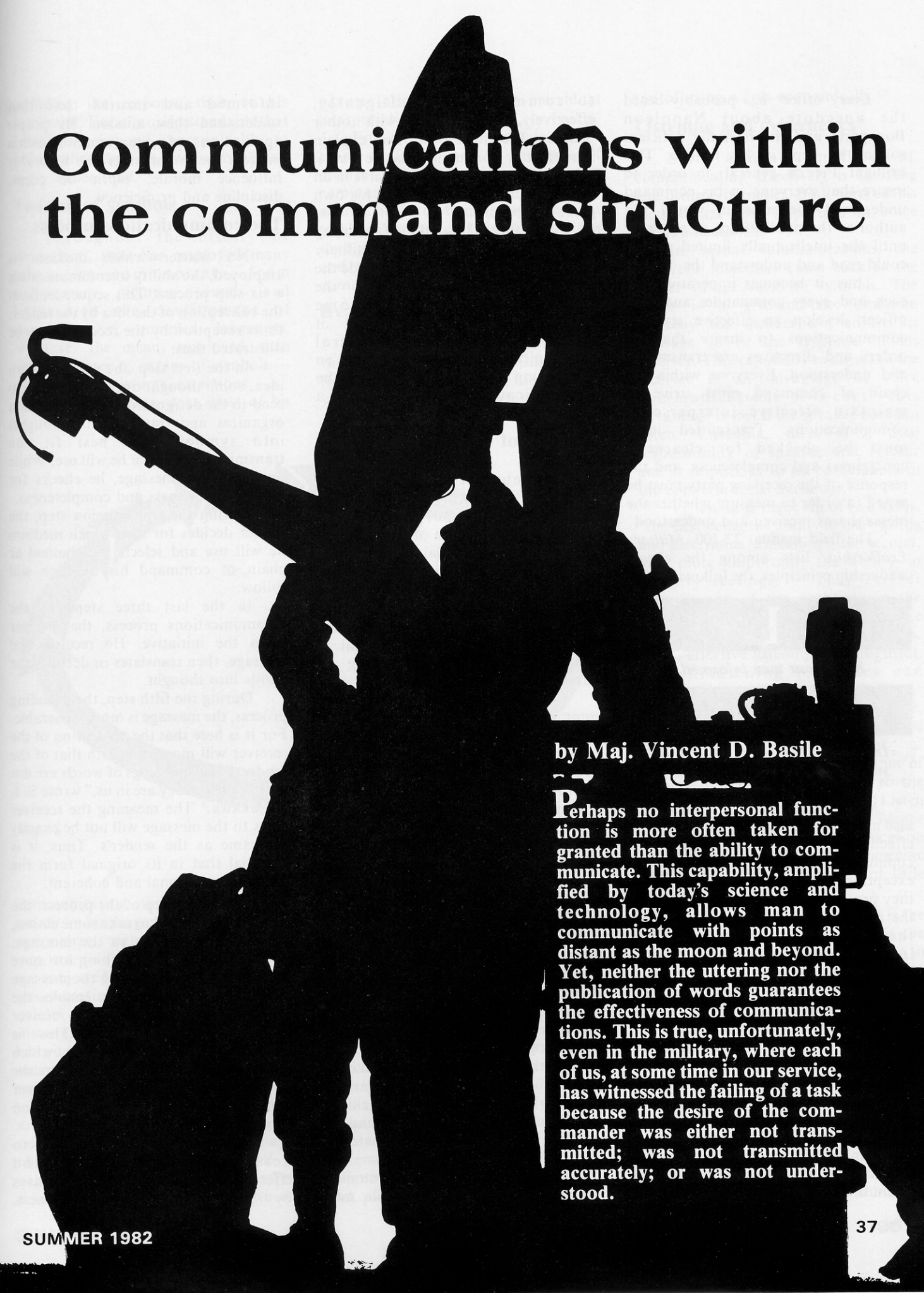
Communications within the command structure



by Maj. Vincent D. Basile

Perhaps no interpersonal function is more often taken for granted than the ability to communicate. This capability, amplified by today's science and technology, allows man to communicate with points as distant as the moon and beyond. Yet, neither the uttering nor the publication of words guarantees the effectiveness of communications. This is true, unfortunately, even in the military, where each of us, at some time in our service, has witnessed the failing of a task because the desire of the commander was either not transmitted; was not transmitted accurately; or was not understood.

Every officer has probably heard the anecdote about Napoleon Bonaparte and the mentally deficient soldier he kept in his retinue. This brilliant French general, in order to insure that everyone in his command understood the mission, would not authorize the publications of an order until the intellectually limited soldier could read and understand the order.

Thus, it becomes imperative that each and every commander and staff officer develop an effective style of communications to insure that all orders and directives are transmitted and understood. Everyone within the chain of command must strive to maintain effective interpersonal communications. Transmitted ideas must be checked for clearness, conciseness and completeness, and the response of the receiving party must be tested in order to measure whether the message was received and understood.

The field manual 22-100, *Military Leadership,* lists among the eleven leadership principles, the following two:

1

Keep your men informed.

2

Insure that the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished.[1]

Many other military publications also allude to the need for adequate and effective communications within the command structure, but with the exception of some general statements, they provide very few specifics to assist the individual in the development and the measurement of effective interpersonal communications. However, the need for effective, interpersonal communications has long been emphasized by business managers who have stressed the need for executives to possess communication skills. Charles M. Schwab, former president of U. S. Steel, once stated, "I'll pay more for a man's ability to express himself than for any other quality he may possess."[2] And, as Jones and Johnson point out, "Every business organization is dependent to a large extent on the ability of its business men to communicate intelligently, effectively, and swiftly with other people....The man who can explain himself may command what he wants; he who cannot convey his desires in an understandable way is left to his own personal resources."[3]

Therefore, by relating existing organizational practices to military needs, this monograph can provide the reader with an analysis of the communication process, some techniques on the development of effective vertical and lateral communications, and some guidance on the testing of the accuracy of the communication system within a command.

The role of communications

Communications within the command structure is an essential element of any organization's effectiveness. The role of communications in an interpersonal relationship is simply defined as "the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another."[4] Significantly, this process always involves a sender and a receiver. Effective communications involves both the passing of information and understanding.

From a military perspective, communications is the process by which leadership takes effect. For it is through communications that the leader: provides the information and understanding necessary for the organizational effort and provides the attitudes necessary for individual motivation, cooperation and job satisfaction.[5] It therefore, provides the skills to work and the will to work, both of which equal effective teamwork.

Lt. Col. Thomas J. Barnham, writing in INFANTRY, defines leadership communications as "the exchange of ideas, information, attitudes, and understandings between a military leader and his subordinates which results in the establishment of mutual confidence, trust, respect, and pride in themselves, their unit, and each other."[6] Ineffective communications leads to misunderstanding, lack of motivation, insecurity, conflict and an inability on the part of subordinates to make effective decisions.

In essence, through communication the commander keeps his men informed and insures that they understand their mission. By proper application of the communication process the commander can favorably influence morale, esprit de corps, discipline and proficiency.

The communications process

No matter which medium is employed, the ability to communicate is a six-step process. This sequence, from the conception of the idea by the sender, to its reception by the receiver, may be illustrated thus:

In the first step, the sender has an idea, some thought or fact he wishes to send to the designated receiver. He then organizes and transmits his thoughts into symbols that best fit the transmission medium he will use. While encoding this message, he checks for clarity, conciseness and completeness.

During the transmission step, the sender decides for sure which medium he will use and selects the channel or chain of command his message will follow.

In the last three steps of the communications process, the receiver takes the initiative. He receives the message, then translates or decodes the words into thought.

During the fifth step, the decoding process, the message is most vulnerable. For it is here that the perception of the receiver will most vary with that of the sender. "The meanings of words are not in the words; they are in us," wrote S. I. Hayakawa.[7] The meaning the receiver gives to the message will not be exactly the same as the sender's. Thus, it is essential that in its original form the message be rational and coherent.

In the final step of the process, the receiver is expected to take some action, either by responding to the message, rejecting the message, asking for more information, or by storing the message away. The response taken enables the sender to determine if the receiver understood the message. This is especially true for messages which require some sort of feedback to the sender. The action of the receiver completes the six step communication process.

The commander is able to determine the accuracy and effectiveness of his orders and directives by measuring the responsiveness,

including the response time of his command. For it is understandable that "men will respond more quickly to orders when they are clear, concise and easily understood."[8]

The use of symbols

Throughout the history of civilization, man has employed many means to communicate, from rudimentary pictures, sounds and letters, to the development of comprehensive, complex languages. Whatever the means employed, man communicates by means of symbols — either words, pictures, or actions.

Obviously, man does most of his communicating through the use of words or language. We even think and rationalize with words. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that words are subjected to the reader's or listener's interpretation of them. A study conducted by William Sattler in 1957 discovered that the Oxford Dictionary recorded an average of 28 separate meanings for each of the 500 most-used words in the English language.[9]

Pictures, another type of symbol, are of extreme importance in the military. We use films, posters, maps, charts, television, and a multitude of other pictures as a means of communicating information. However, pictures also are subject to individual interpretation.

Finally, actions, particularly our own actions, are a means of communicating. Whenever the commander takes action, or fails to take action, he is communicating a thought to his subordinates. It is by his actions that the commander sets the example and transmits to the members of his command what is expected from them.

Readability

Since meaning is subjective and therefore difficult to transmit, it is imperative that the sender use symbols, whether written or verbal, that can be simplified so that the receiver can more easily understand them. A person communicates more effectively by adapting his words and style to fit the language level and ability of his receiver. Since the main purpose of communications is to transmit information, the commander should consider the target group of his communication and try to fit his message to the receiver's needs. Davis, William Himstreet and Wayne Baty stress the importance of readability, or the making of writing and speech more understandable. All three emphasize the importance of using short, simple words and phrases; of using familiar words; and of using words economically.[10]

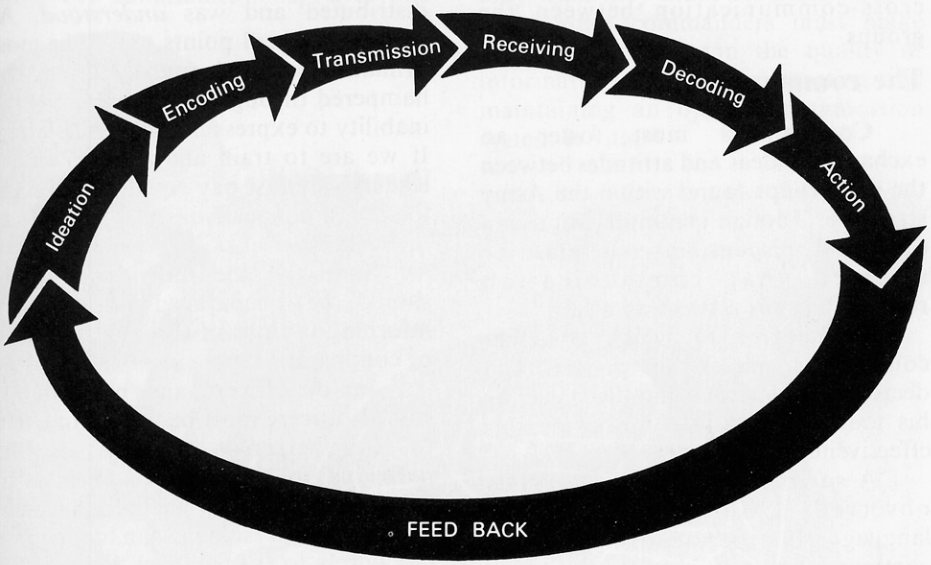


Figure 1

Listening and cybernetics

Still another method of communicating effectively is listening and using cybernetics. Both parts of this method are very important in voice communications.

In verbal communications, the receiver's responses come back to the sender in the form of symbols. The result is a give-and-take situation whereby the speaker can adjust his message to fit the response of his receiver. This capability to adjust to the receiver is an advantage of voice communication. However, this advantage is lost if the speaker does not listen. Listening, then, is a dual responsibility of speaker and listener and is important to all participants in the conversational exchange.

Listening is made up of two skills, "the first being the ability to hear words and discriminate meanings; the second, and more important, the ability to identify feelings."[11] They further identify one of the problems in the communication process as the incompatibility of words and feelings. Thus, effective listening and insightful, non-threatening responses can compatibly match words and feelings.

From a military perspective, listening is essential to the flow of information between echelons of command and can insure the input of information from subordinates to the commander. In this article, "Let's Listen For A Change," Capt. Thomas Meyer points out "that any communication process that does not contain specific and constructive feedback is of little value."[12]

In conjunction with listening is the technique of cybernetics, which is the process by which the speaker listens to the effect of his remarks and then adjusts his continuing conversation to fit the needs of the situation. In short, the speaker listens to keep himself informed of the effect of his communication and then adjusts his response. Through cybernetics, the commander can keep the conversation directed to the subject matter under discussion. This is an especially useful aid in conferences and staff meetings.

In sum, listening with our full physical and mental abilities should be

the norm in the communicating process — the means by which we can measure the effectiveness of our own communication style. As Meyer says, "By trying to receive and interpret every message, we can guarantee the most effective communication with our men and consequently develop a fruitful human relationship. The obvious result of a series of good individual relationships in any organization is a highly effective organization, be it a civilian firm or a rifle company."[13]

The science of semantics

In the receipt of any message, semantics, the science of meaning, plays an important role, for effective communication requires that meaning be transmitted. Since meaning is determined by our environment and emotions, it is often subjective.

The receiver has a frame of reference, molded by his environment and ego-related beliefs. A message which challenges these beliefs and values may be rejected or distorted. This distortion, called semantic noise, can be reduced if the communicator is careful to define his terms and adjust his vocabulary to the interests and needs of the audience he wishes to reach.[14]

Remembering that words are not things or qualities, but only symbols for them, the speaker must give careful consideration to the interpretation his audience will give to the word symbols he uses. "Precise meaning can be expressed only if words are precisely chosen."[15] Words must be chosen which express the exact shade of meaning the speaker wishes to convey.

Because of this difficulty with meaning, "it is helpful to separate in our minds inference from facts."[16] One should not read into the message that which is not really present. Davis concludes that it is easy to make inferences, but hard to be factual, though both are essential in most communications.

An effective leader will develop more effective communications when he has the wisdom to know the difference between fact and inference in both the transmitting and receiving of messages.

The responsibility for communication

The responsibility for developing interpersonal communications runs the full gamut from the chief of staff to the bottom man in the chain of command. The Army recognizes the communications problem and is presently emphasizing the importance of interpersonal communications.

Although the importance of communication has been stressed in both FM 22-100, *Military Leadership,* and FM 101-5, *Staff Officers Field Manual: Staff Organization and Procedures,* the Army, like any rigidly structured organization, is susceptible to a communications gap. This gap usually occurs when senior officers talk almost exclusively to other senior officers or to senior noncommissioned officers, and junior officers talk to only their peers or to junior noncommissioned officers and troops — with little cross-communication between the groups.

The commander

Commanders must foster an exchange of ideas and attitudes between the sub-groups found within the Army structure. Though communication is a command responsibility, it must be stressed that communication responsibility is a two-way affair.

The degree to which a higher commander makes his policies and decisions understood and accepted by his unit will greatly contribute to his effectiveness as a leader.

A soviet Army Col. I. Degtyarev observed, "Mastering command language is an irreplaceable part of the commander's occupation. And the main thing in this is a good knowledge of one's specialty and a high level of operational-tactical training."[17]

By his actions and his application of the leadership principles, the commander can develop, within his subordinates, the desire to contribute to the useful interchange of information. As a part of the Army's Organizational Effectiveness Program, the commander must often take the initiative to create a more free and open communication environment.[18]

The subordinates

Staff officers and junior officers are asked to interpret and disseminate the commander's desires throughout their assigned areas of responsibility. They should act as the channel by which communications flow vertically within the command structure. At the same time, they should be communicating with each other to insure adequate staff coordination.

One function of the staff officer that gets overlooked is his responsibility to insure that the message is passed along, either upward or downward. Far too often, staff officers have been content to issue verbal or written directives without following up to insure that the message was distributed or understood. We have frequently observed the commander or the staff officer who could not understand why the troops did not get the word; "After all, the order was published," becomes the stock reply. In actuality, they should be insuring that the order was distributed and was *understood.* As Donald Halbedl points out, "The most brilliant potential manager may be hampered throughout his career by the inability to express himself articulately. If we are to train and develop future leaders we must pay equal attention to their communicative skills as well as their managerial skill."[19]

Similarly, the individual soldier should be encouraged to pass on information upward through the chain of command.

Junior officers and noncommissioned officers must be willing to listen to the personal problems of the individual soldier. By having his fear of being criticized or penalized negated, the individual soldier can contribute immensely to the feedback process.

In summation then, the responsibility for interpersonal communications is found at every level of the command structure. However, the commander must always be cognizant of the fact that he is ultimately responsible for developing effective communications within his unit or organization. The commander who has the respect, confidence, and loyal cooperation of his staff and the members of his command will have little difficulty in effecting the interchange of ideas.

The communication system

Within the US Army, as in any other army or in any social structure, there are various sub-groups, such as senior commanders; senior staff

officers; junior officers; senior noncommissioned officers; junior noncommissioned officers; Infantrymen; Signal Corps Officers and so on. Each of these sub-groups is engaged in intra-group and inter-group communications. It is primarily through inter-group communications that one observes the flow of communications both vertically and laterally. The military organizational structure provides for the flow of communications between commanders, from commanders to subordinates, and from subordinates to commanders.

Because of the chain of command, every echelon of the command is a link in the communication chain. In other words, in the upward and downward flow of communications, everyone between the sender and the receiver is tasked with the handling of the message, and thus acts as a communication link.

However, inherent within the chain of command is the potential for misinformation or a lack of valid information.

Organizational elements develop areas of self-interest that may result in a filtering of valid information to fit the needs of a sub-system rather than the needs of the total system. This filtering phenomena combined with the competitive nature of the Army's personnel rating system has the adverse effect of creating a lack of assertiveness among subordinates to provide critical feedback to superiors. Far too often subordinates tend to tell their superiors only what they think superiors want to hear. Since commanders must make decisions based upon the quality of information available, promoting and maintaining an open communication system is vital.[20]

Downward Communication

Downward communication in an organization merely means that the flow of communication is from a higher to lower authority. It might be directed from a commander to a staff officer, to a subordinate commander, to a subordinate unit or to an individual. "Downward communications are usually better than anyone realizes and frequently more accurate than those at higher levels want them to be."[21] He further points out that this is largely due to the fact that subordinates react most effectively to those matters that they judge to be of greatest personal interest to the boss. The same theory may be applied to the military structure, by substituting the commander for the boss. However, effective downward communications must insure that the subordinate acts in the best interest of the command and not just the commander. Furthermore, everyone should insure that the message being sent down is accurate.

In order to guarantee effective downward communications, the commander and everyone involved in the chain of command should be guided by the following:

1) Be informed. If the commander or communicator is not knowledgeable on the subject matter, he cannot effectively communicate information.

2) Develop a positive communication attitude. Take an interest in communicating with subordinates. Within the limitations imposed by security, be willing to share that information that the subordinates think they need. This also implies positive listening.

3) Plan for communications. Develop a suitable plan for communication so that subordinates can expect to be informed.

4) Gain the confidence of your subordinates. This can be achieved over a period of time by insuring that the information you pass on is accurate, complete, and timely.

5) Do not over-communicate. The commander sould communicate only that information which is timely and pertinent.

The commander should remember that people downward of the communication flow have a number of communication needs concerning their role and function in the command structure. Anxieties can be overcome if information which affects them directly comes to them as news, not as confirmation of what they already know.

Upward communication

Upward communications, or the flow of communications traffic from the bottom to the top is much more difficult to attain, especially in a system as rigid as the Army. "Upward communications are poor in most hierarchial organizations because perception downward is poorer than perception upward. Add to that the 'filters' of management levels that dilute upward communications. As you go higher, the word gets more garbled, edited, or even worse, eliminated entirely."[22] This, however, is not to imply that effective upward communication cannot be achieved.

Upward communications must be encouraged at all levels of command. The commander may accomplish this either by an open door policy, if this is his style and/or by seeing to it that the junior officers and noncommissioned officers of the command are communicating with the troops.

"An open door policy, while threatening to some officers and noncommissioned officers is not meant to dispense with the integrity of the chain of command. Rather, the junior officer must be willing to talk to the individual soldier to insure that the man does get passed up the chain when he so desires."[23] While adopting the open door policy, the commander must prod his subordinates into being more receptive to the information coming upward.

The commander's participation in discussions and encouragement of formal staff studies, together with frequently conducted staff meetings and conferences, are still other ways of insuring upward communications.

Similarly, staff officers should be encouraged to be candid in presenting their staff study to the commander. They should never consider telling the commander what they feel he wants to hear. Rather, they should be guided by what they honestly believe to be the best interest of the command.

Because of the unique role of the staff within the command structure, inter and intra staff communications are most important. The staff officer is more mobile than a line officer and thus has a greater opportunity to receive and disseminate information. He is also more easily motivated to communicate because his role forces him to coordinate with other staff officers. Also of importance is the fact that the staff officer has a shorter communication channel to the commander. Thus, because of these functions, the staff officer should: be trained in communication skill, recognize the importance of his communication role and make full use of his role in the communication chain.

Effective use of upward communications will insure a stimulation of the individual's interest and participation, the receipt of valuable information and a better understanding of staff problems and views. It will also serve to evaluate the effectiveness of downward communications.

Lateral communication

Because coordination is very important, cross or lateral communication is necessary, especially at lower levels in the chain of command.

To stimulate lateral communication, let us look at Henri Fayol's bridge for cross communications:[24]

Fayol's bridge illustrates that it would be senseless to have J communicate with K by going up the chain of command to A and then again to K. Rather, it would only tend to negate effective cross communications. The same condition would exist if J was required to communicate with I, or with someone else outside the chain of command. Fayol encourages direct lateral communication concerning a matter if the sender and receiver have the authority and the ability to handle the situation, and if two requirements are satisfied:

1

Each communicator receives in advance, the permission of his immediate superior.

2

The communicator keeps his superior appraised of all significant results of the lateral communication.

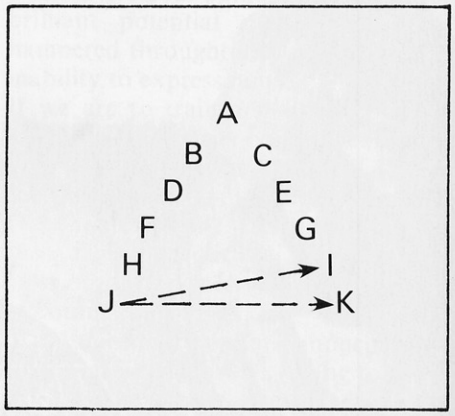


Figure 2

This theory does not present any difficulty for inter staff communications because it maintains in a practical manner, the integrity of the chain of command. To this end, commanders should be made aware of the practicality of lateral communication and should encourage it whenever possible.

This, then, summarizes the communication system within a command. It would be wise to remember that the communication system is so affected by human factors that it can never be perfect. Rather, the commander, the staff officer, and every subordinate within the command must continually work to improve and maintain effective interpersonal communications.

Applying the principles

As has already been demonstrated, the commander has the ultimate

responsibility for developing an effective means of interpersonal communication within his unit. He should always be cognizant of his role as a communicator and should continually measure the effectiveness of the communication system within his command. As FM 22-100 states, "The degree to which a higher commander makes his policies and decisions understood and accepted by his organization will materially affect his effectiveness as a leader....Without effective communications, there can be no cooperative action."[25]

Every commander, therefore, should assess the situation in his organization to determine the effectiveness of the interpersonal communications within the chain of command. If the command is lacking in morale or esprit, is demonstrating a poor performance record, or is having a discipline problem, then the commander should take a closer look at his communications program. Certainly, a shortcoming in any one of these areas is indicative that the men are not getting the message. The result is that the effectiveness of the unit is impaired.

If and when this happens, commanders at all levels should review their communication style. Perhaps the commanders are not communicating, but over-publishing, thus burdening the subordinates with directives and memos they neither read nor understand.

Also, there is a tendency on the part of some communicators to depend more on verbiage than on substance. This results in "Gobbledygook ... a pretentious, wordy, involved, sometimes unintelligible jargon ... presently strangling all forms of communication."[26]

Moreover, the commander might not be communicating effectively with timely and informative messages, leaving the downward flow of communications susceptible to rumors or inaccurate information. Conversely, flow of upward communications might be subject to the "filtering out" by subordinates.

In sum, interpersonal communication is so closely allied with human relations that one cannot exist without the other. Thus, it is possible for a unit's short-comings to be traced to a poor communication system.

Developing a plan for improvement

Interpersonal communication is a human relation function, and several programs now being used effectively throughout the Army may be employed, including the use of junior officer and soldier councils, racial coordinating groups, rap sessions and so on.

An effective Command Information Program is vital to satisfy the communication needs of subordinates.

Equally important is the need for commanders at all levels to seek self-improvement in the area of interpersonal communications. Leadership and management classes should be established and utilized.

The commander should also use all available communication media to disseminate his message to the troops. This will also insure that the communication flow, either downward or upward is not impeded or filtered. Perhpas the most important function of the small unit leader is to mediate this flow of information. It cannot be taken for granted that because information is passed on, it has reached its ultimate destination.

Above all, the commander must be concerned about a positive communication program, and he must signal this concern to his subordinates by his actions. This positive attitude will make the subordinates feel informed and will insure the passage of communications upward. A commander must insure that every plan of command action should have a plan for communicating it to those who will be affected.[27]

Once the commander has implemented his program for improved interpersonal communications, he should continually test it for its effectiveness. If the commander has the respect, confidence and loyal cooperation of his subordinates, and if the unit's morale and performance are

effective, then he can consider his communication program to be effective.

However, this does not mean that the commander should not continually strive to maintain and improve his communication system. As Emery states, "the communicator must continually work at making his message understood by his target audience. This is especially true in mass communications when little opportunity is afforded the receiver for feedback."[28]

Maintaining an effective interpersonal communication system is hard work that can produce excellent long range benefits. An effective unit *must* have good communications. As Thomas points out, "There is little doubt that the key to understanding and caring, to leading and motivating, is good interpersonal communications."[29]

Endnotes

[1]Pp. 21-23.

[2]Donald Halbedl, "To Be A Good Public Speaker Is A Help Toward Genuine Success In The Army," *C-E Trends*, (Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey), December 1970, p. 15.

[3]W. Paul Jones and Quentin Johnson, *Essays on Thinking and Writing in Science, Engineering and Business*, (Dubuque, Iowa, 1963), pp. 120-121.

[4]Keith Davis, *Human Relations at Work*, (New York, 1962), p. 344.

[5]Davis, pp. 346-347.

[6]"Leadership Communication and the Black Soldier," *Infantry*, Vol. 64, No. 4, (July-August 1974), p. 28.

[7]*Language in Thought and Action*, (New York, 1949), p. 292.

[8]FM 22-100, p. 23.

[9]Davis, p. 353.

[10]Davis, pp. 355-358. William C. Himstreet and Wayne Murlin Baty, *Business Communications*, (California, 1965), pp. 53-70.

[11]Roy Kern and Capt. Robert F. Radcliffe, "Effective Communication," *Infantry*, Vol. 64, No. 4, (July-August 1974), p. 38.

[12]*Infantry*, Vol. 64, No. 4, (July-August 1974), p. 35.

[13]P. 13.

[14]Edwin Emery, Philip H. Ault, and Warren K. Agee, *Introduction to Mass Communications*, (New York, 1973), p. 8.

[15]Alan H. Munroe, *Principles and Types of Speech*, 3rd Edition, (Chicago, 1949), pp. 358-359.

[16]Davis, pp. 351-352.

[17]"Command Language," *Military Review*, Vol. LIV, No. 8, (August 1974), p. 29.

[18]US Army Command and General Staff College, *RB12-2. Organizational Effectiveness*, (January 1978), p. 33.

[19]"Management Training as a Key to Leadership," *C-E Trends*, (June 1972), p. 27.

[20]RB12-2, pp. 32-33.

[21]Bruce Harriman, "Up and Down the Communications Ladder," *Harvard Business Review*, (September-October 1974), pp. 144-145.

[22]Harriman, p. 146.

[23]Maj. Robert B. Thomas, "Common Problems," *Infantry*, Vol. 64, No. 4, (July-August 1974), p. 37.

[24]Davis, pp. 377-378.

[25]P. 38.

[26]Argus J. Tressider, "On Gobbledygook," *Military Review*, Vol. LIV, No. 4, (April 1974), p. 16.

[27]Davis, p. 369.

[28]Emery, et. al., pp. 8-9.

[29]P. 37.

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