Zicht op Interne Communicatie. Ontwerp van een bedrijfseconomisch georiënteerd diagnose-instrument.
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Introduction

Communication, the process in which a sender, through signs and signals, tries to transmit a message to a receiver with the intention that the message is decoded into the intended information, plays a crucial role in organizations. Accordingly, the communication aspect of organizations gets more and more attention in organization literature and the number of books on the subject is nowadays almost uncountable. To read these books, however, is to develop a disconcerting feeling because internal communication and its organizational context are hardly ever treated in an integrated way. This has two consequences. First, communication is not analyzed within the boundaries of its organizational context which implicitly suggests that the communication can be changed without changing the organization structure, culture, etc. and, second, the contribution of the communication to a effective and efficient performance of the organization can not be judged. This study however, tries to present such an integration. To be more precise, it describes the design process of a diagnosis instrument for internal communication, in which communication is related to its organizational context and is seen as a co-producer for organizational effectiveness and efficiency. This instrument is named Diagnosis instrument for Organizational Communication, abbreviated to DOC.

Diagnosis and diagnosis instruments

In this study diagnosis is defined as the autonomous research process within a problem solving process. Ideally it is based on a certain systematic approach and results in an informed judgement about the organization as a whole or a specific function or aspect. The approach is founded on a conceptual model of the organization: an abstraction of organizational reality in which the matters that are crucial for the performance of the organization are highlighted. This conceptual model is translated into a conceptual diagnosis model which can be described as a-priori notions about the problem that needs to be analyzed. This diagnosis model provides the basis for the collection of data, the judgement of the situation and the design of solutions for detected problems.

The systematic approach can be incorporated in a ready-made research tool, a diagnosis instrument, which ideally describes the following components:
- the conceptual organization model;
- the conceptual diagnosis model;
- the norms on which the judgement is based;
- the diagnosis process (research phases, the attitude towards the organization);
- the diagnosis techniques (methods of data collection, analysis and judgement);
the diagnosis system (the collection of indicators and operators). In practice however, these components are hardly ever all explicitly specified: especially the conceptual models often fail. This is a significant shortcoming because the usefulness of diagnosis instruments in future problem situations as well as the quality of the results of the diagnosis will have to be assessed on the basis of the specification of their components. The existing instruments for the diagnosis of internal communication also suffer from this shortcoming. Besides integration of the communication and its context, explicit foundation on a conceptual model of the organization and a conceptual diagnosis model is the other surplus value of DOC.

The design process

The design process of DOC consisted of three phases:
- a theoretical phase, in which the relation between (1) communication and its organizational context and (2) communication and organizational effectiveness and efficiency is elaborated and the first design of the instrument is specified;
- an empirical phase, in which the first design is tested in three diagnosis/intervention projects;
- an evaluation phase, in which the first design is evaluated and improved on the basis of the three projects.

The theoretical phase

An organization can be described as an, in intention, effective and efficient cooperation of people using means. As an open system it operates within an environment to which it has to adapt. In order to create and maintain effectiveness and efficiency decisions have to be made. Accordingly, an organization can be conceptualized as a collection of decision making processes.

For reasons of efficiency, in organizations the production of goods and services is divided in partial tasks and related decisions. These tasks and decisions are assigned to functions and, because in the end together they have to result in the product, have to be coordinated. Coordinated behaviour can be achieved through several coordination mechanisms: standardization of work processes, of outcomes and of skills and norms, lateral relations and direct supervision. The choice of a specific mechanism is contingent on the stability and complexity of the environment and the technology, and on some other factors such as the size and age of the organization. Every mechanism makes specific demands on the information available to functions.

Trying to bring about coordinated behaviour is being complicated by three factors:
- information in an organization is not symmetric, which makes communication necessary;
- members of organizations do not necessarily extract the same expectations about and images of the goals of the organization, their own tasks and the interrelation with other tasks from the same data;
- organizations are not holistic entities but coalitions of (groups of) members with different, not only economic, goals and interests. The extend in which the extracted
images and expectations are perceived as legitimate and are being accepted influences behaviour.

Accordingly, control in connection with coordination is trying to create accepted and legitimate images and expectations that will result in coordinated behaviour. Communication is a very important instrument at this. Communication, however, is neither unproblematic nor priceless.

The specific demands the coordination mechanisms make on the available information can be translated into demands on the communication system. The communication system can be described by the elements *structure*, *means* of communication, the *specific use* of these means and the *image of the communication practices* the members of the organization hold.

From all this, after adding some related aspects on the basis of literature, a conceptual model results in which the communication system is contingent on the coordination mechanisms, which for their part are contingent on contextual factors such as the environment, the technology, etc. Besides this, the communication system functions within the limitations and possibilities dictated by the organizational context such as the organization structure, the culture, etc.

Summary

In this model communication problems are caused by:

- an inadequate fit between the contextual factors and the coordination mechanisms;

Figure 1. The communication system and its context
- an inadequate fit between the coordination mechanisms and the communication system.

On the basis of a elaborate study of literature theoretical dimensions are selected to describe the elements in this model. These dimensions and the model together form the conceptual diagnosis model. The dimensions are finally translated into indicators and items (the diagnosis system).

Three sources of norms are contained in DOC: organization and communication theory, the goals of the organization and the members of the organization. The norms based on theory are specified in the instrument in advance. The other norms are part of the diagnosis. In addition to these three sources, the professional user of the instrument, the diagnostician, brings in his expertise.

DOC specifies four methods to collect the data that are necessary to determine the scores on the theoretical dimensions:
- document analysis, which primarily serves to get acquainted with the organization and as a preparation for the interviews and the questionnaire;
- focused interviews, to get further insight in the organization and its context and to collect information necessary for fine-tuning the questionnaire to the specific organization. The interviews leave much room for topics brought in by the interviewees. The first round of interviews is limited to key figures, in the following rounds respondents are selected on the basis of issues pointed out;
- a questionnaire, containing Likert-scale items and some open questions. In small organizations the questionnaire is send to all members of the organization, in larger organizations a stratified sample is used;
- observation, to get a first hand impression of communication practices in meetings and gatherings.

Finally the instrument also specifies the phases of the diagnosis process, the attitude towards the organization and some guidelines for formulating recommendations.

The empirical phase

The first design of DOC was tested in diagnosis/intervention projects in a police organization, a large industrial organization and a department of a large services organization. The organizations were selected on their supposed differences in organizational context.

All projects consisted of four phases:
- problem recognition;
- diagnosis;
- intervention;
- evaluation.

Problem recognition was done by the management of the organizations. In the diagnosis DOC was used to describe the contextual factors, the internal communication and the communication problems and their causes. The diagnosis resulted in broad recommenda-
Summary

The experiences and the data collected during the three projects were used to evaluate and improve the first design of DOC on the basis of three overarching criteria: efficiency, scientific soundness and practical relevance. These criteria were given a different concrete form for the different components of the instrument. For the questionnaire for example scientific soundness was translated into a cyclical procedure for the assessment of both validity and reliability.

Some of the more important adjustments in the first design of DOC on the basis of the evaluation were:
- the inclusion of power and reporting of meetings in the conceptual diagnosis model and the diagnosis system;
- the elimination of two dimensions, a couple of items and the rearranging of one scale;
- the elimination of almost all open questions because they did not provide any additional information.

On the whole the quality of the diagnosis instrument proved to be satisfying.

In the diagnosis/intervention projects the different sources of norms appeared to have different functions. The norms based on organization and communication theory guide the diagnostician through the complex data, give a first rough impression of communication problems but do not have enough detail to ground the judgement of a specific situation upon. In this respect the norms on the basis of the goals of the organization already provide more hold, but especially the norms from the members of the organization prove to be very valuable. They also give an insight in the basis for changes.

Concluding remarks

In the light of the aim of this study - to design a diagnosis instrument that is based on an explicit conceptual diagnosis model in which internal communication and its organizational context are integrated and communication is seen as a co-producer for organizational effectiveness and efficiency - three concluding remarks can be made. First, the conceptual model aimed at has indeed been developed. Second, the diagnosis instrument that is grounded on this conceptual model meets important criteria concerning scientific soundness, practical relevance and efficiency. Third, in the three diagnosis/intervention projects the use of the instrument correlated with communication improvement. All in all DOC provides a sound basis for the diagnosis and improvement of internal communication in the future. These future projects can then be an input for further theorizing and improvement of the instrument.
Summary

The communication norms are selected to form indicators and into the communication theory, the norms based on norms are part of the instrument, the organization and its context and to the specific organization, in larger practices in meetings process, the attitude recommendations.

In the diagnosis/intervention projects the different sources of norms appeared to have different functions. The norms based on organization and communication theory guide the diagnostician through the complex data, give a first rough impression of communication problems but do not have enough detail to ground the judgement of a specific situation upon. In this respect the norms on the basis of the goals of the organization already provide more hold, but especially the norms from the members of the organization prove to be very valuable. They also give an insight in the basis for changes.

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