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Zicht op interne communicatie

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Summary

Zicht op interne communicatie. De functionaliteit van teksten.
(Understanding internal communication. The functionality of texts)

This study on internal communication focuses on the following questions:

1. Is it possible, while using theories from the field of language usage, to describe (un)desired functioning of oral or written texts within an organization and to explain this (dis)functioning?
2. Do suggested changes to the texts result in a correct, i.e. desired, functioning of those texts within the internal communication system of the organization concerned?

These questions are discussed successively in the first part of this Ph.D. thesis, Chapters 1 through 4. This part of the thesis comprises the following: firstly, the analysis of internal communication; secondly, an instrument of communication diagnosis and thirdly, a description of communication problems within three organizations. In the second part, Chapters 5 through 8, the focus is on *verbal* communication. This part is a report on experimental research on texts in which the text function has been made explicit. The research involved three organizations.

A Diagnosis of internal communication

The first four chapters of the thesis contain a (concise) explanation of the methods currently used to study internal communication, followed by the presentation of a model of diagnosis for internal communication, that was used to study the internal communication of the three organizations.

Regarding research on internal communication, Chapter 2 states that there is increasing interest nowadays for this subject, both with different organizations and with students. Especially *organizational scientists*, however, have shown an interest in internal communication. The methods organizational scientists use to study internal communication are strongly influenced by the different schools and approaches, that can be discerned within the organizational sciences. The model of diagnosis presented here is in keeping with the contingency approach, that sees the organization as having strong ties with situation, time and environment.

Different publications concerning research on *verbal* internal communication show time and again that, in order to adequately describe the functioning of texts within organizations, it is necessary to have a model at one's disposal for describing the (organizational) context. To this day, little or no Dutch-language publications are known that explain how the functioning of texts can be related to (parts of) the organizational context.

Instruments are available, however, for judging the channels, structures and means of communication used. These instruments are known as communication audits. The data gathered through audits is contrasted with certain norms, that were set beforehand, after due consultation with those concerned. By comparing the data to the norms, it is established which channels, means et cetera do not function well. As a final step in such audits, solutions to the established problems are proposed.

Major objections were raised to the use of audits, such as the high level of standardization, the limited number of variables that can be included, problems of measurement and problems of interpretation.

In spite of these objections, it was decided to use this instrument for making a communication diagnosis in the present study. An audit offers a relatively easy way to acquire a large quantity of information on internal communication. It also makes it possible to study a problem, that has not yet been strictly defined, and enables comparisons with other organizations, provided that identical or similar audits were used.

Chapter 3 describes a diagnosis model of internal communication. This model was developed in collaboration with Dr. C. Reezigt of the Faculty of Economic Sciences at the University of Groningen (now the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Groningen). The background and operation of this model are described in Dr. Reezigt's thesis *Zicht op interne communicatie. Ontwerp van een bedrijfseconomisch georiënteerd diagnose-instrument* (Understanding internal communication. Design of a business-oriented diagnosis instrument) (1995).

The main focus of this conceptual organization model is especially coordination and control of organizational activities. Within this framework, attention is paid to the acceptance of the decisions taken. Both in controlling an organization and in gaining acceptance, communication plays an important part.

This conceptual diagnosis model consists of the elements *Structure, Culture, Technology* and *Strategy*, which are then related to internal communication, i.e. the *communication system*. This system is subdivided into the following four parts: firstly, the *communication structure*; secondly, the *means of communication*; thirdly, the *specific use* of these means and finally, the *image of communication practices*.

The diagnosis model is applied to three organizations, in order to describe the communication problems. These are the three organizations concerned:

- a. a police organization;
- b. a production organization;
- c. a commercial service company.

Firstly, Chapter 4 summarizes each organization in view of the elements mentioned before. Secondly, it describes the internal communication, including a discussion of strong and weak points. Thirdly, it formulates recommendations to improve the internal communication. The descriptions of the internal communication and the recommendations have been presented to the respective managements of the organizations concerned, in the form of a report.

In consultation with the management, the report was followed by a threefold decision: firstly, which recommendations should be implemented by the organization; secondly, which part the researchers would play in this implementation and thirdly, when these intervention activities would be set on the agenda. This period of intervention lasted about one year. After a period during which the researchers had withdrawn, the diagnosis was repeated, in order to establish the effects of the implementation of the recommendations.

One of the communication problems concerns the *status and function of the information* offered to staff members in the organizations. This problem is the main focus of my study and is elaborated further in the second part of the thesis. I shall now summarize and explain these problems for the three organizations.

a. The police organization

The police organization had a staff of 50. Due to the transition to a *proactive* procedure at the organization, the following goals were of prime importance: policy participation was to be realized at the base of the organization; responsibilities were to be delegated as low in the organization hierarchy as possible; the organization's different activities were to be better geared to one another, in order to enable the management to coordinate tasks better.

One of the means to be used in order to reach these goals was the so-called 'working plan'. This plan was tailored to concrete police problems and specified the following questions: which tasks were to be completed in the immediate future, and when precisely; which means should be used; and which moments of measurement would be chosen to establish, whether the plan had indeed had the desired result. Examples of such plans are 'Curbing bicycle theft' and 'Discouragement of fencing'.

In several areas, the internal communication system of the organization did not function well enough. It was difficult to raise the working plans within the organization. Furthermore, the system facilitated neither adequate response to the plans from staff members nor relay of this response to the management team. In other words, the possibility of adequate *feedback* was lacking in the organization.

b. The production organization

The production organization had a staff of 750. The organization's goal was to significantly raise the management's level of efficiency. The organization was forced to do so by a policy change at the parent company and the government, making increased market orientation necessary.

The company was characterized by a high degree of separation between different services and departments. It was a collection of 'little kingdoms', rather than a cooperating organization. The management wanted the communication system to allow them to reach every unit within the organization, and to make feedback possible. Feedback was also important for checking whether staff members were reached.

To make all this possible, it was important that the status and function of all communicated information was made clear. The premeasurement showed, that the purpose of circulated information was currently unclear.

c. The service company

The research at the service company was carried out at one of the company's head offices, with a staff of 250. The company is part of a privatized government organization, that, at the time of research, still had a monopoly in a considerable part of its services. The loss of this monopoly was the management's reason for a more market-oriented operation.

For the service company to become more market-oriented, feedback from staff should be made possible. A further reason to stimulate feedback was to ensure some level of involvement and motivation on the part of the staff, whose position had become less secure due to the privatization.

Also the management of this organization wanted the internal communication system to allow them to reach every unit. The management furthermore wished to receive feedback, within the not too distant future and from different departments and regions.

It was established, that a considerable amount of information was being offered to staff members. It remained unclear, however, whether the information actually was reaching them. In any case, feedback seldom took place.

B Communication problems as processing problems

The problems in the area of information's *status and function* are further described and explained in Chapter 5, on the basis of theories from the field of cognitive text processing. The intention of the sender (the management) can be described as follows: to allow staff members to *respond* to the information (policy proposals) being offered.

In this study, the 'functions' of these texts are equated with 'the expression of the request for response'. 'Function' is thus equated with the concept of *illocution*, as developed by Searle (1977).

According to Searle, a function can roughly be realized in two different ways. One way is entirely *implicitly*. In those cases, staff members themselves attribute the function intended by the management to the information offered. The other extreme is entirely *explicitly*. In those cases, the function is made explicit in the text.

Until the time of research, text function at the organizations was realized entirely implicitly. The management (wrongly) supposed that staff members themselves would be able to attribute the correct function to the text. The management furthermore supposed that staff members would realize the function, and give feedback accordingly.

The understanding of functions, for that matter, does not demand exceptional skills. In everyday conversation and other (formal or informal) communication practices, competent language users are well able to give an adequate interpretation of the other's intentions (for example: 'she/he is asking a question').

Therefore, the main question in Chapter 5 is the following: 'why don't staff members adequately interpret the function of the information offered?'. In order to answer this main question, a more fundamental issue is considered: which kind of knowledge is used in processing texts? This issue is considered on the basis of explanations by Ensink (1992), Bax (1995), Craik & Jennings (1992) and Schank (1982) of the cognitive text processing system.

In view of this theoretical explanation, a relation is established with the knowledge staff members have of the customs and habits in the organization. More concretely put, the issue here is the knowledge of the context in which the information is brought up. In this case, the context is the *work meeting* (discussion of progress). Staff members have knowledge of the parts that participants play in this type of meeting and of the function that information normally has there. The text is processed by staff members against the background of this knowledge.

At the time, in the organizations concerned, the staff on the one hand thought of work meetings as meetings, in which *announcements* were made and *instructions* were given by the management. The intention of the management, on the other hand, was to receive response to a text containing a policy concept. This same text was interpreted by staff members as an announcement on tasks to be executed.

In interpreting the text, staff members use their knowledge of the theme of the text, of the organization's communication system and of its communication culture. The

communication problem can be traced to the difference between the *actual* intention of the management and the *attributed* intention. The attributed intention is what staff members *think* the management intends with the information.

To solve the communication problem, the intention has to be made explicit. If this solution is to be implemented, obviously the communication system has to be adapted first. By explicitly mentioning the function of each text, internal processing is more clearly focussed on a goal, thereby reducing the amount of processing involved. The interpretative effort to arrive at a significant processing goal decreases (Craik & Jennings 1992).

Where and how it is best to make the text function explicit, is discussed at the end of Chapter 5. The answer to this question is given after a reflection on text processing, based on Ensink (1992), Kintsch & Van Dijk (1978) and Hacquebord (1989). The conclusion is that the most attractive and most realistic view seems to be 'interactive text processing'. In accordance with this view, 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' processing strategies are used alternately. When these strategies of text processing are related to cognitive explanation, it is concluded that the best place to make the function of a text explicit, is at the beginning of the text. When this is done, a maximal use of external stimuli takes place, making it possible to immediately steer text processing into the desired direction. In other words: by making the function of a text clear at the start of text processing, the reader will immediately start processing the entire text within the framework of the desired interpretation.

Chapter 6 contains a research report on the effect of making the function of a text explicit. An extra page is added to the (existing) text. This page includes the following:

1. the part of the communication structure that is employed;
2. the demands that are placed on the structure;
3. the general function of the text (to inform, to carry out the instruction or to give a response);
4. the context of the content (relevant information related to the subject);
5. the intention of the sender, on the basis of questions.

All these elements, that make the function of the text explicit are called *function indicators*.

The expectations were the following:

1. understanding of the function of the text will increase;
2. understanding of the content of the text will increase;
3. the intended communication process (i.e. attaining feedback) will be realized;
4. satisfaction with the meetings will increase;
5. satisfaction with the internal communication will increase.

As a result of intermediate evaluation of the results, the implementation of function indicators was changed during the research. Function indicators were given both orally and in writing. As a consequence, the measurement moments were also subject to change, with obvious effects on the comparability of the results. The intermediate evaluation of the results, however, made these changes necessary.

A sum total of 9 texts were studied: 7 written policy statements, 1 oral policy presentation and 1 text from a staff magazine. The reading results were measured by means of tests, which consisted of multiple-choice questions about the content of the text. These tests

established whether readers understood the texts correctly. Whenever possible, both premeasurements and postmeasurements were held in relation to all 'reading levels' ('macro', 'meso' and 'micro'), as well as the function level. Of each text, all data relevant to the research is included in the report. This data consists of, in no particular order: the sender, the receivers, the communication structure that was used, the content of the text (including length and difficulty level), the function of the text, the results of both measurements, the meeting and an evaluation.

Chapter 7 shows the *postmeasurement* of the entire research. As with the premeasurement, the results were presented to the management. In the final chapter, Chapter 8, the results of the research on text functionality are given. A concise discussion of these results follows next, related to the five expectations mentioned in Chapter 6.

1 and 2. Understanding of the function of the text will increase and understanding of the content of the text will increase.

In a small number of cases a significant result was found, on the function level, the macro level and the micro level.

Test scores concerning status and function of the texts in the communication audits did not show a significant rise in any of the organizations.

3. The desired communication process (i.e. attaining feedback) will be realized.

The results show a positive picture at the police organization, although not significant. There was no positive result at the production organization, where the internal communication system could hardly be adapted. At the service organization, a slight improvement was noted in the case of response from the management. This improvement was certainly influenced by the use of the function indicators.

4. Satisfaction with the meetings will increase.

At the police organization a rise in the value judgement on the meetings could be established, although not significant. At the other organizations, however, there was a fall in the satisfaction ratings.

5. Satisfaction with the internal communication will increase.

All the organizations show a higher degree of satisfaction with the internal communication, although not significant.

These results are discussed in Chapter 8 and summarized below. Firstly, it should be noted, that the research involved a limited number of test subjects. Secondly, it was not possible during the intervention period to set up a properly functioning ('linking pin') communication structure at every organization in time. As it turned out, the management teams of the organizations concerned did not always have the perseverance necessary for this adaptation. When a communication structure could not be entirely realized, feedback was made much more difficult.

Finally, in Chapter 8 the diagnosis model, the theory employed, the research method and possibilities of application are evaluated.

Concerning the *diagnosis model*, it is noted that the relation between the functioning of texts and contextual variables should be made more explicit. In the model, these variables mainly concern the dimensions of the communication environment.

In relation to the *theories employed*, it is noted that an accurate insight is currently lacking in the relation between contextual variables and (elements of) the processing of complex linguistic structures, i.e. texts.

The measurement of the processing result (the measurement of text comprehension) is impeded by the complexity of the skills involved in the formation of understanding. Apart from that, the reader's processing goals are related to the reader's place and function within the organization. In the measurements, no distinction is made between this data and the processing result. Although function indicators are unambiguous when written down, the management can still influence the effect of the function indication during a meeting. These variables could not be sufficiently controlled during the research. Within the organizations, it was clearly shown to be possible to work with function indicators, but it should be noted, that adaptations regarding verbal communication presuppose an adequately functioning communication structure. Successfully adapting the internal communication structure requires perseverance on the part of those responsible, which was often lacking within the organizations.

Finally, it should be noted, that when the research was being conducted, important developments took place at the organizations, such as reorganization, possible bankruptcy and privatization, that have influenced the results.