Corporate Communications: Challenges Arising from Communication Barriers

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Communication is a broad concept with factors included in its definition is varied, although the notion of exchange of messages is constant. There are barriers inhibiting effective communication that pose a challenge to organizations in crisis. Through the understanding of communication and its barriers, organizations can be better equipped to resolve conflicts and problems. This essay discusses the definitions of communications and its barriers. Through case studies, it illustrates how these barriers inflamed challenging situations for organizations and how they were or could have been overcome.

Hund (1986) described communication as transmitting or exchanging information through messages, forming a part of individual behavior as emotions and codes are also exchanged. The elements of cultural exchange and conveying demands were also included. It has also been noted that human use communication as a means of establishing, building and continuing relationships. Based on the sum of these definitions, communication can be said to have the following schematic presentation:

Figure 1: Schematic Representation of Communication
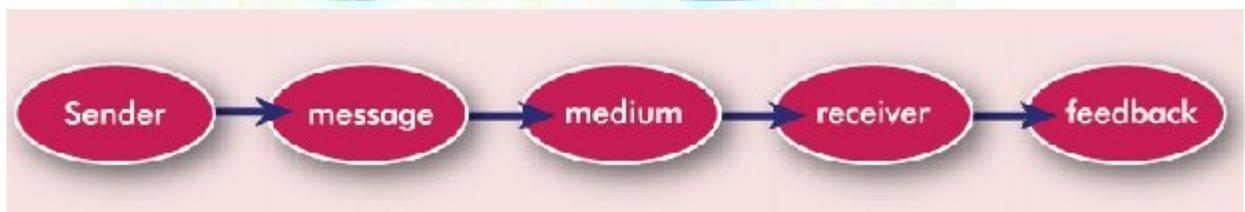
The effectiveness of communication relies greatly on the sender and receiver of the message. A set of skills, knowledge and characteristics have been assigned to each for communication to be successful. Scholars such as Mellor (1990), Baguley (1994), Burnes (1994), Libani (1997), and Sarris (1998) have proposed the following traits for the efficient transmission of messages: a) good command of the language in which the message is to be conveyed, b) ability to weave written and spoken words, c) being knowledgeable of the policies
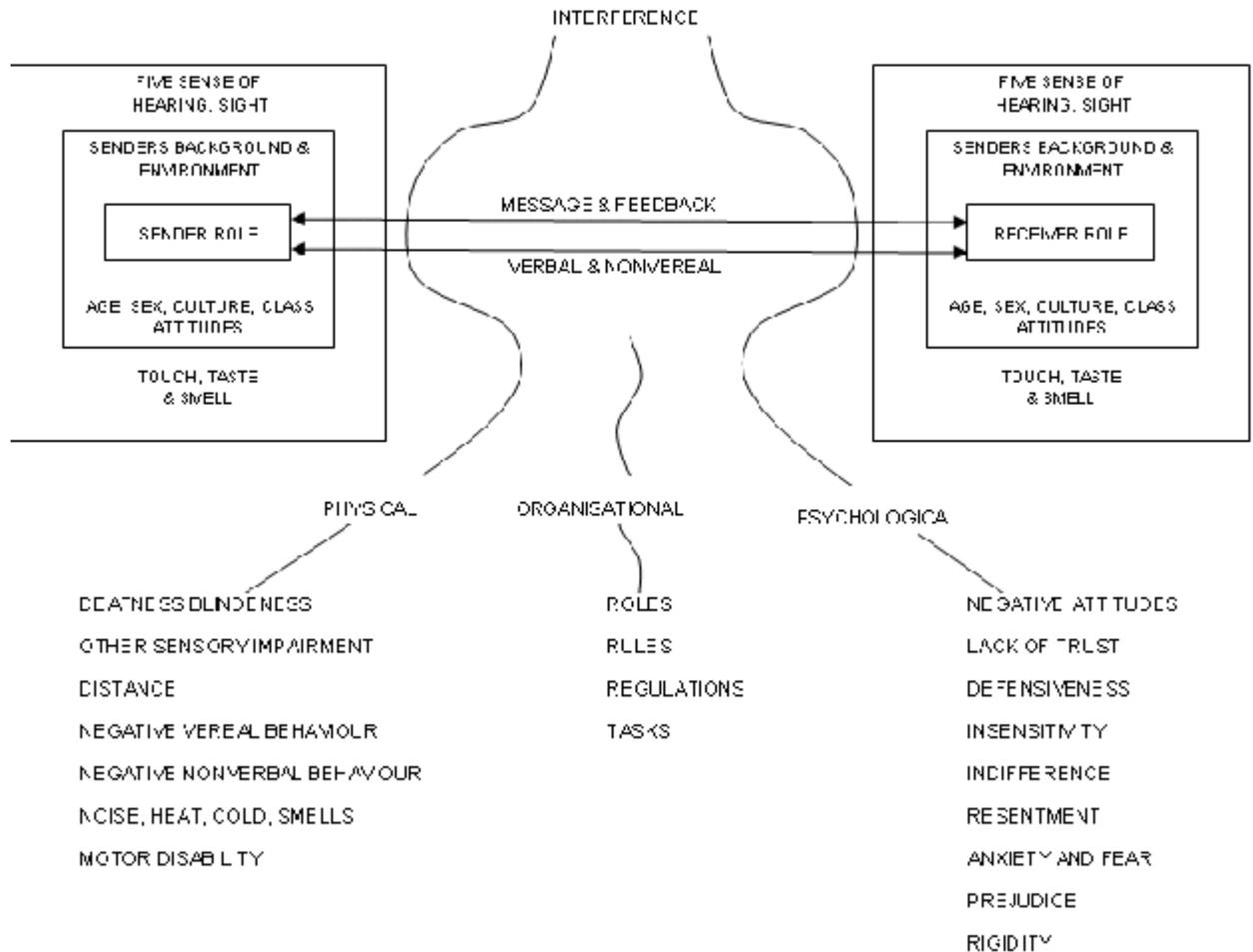
and acceptable terms of communication, d) knowledge of psychological and sociological norms, e) understanding the culture, beliefs and environment of the receiver, f) selection and use of a means of communication best suited for the message to be conveyed, g) conveying messages in a concise, simple and clear manner, h) ability to keep the receiver interested in the information being conveyed, i) ability to listen to and comprehend the reaction of the receiver to the message, j) respond with a counter message to promote a positive feedback from the receiver, and k) generating trust and building a relationship.

How well a person receives, understands and responds to a message also depends of several variables that have been discussed by Sarris (1998) and Friedrich (1998). These variables are: a) self-knowledge and perception, b) self-esteem and self-worth, c) one-sided or skewed view of reality, d) the emotions the receiver perceives from the sender or transmitter, e) emotional and physical state of the receiver when the message is received, f) environmental influence, and g) cultural factors.

Individuals face several communication barriers that may prevent them from conveying information accurately. According to Sonnenberg (1990), these barriers can be classified into: a) Psychological, b) Physical, and c) Organizational. Psychological barrier are those that arise from the individual characteristics and natures of the communicators. These include level of trust, negativity, rigidity, prejudice, indifference, defensiveness, insensitivity, fear and resentment. Physical barriers are those that arise from the physical environment in which a message is sent and received. These include sensory impairments such as deafness or blindness, poor verbal behavior or body language, the distance over which the message is being conveyed, noise levels and other disturbances, and motor disability. Finally, organizational barriers are those that arise

from company rules, regulations, tasks and roles. These barriers and their interactions are
highlighted through Figure 2:

Figure 2: Barriers to Communication (Sonnenberg, 1990)

INTERFERENCE

FIVE SENSE OF
HEARING, SIGHT

SENDERS BACKGROUND &
ENVIRONMENT

SENDER ROLE

AGE, SEX, CULTURE, CLASS
ATTITUDES

TOUCH, TASTE
& SMELL

MESSAGE & FEEDBACK

VERBAL & NONVERBAL

FIVE SENSE OF
HEARING, SIGHT

SENDERS BACKGROUND &
ENVIRONMENT

RECEIVER ROLE

AGE, SEX, CULTURE, CLASS
ATTITUDES

TOUCH, TASTE
& SMELL

PHYSICAL

ORGANISATIONAL

PSYCHOLOGICAL

DEAFNESS BLINDNESS
OTHER SENSORY IMPAIRMENT
DISTANCE
NEGATIVE VERBAL BEHAVIOUR
NEGATIVE NONVERBAL BEHAVIOUR
NOISE, HEAT, COLD, SMELLS
MOTOR DISABILITY

ROLES
RULES
REGULATIONS
TASKS

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES
LACK OF TRUST
DEFENSIVENESS
INSENSITIVITY
INDIFFERENCE
RESENTMENT
ANXIETY AND FEAR
PREJUDICE
RIGIDITY

ASSIST

As Howard (1995) notes, communication can enable the creation of an
environment that promotes 'peace, dignity, justice, disarmament and solving universal
problems'. Researchers such as Parsons (1960), Fiedler (1967), Guest (1996), Katz and Kahn
(1996) and Goleman (1999) have noted that focused and knowledgeable communication among
individuals develops an environment of psychological and social positivity among businesses

and organizations through: a) extended human reach, b) identification of problems, c) resolution of problems and crisis, d) decreased levels of conflict within groups, e) facilitated collective thinking, f) enhanced support and effectiveness, g) improved acceptance, behavior, cooperation and interpersonal understanding, h) accurate exchange of messages, information and ideas.

CASE STUDIES

Case 1: Bernard Matthews Farms

The adverse effects of unfavorable communication are evident in the case of Bernard Matthew's farms. One of the largest producers of Turkey in the United Kingdom faced closure after the press had published false reports that the company imported the turkey from abroad that was unhealthy. However, the company did not respond in any manner to clarify these incorrect statements as communication was not considered a priority. This inaction misled consumers who lost faith in Bernard Matthew's products. The company experienced a loss of 35% sales in the U.K. and finally decided to establish its reputation anew with consumers and media via efficient communication program (The Times 100, 2011).

The communication tactics of Bernard Matthew's launched with both the external shareholders and the internal stakeholders of the company. In case of the internal stakeholders, various activities such as a weekly newspaper, updated news and information on the intranet site of the company, direct meetings along with the publication of economic statements were used to ensure that all the internal stakeholders clearly understood the strategy of the company and provided them with impetus to maintain good relationships with the company. The company had

clearly done its homework since reports suggest that verbal communication is more effective than non-verbal communication in clearly expressing the information of the senders (The Times 100, 2011). The approach adopted by Bernard Matthew's happens to be consistent with the third level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs i.e. the belongingness needs which indicates that the staff of a company may enhance their sense of belongingness through more informed messages from the organization leading to the development of their satisfaction and motivation towards work (Maslow, 1943).

The company used a separate pattern for of the external shareholders like the internet, advertising, participation in charity activities, to communicate with the social media, customers and communities. This was an attempt to recreate the brand image of the company in public. Bernard Matthew's even employed celebrity endorsement advertising for increasing the reliability of the information. These measures helped the company achieve the biggest increase in turkey consumption in 2010 and exhibited the benefits of rational use of communication strategies to improve the reputation of the corporation.

Case 2: The Danish Cartoon Crises

The Danish cartoon controversies of 2005-2008 exhibit the evils of uninformed communication methods. The Danish newspaper "Jyllands-Posten" had published several cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad in 2005 that were treated as a direct insult to the religion of Islam. The matter escalated into a complex, heated, global and sometimes violent debate that claimed the lives of 138 people in violent demonstrations. The Danish krone or DKK suffered a loss of almost a billion through widespread consumer boycotts in the Middle East (Anderson, 2008). The cause of the crisis remains unclear since similar cartoons had been

published many times in Denmark in the past without significant effect and in this case also the initial reactions to the cartoons began almost a week after the publication of the cartoons. Many of the protestors had apparently never even viewed the cartoons (Rynning & Schmidt, 2006).

The crisis in this case grew out of proportion mainly due to the massive gap in cultural understand that has been deemed to be so crucial to effective communication by Saaris (1998) and Friedrich (1998). Communication was also subject to predominantly psychological barriers here, with the parties involved failing to understand each other's perspectives (Sonnenberg, 1990). The Danish government did not claim responsibility for the incident, stating that the government had no influence on the press. Communication strategies of the Danish government were characterized by freedom of speech and other controversial issues in German and English language articles. Although it did announce that the incident was 'regrettable', it was a case of too little, too late. (Andreasen, 2008). However, neither of these was the primary language used by those who were most offended by the cartoon - Arab Muslims. Hence, language was another front on which communication during the crisis failed, which is again a cultural barrier (Sarris, 1998). In order to curtail the situation, the Danish government needed to adopt a more sensitive approach towards to the communities that were affected by the cartoons. Communicating a call for restrain and understanding to the local media as well as issuing a more sensitive apology in the languages spoken by the Arab Muslim communities may have enabled the Danish government to break the psychological barrier in communication that it was facing.

Case 3: Google Street View, Germany

The Google Street View feature allows the exploration of places and streets all over the world via 360-degree street-level imagery. Google uses its communication tactic to advertise the

practical advantages of Google Street View. However, the service was stated to violate the privacy rights of individuals and the public outcry was the greatest in Germany. Effective communication of the benefits of the feature was absent leading to misunderstanding with the Germans. Google had to deal with various accusations. The company established that it will comply with regional data protection laws and the license plates of cars would not be visible on the images. More detailed information regarding Street View was released later. The company even had to remove any pictures that were deemed as inappropriate by German citizens (Weisbach, 2010).

Google used its communication system effectively to deal with external shareholders and the customers of the company to revaluate the reputation of both the company and the Google Street View feature. In crisis situation, the roles of the stakeholders and the media and effective response strategies were necessary for Google. However, the strategy failed to take into account cultural or psychological barriers as well as legal issues which are a part of organizational barriers (Sonnenberg, 1990).

Google must rely on good communication strategies to prioritize the needs of data protection commissions, federal ministries and the media by informing and involving them since they possess the greatest influence on the opinion of other stakeholders and legislation. However, even though the public in Germany is determined as latent shareholders depending on the perspective of the holder, the success of Google Street View depends on the frequency of use and attitude.

To conclude, communications plays a critical role in conflict resolution at an organizational as well as social level. In the case of Bernard Matthews, untimely and inadequate communication in response to the rumors of the origins of their turkey meat was the cause of

their reputation being tarnished. The Danish Cartoon Crisis reveals how cultural barriers in communication can lead to a disastrous situation with a global impact. Finally, Google's Street View launch in Germany illustrates that an organization needs to be aware of cultural as well as legal or organizational barriers when introducing products in foreign markets.

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