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The theoretical basis of internal communication as an active process of information exchange

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Abstract. Communication is a broadly exploited concept or, more precisely, a social phenomenon for which in contemporary science there are various discursive approaches. But, regardless of the access discourse, in each of them, communication confirms the unconditionality of its existence as a prerequisite for the functioning of man as a being, and of society as a system. The approach used in this paper supports the thesis that information is the basis of communication, and hence communication is an active process of information exchange, the process of creating and exchanging messages within a network with mutually dependent relations. Referring to the theoretical aspects of communication as a process for information exchange, this paper puts special emphasis on internal communication and its essential importance for the development, management, and efficient functioning of an organization. The research done by analyzing different theoretical approaches to communication confirms the initial research hypothesis that communication and information are pair categories that inevitably go side by side, and the exchange of information as a part of the communication process is of increasing importance, especially in the conditions when it brings and gives knowledge that corresponds to the needs of a particular individual, group or organization. Hence, well-established rules of internal communication from the aspect of information exchange have priority and are set as a condition for the successful functioning of an organization.

Keywords. communication, information, exchange of information, internal communication

1. Introduction

Communication in contemporary social life has become one of the most essential and important factors for the development of society in all its segments and as a whole. It is a universally recognizable value that, regardless of the way, forms, and shapes in which it takes place, has the role of an indicator for measuring the progress and achievement of a society. Its efficiency at all levels of communication - individual, interpersonal, group, organizational, social or global level, its practice and successful performance (with a reception that corresponds to the intention of the sender, with feedback as a necessity for its functioning) are prerequisites for the success of an individual, a group, an organization, and a society.

The exchange of information as part of the communication process is becoming increasingly important, especially in the conditions when it brings and provides knowledge that corresponds to the needs of a particular individual, group, or organization. For these reasons, the need for well-established rules of communication from the aspect of information exchange

is increasingly gaining priority for the successful functioning of an organization, whether it is a private (small or larger enterprise/organization) or a public or state institution.

2. Communication as a social phenomenon

2.1 Transmission of information

Communication is one of the oldest human activities, and yet there is no generally accepted definition. Trying to answer this question about a lack of a general definition about communication, John B. Newman states: "The reason that no generally accepted definition exists is not because of a lack of knowledge of communication, whether as a process, a body of knowledge, or a field of study, but because of a lack of understanding of nature, the scope and the function of a definition."¹ Agreeing with Newman's stance that communication is so versatile and discursive that the attempt to create a generally accepted definition, becomes so serious that it hinders rather than helps further elaboration on the subject. In what follows there is an array of definitions of communication, from which a definition arises which is appropriate to the role of communication in an organization or institution. According to encyclopedia definitions, the word communication is of Latin origin (*communicatio*) and denotes reporting, report, linkage, behavior, connection, touch, traffic (Vujaklija 1988: 445; Small Encyclopedia "Prosveta", 1978, 284). On internet sites, communication is defined as a process of information exchange through the agreed composition of signs; a process of sending information to yourself, or some other entity, most frequently by means of language. The word communication literally means to do something general or common. It is usually described according to three main dimensions: content, form, and target. The content of the communication and the form create messages that are sent towards the target. The target can be the person himself, another person (in interpersonal communication), or another entity as an organization or group.

Web definitions for communication range from its explanation as "activity for transmitting information"; "a connection that allows access between persons or places"; "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols"; "successful information transmission by a common system of symbols, signs, behaviors, speech, writing or signals"; "exchange of information between two points"; "a process of exchange of information and ideas, i.e. an active process that includes encoding, transmission and decoding of the received message"; "effective transmission of information and expression of thoughts and facts"; "data transmission from one to another part of the system, in which local communication is data transmission between the processor and memory, and global communication is data transmission from one spot (knot) to another"; "transmission of matter and energy between two parts of the universe"; "this matter or energy might be information carrier"; "a fundamental component of social behavior, the transmission of information (messages) between the sender and receiver by using any of the five senses" (Online: Google/glossary definition).

Undoubtedly, the basis of communication is information transfer. The term comes from the Latin word *informare* - to give form to something, to shape, create, organize and structure. Information is the quantity of the shaped or its complexity in every system. The systems theory explains information as a degree of freedom in a particular situation, an opportunity to choose among signals, symbols, messages that need to be transmitted. For information theories,

¹ Newman J. B. (1960). A rationale for a definition of communication. *Journal of Communication* 10, 115-124.

however, the key problem is: a) how to transmit information so that the transmittance is accurate and economical; b) how to transmit information so that its quantity translated into time units through the telecommunication system is larger; c) how to encode information to best suit the information channel properties. Communication is more successful if a larger amount of information is transmitted (Vreg 1973: 162).

Finally, communication should be viewed as a way of exchange of information and ideas, a process of creating and exchanging messages within a single network with interdependent relationships, i.e., an active process of exchange of information about work activities related to a certain area that an organization or institution is responsible for. Thus, it enables the effective transfer of information, expressing opinions and facts, and data transmission from one part of the system to another, being the key element for uninterrupted workflow.

2.3 Theoretical overview

Communication theories try to explain communication as a kind of social phenomenon present even in the smallest units of social life, so, depending on the level at which it takes place, it can be represented as a "closer relation", or rather as a relation between two individuals or, at a higher level, as a relation with a common human or global dimension, that is, according to the system theory, which sees reality from the aspect of hierarchical division of systems at different levels, "from the atom all the way to the supranational system and higher systems" (Miller, 1965: 93). The core of communication theories emphasizes the role and significance of communication as a civilizational landmark. Communication, regardless of the access discourse, confirms the unconditionality of its existence as a precondition for the functioning of man as a being, of society as a system.

For Luhmann, who in systemic theory puts the function of the system in the foreground, communication is that fundamental social process which extends in and covers all areas of social life. He starts from the observation that social systems result from communication. Society cannot be imagined without communication: social systems are created as a result of communication among people, and the history of social systems begins with each communication. Society can be defined as a system composed of all the experiences and activities in the communication process (Luhmann 1970: 114).

In this context, German communicologists Michael Kunczik and Astrid Zipfel argue that there can be no society without communication and social structures cannot be constituted and maintained. According to Paul Watzlawick, communication is a "*condicio sine qua non* of human life and of social life". What they have in common is that they view communication as a functionally inevitable precondition for every social system and the most important basic social process in general (Kunczik and Zipfel 1997: 12).

Parsons, the father of functionalism, starts from the assumption that each system of action can be analytically divided into an organism, a system of personality (its characteristics), a social system and a cultural system (cognitive, evaluative and symbolic organization of the system of action). All subsystems are mutually related to common values into a single system. It defines communication as a complementary (action) interaction of two or more individuals in which everyone adapts to the expectations of the other. Basically, it is not about complementarity of expectations of both individuals, but about the consensus that brings both individuals to full conformity. This interaction conformity coincides with his view of society that is based on order, consensus, fostering of structure, on interdependence of the parts. For

Parsons, the basic characteristic of any system is the interdependence of parts or variables (Talcott Parson in Shils, 1962: 15).

In this context we can connect organization as part of a system, i.e. a subsystem, in accordance with the definition of organization as "merging of individual parts (organs) into a whole, in order to make that whole capable of living" (Vujaklija 1988: 639). This couples with the attitude of Kunczik and Zipfel who define society as "a system composed of all communication experiences and actions ... which can be built and maintained only when the participants are interconnected through communication, because each joint action of individuals is based on shared (through communication) conveyed meanings (communication does not mean only announcing, but also "community", "participation"). This means that:

The concept of communication turns into the concept of organization, because without communication, organized action is impossible

(Kunczik and Zipfel, 1998:12)

Communication theories and theories of organizational communication emphasize the role and importance of communication as a priority condition for the functioning of an organization.

2.3.1 System theories of the communication process

Contemporary systems theory lists the following basic categories:

- Information;
- The openness of the system;
- Structure of the environment;
- Feedback;
- Morphostasis and morphogenesis.

For systems theorists, information is the degree of freedom that man has in certain situations when he chooses among different alternatives – among signals, symbols, or messages. In doing so, the information carrier is always matter-energy. In the process of information transmission, the matter-energy carrier can change, but the very structure of the information does not change. Information is the content of the information flow which flows along with the communication networks of the system. For the systems theory, the communication network, an analogy of the nervous system, is a dynamic and flexible network of information channels that connect all parts of the system and provide information for themselves and the environment (Vreg 1990: 163).

Concerning the openness of the system, system theories differentiate open and closed systems. Open systems, those whose system boundaries are at least partially leaky, enable minimal transmission of matter-energy or information, unlike closed systems. Such a feature of open systems enables them to react to the environment, which leads to adaptation to the environment or changes at a higher or more complex level.

Openness and closeness of systems are in connection with the structure of the environment, which as a set of different elements has diversity as a basic characteristic, which is often the reason for the occurrence of mutual tension at a certain level. For Franc Vreg, closeness allows a monopoly position of information while openness causes a competitive communication situation (Vreg 1990: 185-186).

Openness is a form of information environment exchange, a source that diversity of the environment system comes from. If the system is developed and structured, then it is capable of open exchange with the environment. This comes as a support for the need for good internal

communication in one system as one of the conditions for its good development and structure, as well as a prerequisite for successful external communication. Namely, external communication, i.e. openness of the communication system, according to Vreg, is dealing with other systems in competitive situations. As openness is not only the inflow of information that is under institutional structure but also information with negative feedback flow of the system itself, the inflow of innovation, intentional and nonintentional deviations, social and structural influence on the other systems. The readiness of the system itself to cope with such feedback flows depends a great deal on the development and structure of the institution which would enable final effects out of the inflow of information to enrich and vitalize the pool of common information and meanings.

The feedback is most often equated with a system of equilibrium based on mutual interaction.

Morphostasis and morphogenesis are processes that relate to communication exchange between the system and the environment. Morphostasis tries to preserve the form, organization, or system status while morphogenesis tries to develop or change the system form, structure, and state.

3. Communication-information systems

Li Taer, who develops a conceptual scheme of living systems of behavior as communication or information-transfer systems, thinks that each organization by its nature limits its openness to the environment or stabilizes the structure and action when it attains the degree of the smallest change (Vreg, 1973: 293-296).

Li Taer believes that an organization is composed of three basic information systems: an operating information system that registers and changes the flow of all messages relevant to a particular company for daily functioning of basic tasks; a harmonized information system that registers and changes the flow of all relevant messages if it wants to achieve the goal, to determine the tasks, to prepare the rules, and to define the decision framework; and a developing information system that registers and changes the flow of all messages important for the maintenance of all centers of change, channels and action centers - from a material, non-material and human aspect (these are announcements that award, educate, institutional announcements) (ibid).

Franz Vreg's systemic development model, which corresponds to the complex, contradictory, pluralistic communication situation in modern society is of particular importance. He emphasizes the relative autonomy of the information-communication subsystem compared to other subsystems, as well as functional communication in communication between the subsystems and the public. According to him, the complete and two-way communication network of the information-communication subsystem extends to all parts of the system, it provides a connection between its parts and strengthens interaction communication between relatively autonomous subsystems. The communication network consists of mutual and mass subsystems - from institutional and non-institutional channels, through which positive and negative feedback information can be transmitted.

At this point he singles out selectivity as the ability of understanding and selecting information from different internal states of the system and the external environment. According to him, selectivity is not a mechanical choice of information, but a choice based on normative and value-based standards. However, the integrating function of the information-communication subsystem in the direction of linking different subsystems and enabling their coordinated action is not less important. He argues that a developed and independent

information-communication subsystem does not only enable a horizontal connecting of the society, but it also enables vertical connecting from top down. Such a system is the foundation of synchronized action of various centers of political power and a dam from the monopolization of the communication system in favor of one center.

4. Internal communication as a form of organizational communication

Learning about organizational communication is not new, but it has recently gained a certain level of recognition as a field for academic study (Online: Baker 2002, Chapter 13: 1). Baker explains the interest in studying this field with the needs and commitments of the "business" and points out that if initially communication programs were typically located in speech departments, most business schools now include organizational communication as a key element for studying, given the increasing recognition that all organizations, not just business organizations, have communication needs and challenges (ibid).

According to Baker, in terms of organizational communication two streams can be singled out: one that sees organizational communication as one aspect of the organization, and the second one that sees organizational communication as the basic foundation of the organization itself. An example of the latter is given by Drenth, who defines communication as sending and receiving messages through the meaning of symbols, and he views organizational communication as the key element of the organizational climate (Drenth 1998 cited in Baker 2002: 2). Later Myers and Myers define organizational communication as a "central binding force that enables coordination among people and thus contributes to organized behavior" (Myers and Myers 1982 ibid), and Rogers and Rogers argue that "the behavior of individuals in an organization is best understood from the point of view of communications" (Rogers and Rogers 1976: 3 ibid). Krlev determines organizational communication as interpersonal and as a transfer of information between two organizational units or organs, which practically enables effective relation in the environment (2001: 113).

Baker lists the changes in organizations that influence organizational communication so that it becomes very important for overall organizational functioning. He singles out the following as key changes:

- Complexity of work that requires greater coordination and interaction among employees;
- Faster pace of work;
- Complexity and number of employees' work tasks;
- Overlapping of work tasks and processes;
- Importance of knowledge and innovation for competitive advantage of organizations;
- Communication technologies and networks are becoming increasingly essential for organizational structure and strategy.

Pursuant to this, the argument that communication is not only an essential element of these organizational changes, but that effective communication can be seen as a foundation for modern organizations can be taken as bring correct (Grenier and Metes 1992; D'Aprix 1996; Witherspoon 1997; von Krogh et al. 2000 cited in Baker 2002: 2).

Regarding the importance of organizational communication, it is emphasized in theory that communication in an organization not only provides timely and thorough information to managers and employees about the subject of their activity as well as overall and individual

results of the company, but communication enables the work process to go on without disturbances and deviations, and irregularities, mistakes or delays in work can be overcome.

Speaking about the basics of internal organizational communication, Carter McNamara emphasizes that the majority of experts in organizations, management and leadership point out that effective communication is the basis of effectiveness in any type of organization and that it can never be said that there is too much communication.

Some leaders misinterpret communication as if it is a matter of documenting or bureaucracy and hence they feel repulsiveness towards a higher level of communication. As leaders and managers mature, they are becoming aware of the need to effectively send and receive information, and their interest in communication (internal and external) increases significantly (On line: McNamara).

4.1 Key factors of internal organizational communication

Literature on communications generally confirms that the basic function of communication is to influence the knowledge and behavior of the respondent (recipient) by providing information, guidance, regulation, socializing and persuasion. Neher (Neher 1997 cited in Baker 2002:10-11) identifies the primary functions of organizational communication as:

- Compliance-gaining
- Leading, motivating, and influencing
- Sense-making
- Problem-solving and decision-making
- Conflict management, negotiating, and bargaining.

Neher and Rogers and Rogers emphasize more the social and organizational functions of organizational communication as a whole rather than focusing on specific organizational exchanges. In this way, they combine the functions of informing, directing and regulating into a wider category of behavior compliance, placing greater emphasis on the role of communication in managing threats to organizational order and control, on identifying and solving problems and conflict management as key functions of organizational communication (Rogers and Rogers 1976 *ibid*).

Myers and Myers combine similar functions into one common (joint) function at a higher level and they provide a particularly concise and clear version of the functions of organizational communication. Their approach focuses on the functional goals of organizational communication, rather than on the results of respective acts of communication, such as making decisions, convincing, or resolving a conflict. They see organizational communication as having three primary functions:

- ***Coordinating and regulating production activities*** - This communication function changes most with time. According to the traditional bureaucratic view of the organization, the expectations for clear communication behavior and its consequences, related to the fulfillment or failure to fulfill expectations and monitoring were considered the foundation of organizational order and control. This function of organizational communication was considered to be rather proceduralized, rule-oriented, one-way, top-down communication. Tasks in many organizations have become much more complex, less routine and repetitive, and interactive and, as such, the traditional bureaucratic view of organizational communications is no longer sufficient. Such productive activities require dynamic, reciprocal, horizontal communication among employees and two-way, vertical communication between employees

and managers. Communication as a means of coordinating and regulating has become more important, more complex and more difficult.

- **Socialization** - The socializing function of communication is emphasized from the aspect of human relations in organizations, which emphasizes that the "capturing" of the hearts and minds of the members of an organization is necessary for the effective coordination of the organizational activity in order to achieve common organizational goals. Communication aimed at socialization is focused on articulation and reinforcement of organizational values and harmonization individual goals with those of the organization. This is related to the establishment of an appropriate organizational culture and climate. This form of communication cannot be one-way or top-down. It must take place reciprocally between organizational leaders and organizational members.

- **Innovation** - The literature on organizational communication increasingly stresses the importance of communication in the direction of promoting innovation, to the same extent as for control and coordination. The communication for promoting innovations is connected with strong communication within and beyond an organization (Myers and Myers 1982 *ibid.*).

Starting from this, and for the purpose of efficient functioning of the public administration bodies, the key functions of communication can be defined as:

- information (two-way, horizontal and vertical);
- directing, coordinating, regulating and planning work activities;
- familiarizing with the activities (which contributes to the employees' familiarity with the situation, more motivated and involved in the work of the organization);
- socialization of employees;
- better understanding of the need for changes;
- solving problems;
- identifying individual goals with those of the organization.

4.2 Dependence of external communication on internal communication

The theory of organizational communication divides the flow of communication into:

- communication flow within an organization (internal communicating);
- communication flow towards/from the environment (external communicating).

Good communication (internal and external) is the core of every successful operation. It is not by chance that their importance is emphasized in numerous publications and projects supported by the European Union, intended primarily for developing countries, that is, for candidate countries for EU members, which are aimed at strengthening the capacity of administration. In one of the publications on the topic of business administration it is said that if the sender does not understand what is involved, then either the recipient does not understand and requests information again, or it is a misunderstanding, or the result is defeating (Poslovna administracija 2000:12). Good communication is accomplished when the information given by the sender is received, fully understood and reacted to in an appropriate manner. In order to ensure such communication, it is important to have feedback in a particular form. This means that there is a cycle that needs to be followed. In internal communication, it is necessary to determine some form of procedure to be followed (*ibid.*).

Internal communication is defined as communication among people who together constitute an organization, between departments of an organization or between the management and employees. Internal communication can be:

- Informative (the purpose of which, as its name implies, is to give / convey certain information, that is, to inform about certain happenings, events, activities, etc.);
- Directive (consisting of giving directives, from direct supervision to imposed instructions). According to theorists, it can be found in organizations with a kind of an old-fashioned power structure.);
- Interactive (in which employees participate with mutual exchange of information);
- Indirect communication (practiced in cases when acceleration of changes in an organization and mobilization of the organization are wanted, so all means of communication are used).

Brigitte Kuchar, author of the publication "Institutional Communication", defines internal communication as "informing employees about the objectives and priorities of the institution or events, changes and new initiatives". She also emphasizes that it is very important that employees receive sufficient information, because: "They want and deserve to be informed about things that affect them and their work. They want to share a common vision for the organization. They get a "bigger picture" and a sense of belonging to the organization and gain a greater motivation." (Kuchar 2004:8).

External communication is communication with external public, with people, citizens who are not an integral part of the organization or institution. This includes informing citizens about the policies, programs, services and initiatives of the organization/institution, but at the same time "listening" and taking into account the needs and expectations of citizens, which is mostly done indirectly through surveys or by monitoring their responses (for a certain activity of the organization/institution) through the media. The established special departments of public relations in most organizations, as well as in the institutions of the system, have the role of maintaining exactly this communication.

According to Bozo Skoka, who deals with the issue of understanding public relations, external communication largely depends on internal communication, where internal public is made up of employees in a particular organization or institution. He points out that "this is quite logical because if things do not work well 'in the house', it can hardly be expected that good relations with the public surrounding you will be established" (Skoka 2006) and adds that communicating with the external public cannot be performed optimally if the internal public is not well-informed enough, involved in the working processes and motivated for successful performance.

In order to clarify the connection between internal and external communication, Skoka points out that not only do employees communicate among themselves in the organization, but they also discuss the organization with their family members, friends and acquaintances, and thus consciously or unconsciously become its mouthpieces and carriers of its identity.

"According to a study by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), even 2/3 of the perception of an organization is created by its employees - with their statements and behavior. If employees have enough information and sufficient motivation, they will more easily and in a better way explain the organization's activities of the organization in everyday contacts. If they are satisfied with their own organization, they will project this pleasure in the public and thus contribute to the strengthening of its image."

(Skoka 2006)

Hence, a strict distinction cannot be made between the internal and external communication of an organization, because they intertwine in their interdependence.

Katherine Johansson's view, who believes that a strict separation between external and internal communication cannot be made, is similar to this. In her opinion, the definitions of organizational communication that traditionally establish a line of division between internal and external communication, both formal and informal (Johansson 2007: 94-95), are have become inadequate. Such a division is not defensible, but, on the contrary, it is counterproductive.

It is very difficult to separate internal from external communication, because internal communication expands beyond the boundaries of the organization, and there is great interest for external communication among organizational members (in some cases, members of organizations get news first from external sources, such as the media). For this reason, in practice, communications departments are increasingly becoming responsible for both internal and external communication.

Concerning the topic of the connection between internal and external communication, Ericsson and Leslie argue that "the concepts such as 'total communication' and 'integrated communication' are increasingly appearing in popular literature (Erikson 2002, Lesley 2004 cited in Johansson 2007)." Cheney and Christensen believe that there is "a growing conviction that the activities of internal organizational communication, often managed by managers, are very important for public relations practitioners" (Cheney & Christensen 2001 *ibid*).

Conclusion

Internal communication is especially important for the successful operation of all segments of society.

Employees in an organization/institution want and deserve to be informed about things that affect them and their work. Thus, they share the common vision of the organization, get a "bigger picture" and a sense of belonging to the organization and gain greater motivation.

In order to achieve efficient internal communication, it is necessary to know and accept communication as a way of exchanging information that should be put into the function of achieving the goals of the entities in the complex system of every social whole.

This is important for all organizations, especially for public or state institutions covering important areas of social life, such as education, health, ecology, etc. The exchange of information is a prerequisite for the effective implementation of any reform and activity in these institutions.

Successful functioning of internal communication contributes to the effective transfer of information and free flow of data, which is the key factor for successful operation.

In this regard, the unity in the functioning of the operational information system, the harmonization information system and the development information system is established as a precondition. If previous assumptions are realized, efficient and effective operation of each organization can be expected.

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