

Communication in the labour relationship

G. M. Ferreira

Department of Public Administration and Management
University of South Africa
ferregm@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

Effective communication is essential to sound labour relations. Positive communication can be vital to the survival of an institution and reduces the possibility of conflict and labour unrest within the institution. In a country with a diversity of cultures, such as South Africa, the methods of communication are very important to a sound labour environment. Communication is also vital to negotiations. The purpose of this article is therefore to explain communication in the work place and to explain the impact of communication on the negotiation process. A culture of good communication and joint decision making is conducive to effective negotiations and trust between the parties to the labour relationship. Workplace issues can then be solved through communication and harmonious labour relations. Increased positive interaction between employers and employees may lead to a shared identity, common goals and objectives and a decrease in distrust between management and the work force.

I. Introduction

Labour relations is a complex and dynamic discipline and it is all about interaction. Labour relations as a tripartite relationship has various core players involved in the process, namely employees, employers and the state. This relationship is a human relationship, governed by rules and regulations. The parties to the employment relationship should be encouraged to communicate and cooperate in resolving differences and in redressing workplace issues in a sound labour environment. Communication in an institution requires employees to take one another into account while pursuing a desired outcome. Effective communication is vital to sound labour relations and to the survival of the institution concerned, as well as of society in general.

This discussion starts by explaining the meaning of the concepts of 'communication' and 'labour relationship' and looks into the important role communication plays in the labour relationship. The communication process is described, and guidelines for the improvement of communication are given. Effective

communication in organisations and worker participation in communication are then discussed, followed by an indication of the Recommendations of the International Labour Organisation regarding communication in the labour relationship.

2. Definition and explanation of communication

Relationships are based on the effective transmission of information from one person to another. This transmission of information is communication. According to Bendix (2004, 305), it is estimated that the average person spends four fifths of his or her working life communicating. Communication is a vital aspect in the labour relationship, aimed at ensuring that common understanding is achieved in the pursuance of a desired outcome. Communication is a process whereby a sender passes on a message to a receiver, who then in turn interprets the message and endows it with meaning. The receiver may then reply, communicating his or her own message. The effectiveness of the communication is determined by whether the message communicated is interpreted by the receiver as having the same content that the sender intended. It is therefore vital that the *intended* meaning is passed on. Bendix (2004, 305) writes that communication is a means of exchanging behaviours, perceptions and values, of getting others to behave and to feel differently, and of creating understanding. Venter (2003, 369) states that communication comprises verbal (both written and oral) and nonverbal communication (kinesic behaviour, proxemics, paralanguage and object language), both of which can be found in the labour relationship. He explains the different forms of communication as follows:

- *Written communication* consists of policy documents, memoranda, letters and the like.
- *Oral communication*, i.e. the spoken word, refers to the effective structuring and presentation of arguments in such a way that all parties involved understand them.
- *Kinesic behaviour* refers to the body language of the communicators. Posture, gestures and facial expressions provide the other party with clues. Defensiveness, openness and confidence, or the lack thereof, are communicated through the body language of the communicators.
- *Proxemics* is about the spatial relationship, e.g. how the communicators are placed in the room or the space where communication is going to take place. For instance, potential conflict can be communicated when people choose to sit at opposite ends of a table.
- *Paralanguage* is related to oral communication and refers to the way in which things are said. Emotion and mood are indicated by tone of voice and verbal inflections, e.g. a raised voice could indicate anger.
- *Object language* refers to the use of objects to enhance communication. Formal clothing such as a suit and tie may indicate to the opposition the level of formality and seriousness of the communication that is going to take place.

Organisational culture may also influence the particular dress code. Colour may also play a role in setting the atmosphere.

Communication is information in transit and employers and employees need to receive and transmit information to coordinate their activities and execute their tasks. Communication is the process through which the receiver's knowledge, attitude or behaviour are changed or confirmed in some predetermined manner (Schwella, Burger, Fox and Muller 1996). According to Fielding (2006, 10), communication is a transaction during which participants together create meaning through the exchange of symbols. Such symbols may be verbal (spoken or written), nonverbal (gestures, facial expressions, posture, voice) and graphic (making use of tables, line graphs, bar graphs and diagrams) (Fielding 2006, 11). There are a number of factors that impact on the communication process and that can determine the effectiveness and the outcome of the communicated message. The factors of stereotyping, the halo effect, perceptual defence, selective perception, projection, attribution processes and semantics are explained below (Venter 2003, 370–371).

- *Stereotyping* occurs when certain characteristics are attributed to an individual because of the group that he or she belongs to. Stereotyping can be based on gender, age, race, profession and other indicators. For instance, a young female employee may be seen as inexperienced and soft and as someone who therefore does not have to be taken seriously in a work situation. A group, for instance a trade union, may also be stereotyped, causing its members to have a predisposition to behave in a certain way in a negotiating situation. In such a context, stereotyping can be discriminatory and short-sighted, and could result in an undesirable outcome.
- The *halo effect* is experienced when an employee or person is categorised because of the characteristics of the group or institution represented by that particular employee or person. His or her actions and reactions are predicted on the basis of those characteristic of the group represented.
- A negotiator may ignore a message (or an event) because he or she finds the behaviour insensitive or offensive to his or her convictions. Such a reaction is called a *perceptual defence*. The negotiator may ignore such a message (race or gender issues might be a good example) even though the information conveyed is important.
- Since it is difficult to absorb everything we see, human beings tend to absorb only those characteristics that are obvious. This leads to *selective interpretations or perceptions*, based on the interests, experience and attitudes of the person receiving the message. For instance, when one meets somebody for the first time, judgments are often made on the basis of very few clues.
- *Projection* occurs when the person receiving the message assumes that the other party shares the same beliefs, attitudes and opinions as he or she does. This may

send the negotiations in a particular direction and may fail to leave room for dialogue.

- *Attribution* is the process of determining whether the behaviour observed in others is caused externally or internally (Amos, Ristow and Ristow 2004, 131). When the negotiator judges what causes the other party's behaviour or approach during negotiations, this is called the *attribution process*. When judging ourselves, we tend to display the self-serving bias of attributing our successes to internal causes, and our failures to external causes. A negotiator who congratulates himself or herself on negotiation successes while ascribing negotiation failures to the other party fails to establish common ground between the parties and will therefore fail to reach a situation of compromise.
- The choice of words or the meanings attributed to such words can also influence negotiations. Such *semantic* differences may be central to a breakdown of negotiations, since the negotiator and the opposition do not ascribe the same meanings to the words used.

All the factors mentioned above impact on the negotiating process and determine how effectively (or ineffectively) the parties communicate and negotiate.

3. Definition of the labour relationship

Labour relations is a very important part of the total behaviour of society, and one should be familiar with the factors that influence labour relations and the labour relationship. Because of the lack of a universally acceptable definition of labour relations, and therefore the labour relationship, an acceptable definition will be provided for the purposes of this article.

According to Tustin and Geldenhuys (2002, 33), labour relations as an interdisciplinary field of study concerns itself with the continuous processes of control over the dynamic individual and collective relationships between workers and management in organisations. It functions within the broader environment, with a view to determining the conditions under which work is done in such a way that the needs of both parties are addressed. The labour relationship is dynamic and of both an individual and a collective nature. The relationship occurs within all institutions, and influences the working environment in particular and society in general. According to Swanepoel (1998, 1–4), work (aimed at producing goods and rendering services) is central to labour and therefore the concept of industrial relations implicitly refers to relationships in the context of work – i.e., the work relationship between an employee and an employer. At least one half of an individual's waking hours is devoted to work, which makes relationships in the work situation one of the most important aspects of modern human life. To prevent negativity between employer and employee, who may regard the working situation as an unfair deal brought about by an unfair system, communication is instrumental and very important.

The labour relationship is usually described as a tripartite relationship between employers, employees and the state. As this is a very complex relationship, it should be formally regulated (Ferreira 2005, 419). Labour relations is therefore about the dynamics between the parties to the relationship, the rules and regulations governing the relationship, and the environment in which the relationship takes place. Employers and employees should learn the art of effective communication to ensure a working relationship that promotes an environment conducive to sound labour relations. The new South African Constitution formally recognises equitable labour relations as a fundamental right in South Africa. All advanced industrial democracies ensure such protection for all workers. Labour relations are now conducted in an environment where the challenge is to harmonise labour and capital, to achieve industrial peace and to improve productivity, and all of these aspects can be improved through effective communication.

Without communication, relationship is impossible. It is essential for any relationship, especially the labour relationship, that there be effective communication. All communication in the workplace should aim at establishing a healthier labour relationship. In a labour relationship, people are involved in a work situation and are in a specific relationship with one another. Because of the impersonal nature of the labour relationship, poor communication in the work place can induce all parties to be negative. Communication in the workplace must therefore be aimed at helping the parties to understand each other better, and to be able to put themselves in each other's shoes. Although communication is a very important tool for establishing healthier labour relations, a lack of good communication is not the only reason for labour problems. Differing attitudes, values, perceptions and a conflict of goals and interests can also cause such problems, which are of course intensified in the absence of effective communication.

Communication is one of the most important skills in life. Communication is not only about speaking, but also about listening. If effective interaction has to take place, there must be understanding between the different parties involved. Stephen Covey (1994, 239) says that most people do not listen with the intention to understand – they listen with the intention to reply. They are either speaking or preparing to speak, meanwhile filtering everything through their own paradigms and projecting their own values, beliefs and attitudes onto others. Most human beings expect others to see things as they themselves see them. No wonder, then, that poor communication is the most frequently cited source of interpersonal conflict!

4. Communication: the process

Communication serves a number of important functions in an organisation such as sharing information, sharing and clarifying goals, identifying the way in which goals are to be achieved, exerting control, motivating others, developing a sense of community and commitment, and creating common understanding (Amos et al. 2004, 102).

Although communication remains one of the most important elements in the labour relationship, few institutions and managers devote enough attention, time and resources to ensuring that effective communication systems and processes are in place. Communication as a process should receive much attention from both employers and employees and the flow of communication should be improved to ensure that the message sent and the message received are the same. The cycle of the communication process proceeds through a number of stages during which a message is conceived by a sender and encoded and relayed via a particular route to a receiver, who then decodes and interprets it and finally confirms to the sender that it has been understood (Evans 1986, 1).

All too often, in the work situation, there is a difference between what a person actually says and what he or she thinks was said. This gap between the intent and the action often leads to a breakdown in communication. The breakdown may develop into a chasm, with managers and trade unions refusing to meet (and governments recalling their ambassadors and declaring wars).

Negotiation in the workplace, as a means of conflict resolution, is the best way to resolve differences between groups. Negotiation is fundamental to labour relations in any place of work. Negotiations are characterised by several elements:

1. Negotiation is a verbal process.
2. It involves two or more parties.
3. The parties involved seek to reach an agreement.
4. Agreement is sought over a problem or conflict of interest between them.
5. The parties involved seek as far as possible to preserve their own interests, but adjust their views and positions in the joint effort to achieve agreement (Finnemore 2003, 191).

Ideally, the parties involved should negotiate in good faith and should be able to communicate in an effective way. As negotiations are neither a game nor a war, all the parties should come to the negotiating table prepared, focused and organised (Kearny 2001, 85). Good communication between the parties should ensure that the outcome is fair. Effective communication should also ensure that staff work well together (and with management), understand the organisation's objectives and work towards achieving those objectives.

Effective communication in an institution is further determined by the culture and the climate within the institution. The difference between the culture and climate of institutions is described by Fielding (2006, 43):

'The culture in an organisation refers to the pattern of basic assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and values that a group has built. The group builds these up as it learns to cope with its problems of working as a group and adapting to the business environment.'

The culture in an organisation differs from the climate in an institution as ‘the climate in an organisation . . . changes quickly and is easier to describe. The climate describes the present trend of opinions, attitudes or feelings in an organization’ (Fielding 2006, 43).

Attitudes are linked to beliefs and values and form part of a person’s personality. Attitudes include feelings, beliefs and behaviour (Amos et al. 2004, 132). A value is determined by what the individual thinks is desirable, what the individual believes ‘should be’, and values often develop into attitudes. Values can be universal, attached to the principles of equity and justice, power-related, or about status and getting respect from others (Amos et al. 2004, 132–133).

As communication takes place between a sender and a receiver, problems may arise from the receiver decoding the message differently from what the sender encoded (Bendix 2004, 306). The receiver may have been unable to understand the language used by the sender, or to interpret the signals sent by the sender. The ideas or thoughts that are communicated therefore need to be translated into a code or language that the other party can understand, and this is called the encoding of information (Amos 2004, 103). In the labour relationship, semantic and cognitive barriers may lead to a lack of communication between employer and employee. The receiver is constantly busy interpreting – or ‘decoding’ – the message communicated by the sender, by listening to or reading it. The receiver then creates a meaning in his or her mind in terms of the message received. This often leads to an incorrect interpretation of the message sent by the sender.

Correct communication must be ensured through constant feedback. Feedback is the receiver’s response to the message communicated by the sender. Many of the misunderstandings in labour communication are caused by indirect communication between the employer and employee (i.e. through union representatives). Feedback is therefore very important, to ensure correct and effective communication. Feedback is almost the only effective way of measuring correct communication. One hundred percent correct communication is therefore difficult, because of the interference of the attitudes, beliefs and values of the parties involved.

Other factors that may also influence the communication are the perceptions, experience and knowledge of the participants (Bendix 2004, 308). The relationship between the participants is also important. It is always easier to interpret and understand the message communicated between close communicators, as they are familiar with each other’s looks, gestures and vocabulary. Differences in status may also influence and hamper communication, as the subordinate may feel inhibited by the situation and circumstances.

Physical barriers such as noise or temperature may also lead to the ineffective interpretation of a message.

Presenting too much information at once may also contribute to misunderstandings or to the misinterpretation of communication.

The communication framework outlines the dynamic nature of communication and may influence the success or failure of communication. The transmitter of a message should always ensure that the message has been correctly understood by insisting on feedback.

Ineffective communication can be the result of a combination of different aspects in the communication process (encoding, decoding, the context or environment in which the communication occurs) and the medium of communication.

5. Guidelines for improving communication

As effective communication is one of the important tools for ensuring sound labour relations, much effort should be put into ensuring the effectiveness of the communication process. Amos et al. list various guidelines for the improvement of communication (2004, 104):

1. As the message encoded by the sender is often not the message decoded by the receiver, the message should be communicated in a clear, logical and understandable manner. Feedback must be part of the process, to ensure that the message sent is the message received.
2. Use language that all parties are familiar with and that is not unique to only one of the groups involved in the communication process.
3. The correct formulated message should be sent to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation.
4. The culture, gender, values, beliefs etc of all parties should be taken into consideration in the communication process.
5. The communication should always be objective and not personal, and only relevant facts should be communicated.
6. Both parties' words and actions should be familiar and consistent.
7. Communication should as far as possible be direct, to ensure through direct feedback that the correct message has been received.
8. Keep the communication as brief and as direct as possible.

6. Effective communication in organisations

An atmosphere of trust has to be established in any institution to ensure the best possible communication. The organisation in the institution refers to the grouping of the workforce to reach the goals of the institution (Fielding 2006, 31).

Fielding (2006, 31) lists four types of messages used in the communication process in an institution, namely messages to

1. maintain good relationships;
2. describe tasks;
3. give instructions; and
4. communicate the goals and philosophy of the institution.

This article is mainly about messages aimed at maintaining good labour relationships within the organisation. Effective communication ensures the establishment of an atmosphere of trust, as a precursor for sound labour relations (Fielding 2006, 35). Employees should feel free to insist on their rights, but not at the expense of others. If aggression and the manipulation of other workers can be avoided, the atmosphere should be conducive to people listening to each other and understanding each other. Labour relations is concerned with the worker, not only as a factor of production but also as an individual who brings needs, expectations and goals to the workplace (Tustin and Geldenhuys 2002, 36). Information is transmitted differently in different organisations. Information may be communicated through oral and written instructions, policy manuals, memoranda, reports, notices, in-house magazines, specifications, inserts in pay packets and personnel meetings (Fielding 2006, 52). Downward communication normally takes place through these types of messages. Upward communication takes place through oral and written reports, memoranda, proposals and spoken and written suggestions. These are the formal ways of transmitting information in an institution. Informal and effective communication takes place on a daily basis, through face-to-face discussions. Communication is therefore an important instrument in creating the right atmosphere for negotiations and bargaining to take place.

Labour relations in the public sector focuses mostly on remunerations and conditions of service. However, in practice this relationship includes negotiations and bargaining on issues such as involvement in policy making in terms of issues such as transformation and affirmative action. These issues create new winners and losers, new collectivities and alliances, all of which call for new labour relations and communication processes.

Collective bargaining in the public sector refers to the continuous process in which representatives of the government as the employer and the employees (and unions) meet jointly to establish the terms and conditions of employment for workers in a bargaining unit (Kearney 2001, 86).

The Labour Relations Act, 66 of 1995 (LRA), brought about new labour relations processes in the public sector. Workers were allowed to organise and bargain freely with managers about the establishment of the Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC), the right to join unions and the right to strike. Union membership increased rapidly and a number of agreements were struck (Adler 2000, 15). The PSCBC strives to further good communication between the state as the employer and public servants as the employees. It is a formal communication channel and has the value of maintaining the authority structure. Proceedings can be substantiated and official feedback is ensured. The employer and the employee can share information on an official basis.

7. Communication and worker participation

As communication is the means by which employees and management interact,

participation by both sides should be promoted to facilitate good labour relations. In the labour relationship there is a commonality of interest and this should be honoured through collective bargaining. Communication in the labour relation manifests through worker participation. Worker participation and democracy emphasise the need for the involvement of employees in the decision-making process and in a self-management process. The worker must therefore be involved in as many aspects of his or her work life as possible. Management promotes communication, and therefore worker participation, to obtain greater commitment and cooperation from employees (Bendix 2004, 652). Worker participation refers to the ownership and management of the institutions by workers and the state (Venter 2003, 441). Venter (2003, 441) defines worker participation as ‘... a style of management which allows employees, either individually or collectively, to meaningfully participate in and contribute to the decision making and running of the organisation’. Employees participate in the workplace because they want more influence and control over their own work situation. Worker participation and communication can range from informal information sharing and consultation to formal joint decision making and shared ownership. Participation takes place at different levels in the organisation, depending on whether it is task-centred or power-centred (Bendix 2004, 657). Task-centred participation involves decision - making on lower levels of the work process. Power-centred decision making takes place on higher levels and is related to the worker’s department, the section or the entire institution. Participation and communication may be used to increase levels of job satisfaction and consequently to improve motivation and enhance productivity (Venter 2003, 443).

There are two different forms of worker participation through the communication process, namely direct and indirect worker participation. Direct participation takes place when an employee is directly involved in the activity or process (Bendix 2004, 657), whereas in indirect participation, employee involvement occurs through a representative. More power-directed participation or activities occur through representatives or union involvement.

Different institutions are created to enable employees to take part in activities such as decision making in the institution. In the public sector the PSCBC is such an institution. Prior to 1998, the Public Service Act determined that the responsibility to determine working conditions and human resource activities in general was, for public servants, vested in the Public Service Commission (PSC). On 1 July 1999 new Public Service Regulations came into effect, determining that the sections of the Public Service Staff Code that deal with terms and conditions of employment should become part of a collective agreement of the PSCBC (Resolution No. 3 of 1999 of the PSCBC). The public service labour legislative framework includes:

- the Public Service Act 103 of 1994, and regulations passed in terms of the Act
- the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998, and regulations passed in terms of this Act

- the South African Police Services Act 68 of 1995, and regulations passed in terms of this Act
- the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995.

This legislation makes provision for the recommendations of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). South African labour relations in both the private and public sectors also comply with the recommendations of the ILO. The recommendations on communication are set out below.

8. International labour organisation recommendations

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) issued a Recommendation, No.129 of 1967, on the subject of communication in the labour relationship. The Recommendation reads ‘it is in the common interest . . . (of employers and employees) . . . to recognise the importance of a climate of mutual understanding and confidence within undertakings that is favourable both to the efficiency of the undertaking and to the aspirations of the workers’.

It further says that ‘this should be promoted by the rapid dissemination and exchange of information, as complete and objective as possible, relating to the various aspects of the life of the undertaking and to the social conditions of the workers . . .’ and recommends that ‘management should, after consultation with workers’ representatives, adopt an effective policy of communication with the workers and their representatives’.

The ILO regards communication with employees as highly important and recommends that employees should always be consulted when establishing communication channels in an institution, as employee buy-in would ensure effective communication and a positive labour relations atmosphere. The guidelines for an effective communication policy as quoted by Bendix (2004, 315–317) include the following:

1. The policy of the institution should ensure that ‘information is given and that consultation takes place between the parties concerned before decisions on matters of major interest are taken by management.’ Such consultation must not cause damage to any party.
2. The method of communication should ‘in no way derogate from the freedom of association [and] should in no way cause prejudice to the freely chosen workers’ representatives or to their organisations’. Communication should therefore not be channelled through any other person if a representative body has been established.
3. Steps should be taken ‘to train those concerned in the use of communication methods and to make them as far as possible conversant with all the subjects in respect of which communication takes place’. Training for shop stewards or any other employee representatives should therefore be promoted and given when needed.

4. Means should be made available for employee representatives to communicate any information to employees.
5. Two-way communication should be promoted between management and employee representatives (although direct communication between employees and management is strongly advised), through a proper communication system in the organisation.
6. It is recommended that the communication policy should be 'adapted to the nature of the undertaking concerned, account being taken of its size and of the composition and interests of the work force'.
7. National practice and the circumstances of each particular situation should be taken into consideration when determining the medium of communication as well as the timing.

There are also recommendations on the specific issues that should be communicated by management to the workers. These include information regarding the following:

- general conditions of employment, including regulations concerning engagement, transfer and termination
- job descriptions and the place of particular jobs within the structure of the undertaking
- possibilities of training and prospects for advancement within the institution
- general working conditions
- occupational safety and health regulations; instruction on the prevention of accidents and occupational diseases
- procedures for the examination of grievances as well as the rules and practices governing their operation and the conditions for having recourse to them
- personnel welfare services
- social security or social assistance schemes available to the employees
- the regulation of national security schemes to which the workers are subject
- the general situation of the institution and its prospects or plans for its future development
- the explanation of decisions which are likely to affect, directly or indirectly, the situation of workers
- methods of consultation and discussion and of cooperation between management and its representatives and between workers and their representatives

The South African legislative framework makes provision for the ILO recommendations through laws such as the South African Constitution, the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997, the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993, the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act 130 of 1993, the Public Service Labour Relations Act 105 of 1994, the Public Service Act 103 of 1994 and the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998.

Recommendations of the ILO on communication media include:

- meetings
- bulletins and personnel policy manuals issued to supervisors
- mass media, such as house journals and magazines, newsletters, information and induction leaflets, notice boards and annual or financial reports
- media allowing workers to submit ideas and suggestions

These ILO recommendations provide a framework for communication aimed primarily at management, which under normal circumstances is responsible for communication. It also provides recommendations on the cultivation of a positive atmosphere conducive to interaction between management and employees and/or their representatives.

9. Conclusion

Labour relations is all about people in the workplace. It involves elements that are part of all human relationships, such as friendship and any other forms of association between people. This dynamic relationship should also be based on what is required to make any relationship work. Therefore, communication as one of the cornerstones of any effective and successful relationship is also part of the labour relationship. Communication is an essential aspect of survival and no institution can exist without it. The labour relationship and communication are complex and involve participants working together to create meaning through exchanging information in the work environment. The rules that an institution must comply with in the labour relationship and communication in an institution are nationally determined through legislation and internationally through recommendations by institutions such as the International Labour Organisation.

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