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Assessing Organizational Communication: Strategic Communication Audits

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Most of those who work, teach and research in communication have come to support van Riel’s notion that everything about an organization communicates. Everyone has seen how ignoring this can lead to crisis in organizations when employees are surly with customers, when management behaves inappropriately or unethically, or advertisements end up as jokes because the firm has such a bad reputation and so on. Readers will certainly agree that communication is one of the most critical activities when trying to build a good reputation.

As noted by Ellis et al. (1993), however, despite the acknowledged importance of communication, there is relatively little written about measuring effectiveness of communication associated with organizational communication. In this context one means non-marketing communication (defining organizational communication certainly adds to the problem of what to measure and how). Marketing communications, where it is possible to connect sales figures with various communication efforts, have enjoyed a larger literature and more scrutiny by scholars.

Methods exist, however, for measuring organizational communications, so-called audits. Ellis et al. (1993) carried out a survey of three distinctive types of internal audits: information audits, communication audits and information mapping. They contend that the communication audit can accomplish a number of objectives including:

1. Assessing the best way to introduce information technology into an organization
2. Measuring interpersonal communication
3. Measuring management-employee communications
4. Assessing effectiveness of organizational communications and
5. Measuring public relations activities.

According to Downs and Adrian in their book, Assessing Organizational Communication, a communication audit very simply ‘takes a communication perspective on the organization’ (p. 6). The authors believe that many organizations only pay attention to communication after experiencing problems, but like other assets of the firm, communications need monitoring. They argue that communication audits follow a ‘long tradition of management trying to obtain feedback about the current state of the organization’, in this case the state of the organization’s communications (p. 6).

Downs and Adrian approach the book as academics and consulting auditors, thus improving the book by being able to discuss their own experience with different types of organizations. But the book can also be used in the classroom as the authors...
also discuss how their (mostly graduate) students carry out audits as class projects. The authors insist that organizations must take a professional approach to communication audits and that an audit must take a process perspective on communications in order to relate communications to other organizational processes (p. 6).

Furthermore, as much as possible, those doing the audit should be independent of the organization and should be well trained and qualified for these types of audits. One reason for this is that communication audits entail collecting data from employees, often about their immediate supervisors. The ability to get honest and candid data is obviously greater with an independent auditor. Downs and Adrian also make the point that audits should be tailored to each organization. There do exist a number of communication audit 'how to' packages (see for example the 'International Association of Business Communicators' resources on measuring communications programs) and Downs and Adrian discuss at least four audit instruments, but they emphasize that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to communication audits.

The book is divided into 14 chapters, eight of which deal with different aspects of conducting an audit, analyzing data and writing the final report and four of which deal with specific audit instruments (Chapter 1 is an Introduction chapter). One chapter is devoted to the concept of diagnosing communication networks.

Chapter 2 is basically a chapter on how to get started and is entitled 'Initiating and Planning an Assessment'. The authors take initiation and assessment as two phases in the audit process. Initiation, they argue, can come from a client or it can be sold into the organization by a consultant. Once the audit has been decided upon a series of issues need resolving. First is meeting with key people. The authors do not really discuss who these people are, however. Who in the organization should take responsibility, the public relations person alone, in conjunction with human resources, or human resources alone? Normally, these types of audits should have the total endorsement and support of upper management if they are to be taken seriously. ‘Selling in’ the audit concept could have been covered better.

The authors do discuss what needs to be achieved in meetings — accommodating the client’s purposes, achieving consensus about the project, defining the scope of the work, familiarizing the audit team with the organization and familiarizing management with the procedure. All of these things are very important and Downs and Adrian discuss different pitfalls and things to watch for with each.

Phase 2, or planning, encompasses outlining a basic road map for the auditing project (p. 22). Crucial to success, according to the authors, are: finances, expectations about the final report, the nature of the client-auditor relationship, liaison format with the organization and identification of major focal areas. Also important are appropriateness of audit techniques, selection of respondents, time sequence, publicity about the audit and documentation of audit arrangements. As with the initiation phase, the authors discuss each of these with advice on how to approach them. They emphasize that the planning stage is key if the audit is to be successfully completed.

While the authors state that consultants conduct most audits alone or in pairs, they devote an entire chapter (Chapter 3) to the team approach to conducting an audit. This approach is most often used by students, therefore the chapter provides good insight to those wishing to use the book in a classroom setting where teams of students are more optimal than students working alone or in pairs. Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3 is also the first time the authors present an
overview of the audit process. This figure would have been nice to have earlier to illustrate the process, which they already started discussing in Chapter 1.

Chapter 4 is probably the heart of this book. Unfortunately, it tries to cover too much in too little space. The central point of this chapter is choosing a focal area. Here the authors provide what they call guidelines for choosing a focal area. The first step is investigating how task processes impact communication, seeing how tasks and people are related to each other. The end result is what they call an organizational logic, a listing of tasks and how organizations function. Next is determining the adequacy of information exchange — type of information, timing and load. Who gets what and how much. This is followed by assessing the direction of information — downward, upward and horizontal. They briefly describe the various elements associated with communication direction for which auditors should look.

The audit has now reached the stage of looking at specific communication channels and their use. The authors provide a good discussion of the difference between channels that are used a lot versus channels that are effective, pointing out that they are not necessarily always the same. This is a complicated stage of the audit and requires knowledge of appropriate media use, communication theory and social information-processing theory, among other things. Auditors first comprehensively measure the client’s media, listing all the channels used in the organization. It should be noted that the authors focus only on internal communication media. Next is measuring employees’ reaction to the various media, followed by evaluating the appropriateness of channel use. Again, the authors provide a list of things to concentrate on here.

The rest of the chapter is devoted to the remaining steps in the process, steps that, along with those discussed above, could use an entire chapter each. The final steps are: being sensitive to differences in communication functions (here they mean how communication functions, not the various jobs within communications), checking the quality of communication relationships, plotting communication networks, reviewing the organization as a communication system, relating communication to organizational outcomes and linking internal communication to organizational strategies.

Granted the book does not promise that readers will be able to carry out an audit when they are finished reading it, it merely presents very briefly what is possible to do with an audit. The reader therefore must find supplemental reading to truly understand what is possible from the steps discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapters 5–10 discuss methodological approaches to measuring communication. Chapter 5 discusses interviewing techniques and Chapter 6 discusses the use of questionnaires, leaving Chapters 7–10 to discuss four different surveys readily available on the market. The first survey discussed, in Chapter 7, is the International Communication Association (ICA) survey developed under the leadership of Dr Gerald M. Goldhaber, a leading academic within organizational communication. This well-known instrument was developed during the 1970s and, according to Downs and Adrian, it continues to be a viable tool for auditors. Its strength is in its comprehensiveness. With 122 questions, it is divided into eight major sections. The chapter provides an overview of the instrument as well as a discussion on its limitations and its current status.

Chapter 8, which is co-authored by Downs and Phillip G. Clampitt, discusses another survey instrument developed around the same time period as the ICA instrument. This instrument is called the Downs-Hazen Communication Satisfaction
Questionnaire and has similar roots. The Downs part of the couple is the co-author of this book. The ‘ComSat’, as the authors refer to it, differs from the ICA Survey in the way it was developed. The ICA Survey with its 122 questions is based on a theoretical compilation of questions, while the ComSat’s 60 questions were derived from a factor analysis of a pool of questions. The ComSat measures eight dimensions of communication satisfaction, including communication climate, communication with supervisors, communication with subordinates, media quality and so on. The authors give an overview of the questionnaire and tips on how to administer and interpret it.

The third survey instrument discussed is the Critical Communication Experience Survey. Based on the critical incident method developed by psychologists studying descriptive behaviors, this survey technique uses a standard questionnaire but in addition asks respondents to describe what were, for them, effective and ineffective communication experiences. This qualitative addition enriches the quantitative data collected and gives auditors more insight when analyzing the organization. Again, the authors provide some directions on using the instrument, including a summary of some effective and ineffective experiences collected at one organization. The authors do not mention it, but it would seem this type of demanding data collection requires special training. While some of these surveys they discuss can be purchased and implemented by the communication personnel in an organization, the critical communication experience summary would seem to be an instrument that would necessitate specialist intervention.

The final survey instrument discusses something called ‘ECCO analysis or Episodic Communication Channels in Organizations’. This survey measures primarily communication channels, specifically (1) length of time messages take to circulate, (2) the media usage for the messages and (3) the ways that different types of information are processed. The authors discuss how to go about designing questionnaires based on an ‘ECCO log’, which they do not really adequately explain. The authors note that, while many references to ECCO appear in literature from the 1970s, that should not deter those wishing to use it. It is still very much in use and Downs and Adrian find it particularly useful for this aspect of communication audits.

The authors devote an entire chapter to diagnosing communication networks, in this case internal communication networks. According to the authors, this aspect of auditing is often overlooked but is quite important as a way to understand information flow. Basically, it helps map where information flow is being blocked and who is blocking it, but it also aids in helping to design new communication structures to facilitate greater flow. The authors give advice on how to approach network analysis, leaving the reader to design their own survey instrument. The tricky part, however, is conceptualizing the actual network and this probably could not be performed by the average communications director and their staff. The actual generating of the network map can be done with computer programs and the authors mention one entitled ‘KrackPlot’, developed by Carnegie-Mellon University.

For some reason, the authors chose to insert a chapter on focus groups at the end of their discussion of various methodologies for carrying out audits. It is true that focus groups are highly recommended, if for no other reason than that they give employees a sense of being involved in the project, but the chapter might have made more sense earlier in the book. Focus groups can help identify variables needing study and this could assist in adapting some
of the audit instruments discussed for an individual organization, something the authors stress throughout.

The book ends with a chapter on final analysis, interpretation and writing the final report. Here, they give guidelines on how to approach the data, what the auditor should look for and interpreting data. In the final report chapter they provide suggestions on how to create a final report that management will be interested in reading. To that end, they do provide a sample final report for the reader.

Early in this review, note was made of the fact that the term organizational communication is often interpreted in different ways. Some view it as all of the communications of the organization, which is perhaps the more agreed upon definition in recent years, while some continue with a more traditional view of organizational communication as internal communications. This book views auditing from the latter viewpoint, perhaps covering areas 2, 3 and 4, as described by Ellis et al. (1993). Therefore readers should be clear that the auditing discussed in this book does not cover external communication. That being said, any improvements to internal communication will certainly improve communications externally.

This book can be a guide for practitioners considering doing a communication audit. They could then employ an outside auditor to carry it out, or purchase the many guides that exist that really give step by step instructions. Likewise, there are many audit instruments available for purchase that include questionnaires and diagnostic information. Downs and Adrian’s book is an ideal book for the classroom; while discussing already existing instruments it can be used very well for students wishing to design their own instrument and carry out an audit as part of their education in communications. For that reason it is very practical.

The book also is important because it emphasizes the necessity of having some sort of overview of the communication processes in an organization and their relationship to the rest of the organization and its business activities. As the authors note, this area is often overlooked in favor of external communication, particularly marketing communication, but it is an area that, if not handled properly, can have devastating effects on an organization’s reputation.

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