The illusion of the cascade

Various studies have shown that communication via the line (serial communication) is crucial in change processes. A company's strategists tend to rely on information being "cascaded" down from management to shop floor. But this information cascade is actually an illusion. This article explains why and points us in a more promising direction.

Communication makes up some 70% of a manager's work, although unfortunately few managers have enjoyed specific communication training to allow them to carry this out effectively. They are simply *expected* to communicate and in most cases they themselves are overly confident that they actually can and do communicate properly. The Dutch National Change Management Survey (*Nationaal Onderzoek Verandermanagement*) conducted in 2006 demonstrates that a lack of communication forms a key obstacle when it comes to achieving change (see below). Boonstra (2000) and other authors also believe that information and communication are success factors for making changes work.

1. "This company's employees are unclear about what its management thinks needs to be changed or improved..."
4. "The managers here are not properly able to get across their vision and policy to their people"
Source: the Top 5 greatest obstacles from the National Change Management Survey (2006).

A court's sectional chair (vice-president) heads up a team of 25 highly qualified professionals (judges and clerks) and their support staff. There is a monthly meeting for the court section, scheduled for around lunchtime so that "everyone can be there", to discuss all kinds of topics relating to the section and the court's policy. The sectional chair draws up the agenda and chairs the meeting, doing most of the speaking himself. In a conversation before the meeting the chair says to me, somewhat apologetically, "Our section meeting does have quite a 'Listen while grandpa tells' element, but that's logical because I know the most…".

It is inconceivable that a team of such highly educated professionals sit and listen to "grandpa" each month like a group of young children, and it must be incredibly difficult for the chair to find a different approach to the meeting. He is probably genuinely afraid of the meeting going completely off the rails if he does things differently.

When it comes to the fear of entering into dialogue, this is certainly not a unique example. Other cases show that team leaders avoid difficult conversations with their staff during major restructuring. For a manager, the prospect of being faced with a deluge of misery and despair during a confrontational encounter is not an attractive one, which is why many try and worm their way out of holding team meetings. Keeping the lid firmly on the powder keg certainly feels like the safe option at this stage.

What keeps managers awake at night?

"How do I keep things calm during a reorganisation?"
"How do I answer questions to which I don't even have an answer myself?"
"I'm prepared to talk to my staff, but I don't want to be met with a lament of misery. What do I do?"
"How do I explain and defend a policy I do not really believe in myself?"

Cancelling or postponing a meeting is not a formal policy, but in practice we can think of countless arguments for avoiding dialogue that may turn out to be confrontational, and all of these arguments appear legitimate: "There were so many people away that I decided to do it by e-mail." "It was just too busy...". And so the PowerPoint presentation is simply forwarded to staff without any explanation. There are also managers who reason that "the decision-making is still underway so there's not much point in organising a meeting now. I'm better off waiting until a final decision has been made". Fortunately, unwillingness or fear do not apply to everyone; some managers are capable of excellent, objective communication.

Casual comments

At directors level serial communication is not really a topic of discussion. Once a matter has been discussed, it is announced that it now has to be communicated down through the organisation. "It's now up to the line to explain it!", "It's now entering the organisation via the line". At face value these are casual comments; everyone is now expected to discuss the subject with their subordinates, who in turn discuss it with their subordinates until it reaches the shop floor. The idea behind this is that the manager gets across the message, translating it appropriately for his or team: how will it affect us? The process is often referred to as *cascading*, an allegory to a stream of water flowing down over various plateaus before it finally reaches the bottom. The top-down communication cascade follows the *linking pins* in the organisational structure. A linking pin is a person (manager) who links a higher hierarchical level with a lower one. The regular team meeting therefore provides a good opportunity to pass on the information.

The notion of communication flowing down the chain like a cascade is already decades old. To this very day, a great many managers rely on key information being passed down to the front line in this way. If a line manager "just" does what he or she is supposed to, the information will "automatically" find its own way to the shop floor, in a format suited to those workers.

Ten side notes

People who believe that information will successfully cascade down to the front line have a naive understanding of communication, to say the least. Ten side notes on cascading:

1. The cascade functions on the basis of regular team meetings providing an opportunity to pass on information to the team at every level. If this meeting does not take place (for whatever reason, see above), cascading will not take place.
2. Cascading is simply about informing others, not about communicating or engaging in dialogue. The cascade does not allow for an upward flow and disregards the fact that people want to (and will) respond, making it a one-sided model offering only one-way traffic.
3. Cascading ignores other formal moments for consultation and networking (such as projects) to diffuse and share information.
4. Information spreads much more readily through informal channels, the odd chat in passing, conversations by the coffee dispenser, during a phone call, Twitter, text and e-mail messages, or a chat over lunch. People tell each other about "how it is" and are influenced by what they hear from others. Whether true or not, rumours have proven to be a reliable source of information.
5. Cascading assumes that the various forms of consultation at every level are coordinated in terms of time. However, it has been seen time and time again that this timing is often unfeasible for all kinds of practical reasons (see above).

6. Cascading also assumes that managers actually want to, are able to and have the courage to share and discuss the information with their staff. Earlier on we saw that managers do not always jump at the chance to interpret, share and discuss information. Sometimes they are not even sure *how* to translate the information. Many simply read out the PowerPoint slides they have been given or forward the presentation to their employees. Of course, there are also managers who are good at passing on the information and people are generally of goodwill, but things could be done so much better.
7. Cascading assumes uniformity not only in terms of persuasiveness and enthusiasm but also interpretation of the content. The information of course has to be translated at every level, but the key message must remain the same, which is why toolkits exist (see below). As regards content, the message itself will be to the point and geared to a particular target group but the way the information is brought across varies greatly because everyone gives it their own spin.
8. The information to be passed on to the employees through cascading offers the opportunity for a higher level of abstraction, making it relevant for everyone. However, at the same time it is not specific enough for people requiring detailed information. Managers are often unable to provide answers because many aspects still have to be worked out at local level. The information provided does not answer all of the people's questions, resulting in dissatisfaction.
9. The model does not answer the question of how the employee interprets the message and how he or she views it. And you can certainly count on the recipient having an opinion.
10. Today's employee is a proactive information finder and processor, going beyond the cascade in search of the information he or she requires. Cascading passes these proactive recipients by.

The larger an organisation, the stronger the illusion of the cascade because of the higher number of plateaus/levels. Intensification of many of the side notes can be expected. It may be possible to overcome some of the problems mentioned above, by giving managers toolkits for example. These could contain ready-to-use presentations, brochures, references to information sources and/or a list of frequently asked questions with answers to try and ensure that managers "tell the same story" wherever possible. Whether or not they actually use these toolkits is a different matter. The various forms of consultation should also correspond well in terms of timing, but these are ultimately all makeshift measures that, in my opinion, remain faithful to the outmoded system of passing information down step by step via the hierarchical structure.

Information via the line: so how should it be done?

How can serial communication be effective? I believe two elements to be important:

1. Factual general corporate information is available on the intranet;
2. The teams assign meaning to the information together with their managers.

Intranet as the primary information source
Most reasonably sized companies have their own intranet, which in many cases is visited too little and has become a poorly organised means of communication. The intranet should be an easily accessible source of detailed and up-to-date information in the form of news articles and management decisions, something which may demand a reassessment of a company's intranet, in some cases a thorough one. In theory, in three clicks employees should be able to find the latest management decisions, news articles about the

organisation, PowerPoint presentations with background information, details of changes projects, etc.

But improving an intranet purely in terms of technical and communicative aspects is not sufficient. It calls for employees who no longer wait until they receive information from their manager. They are now expected to quickly find and read the information they require themselves. The boss is no longer the most important information provider. This goes hand in hand with the new information-seeking employee. A company's communication department can see to it that the intranet is improved where necessary (making it more up to date and interactive and less cluttered), as well as making sure that detailed information becomes available quickly and conveniently.

Teams as a basis for assigning meaning
Information only means something to a person if they can place it in their own context and give it their own meaning, i.e. link the information with the information they already have. The meaning needs to answer the basic questions *what is going on and what do I have to do?*

The information gathered from the intranet (or elsewhere) is of a rather general nature, unable to provide answers to the many specific questions that employees have. It can also raise new questions. For this reason it is advisable to arrange periodic meetings between members of staff and their manager. However, as we saw above, managers often decide not to go ahead with such meetings. Here too they may find themselves in an awkward position as they still do not have an answer to specific questions, knowing just as little as their staff.

The fact that managers end up in an uncomfortable position despite having a crucial communicative role is implicitly a presenting problem. And because it concerns serial communication, it is my firm belief that the communication professional is the obvious person to deal with this, as follows:

1. Remove virtually all the intermediate "plateaus" and ensure that all managers at the front line of the organisation have more detailed information than their staff or the intranet. Make these managers *privileged recipients*. They can use the extra information to provide better answers to their staff. Toolkits may be useful for this purpose but are not sufficient on their own.
2. Make sure that these managers are given the best possible support in their communicative role so that they can assign meaning to the information together with their team.

What exactly do managers need? And how do you achieve that?

Line managers require assistance in addressing the following five communicative themes:

1. How do I encourage my staff to go along with changes?
2. How can I best deal with uncertainty/disquiet in my team?
3. How do I give a presentation with impact?
4. How do I stimulate dialogue within my team and during team meetings?
5. How do others see me as a manager?

This selection of five themes is not a random one but it is certainly not exhaustive. They deal with a manager's own communicative role, the communicative relationship with others and communication regarding company policy and changes. Research within a manager's own organisation is likely to lead to more specific or additional themes.

Fact sheets for more effective serial communication

To assist managers with communication via the line, the communication department can first demonstrate what it has to offer in this respect. In addition to the five themes/questions mentioned above, a further five communication products or services can be developed and detailed on fact sheets. A fact sheet is a clear description of a contribution (product or service) by the communication department to serial communication based on the interaction vision on internal communication, which revolves around dialogue and assigning meaning (Reijnders, 2010, in print).

The content and design of the fact sheets can be adapted to fit a manager's own organisation and they can be kept in a simple file and/or on an intranet page. They can also feature in communication plans, including the annual plan.

Case study: telecom merger

Geert is a manager at telecom operator that is on the verge of merging with another company, leading to job losses. He discusses the disquiet within his team with the communication advisor. Facts are few and far between; because the company is listed nothing is being disclosed. But there are nevertheless all kinds of questions, which as a manager he is unable to answer. The communication advisor asks how this makes him feel, suggesting that he spend time during the next team meeting on the questions that cannot be answered. To help him she has a list of questions that Geert can ask his staff. She also discusses how Geert can respond if he does not know the answer either. This preparatory talk gives Geert peace of mind, allowing him to take a more confident approach to the meeting with his team. The communication advisor will join the meeting as an observer. They arrange to discuss how the meeting went afterwards.

The meeting turns out to be quite a relief to the employees. They are able to express their concerns and come to understand everyone's position. They realise that a lot of information is being kept secret and that details are lacking. Geert was not looking forward to the meeting but feels that the preparatory meeting provided him with plenty of support. He resolves to hold these meetings on a regular basis.

A fact sheet can be created for the type of meeting Geert holds, making the nature of the meeting clear. An abridged version can be found below.

Abridged fact sheet example

How can I deal with uncertainty/disquiet in my team?

Problem
Manager: "There are changes going on that are causing uncertainty and disquiet in my team, making it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. I do not have answers to all their questions and I have a lot myself too. What is the best approach?"

Targeted result
The communication department can offer you guidelines for discussing the uncertainties with your team. We can come to arrangements on how to deal with this uncertainty.

How can the communication department help?

•   The communication professional assists you in preparing your team meeting: how is the team composed, what topics need to be discussed and how do you approach the meeting? How do you deal with questions to which you have no answer?
•   The communication professional can also attend the meeting (taking a passive role).
•   Afterwards you evaluate the meeting together with the communication professional, who will advise you on any follow-up action to be taken.

What does this demand of you as a manager?

•   taking an open stance during the team meeting (but making sure you maintain your leadership role)
•   investing time
•   remaining open to the emotions of your team and knowing how to deal with these
•   accepting that you cannot answer all questions asked
•   being able to take criticism

When will you see results?
You will notice results immediately after the team meeting. People will be relieved that they have been able to get things off their chest and have someone to listen to their concerns. They will realise that not all of their questions can be answered at this stage but they are glad that they are being listened to and acknowledged. What's more, they are also reassured by the fact that they are given the opportunity to ask questions and express their doubts.

Examples of questions that you can ask during the team meeting, depending on the situation:

•   What do you know about the change?
•   What do you expect of this change?
•   What advantages do you see in the change?
•   What do you think the consequences will be for yourself?
•   What makes you concerned, afraid, uncertain or anxious?
•   What do you find important in the coming period?
•   What exactly do you expect of me?
•   What do I expect of you?
•   What can we/should we do as a team?
•   What arrangements should we make for the coming period? How will we get through this period together?

It is clear that making fact sheets is only a start; they are simply tools to help you along. They show how you can achieve an interactive approach to communication via the line.

Dual function

Success depends on the communication professional being able to live up to what is written in the fact sheet, which may require additional training (coaching, working styles, advice skills, etc.). The communication department now has a dual function when it comes to serial communication. On the one hand it supports senior management by formulating communication policy and providing corporate information using an improved intranet. On the other hand it actively/proactively supports the lowest level of managers in their communicative performance by providing the assistance described in the fact sheets. It does not take over responsibility for communication via the line.

Tailor-made fact sheets have already been drawn up by a number of large companies, where they are now being used to improve communication via the line. At the same time, companies are distancing themselves from the "holy" cascade approach. Alternatives are being sought to the illusion of cascading by involving the communication department in making the intranet more accessible, complete and up to date, actively seeking a connection with the lowest-level managers, giving them a privileged information position and assisting them through fact sheets.

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