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The Strategic Importance of Organisation and Leadership in National Development Communication Programme

By

Jesucita L Sodusta
The Strategic Importance of Organisation and Leadership in National Development Communication Programmes

Jesucita L. Sodusta

I. Introduction

Since the publication of The Passing of Traditional Society (Lerner 1958) in the fifties, the need to increase the impact of development communication and subsequently expand its strategic role and enhance its contribution has continued as a definitive framework for research. The classic work has reoriented communication development (Belshaw 1965; Kearl 1976; Schramm and Lerner 1976; Tehranian 1990) and complemented approaches either as an interactive device (Arno 1985), or as an organising mechanism (Wilder 1982).

Despite the strategic significance of communication as a means of socio-political control (Wu 1970; Chu 1978; Tarantino 1978; Chao 1986), or as a development tool (McAnany 1980; Soedjatmako 1985), it is often not included in development programmes. The majority of these programmes have been conceived and executed without a communication component. Only a few agencies such as IDRC, UNESCO and, recently, PCARRD have done so.

Communication and development have a natural synergy that can facilitate their work together, for example, in the fields of family planning, health and agriculture (Schramm and Lerner 1976). However, a number of factors have hampered this connection. For example, communication is implicitly linked to the rest of the development programme in that it is not addressed as a specific component by itself. This is largely attributed to the paradigm on development in which the narrowly diffusionist (Mitchell 1974; Hoben 1982) and the patronizing top-down model of development are predominant (Lees 1986). Communication was simply regarded as a channel which provided the source and flow of ideas, techniques or information instead of being treated as a system which has its own institutional structure, value system and goal attainment processes (Parsons and Smelser 1956). Another factor
is the lack of strategic planning to make communication responsive to new development situations. Development communication has to cope with the challenges and changes confronting the programme and its environment. Without strategic planning, decision-makers and practitioners are unable to deal with rapidly changing circumstances effectively including those that require maximum discretion in the area of organisational control. Finally, communication has not been able to harness its "profit-making" force for development. The environment that development programmes operate in are intensely competitive and have tangible components which require utilization rationale. For example, the farming systems programme has an impact on the quality of life of the poor as it helps boost productivity and improve their income level. However, the economic returns to investment on development communication have not been adequately addressed or pay off in investments demonstrated. This has weakened the competitive advantage of the participation of communication in development efforts. It did not encourage the promotion of communication in development programmes in terms of policy and budgetary allocation.

In this paper, I will discuss the structural dimension of communication particularly the structure of organisation which is designed to meet strategic challenges. This aims to understand why one organisation works while others not. What style of management to follow and how communication exchange is achieved or how participation is maximized. This does not only strengthen the links between communication and development, but helps improve the contribution of development communication towards the various ways of organising transactions among the different levels of management.

II. Organisational Challenges

Historically, organisations have played a limited role in development communications. The studies concentrated on the transmission of messages (Rao 1972; Kearl 1976; Rahim 1976) and on the means of their communication techniques, hardware, media campaigns and training courses (Diaz-Bordenave 1974). The interest on organisation emerged when studies included "communication at and among all levels" of management involving not only agency representatives and the farmers (Fett 1974; Esman 1974) but also bureaucrats, businessmen, opinion leaders, scientists and others. In many respects, the new approach to communication involving organisation came with the studies by Schramm and Lerner
(1976) and Rogers (1976). They recognize that development communication must include a strong component of social organisation and interpersonal communication.

Today, many development programmes still have difficulty in integrating organisation into their communication strategy and in assessing its impact on performance. The problems encountered by the National Agricultural Extension Project in Thailand (Yookti 1981) and the Agricultural Extension Systems in the Philippines (Stuart 1990) are examples of this. In Thailand, the existence of the gaps in communication lines between the extension agents and the cooperators on the one hand and between research and extension on the other hand has been attributed to the organisation factors among other things. In particular, it is the vertical flow of work, authority and communication that has created the gap, inhibited the quick information feedback, and allowed the long communication lines to persist.

The new department of agricultural extension, the mechanism of which made the gap even wider, has recommended the development of the organisation strategy in communication through increased transactions or exchanges and other forms of social network around Thailand. In the Philippines, which has encountered similar problems in communication integration, the lack of the mechanism of inter-organisational linkage within the department of agriculture particularly in its research and extension efforts has led to a major reorientation of the organisation strategy. Through this reorientation is an attempt to align agricultural and development communication institutions more closely, i.e., department of agriculture and PCARRD (Stuart 1990).

However, today's development communication needs more than integrating an organisation component into its programmes. The environments of these programmes have changed dramatically in the last decade. Demand for service quality, a broad-based participation, new information technology and so on require an organisational strategy that can keep up with all these changes. Keeping up with this new reality implies the need for a changing role for organisation.

III. Structural Imperative

Development communication programmes must look into their structure, including the feedback, to remain effective and competitive. The structure
must move away from the classic linear cycle of one-way flow of the bureaucratic communication to a participatory and feedback communication.

While communication is by definition participatory, in reality the messages and channels of communication are far from being reciprocal. Most sending groups, often those representing the authority, expect for positive feedback to foster programme image and success. Negative feedback devices are hardly built into their master plan and this makes it difficult for the recipients to exert their influence in strategy formulation and research direction. The lack of such devices make it difficult for the authority to improve its performance effectively.

Vertical communication prevents strategic change from taking place such as those noted in Bangladesh (Rahim 1976), India (Dandekar 1972; Rao 1972), the Philippines (Stuart 1990) and Thailand (Yookti 1981). The effectiveness of top-to-bottom communication in accomplishing programme objectives is largely hampered by the limited role it extends to feedback, particularly, the negative feedback (Gonzalez 1989) from potential contributors to every link in the communication chain, including recipients, extension agents and middle-level management.

The replanting project in Kampung Kuala Bera in Malaysia is considered a success largely due to the use of negative feedback device (such as field inspection) built into its master plan (Wilder 1982). On the other hand, the breakdown of the new block planting schemes in the same kampung was attributed to the lack of field inspectors and faulty information derived from the government headman. Incorporating feedback devices into the programme improves performance of government-sponsored agricultural modernization programmes in rural Malaysia as Wilder (1982) noted. Further, recent studies (Pritchard et al 1989) show that feedback increased productivity by fifty percent and that feedback with additional goal setting and incentives increased productivity by seventy-five percent and seventy-six percent respectively.

Apart from the use of feedback devices, programmes must also be sensitive to a diversity of features such as personality, cultural and corporate ones within the bureaucratic structure. Therefore, programmes seeking cooperation and opportunities with the bureaucracies must be flexible enough to adopt new strategies if they are to survive well and perform effectively. Since the bureaucracies cannot be changed merely to meet the demands of a group, there is a need to employ an organisational
development intervention to modify the attitudes of the group towards it. Neuman and his colleagues (1989) have recommended many techniques or interventions such as human process, technological approaches and multifaceted designs. Of the three, it is the human process intervention which is the most applicable in dealing with the bureaucratic structure. This intervention involving activities which put a premium on human functioning and on processes such as the human relations training, sensitivity training. Problem-solving allows the group to address the "human" side of the bureaucracy and respond to its style of handling time, space and rules. Most of today's programmes, regardless of orientation end up dealing with this "human" aspect when facing the bureaucrats (Katz et al 1975).

Programmes that have the strategy on how to communicate with the bureaucrats - managers, assistants and secretaries - do a better job than others whose strategies do not have the appropriate sensitivities. In general, the level of activities in these programmes are directed towards the members or employees of the organisations rather than the organisation or the organisational environment itself. One reason why the result of the Puebla project in Mexico was "undeniably significant" (Cano and Winkelman 1972; Kearl 1976) was because of the consideration of all aspects of the bureaucracy. In the past, programmes were client-focused and neglected the significance of the various levels of bureaucracy. Gradually effective programme performance included the consideration of the bureaucrats, and even those who occupy the lower level management.

Developing the skills and capabilities of the development communication practitioners become absolutely vital not only because in many ways they are in direct contact with the bureaucrats, but also because their efficiency will boost productivity and cooperation in the workplace. To improve the perceptions of these practitioners, a host of activities such as training in sensitivity, human relations, feedback collection and analysis, team building and so on should be introduced. Development communication programme should be a rich source of new training opportunities and methods to other development programmes. This is necessary to keep programmes competitive.

Development communication programmes are rich in communication skills and technical experts that hasten the development process. But development communication has yet to take full advantage of...
the opportunity the human and information resources provide. Quite a number of empirical studies, for example, case analysis, evaluation, or comparative research, exist for guiding the selection of the training content in dealing with all aspects of the bureaucracy.

Development communication can also make its impact felt when the bureaucratic organisations are to team up with the non-bureaucratic ones. Non-government organisations (NGOs) have created competitive advantage for their agencies by adopting non-bureaucratic structures. In the past, the entrepreneurial structure was primarily used in small businesses and medium-scale industries. However, this has spread recently as NGOs have found that it keeps them flexible and permits rapid response to a situation. While bureaucratic structures have bias toward formality and problems of structural inertia, entrepreneurial organisations permit informality and encourages initiative.

One problem with bureaucracies is that it has difficulties in responding to change (Weber 1947) especially as its size grows (Blau 1963) and more rules and documentation are implemented (Child 1973). While bureaucracy is remarkably an efficient tool for accomplishing certain kinds of activities, e.g., documentation (Weber 1947), its predominance across the entire spectrum of government programmes has slackened efforts to meet the needs and solve the problems of beneficiaries particularly in the rural areas (Yeung and McGee 1986). Bureaucracy lacks speed in processing information and in making decisions thereby preventing the delivery of quality services as witnessed in many government-sponsored programmes. One way to overcome this problem is to link the small entrepreneur organisation more closely to the bureaucratic structure since the former has the flexibility to organise transactions rapidly.

IV. Network Building

To meet the increased demand for resource-based linkages, development programmes must build networks. But the choice of a network is important because it influences the success of the programme objectives. Many development programmes have failed in their implementation because their networking criteria were high on one level but low on other. A project in India (Dube 1976) had difficulty implementing the development policies until it was able to integrate various social actors and institutions into its network strategy. Initially, only a few
individuals or a small segment of the village community was mobilized to provide resources for the project directly or indirectly. Later, a number of new linkages with their own technological and other kinds of expertise were established. This resulted in the formation of multi-specialty teams which, under a unified contract, included networks of extension services, local agents of communication, and decentralized institutions.

Apart from the plurality of network sources required to expand the participation of various sectors, network builders should also look into the criterion of resource mobilisation. It is impractical not to link up with individuals and institutions that can influence the mobilisation not only of their own resources but also those of others. It is often not enough to build a network on the basis of size or level of technological activity alone. This is particularly true in programmes with inadequate resources. Programmes will rely on network relations that have the ability to enforce contracts, to reduce labour costs, to increase productivity and even to mobilize the resources of others. Networks that can move resources into the programme stream are likely to have competitive advantage over those that cannot enforce agreements on time or have long-response time and that are less productivity-oriented.

Another criterion is the need for broad-based linkages which reflect different levels of participation. Fostering participation in development communication programmes by building a network with only a few levels, for example, expertise from different fields and target beneficiaries, is likely to be ineffective. Organisations facing different developmental environments require networks that can increase their influence in the formulation of urban and rural developmental policies. By linking with those engaged in policy advocacy, development organisations are able to gain access to sources of influence and power outside the organisation with costs advantages. At the same time, such arrangement preserves some measure of independence for the organisation.

Overall, development communication programmes should have a balanced approach in networking. While it should develop local area networks (of local political officials, church leaders, opinion and grassroots leaders) as a means to gaining access to resources, the need to network with other sectors is equally imperative in meeting strategic, administrative and operating demands. Clearly, networking is not only a vehicle for communication but also for develop-
ment and success for short- and long-term ends.

V. Leadership Style: A Key to Organisational Success

While the organisational structure is an important element in the performance equation, it is not the only determinant. Further, although networks provide the organisation with advantages, competitors for similar resources would appear, new challenges are to be met, high information technology is introduced and the organisational culture transformed. As a result, the development communication programme and its operational issues become outdated. Ultimately, the success of a strategy, the performance of an organisation and the integration between the various organisational components rest on the leadership and its style of management.

It is the leader who determines what new strategy to adopt improving organisational performance. It is the leader who is concerned with the overall relationship of the organisation with the environment. The success of a strategy depends on how the leadership exerts its influences on changes, people and events.

The role of the leader in the organisational performance has been the subject of interest for over 70 years. More than 3,000 studies have been written about it (Stogdil 1974). Still, there is no definitive answer as to what factors make a successful leader (Conger, et al 1988).

The impact of leadership on performance has, however, been demonstrated. Programmes and organisations survive and prosper because of quality of leadership. The success of the Comilla project in Bangladesh has largely been attributed to the role of its leaders, whose original thinking, hard work, openness to cultural diffusion and so on influenced the implementation of the project objectives (Inayatullah 1976). However, the project was a failure when replicated elsewhere without the qualities that the Comilla project leadership had exhibited.

The whole phenomenon of development communication is probably more striking now than ever before. This is because the implementation of the participatory communication and other kinds of participatory models tended to create a situation in which a good leadership plays a predetermining part. Even though information and other resources are derived from a plurality of sources, the fundamental responsibility for organisational success is vested in the top.

What makes an effective leader? The studies of excellent
organisations point inescapably to the condition for a driving quality of an effective leader, that is, a performance-oriented leader. This kind of leader aims to achieve organisational goals and improve performance by developing skills that can help boost productivity. Some studies suggest that personality traits particularly the cognitive ability, the degree and the quality of interpersonal orientation and the attitude towards work all affect the job performance (Day and Silverman 1989). The personality characteristics of the leaders can be a liability to the organisation as it moves from one life-cycle stage to another. In a recent study (Novelli and Tullar 1989), entrepreneurs attribute their difficulties to a personality misfit as their organisation matures rapidly. Personality characteristics that are an asset in the earlier stages becomes a liability in the later stages of the organisational development.

In a separate study, de Vries's observation (1989) of leaders has demonstrated that leadership effectiveness is derailed once they reach the top. This is due to the feeling of loneliness and the disruption brought about by a disturbance of the network of complex mutual dependencies. Similarly, leaders with unstable temperament such as the tendency toward violence, poor level of discipline, biased attitude toward corruption, can hinder organisation performance and development. These observations suggest that personality traits can significantly effect the behaviour of the leaders.

On the other hand, some studies argue that personality variables have poor relations to leadership perceptions (Ghiselli and Bartoll 1953). Likewise, the studies by Guion and Gottier (1965) have found that job performance cannot be predicated by individual personality characteristics alone. There are other powerful factors which effect leadership behaviour. Indeed, no single factor accounts for effective leadership.

One key factor which is considered essential for effective leadership is communication. Corporate leaders should be able to obtain information or feedback from its environments and utilise these for improving organisational performance. Effectiveness and development encourage the search for new and accurate information. This means that a leader not only must be an effective communicator but also must have the skills to collect and process information which are technical, verbal and nonverbal. When the organisational culture varies and breakdowns in interaction occur, the nonverbal communication becomes equally if not more important than the verbal.
Effective leaders should be able to decode nonverbal cues or interactions in verbal communication and subsequently interpret the action of others. Studies (Rosenthal and DePaulo 1979) have shown that there are gender differences in ability to decode nonverbal cues, with women superior to men. Being skilled at decoding nonverbal cues has the advantage for improving organisational performance which involves transactions that are not only corporate specific but gender, ethnic and culture influenced. This is especially relevant in transactional modes dealing with or influencing superiors (Case et al 1989) and those involving subordinates (Dosier et al 1989).

Being able to interact within the symbolic frameworks and to capture the wide range of human symbolic expressions (Goffman 1967; Berger and Luckman 1966) hasten the collection of information even without the use of sophisticated information technology. Leaders who intend to be adept in communication need to understand the symbolic aspect of interaction because in everyday life verbal and nonverbal expressions are hardly separable.

Leaders in the private sector are more effective in attaining organisational objectives because they tend to employ more "sensitive" feedback mechanisms than those in the public sector (Spengler 1961). Sensitivity beyond the organisational or technical aspects of information, i.e., psychological and environmental (Conger, et al 1988), which can be inferred from shifting decision signals or obtained from a reliable source is a useful communication tool leaders. Decision-makers in the public sector or the bureaucracy employ such tool less because they are less eager to look for failures (Spengler 1961).

An important feature of an effective communicator lies in his ability to communicate corporate pride and identity. In development programmes, organisational competency and performance rely extensively on the way values are communicated, which in turn builds the emotional resource for future cooperation. Bonds of collective pride and identity, shared vision and responsibility shape the accessibility of the organisation to other resources.

Another factor for leadership is vision. The significance of vision lies in the way in which it can define the commitments by introducing to its members goals and plans of the organisation. By developing a dynamic organisation in the future and sharing the vision with members of the group, stakeholders, network sources and even its competitors show powerful qualities
of leadership. Yeung and McGee (1986) argue that Indonesia, Hong Kong, Korea, Malaysia and the Philippine have leadership weaknesses in the community level because they fail among others to generate the shared dynamism responsible for the delivery of services. Sharing vision is particularly apt for programmes in which participatory management is needed.

Due to the increasing demands for quality services and sustainable projects, development programmes can no longer rely on conventional transactional leadership. Sharing vision goes beyond mere exchange of goods and services such as rewarding employees for services rendered (Bass 1990), developing the skills of lower level employees (Adick 1990), or obtaining services for others. Performance consequences of transactional leadership indicate that employee effort, satisfaction and productivity are limited (Bass 1990), and that optimal mobilization of people power is not achieved (Lozare 1990). Instead, it should inspire employees with a realistic vision, stimulate them and capitalize on their diversity (Bass 1990). This alternative form of leadership, which Burns calls "transformational" (1978), is much closer to the contemporary realities of participatory development. In transformational leadership, the leader is able to hold the members together because of the sense of purpose which inspires them to a higher level of motivation and morality (Lozare 1990; Burns 1978). Participatory development requires a transformational leader who is able to share the vision with the members to make them work together in building up of a corporate culture.

Another important quality of a leader is his ability to build a knowledge base from which to operate (Shanks 1987). Programmes may perform well when effective communication, environmental sensitivity and clear vision can be used to meet routine and predictable problems. But when programmes are confronted by unanticipated challenges and new difficulties, the liabilities of a leader with inadequate knowledge base are exposed. An important project in the Madras slum in India failed because the leader did not have the essential knowledge of the field (Ranganath 1990).

A common source of knowledge base for well-funded programmes is R and D. Programmes allocate a portion of their budget for research and development. They can acquire new information with fast processing and this enables them to respond quickly to competitive challenges and changes in the environments. However, without adequate means to set up their own R and D, small programmes can join the large organisations to overcome both the lack of knowledge base and the costly investment. For the one-man enterprise, the
best source of knowledge base is the entrepreneur himself. In this case, the leader must have both a stock of knowledge built up over time and this may include empirical lore, stories about special cases and general intuition (Hambrick 1987) and skills technological process and for managing organisation and opportunity.

VI. Integrating Organisation and Leadership

The formulation and communication of strategies involving organisation and leadership require that the two factors be tied to each other. The tacit character of organisation is that it needs leadership for its performance. Conversely, it is difficult for leadership to function without an organisation. However, in many cases, organisational difficulties are attributed to the leadership's inability to strengthen its link to the organisation and consequently to corporate direction and strategy. This is particularly true of the organisational staff—middle level managers, implementors, facilitators, etc.—who are responsible for running the organisation on a day-to-day basis, but has minimal participation in strategic choice and formulation. Wilder (1982) implicitly demonstrates that the greater participation of lower management, the better the project performance. For instance, in the case of Kampung Kuala Bera project, the Ketua Kampung and Penghulu assisted the Mentri Besar.

This basic notion of pluralistic participation may explain the findings by strategic planners and social psychologists (Goold and Campbell 1988; Langley 1988; Sathe 1989) that performance improves with the fostering of greater participation, with the linking of the organisational staff to the strategic vision of the leadership.

Many programmes have had difficulties in integrating organisational participation into their leadership strategy because of the faulty design of the organisation. In centralised leadership, the staff are not encouraged to communicate with the leaders, and, with the target beneficiaries, except the extension workers, because they are entrenched to unending routine tasks. In some cases, leaders encourage open dialogue between staff but the performance consequences run counter to the goals because of the attendance of the immediate supervisor. Informal but structured meetings (for example, during breakfast and lunch sessions) would foster the understanding of the attitudes and problems of the members; but in encouraging an open and free dialogue they must be organised without the presence of the immediate superior. In others,
this dialogue should be limited to a handful of staff members for a roundtable discussion during lunch or dinner. A trained leader invites comments from the group and encourages exchange of views, which may contribute to the organisational stock of strategic information. Since this kind of information is not easily appropriated, it is crucial that a follow-up action should be taken. This includes things which need to be done, things which the organisation can or cannot do, and so on.

Strengthening the lines of communication between the leadership and organisation does not solely depend on frequent informal exchanges. In enhancing their integration in-house training for leadership and staff at different levels is needed. There is no single model of training in strengthening the links between leadership and organisation. Different methods can be experimented and these include on-job coaching of staff, sensitivity training on nonverbal behaviour and management training in social interaction especially in the art of listening. Other effective means include innovative organisation design and capitalising on workers diversity (instead of hiring people with similar background and talent). These approaches, while different, have one common factor: they all are involved in making the leadership integrated to their organisational staff. Indeed, the development of human resources should constitute a significant part of the strategy of the programme.

VII. Conclusion

Development communication programmes must turn to organisation and leadership to increase their strategic effectiveness and to remain competitive. Organisations can be used to improve performance of the programme by greater emphasis on innovative feedback mechanisms, more specialised, higher-quality communication sensitivity, organisational flexibility in coping with rigid network sources and greater networking sophistication. This strategy requires a strong leadership that can effectively integrate its status to the organisation especially in the area of the staff participation and in the shaping and implementation of corporate vision. Unless the leadership capability is integrated in this way, the search for sound policies for programmes will be inadequate.
NOTES

1 IDRC (International Development Research Centre); NESCO (United Nations Educational and Scientific Commission); PCARRD (Philippine Council for Agricultural, Forestry and Natural Resources Research and Development).

2 A classic example of this inability to look at the critical role of organisations in development project is provided by G. Honadle et al., "Dealing with Institutional and Organisational Realities," Implementing Rural Development Projects by E. Morss and D. Gow (eds.), (1985).


4 This is not to say that bureaucrats have one-track mind. In reality, some bureaucrats are quite flexible and have creative approaches to administrative and operative problems.

5 In this study, multi-faceted interventions or the combination of several interventions have been found to be more effective in modifying satisfaction and attitudes than the human process or technostructural approaches. See G. Neuman et al., "Organisational Development Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of their Effects on Satisfaction and Other Attitudes," Personnel Psychology. (1989).


7 The importance of broad-based linkages is discussed in more detail in G. Honadle, et al., op. cit.

8 The leader referred to by Inayatullah was Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan, head of the Comilla project and the "acknowledged source of all of Comilla's significant innovations ...(he) shows an openness to cultural influences emanating from many modern and traditional sources, a capacity to establish direct contact with rural people and a strong inner urge to live for an ideal, Inayatullah, "Factors Relating to the Success of Comilla," Communication and Change, The Last Ten years - And the Next by E. Schramm and D. Lerner (eds.), (1976), p.77.
9 The authors advocated the use of "reframing strategies" that involve unconscious information processing as an intervention of last resort. See L. Novelli and W. Tullar, "Entrepreneurs and Organisational Growth: Sources of the Problems and Strategies for Helping," Management: A Selected Annotated Bibliography, S. Mason, (1989).

10 This interactionist perspective in communication is advocated by G. Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind, (1972).


12 There is a considerable body of literature on integration. I am using the term here simply to mean the linkage of the various components within the organisation to attain coordination and lessen conflict. T. Parsons and N. Smelser first invoked the concept when they wrote "The integrative sub-system of the society relates the cultural value-patterns to the motivational structures of individual actors in order that the larger social system can function without undue internal conflict and other failures of co-ordination." See Economy and Society. (1956), p.48.
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