

Appendix II

Supervisors are still not the preferred communicators!

In 1992, Angela Sinickas wrote the article “Supervisors are NOT the preferred communicators,” a landmark in communication measurement. Much has happened to organizational communication in the years since it was published – most notably the rise in electronic media, intranets and e-mail – but she stands even more firmly by her original conclusions today.

Here, especially for the Strategic Communication Research Forum and for this research report, she has kindly written a new version of the article, bringing the research and her findings up to date.

In 1992 I wrote an article explaining that the many research studies “proving” that supervisors are employees’ most preferred source of information on all business topics are wrong. Twelve years later, I find that too many communicators and their executives still don’t realize this.

If you are completely revamping your communication program around the idea that face-to-face communication with supervisors will best meet all your employees’ information needs, *stop right now or you are doomed to fail.*

What the research studies asked

Most of the flawed research studies I’ve seen on this topic are based on communication audits administered to company employees. Part of the audit lists a series of information sources, including a variety of print, electronic, audiovisual and human channels. Then the employee is asked two questions:

- Which one of these sources is *currently* your primary source for important company information?
- Which one of these sources is your *preferred* primary source for important company information?

The answer to the first question is almost always “rumors from other employees.” The answer to the second is usually “my supervisor.” That’s what all the “Research says...” data is based on.

It looks reasonable. It seems to make sense. There are statistically significant numbers to back it up. *But it is all based on an illogical premise that becomes apparent if you change the subject from communication to consumer goods.*

How about my current and preferred places to go shopping? My current most frequent shopping venue is a grocery store; my preferred primary shopping opportunity would be Cartier. Yet, would anyone use the results of a survey designed this way to start stocking Cartier’s lovely jewellery counters with meat and potatoes? Of course not. Yet everyone is still talking and writing about making supervisors the purveyors of *all*

kinds of information – not just on the relatively few, but important, subjects that employees really do want to hear about from them.

What the research studies should be asking

A soundly designed communication audit should ask the same two bulleted questions as above, but for the current and preferred sources *subject by subject*. In other words, what are your current and preferred sources of information on company objectives? Department goals? Company financial results? What the brand means to us? Benefits?

When the questions are asked individually by subject, electronic and print channels often will be the preferred source of detailed or highly graphic information, or on facts people need to see in writing before they will believe the company means it. For other subjects, only senior management sources will be preferred because employees don't believe their supervisors would really know the answers. And supervisors will be the preferred source for a number of subjects, especially those where a company-wide issue needs to be interpreted at a local and "my job" level.

What happens when you ask the right questions

Several wonderful things happen when you audit current and preferred information sources by subject:

- You will find that media you have been working on very hard, like your intranet or portal and printed or electronic newsletters, will be both the main current and preferred sources on some subjects. In other words, you will have documentary evidence that you're doing some of the right things and should be allowed to keep your job.
- You will have a fairly short and manageable list of topics that employees will want to hear about from their supervisors and a similarly short, but topically different, list of items to be presented by senior management in town halls or forums. You can now work with these people to help them communicate on a more realistic basis, probably on topics that they are familiar with or want to be better informed about themselves anyway.
- You will now know the best combination of media to reach your audiences, or different media for sub-audiences with varying preferences, for every subject on which you will need to develop campaigns.

Now, the question you may be wondering about is: So when we find out preferred sources for each of 10-15 subjects, won't supervisors still come out as the most frequently listed source? The answer: Based on the dozens of audits I've conducted, almost certainly not for most organizations. On average, supervisors, or staff meetings conducted by supervisors, were chosen as one of the top two preferred sources out of

52 opportunities only 42 percent of the time in seven recent surveys.

Your results will depend greatly on the types of subjects you list on the survey – to what extent they are the strategic stuff of executives’ speeches or the update-oriented subjects best suited for mass media. It also depends on what other sources of information are available to employees. I’ve been finding that the better the electronic sources, the less employees need to rely on their supervisors for information that they can conveniently find on the intranet. Based on what they learn electronically, they need their supervisors to provide *context* and *relevance* for what they should be doing in their jobs.

Figure 4.16 shows how often either supervisors or the staff meetings they conduct were chosen among the top two preferred information sources on a variety of topics at seven organizations in the last three years. While this is too small a sample to extrapolate to all organizations, there are some compelling trends in the subjects

Fig 4.16

Topics where “my supervisor” or “staff meeting” is among the top two preferred sources at seven companies, 2001-2004 (Sinickas Communications, Inc.)

	Non Profit	High-tech consulting firms	Financial services firm	Pharmaceutical company	Pharmaceutical company	Manufacturing company	Manufacturing company	SCORE	%
How can I help achieve company goals	Not asked	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6/6	100%
Career development	Not asked	✓	✓	Not asked	Not asked	✓	Not asked	3/3	100%
Compensation	Not asked	Not asked	✓	Not asked	Not asked	✓	Not asked	2/2	100%
Business unit goals/plans	Not asked	✓	✓			✓	✓	4/6	67%
Customer satisfaction	Not asked	✓	Not asked	✓		Not asked	Not asked	2/3	67%
News about employees	Not asked	✓		Not asked	Not asked	Not asked		1/3	33%
Competitive information	Not asked			✓		Not asked		1/5	20%
Company news				Not asked			✓	1/6	17%
Company goals/plans							✓	1/7	14%
Overall financial results	✓							1/7	14%
Products /services	Not asked					Not asked	Not asked	0/4	0%
SCORE	1/3	5/10	4/10	3/7	1/8	4/7	4/7	22/52	
%	33%	50%	40%	43%	13%	57%	57%		42%

- ✓ means staff were asked for preferred sources on this topic, and “my supervisor” or “staff meeting” was the number one or number two preferred source.
- A blank space means staff were asked for preferred sources on this topic, but neither “my supervisor” nor “staff meeting” was the number one or number two preferred source.
- “Not asked” means staff were not asked for preferred sources of information on this topic.

employees definitely do and definitely don't want to hear about from their immediate supervisors. There are also clear differences even among similar types of organizations.

How did we get so off-course?

In the 1980s, IABC and the consulting firm of Towers Perrin designed a series of research studies to measure the effectiveness of communication. While most of the questionnaire was highly useful, the section asking for one current and one preferred source of information overall – not by topic – was fatally flawed. Unfortunately, the PR campaign promoting the faulty findings was profoundly successful.

When publicity about the supervisor being employees' preferred information source first began appearing in communication, HR and management journals and conferences, I knew it wasn't true based on research of my own. However, until that date, the corporate communication balance had been weighted so far to the side of mass media approaches that I thought it would be healthy to pay some attention to the face-to-face channels that had been largely neglected for so long, as Roger D'Aprix has so eloquently and passionately been advocating for decades.

These days, however, the legitimate role of supervisory communication has been taken too far in being expected to carry too large a share of the burden for keeping employees informed about all they need to know:

- An otherwise wonderful book, *Communicating Change* by T.J. and Sandar Larkin, used the results of the flawed IABC/Towers Perrin research as the premise for much of their advice in communicating during major changes in organizations. While the supervisor is one of the most preferred sources on this topic, their advice went too far: it suggested that companies eliminate most of their mass communication channels and stop communication between senior leaders and middle managers and between senior leaders and non-supervisors. This book received widespread publicity, including coverage in the *Harvard Business Review*.
- Many company leaders who read the book or its publicity began telling their communication managers to get rid of all mass media channels and focus purely on face-to-face communication. Thankfully, executives' fascination with new electronic communication channels in the 1990s left at least some consistent and timely information available to employees (at least those with electronic access).

- Many organizational communicators have felt the need to defend other channels and to show the weaknesses of over-reliance on supervisors – albeit somewhat apologetically, since they are arguing against well publicized “research results” that have become part of the

very fabric of common wisdom, not to mention communication textbooks. In fact, these communicators' understanding of the need for a mosaic of information channels is correct, although they don't really understand why, when faced with research to the contrary.

Compounding this original problem was the replication of the faulty questions year after year in a growing number of organizations for the purpose of answering the question: "How do we compare with other companies in the database?"

Now, I've often thought this was an irrelevant question to ask even for attitude surveys. If 80 percent of database companies' employees believe discrimination and sexual harassment are running rampant, but only 60 percent of your own employees feel that way, are you supposed to congratulate yourself on doing well? Shouldn't it be more important to define in advance your ideal level and then measure if you're getting closer to it over time?

Database comparison is especially meaningless in deciding how best to communicate your company's vital subjects to your own unique audience. Of what possible use is it to know how other companies' employees want to receive information on subjects of interest to them?

Worse yet, to create a big enough database, many consulting firms have defined the questions – the topics and the information sources – in a purposely generic way to prevent their valuable databases from becoming tainted and, therefore, worthless. It's easier for them to ask for just a single current source and a single preferred source from a predetermined list of possibilities. The only problem with that is the client doesn't get any information that is really useful in developing targeted communication campaigns.

So what's the solution?

If you are working with a consultant on a communication audit, or gathering proposals from consultants, insist that the central part of the audit include a list of company information topics *that are meaningful to your company*, based on your company's mission, objectives, business plans and employee concerns. Insist that the information sources listed be specific to the ones your employees have available or might like to have available in the future. You will also want to list questions about communication where comparison with other companies could be meaningful (such as "satisfaction overall with communication," "timeliness of information," "credibility of executives," "how well employees understand" subjects like company goals, etc.).

The ideal communication subjects and information sources for your own survey can best be gleaned through executive interviews and employee focus groups. If the survey doesn't have the right lists available for the responses, it will provide misleading data. For example, if your

employees' top current sources of information on competitors are really the mass media and trade journals, but these are not available options to choose from on the survey, you may walk away with the mistaken impression that their top current source is actually the third most prevalent one, but the only one you did happen to list on the survey.

A foolproof communication blueprint

For each business topic that will be on your survey, ask four questions:

1. How interested are employees in the information (on a five-point scale)?
2. How well informed do they believe they are (on a five-point scale)?
3. What are their top two current major sources of information?
4. What are their top two preferred sources of information?

Analysis of these results will provide a blueprint to develop communication plans and budgets:

- You'll know which subjects employees are most interested in learning about, in order.
- You'll find out which subjects employees are best informed about, in order.
- Subtracting the scores for Question 2 from Question 1, you'll be able to measure the size of the information gaps for each subject. Rank ordering these and comparing them with your company's plans and objectives will set your priority subjects for communication in the next year. And you will get *de facto* management agreement in advance, when you demonstrate that employees' information gaps need to be filled before employees can understand and buy into what the company wants them to do in support of these goals.
- For each subject with a large information gap that you think you've been communicating about heavily already, you can check to see if the current sources they're getting the information from are the same as their preferred ones. If not, you can change your media plan accordingly.
- For each subject, you can analyze demographic differences in the results of the four questions to develop a targeted campaign using the best combination of media for each sub-group. For example, let's say people want to hear a lot more about safety than they're currently hearing, and that their top two preferred sources are supervisors and meetings, rather than the current sources: posters and company newsletters. Looking at your demographic data, you may find that supervisors as a group are just as interested in safety as their employees, but no better informed. Their preferred sources might be training and the intranet. Your suggested campaign might

be to educate supervisors about this topic in an interactive way that will help them tailor the safety messages to the needs of their own work groups in meetings.

- For each information source, you'll be able to identify the top subjects that people want to hear about through that medium. This will determine your content list for the next year of your intranet postings, publications, town halls and webcasts. It will also give you a list of four or five subjects that supervisors should be prepared to handle.
- You will have a baseline to compare, over time, how effective your efforts have been. Have you begun closing some information gaps on key company subjects? Have you been using employees' preferred information sources on some subjects? This is *measurable performance*. It might be enough to get you into the company bonus plan.

This is not rocket science, nor does it need a NASA budget

Even if you can't afford to do, or can't sell to management the idea of doing, a statistically measurable communication audit survey, you can probably put together employee focus groups to get answers to the questions I've described earlier. While you shouldn't use focus group information to compare progress over time, because the small number of people involved and absence of truly random selection would prevent reliable repeatability of results, you will at least have directional information at a macro level on all these subjects. That is a lot more valuable than just gut instinct – or just using the results of previous “research studies” to dump all the responsibility for communication on over-extended supervisors.

And don't let a full-blown survey scare you. I developed my first audit, following this approach, in 1981. Thankfully, I didn't start with any existing surveys as a template. Instead, I started with the “crazy” idea that if effective communication of a particular message means identifying the best medium and timing for getting it to each sub-audience... then an audit should be designed around determining the best media mix for each different type of message.

Since I used in-house market research and IT resources, the total cost of my first audit was \$690 and a great deal of my own free time. Of course, I have refined much of the original approach over the years, but my first survey was good enough to completely revamp my company's internal communication program – and obtain a promotion and staff of three for me.

In conclusion, at last!

- Supervisors are not likely to be your employees' preferred information source on most company subjects.
- Take the time to find out, either in informal focus groups or on a

custom-tailored survey, what subjects your own workforce and management believe need the most communication content; then identify the current and preferred sources of information for each subject.

- And don't ever, ever let yourself be bamboozled again by anyone spouting, "As we all know, research says..." anything. Check out how the study question was asked and give it a reality check.
- Remember, statistics can lie, and not every emperor is fully dressed.

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