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Communication diagnostic in research and counselling

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I. Introduction

Intraorganizational communication presents a considerable problem field of the organizational weekday - a fact, one can convince oneself of from relevant practical and scientific publication organs. The innovation pressure of the recent decades and the consequent highly dynamic processes of adaptation caused an increasing demand for a communication system, functional in all hierarchic directions. The more it is unfortunate, that - at least in Germany - until today no respective standardized questionnaire is available, although several attempts at such were made. Management counsellors or departments for staff research developed many instruments which examine the information of their staff from different points of view (e.g. Ladwig & Domsch; 1997). Also on the part of scientific research methods were produced, providing extensive sidelights on the communication status in organizations (e.g. Klöfer, 1996). Among the instruments equally useful to counselling and scientific research several are found which deal with the aspect of communication from different viewpoints (e.G. Hacker, Fritsche, Richter & Iwanowa, 1995), but a specific communication questionnaire could, at least in the German speaking countries, not be found so far. The reasons for this may be of different - practical and theoretical - nature. Communication appears as a very comprehensive phenomenon, which can be examined from a variety of viewpoints. An instrument meant to consider all or only about this many aspects, would have to be too extensive to be answered within an acceptable amount of time an effort. Furthermore, organizational-pragmatic formulations of questions and enterpreneurial objectives, which are often connected with such surveys, are worded mostly very specific. Finally, since the research process needs to limit to theoretically tightly embedded formulations of questions in order to receive precise statements, individually suited instruments are suggested.

On the other hand, the linking with counselling presents valuable chances for communication resarch. Valid data for intraorganizational communication may be obtained mostly in practice only. If one does not intend to restrict himself to the hope for a more or less altruistic motivated readiness for cooperation, one is forced to offer the potential cooperating partners an adequate contra credit which supports their decision for cooperation; that this accommodates the often quoted cooperation of university and economy may only be mentioned in parentheses. With this double objective of research and counselling the „Questionnaire for the assessment of communication in organizations“ („Fragebogen zur Erfassung der Kommunikation in Organisationen“; KomminO) was developed and so far employed in approximately 30 organizations for organizational surveys. It was designed in such a way that theoretical and practical relevant subject fields - naturally also of limited number - are inquired as economically as possible which give the practician profitable structuring advices and the theorist relevant informations. The method is at the same time meant to be employed accross organizations and to allow empirical comparisons on a broad basis.

II. The organizational survey as a communication and management instrument

Within the bounds of progressive approaches for innovation and quality management, the instrument of the organizational survey, which superficially appears to be a rather traditional instrument, could reestablish during the past years. A first decisive factor for this development was the growing philosophy of a total-quality-management (compare Bungard, 1997). Against the background of a permanently increasing innovation pressure, the aim is to improve products and services gradually. In order to adopt specific measures, it is necessary to acquire precise quantitative data, giving information about existing deficits and the effectiveness of applied actions: „You can't manage what you don't measure" (Globerson, Globerson & Frampton, 1991). Not only the respective actual quality level can be read from these data and deficits be identified, also subsequent surveys allow a direct and quantitative assessment of time courses. The extension of the total-quality-management approach to an internal process controlling was finally decisive for the revival of the organizational survey. Not only the manufactured products or economical production data, but also the internal processes and services became the object of quality assessments. This naturally increased the interest in socialscientific data reflecting work, management, and communication processes, and making them available for a specific management.

The organizational survey offers an instrument for the elaboration of such data. It is a strategic method, agreed upon by the management and the staff representative and employed once or - even better - in regular intervals in order to obtain collective data on estimations, opinions, or expectations for particular subjects. An if possible standardized questionnaire, particularly set up for a relevant set of questions, is given to all staff members, a representative sample, or groups of special interest. The filling up of the questionnaire is voluntary. The data is usually evaluated in form of defined mean values over groups of persons, and the destinctive values are reported back to the organization respectively to the survey participants. Group specific fields of problems (e.g. of a department) can be realized from the data and serve for well-directed interventions. Repeated surveys carried out at definite intervals also allow to check whether and to which extent the interventions have been effective and whether and where new fields of problems have developed. Outstanding positive results also serve to draw the attention to existing organizational strengths and to look for utilizable potentials in the sense of an organizational learning.

Such a survey may be assigned conceptually to the participative philosophy of the organizational development. Seen distinct from administratively controlled innovation strategies, the viewpoint lies on the informative inclusion of all participants; in case of subsequent organizational interventions participants also participate actively in the search and implementation of innovative actions. This involves different advantages: The participants are sensitized for the examined subjects, confronted with them, and thus integrated in forthcoming changes. The feedback of the results „in black and white" increases their acceptance and obligation. Problems, for instance of the intraorganizational communication, are often somehow known and subject of formal or informal discussions. It is, however, difficult to take up specific measures whithout having a systematic opinion picture. The feedback of the results shows such an an objective (in the sense of intersubjective) opinion picture, conveying the opinion of all survey participants. This objectivates the problem situation, since it may be discussed without having to fall back upon the own, subjective opinion. The actual value of these statements allows to disprove resistances more easily respectively discuss them on a neutral basis. Through a specific, quantitative evaluation of the results the problem fields can be recognized and well-directed measures be taken. The graphic representation of the result reports indicate at a glance where potential problems or utilizable strengths are to be found.

With regard to the data processing, the aspect of „bechmarking“ currently enjoys particular attention (e.g. Lawrence & Braun, 1996). The ascertained assessments of the respective organizations are compared with assessments of similar organizations. An external comparison facilitates additional information, which lighten the interpretation of the data and allow an estimation of the own market position. The occasional problem to find suitable comparative partners can be avoided by norming the instruments - a procedure applied in psychological diagnostic since a long period of time. After designing the questionnaire, it is firstly applied in a norm sample; thereafter not the raw values are stated, but values, representing the assessment of individuals respectively groups relatively to the norm (e.g. the intelligence quotient, where an IQ-value of 100 means that 50% of the norm have solved the exercises poorer or equally good, 50% have found more correct solutions). This method requires, however, the design of a standardized questionnaire and naturally the prior acquisition of norm values.

III. The „Questionnaire for the assessment of communication in organizations“

The „Questionnaire for the assessment of communication in organizations“ (KomminO) is such a standardized and normed instrument. It is based on the „Organizational Communication Questionnaire“ (Roberts & O’Reilly, 1974) as well as other literature references, and includes 38 items (statements to be assessed) for the below mentioned scales which are confirmed by factor analysis (compare Sperka, 1997).

1.	**Importance of communication**	How important is communication with others to deal with the own work?
2.	**Quality of information**	How is the quality of communication (accuracy, accessibility to information if required, lack of information through others, general satisfaction with the communication) with others judged?
3.	**Information overload**	Is the survey participant flooded with more information than he can utilize?
4.	**Trust in the communication partner**	Is it to be feared that certain communication partners don’t treat information confidentially or use it against the partner?
5.	**Feedback**	Does the survey participant receive sufficient feedback on his own conduct in the organization?
6.	**Summarization of own information**	Can information be given to others comprehensively or only briefly?
7.	**Gatekeeping of own information**	Can own information be given to others easily or are obstacles experienced?

Since unlike to most other assessment subjects (e.g. „work satisfaction“) communication takes place between two different persons or groups of persons, all scales are ascertained with the three groups most important according to the formal structur of the organization: the communication with the direct superior, the own colleagues, and - in the case of executives - the subordinated personell. (In some instances the project partners required also the communication between specific departments, representing important cooperating partners, to be assessed.)

IV. Application of KomminO in counselling

The described instrument is applied in organizational surveys (partial or full surveys) in accordance with the guidelines described in section II. After laying down the organizational objectives and if necessary the background of problems, the implementation procedures and in particular the analysis form are discussed. In view of preserving the anonymity of all participants, the different units (e.g. departments) for the future analysis are laid down (marked in figure 1 as „Dept.A“ to „Dept. D“). For feedback reports percentage ranks are used: By comparing the statements of the organization performing the survey with the norm of different organizations (N>1500), these statements are arranged in ascending ranks and then converted in percentage ranks from 0% up to 100%. The calculation of mean values give the percentage rank of each department. A value of 51 (figure 1: Dept. A, communication with the superior), for instance, implies that on average 51% of all persons involved in the survey of other organizations reported a poorer or just the same good information quality, 49% reported a better quality. This representation does not only allow the identification of intraorganizational strengths and weaknesses, also an additional external comparison in the sense of a benchmarking (see above) is drawn. The graphic representation of the feedback allows to get an instant general idea (figure 1). The marked sections above 70% and below 30% indicate critical conditions which deserve particular attention.

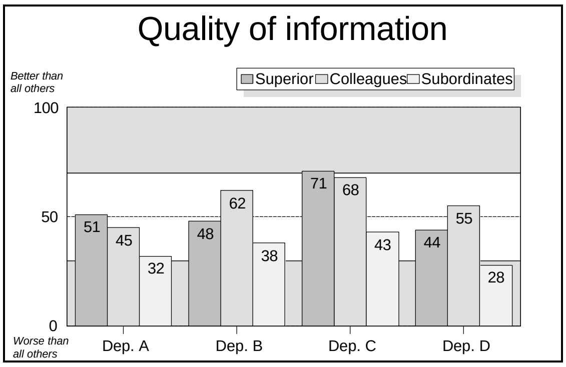

Figure 1: Example for the graphic presentation of survey results.

The employment of the survey results depends on the individual organizational objectives. The results can serve to simply get an idea of the present situation in the organization or in individual departments, to prepare and introduce definite structural measures (individual coaching, survey feedback etc.) or to accompany the evaluation of restructuring measures.

V. The application of KomminO in research

The following examples serve the exemplary illustration of accumulated results; they originate from surveys carried out in 1998 at 22 banks (N=1320) with approx. 100 to 350 staff members.

1.) Department size and feedback

The relationship between department size and process variables is frequently handled under the term „span of control“ - the number of staff members per executive. Although it represents one of the oldest concepts of organizational theory (Fayol 1916), only very few investigations of its relation to communication processes are available (Jablin 1987). In principle one should assume that in service organizations like banks communicative tuning processes particularly with the superiors are impeded the larger the department grows. Brewer (1971) confirmed this assumption by showing that a low span of control is connected with increased communication between superior and subordinates, although, according to Jablin (1982), the communication is not perceived as being more open. No results are available for the variable „feedback“, which is of interest here, but it can be assumed that with an increasing span od control the extent of feedback through superiors is also reduced. Due to possibly less intensive lateral contacts within the department, this could also apply to the communication with colleagues, however, the connection seems a priori to be less plausible.

With regard to the communication with the superior, a negative correlation between the subjective assessment of feedback and department size became apparent (Rho=-.098, p=.001; figure 2). As far as the communication with colleagues is concerned, also a negative, but not a significant trend was noted (Rho=-.046, p=.122). It must be noted, however, that the correlation of -.098 is relatively small; further influence factors, for instance the individual communication style of the superiors or the department climate, have obviously - and as to be expected - also a decisive influence on the quality of the feedback.

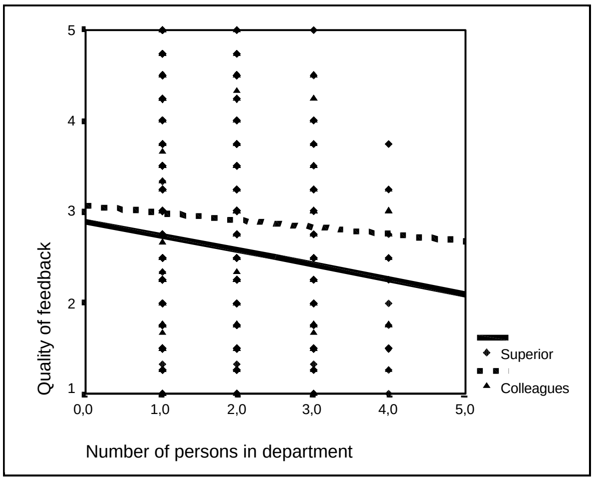

Figure 2: Relationship between feedback by superior and colleagues and department size; x-axis: 1=1-5 persons, 2=6-10, 3=11-20, 4=more than 20 persons.

2.) Hierarchical position and Information overload

According to respective investigations it seems apparent that with ascending hierachical level the volume and amount of time spent with communication increases; the exact form of this increase respectively its distribution into different directions of communication however appears quite irregular and variable accross organizations (Jablin, 1987). In principle with the increase of communicative activities at executive level, the subjectively experienced information overload should also increase.

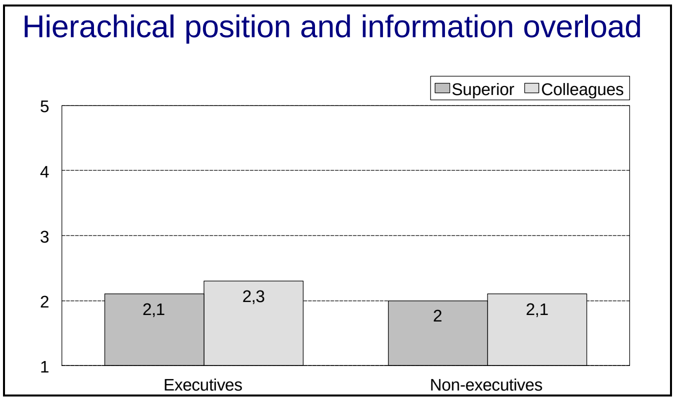

Figure 3: Information overload in the communication with superiors and colleagues for executives and non-executives.

In fact, the perceived information overload at executive level is for both directions higher than at non-executive level (comminication with superior: U-test, p=.030; communication with colleagues, U-Test, p=.001; compare figure 3).

3.) Gender and Quality of information

With ascending hierarchical level the gender distribution typically changes towards a relative numerical superiority of male organizational actors. In the discussion of the role of women in organizations, this frequently gives rise to focus upon their chances respectively problems in moving up the corporate ladder or upon their leadership style - in contrast to the style of their male colleagues (e.g. Miller, 1995, Daniels, Spiker & Papa, 1997). For the numerical asymmetry three explanatory approaches can be found (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990): First, due to individual differences (e.g. lower qualification or assertiveness) women might be less able to qualify for higher positions. Second, it is possible that women fail by systemic barriers. Evidence shows for example, that women encounter diffuculties in accessing predominantly male informal social networks in upper hierarchies, which are essential to collect necessary informations or to form alliances. A third explanation could be the discrimination of women on the part of other organizational members, caused by prevailing prejudices.

The role of women in non-executive positions - proportionately as well as in the case of their male colleagues by far the larger number - has differentially not been examined to the same extent. This shall be done here. First of all, however, two prerequisities have to be dicussed. When speaking about gender-specific communication, the gender of the communication partner - especially in the case of executives - has to be taken into consideration too. In the above described sample 22% of the executives are female, 78% are male. Therefore one can conclude hat „communication with the superior“ predominantly refers to the communication with male superiors. For the lateral communication among colleagues the gender distribution is approximately symmetric: 58% of the non-executives are female, 42% are male. Concerning the communicative embedding of non-executive women in the organization two positions seem plausible. On the basis of the discussion above one could conclude, that women experience more problematic communicative relationships than men, particularly with their male superiors (social network barriers, prejudices or assertiveness). Alternatively, the opposite position is also justifiable. Burrell, Buzzanell & McMillan (1992) report - however not undisputed (Wilkins & Andersen, 1991) - at least for female executives, that they are less competitive and more willing to discuss diverse viewpoints. If this applies to female non-executives too, one could assume that they raise less conflicts for their communication partners, in turn are themselves treated more openly, and consequently evaluate their communication more positively.

The obtained data suggest the latter interpretation. The quality of information with superiors is judged more positively by women than by men (U-test, p=.014, compare figure 4). For the communication with colleagues at least a statistical tendency in the same direction can be found (U-Test, p=.069). Altogether the results support the notion, that the conditions for communication in banks are likely to be more advantageous for women than for men; the own communication style could provide a plausible explanation for this.

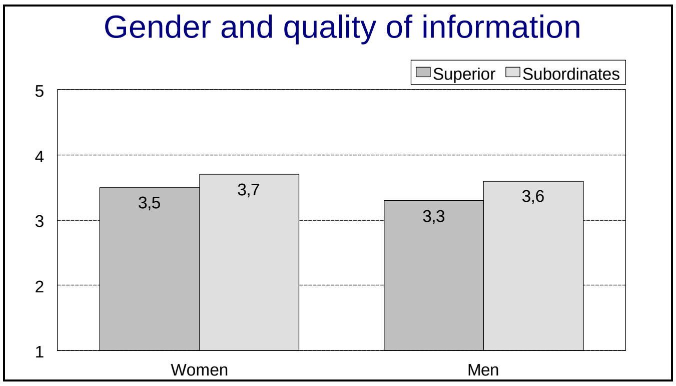

Figure 4: The assessment of the quality of information with superiors and colleagues by male and female non-executives (N=930).

VI. Conclusions

The empirical results in the last chapter have been indroduced with the objective to give examples for directions of research with the above described questionnaire KomminO. It was intended to demonstrate that this instrument is able to measure theoretically relevant communication variables. At the same time the limits of the instrument also became apparent. In particular, aspects of the content of communication respectively processes of the individual construction of meaning or the social construction of realities cannot be assessed with it directly. Its focus lies on a broad applicability and the generation of comparative results of different nature,that are - combined with other methods - suitable to contribute to a deepening of the existing knowledge.

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