THE ROLE OF INFORMAL COMMUNICATION NETWORK IN A MULTI - SHIFT GOVERNMENT SECTOR BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF A DEVELOPING ECONOMY - SRI LANKA

W. M. JAYARATNE, B.A. (Hons) (MGT) (Vidyod.) M.A. (Econ) (MGT)
(Newhampshire) Dip. in Int. Business (Hawai)

Head, Department of Commerce and Management,
University of Colombo

Abstract

This is an empirical study of the pattern of informal communications operating between the managerial hierarchy of a government managed large size industrial organization of Sri Lanka. The study is intended to bring some light on the importance of the "grapevine" in a formal organization. Special emphasis is placed on the accuracy of information, the degree of dissemination and of information, the communication centers involved in the cultural network of the communication channel. As informal communication network exists in almost all organizations, management can use this as a communication toolto reach the informal group members not included in the path of formal communication channel. The role played by certain communication agents such as "Silindu" cannot be ignored in these cultures. Accuracy, reliability, speed and dependability are inherent ingredients of these informal messages.

Background and Methodology

The study was made on a semi-government organization[1]. It is a business organization established in early 1960.[2]

The Directorate of the organization consists of six members, The chairman and one other member of the Board of Directors are full time officers of the organization. In addition, there is a General Manager, appointed by the chairman. These three officers form the apex of the administration and in the study they are labelled as the "Supra management". Below them there are five top executives who are the functional heads of the organization. In the study they are known as the "Top management". There are 44 "Middle management" personnel working under them. In addition, there are 189 supervisors and 1,467 operative grade employees, all of them are "skilled labor" grade employees. The entire work force was working in the three shift basis.

The survey was conducted by the author with the assistance of four faculty members and 20 undergraduate students who were reading for the Business Administrations (Honours) Degree. The students were given a prior

training and sample questionnaires were completed during the training period. The entire group of managerial personnel and 180 workers were interviewed by the author and the other faculty members before completing the question- naire. Every tenth member of the roster of the worker group was interviewed accordingly. All other workers were interviewed by the students. Three sets of questions were incorporated in the questionnaire with a view of obtaining information regarding accuracy, speed, channel or agents and centres of communication. The data so collected were analyzed manually. The hypotheses examined are as follows :

1. The information content is accurate and the transmission of informa- tion is speedier in the informal communication network.

2. There is a correlation between the accuracy and degree of speed on the one hand and the types of person and messages on the other.

3. It is not possible to ignore the importance of the traditional agents, methods and centres of communication in the present organizational set up.

4. There is a continuous link among the various levels of managerial hierarchy in the communication process through the "grapevine"

A word about the terminology. By "communication," it is meant as a dynamic process in which the sender consciously or unconsciously affects the cognitions of the receiver through the materials or agents used in symbolic ways. The definition suggests that communication can be affected not only through" "instrumental messages," but also through "consummatory" and "incidental messages." "Grapevine" and "Informal communication" carry the same meaning and are used interchangeably. Messages which do not follow the scale or the functional lines of communi- cation are classified as informal. In this study no separate treatment is given for " line and "staff" personnel.

Review of Literature

Tomkin (1967)[3] considers that informal messages are "not rationally specified." They develop through accidents of spatial arrangements, personalities and abilities of persons. Many researchers use the word "grapevine" for this type of message behavior. Davis (1972)[4] states that the "term (grapevine) applies to all informal communications". According to Davis "the term grapevine arose during the civil war days. Intelligence lines were strung loosely from trees in the manner of a grapevine and the message thereon was often garbled; and hence any rumor was said to form

the grapevine." Informal communication is "not confined to" rumors only. It has its roots to rumors, gossip, tale carrying ("Kelam") frivolus talks ("Samppappralapa").[5] In fact some of these methods involve gestures or body movements. Some contains an element of secrecy.

Research on grapevine conducted by Jacobson and Seashore (1951)[6] Davis[7] (1953), Walton (1961)[8], Sulton and Porter (1958)[9], and Rudolph (1971)[10] have come to the following conclusions :

1. Informal communication is fast. Since informal communication does not follow the formal channel and is usually more personal in its transmission, the messages are free to travel as fast as the senders and receivers desire.

2. The grapevine did fill gaps left by ineffective formal communications.

3. The grapevine of the company news was confined to the place of work

As against these advantages, it is claimed that one of the major disadvantages of the informal communication is that it serves as a network over which rumors travel. Davis[11] defines rumor as "grapevine information which is communicated without severe standards of evidence being present." Allpart and Postman[12] stated in their "basic law of rumor" that rumor spread as a function of both the "importance" and the "ambiguity" of the information to the topic at issue. Nandasiri[13] contends that any rumor has at least some content of truth. Jayaratna[14] found that the success of rumor as a communication media depends to a very great extent on the skill-fulness of the rumor carrier or "rumor agent". Silva[15] on the other hand recognized that in every organization there is at least one or two successful rumor agents as characterized by "Silindu" in Kelahenda. However, as a generalization it can be stated that a subject of high interest of which little information is known is susceptible to the spread of rumor.

Davis[16] identified four types of patterns in the spreading of information via the grapevine. They are,

(a) single strand in which information passes in a line where much disturbance occurs.

(b) the gossip chain in which everyone communicates with everyone else.

(c) the probability chain in which communication takes place randomly.

(d) and, a cluster chain in which there is selectivity in the way how the message is passed. These systems can be depicted in the following diagrams.
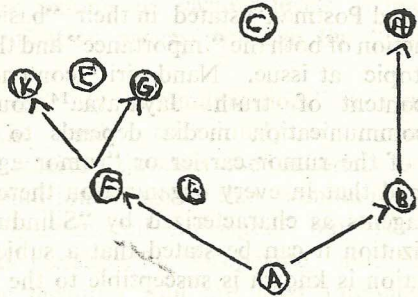
Patterns of Informal Network
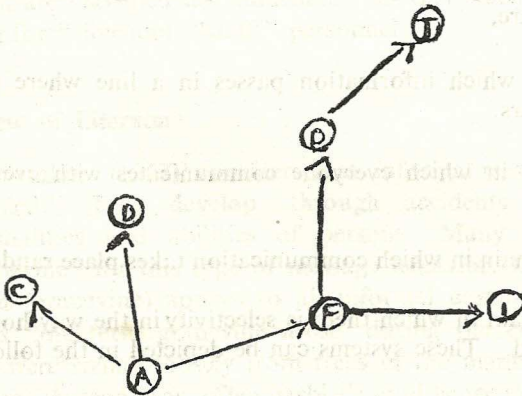
(a)
Single Strand or Chain

(b)
Gossip Chain
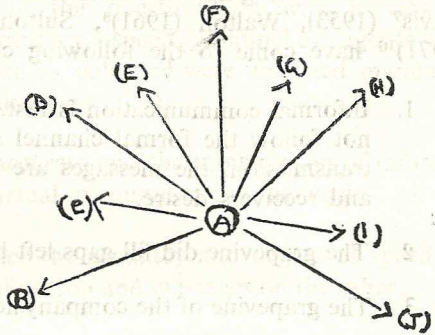
(c)
Probability Chain

(d)
Cluster Chain

Davis[17] also disclosed that there was an active minority transmitting information in the grapewire. This group operates within the cluster pattern. The connecting of clusters is done by certain liaison individuals. Others were isolated. They receive or transmitted information in a very insignificant way. According to Davis, in one case, only 20 percent passed the message to others. In another case, 81 percent knew but only 11 percent passed the information along.

Data Presentation

Of the total work force 1003 persons or 58.9 percent preferred informal communication. Among the workers 60.5 percent indicated they favour informal communication. 48 percent of the supervisors, 40.9 percent of the middle managers, 80 percent of the top managers and all "supra" management personnel preferred informal communications as against formal communication.

Among the supervisory grade employees 72.1 percent obtained "very accurate" information and another 17.3 percent obtained "mainly correct" information. Accordingly, 89.4 percent of the supervisory employees obtained accurate information. Here again, 45 percent of accuracy was recorded in respect of the information pertaining to "(D) Salary increase" and "(G) to nationalization of the competing firms."

In the middle management employee grade, 68.8 percent obtained "Very accurate" information and 23.5 percent got "mainly correct" information. The total "accuracy" percentage of this group of employees is therefore, 92 percent. Only 7.6 percent got "mainly incorrect" information. In the top management level 95 percent got "accurate" information and the entire supra management was able to obtain all information very "accurate".

Of the total work force 58 percent obtained information within the first half hour of the incident or event. 22 percent got it within the first one hour, another 08 percent within the first two hours. Among the worker group 31.7 percent of the workers obtained information within the first half hour. 13.7 percent got it within the first one hour, 6.8 percent got it within two hours.

Among the supervisors 9.2 percent got the information within the first half hour, 14.4 percent got within one hour and 19.5 percent within two hours. Of the middle managers 11.1 percent got the information within half an hour, 26.9 percent within the first one hour, and 19.6 percent got within two hours. Of the top managers 54.5 percent obtained information within the first half

hour, 22.7 percent within one hour and 9 percent within two hours. 60.3 percent of the supra management got the information within the first half an hour, 20.1 percent within one hour and 10.6 percent got information within two hours.

Information regarding sudden "(A) strike action by workers" 78.6 percent of the workers got information within the first half hour, 21.3 percent got within one hour. Among supervisors no one obtained information within the first half hour. Among middle managers 8.1 percent got it within the first half hour and 45.9 percent within one hour. Of the top management personnel 50 percent got information within half hour and another 25 percent within one hour. The supra management got the information within one hour.

In respect of the (B) "Transfer of the Top Executive" workers did not get the information within one hour. 22.6 percent of the supervisory grade, 42 percent of the middle management, 80 percent of the top management and one hundred percent of the supra management got the information within the first one hour.

Information regarding "(C) early payment of bonus", 65.8 percent of the workers, 20.9 percent of the supervisors, 17 percent of the middle management, and 100 percent of the top management was received.

Regarding (D) "salary increase" 67.9 percent of the workers, 11.3 percent of the supervisors, 25.5 percent of the middle management and 100 percent of the top management obtained information within the first hour.

40.5 percent of the workers, 17.8 percent of the supervisors, 55.5 percent of the middle managers, 50 percent of the top management got information within the first hour of the incident regarding the (E) "Death of a member of a worker's family."

Information regarding (F) "Running away of X's daughter with the Driver" was received within the first hour by 74.3 percent of the workers, 68.3 percent of the supervisors, 13.5 percent of the middle managers and zero percent of the top and supra management.

Information in respect of (G) "Nationalization of the competing firm" was obtained within one hour by zero percentage of the workers, 19 percent of the supervisors, 44 percent of the middle management and 100 percent of the top management and supra management.

As far as the centres of communication are concerned 56 percent of the worker group and 30 percent of the supervisors got their information from (A) "Kassippu Centres" (drinking places) 20 percent of the workers, 10 percent of the supervisors and 5 percent of the middle management got information

at the "bus halts" (B); 5 percent of the workers, 30 percent of the supervisors, 6 percent of the middle managers got their information at the "kadapila". (near the village boutique);(C) 2 percent of the supervisors, 55 percent of the middle management, 70 percent of the top and supra management obtained information either at "clubs or restaurants or canteens etc. (D)"; 5 percent of the workers, 20 percent of the supervisors, 26 percent of the middle management and 30 percent of the top and supra management obtained their information from "the political institutions; (B)" 2 percent of the workers and 2 percent of the supervisors got it at the "Tap" (F); 4 percent of the workers, 3 percent of the supervisors, and 4 percent of the middle managers obtained it at the "Religious" Centres" (F): 2 percent of the workers, 2 percent of the supervisor, and 4 percent of the middle management obtained it at the "Vedarala House" (G) Native Doctor; and 2 percent of the workers and 1 percent of the supervisors at the "Lindelanga" (Well), (H) and nobody at the "Ambalama (I)" (Resting Place). The role played by the "Silindu" (tale-carrier) is reflected at every level of the managerial hierarchy.

Discussion

The study covered a variety of informal communication channels and centres which were in operation at the time of the survey. These include (a) special tale carriers ("silundu") (b) political institutions; (c) canteen keeper; (d) liftman; (e) "kassippu" dealer (f) postman (g) clubs; (h) competitive firms; (i) suppliers of raw materials, (j) consumers or clients; (k) indirect labor, and (l) women folk. The information content covered (a) Sudden strike action by workers; (b) Early bonus payments; (c) Salary increase; (d) Transfer of the top executive; (e) Running away of X's daughter with the driver; (f) Nationalization of the competing firms, and(g) Death of a member of the worker's family.

The study revealed that informal communication is indispensable in a formal organization specially of a developing country. Of the total work force, 58.7 percent preferred informal communication as against formal communication. 60.5 percent of the workers 48 percent of the supervisory grade, 40.9 percent of the middle management 60 percent of the top management and 100 percent of the supra management were in favor of the informal communication. The study therefore supports, the view, Davis[18] declared that "no administrator in his mind would, try to abolish the managerial grapevine."

Regarding the accuracy of the information the study revealed that 82.6 percent of the workers, 82.9 percent of the supervisors, 92.3 percent of the middle managers, 96.2 percent of the top management and 100 percent of the supra management claim that the information they got is either "very accurate" or "mostly correct". The study therefore confirms the findings of Davis, Martin[19], Walton[20], and Rudolph[21], in the broad perspective. There are however, deviations from their findings in respect of the accuracy of certain

types of messages as against the others. For example, (c) Early Payment of Bonus" is an important factor for the workers as well. But only 39 percent of the workers reported that their information was accurate. Similarly, "(G) Nationalization of the competing firms," information had been accurately transcribed only to 13.8 percent on the work force. In the supervisory grade only 45.9 percent reported that they got "accurate" information regarding "(D) Salary increase," only 45 percent reported an impact of "(G) Nationalization of the competing firms." Among the middle management, 46.1 percent got accurate information in respect of "(D) Salary increase," and 45.4 percent in respect of "(F) running away of X's with the driver." The study therefore suggests that only certain types of information are being transmitted without "diffusion", in the hierarchy of certain organizations.

The questionnaire regarding the "speed" reveals that 31.7 percent of the worker group got information within the first half hour of the incident or event. Another 13.7 percent within one hour and 6.8 percent got within the two hour period. Among the supervisors, 9.2 percent got it within the first half hour, 14.4 percent within one hour and 19.5 percent within two hours. Among the middle management, 11.1 percent obtained information within the half an hour, 26.9 percent within one hour and 19.6 percent within two hours. Of the top managers 54.5 percent got information within half an hour, 22.7 percent within one hour and 9 percent within two hours. Among the supra management 60.3 percent got within the first half an hour, 20.1 percent within one hour and another 10.6 percent within two hours. Accordingly, within the two hour period, 51.2 percent of the workers, 43.19 percent of the supervisors, 57.6 percent of the middle managers, 86.2 percent of the top management and 91.08 percent of the supra management, claim that they got information with a high degree of speed, namely within two hours after the event or incident. The data therefore supports the contention made by the researchers mentioned above.

A deviation from this generalization, is however, visible in this study. The degree of speed of information transmission of certain messages is higher than others. Furthermore, certain types of information moves and reaches certain receivers faster. This depends on the nature of the channel and the connection the receivers have in the channel. In this study it is evident that information regarding "(E) death of a member of the workers' family" has reached only 15.8 percent of the workers within the first half an hour, while information regarding "(A) suden strike action" or "(F) Running away of X's daughter with the driver" moved very fast. (78.6 percent and 59.2 percent respectively). The speed is not necessarily the same for other categories of employees. For instance, no supervisor got the information within half hour regarding "(A) Sudden strike action by the workers while 41.9 percent of the supervisors got the information regarding "(F) running away of the X's daughter with the driver." Only 8 percent knew this "(E) Death of a member of the workers" family. For the middle managers "(A) sudden strike action" information was transmitted only 8.1 percent, but regarding

the "(E) Death of a member of the workers family" 22.2 percent came to know that. In respect of "(F) Running away of the X's daughter" only 4.5 percent know it. For the top management, 50 percent of them knew which in the first half an hour regarding "(A) Strike action by the workers." Regarding "(E) Death of the workers' family member" 25 percent knew and no one knew about the "(F) Running away of the X's daughter with the driver." 66.6 of the supra management knew about ((A) Strike action by the workers." But they knew nothing about the "(E) Death" or "(F) about the Running away of the X's daughter with the Driver."

What explanation can we give for this situation? Firstly, it is the nature of the message that matters to move faster. Certain messages move faster due to its special value attached to it. Secondly, these values become important to different categories of people in the managerial hierarchy. For example "(F) Running away of X's daughter with the driver" is not an an important or an attractive factor for the top management or the supra management. But "(A) strike action by the workers" is an important factor. Thirdly, the speed and accuracy also depends on the channel or the network. The actors in the "network" should be effective communicators. In the study it is evident that certain personnel involved in this technique are highly trained and that is why they have got the title "Silundu".

The study also reveals that there is a continuous network communication through the informal manner from the bottom to the top and also from the top to the bottom. The position can be explained by the following diagram.
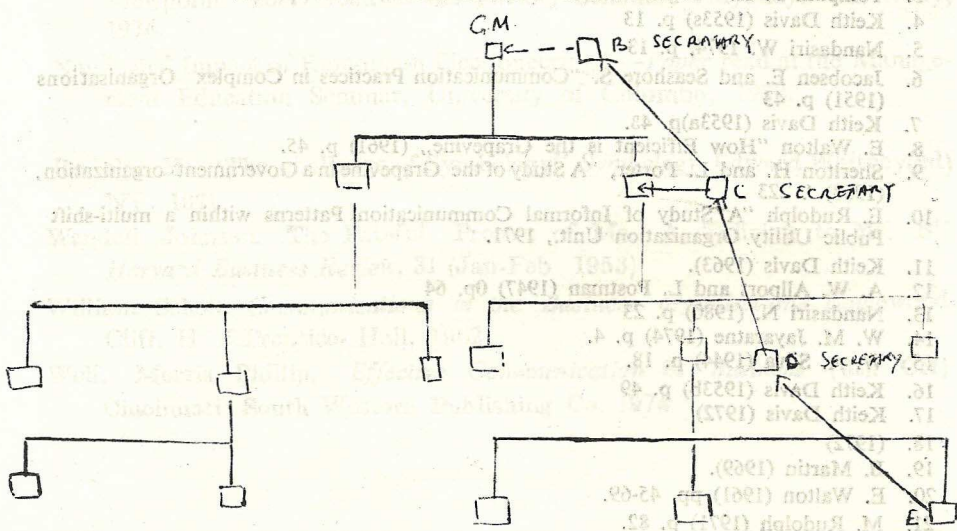
When there are effective "agents" who can carry information, the speed becomes faster. In the diagram E, D, C, DC, B, are very effective agents who can transmit information promptly and accurately. This study therefore suggests that there is a continuous chain in the network from the bottom to the top even within the organization itself. Davis[22] does not accept the position that there is a continuity in the transmission of information.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that (1) Any organization should concentrate on informal communication system as well if the organization is to run smoothly, (2) Certain types of information move faster than others and more accurately in the informal communication channel. (3) Certain personnel in the managerial hierarchy receive certain information better than others and lastly, there is a clear cut channel or network of informal communication in the entire organizations. An efficient administrator should not only utilize these communication network, but also tap the sources of information inherent in our cultures. Special information centres such as Kassippu Centre, bus halt, clubs, restaurant, kadapila, etc. should not be ignored if one is really keen to collect or dissmenate information about one's organization. The leading agents such as the "Silundu" or the postman or the tale carrier should not be ignored.

NOTES

1. Government of Ceylon, State Industrial Corporations Act No. 49, 1957.
2. Government of Ceylon, Government Gazette dated January, 1, 1962.
3. Tompkin P. K. "Organizational Communication,, 1967. p. 13.
4. Keith Davis (1953s) p. 13
5. Nandasiri W. 1974, p. 13
6. Jacobsen E. and Seashore S. "Communication Practices in Complex Organisations (1951) p. 43
7. Keith Davis (1953a)p. 43.
8. E. Walton "How Efficient is the Grapevine,, (1961) p. 45.
9. Sherlton H. and L. Porter, "A Study of the Grapevine in a Government organization, (1968) '. 223
10. E. Rudolph "A Study of Informal Communication Patterns within a multi-shift Public Utility Organization Unit., 1971.
11. Keith Davis (1963).
12. A. W. Allport and L. Postman (1947) 0p. 64
13. Nandasiri N. (1980) p. 23
14. W. M. Jayaratne (1974) p. 4.
15. W. A. Silva (1944) p. 18.
16. Keith Davis (1953b) p. 49
17. Keith Davis (1972)
18. (1972)
19. B. Martin (1969).
20. E. Walton (1961) pp. 45-69.
21. M. Rudolph (1971) p. 82.
22. Keith Davis (1953 A).

Bibliography

Allport, Gorden W. and Lee Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor*, Henry Holt and Co., Inc New York 1947.

Davis, Keith, "Managerial Communication and the Grapevine," *Harvard Business Review*, January—February 1953.

Davis, Keith"Methods of Studying Communication Patterns in Organization" *Personnel Psychology*, 1953.b.

Davis, Leith *Human Behavior at Work*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1972.

Festinger, L. "Informal Social Communication, "*Psychological Review*, 1950.

Festinger, L. D. Darwin Cartwright, et al. "A study of Rumor, Its Origin and Spread." *Human Relation*, 1984.

Government of Ceylon, *State Industrial Corporations Act* No. 49 of 1957. Government Publications, Secretariat, Colombo.

Ceylon *Government Gazette*, January 1, 1962, Government Publications, Secretariat, Colombo.

Jayaratne W. M. "The Role of the Rumor agent in an educational organization." *Case study*, Faculty of Management Studies, SJU 1972.

Martin, B. "A Study of Grapevine Communication Patterns in Manufacturing Organizations." Unpublished *doctoral dissertation*, Arizona State University, 1969.

Nandasiri W. "Communication Patterns in a Rural Village: A Sociological Viewpoint" *paper* read at the Faculty Seminar, Vidyodaya University, 1974.

Nandasiri° Impact of Rumors on Electioneering"—-*Paper* read at the Management Education Seminar, University of Colombo, 1980.

Rudolph M, "The challenge of Symbology" *Symbology* Edward Whitney(ed) NY 1971

Wendell Johnson, The Fateful Process of Mr. A. Talicing to Mr. B" *Harvard Business Review*, 31 (Jan-Feb 1953)

William Scholt *Communications in the Business organisations* Englewood Cliff, H. J Prentice- Hall, 1962

Wolf, Morris Phillip, *Effective Communication in Business* (6th CH) Cincinnati; South Western Publishing Co. 1974

45