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## The Importance of Communication in Sustainability & Sustainable Strategies

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### Abstract

Communication entails the transfer of ideas, thoughts or feelings by the sender to receiver via verbal or nonverbal means. This transfer gains special significance in business especially in the service sector since the service providers work with humans based on communication. In any sustainable plan or strategy communication plays a vital role. In order to plan and develop sustainability and sustainable strategies it is necessary for people to express themselves internally and externally by using appropriate mode(s) of communications. Thus, in order to establish effective communication, the managers in an organization has to channel the receiver what they mean to communicate in a simple, direct and precise manner whether it be on the oral or written modality. To achieve this end, they should also take into consideration the gender and cultural variations in terms of communication.

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## 1. Introduction

Needless to say, communication is essential almost in every field of life, from home to work. Although people are trained in particular specialization areas, in economics, in management, or whatever it is, they do not acquire any communication skill directly. It is a social process that starts from babyhood to death for us as human beings.

In any sustainable plan or strategy communication plays a vital role, both internally and externally. In order to make plans and create applications for sustainable acts people need to express themselves internally within their organization. After completing the internal function, expression of oneself outside of the organization is also crucial. In short in order to plan and develop sustainability and sustainable strategies people need to express themselves internally and externally by using appropriate mode(s) of communications.

Some jobs need less communication capability, as computer programming or truck driving, some need more, as being a receptionist or hotel administrator. For instance in an international hotel setting, that is generally an international setting, in every step of the work if you are not a good communicator you have little chance to be successful. Smithson presents that, in the book, *Business Communication Today*, managerial success builds on good communication [1]. In spite of its importance, many of the workers in hotel business overlook this point in practical world. It is something that is talked about much but done little.

Despite the fact that there are many different definitions of communication, they share some common points, as “transferring”, “interaction” and “sharing with others”. Baguley defines communication as “the process that occurs when ideas, information and feelings are conveyed between individuals or groups of individuals for deliberate purposes” [2]. It is not only about transformation of information but also that of feelings, thoughts, needs and observations. Business communication is defined as “the communication required of an organization in both its internal and external environments” [3]. In business internal communication can be three ways; it can be upward with superiors, downward with subordinates and lateral with peers. External communication can be between customers and service suppliers. The aim to communicate is numerous, however the purpose of most of communications is to affect the other(s)’ feelings, thoughts or even behaviors people are communicating with. Message can be passed through different means; linguistic (content, meaning, speech qualities) and non-linguistic (body language, body contact, distance, appearance etc).

Communication is a two-way process that receiver and transmitter may take part at the same time. Transmitter knows how his message is understood by the receiver’s feedback. The details of the receiver, transmitter, feedback and the other components of communication process will be mentioned later on.

Sustainability, on the other hand, has emerged as an influential corporate strategy, implying that meeting today’s needs with a special care for financial, human, or natural resources of tomorrow [4]. Some scholars describe sustainability as an umbrella term which is capable of providing the means for connecting with the society, broadening the customer base, lowering operation costs and beneficial for the community in general, and hence, sustainability can lead to a competitive advantage in the market through communication [5, 6, 7].

The research question of the study is: why communication is important in sustainability strategies and how it affects the activities, organization and decisions of institutions regarding to sustainability. The paper will start with describing the importance of communication in detail. Further, it will move to the issue of sustainability and its relationship with communication.

## 2. Why Is Communication Important in Business?

Regardless of the size of the company, communication is fundamental for business success. Communication is the process that enables materialization and achievement of public relation goals. Communication process is vital since it is done to inform, convince, motivate and provide mutual understanding [8]. In other words, public relations experts should know what communication is first, and then they should know how to use communication tools effectively.

They also ought to be aware of how message is transferred from source to receiver and how the message is perceived by the receiver. Today, developments in technology provide opportunities for communication tools. By means of these developments communication tools gain ground for public relations. So, communication stands on a more central position than it did before.

Organizational intelligence and organizational integration are the two key terms in understanding communication. Through giving and taking messages, these two terms as consequences of organizational communication are fulfilled. As people settle exchange of messages in an organization, they may start to have common expectations and meanings that are transferred by messages (Figure 1).

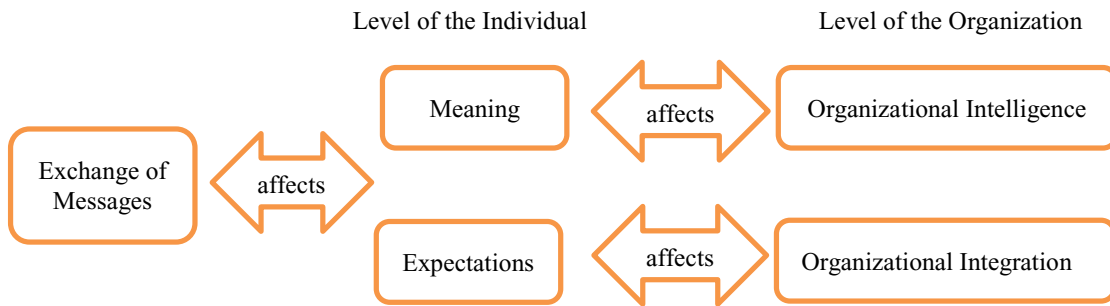


Fig. 1. Key terms in the definition of communication as an organizing process

According to Figure 1, exchange of messages affects meaning and expectations at the individual level and at the same time meaning and expectations coming from individuals affect the exchange of messages. Moreover, the meaning created within the minds of individuals affects the organizational intelligence at the level of organization and this organizational intelligence also has an impact on the meaning creation process of the individuals. Also, the expectations of individuals affect the organizational integration at the level of organizations and similarly, organizational integration affects the expectations of individuals *at the level of individual*.

### 2.1. Communication & Productivity

Although the amount of the effect differs according to type of the business, or job design, or conceptualization of productivity, employees present a relationship between communication in job environment and their productivity [9].

The study showed that successful businesses were those which “more frequently provide channels for upward communication and listen to what their employees say” [10]. In addition, successful businesses are better at downward communication patterns because of the fact that employees are more informed appropriately just in time, as well as they achieve “better understanding of organizational goal” [11].

Kress suppose five points of explanation to enlighten the relationship between productivity and communication [12]:

- Demonstrating the organization's investment in employees
- Educating employees about how payment is determined
- Reinforcing reward-and-recognition programs
- Recognizing contributions in noncash ways
- Soliciting employee feedback on issues that affect job performance

## 2.2. The Relationship of Communication with Sustainable Development

The concept of Sustainable Development was defined by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ [13]. Previous researches have underlined the importance of communication for sustainable development, such as in the achievement of Millennium Development Goals [14] in strategies of OECD and UNDP [15], and also in manufacturing [16]. Although communication for sustainable development is similar to other communication approaches in many ways, it is particularly effective in building bridges across numerous stakeholder groups [17].

However, there are still some challenges that have not been overcome. For instance, the application of communication in sustainable development is not achievable due to the properties of current media and message design, the practices adopted for the application, and finding ways to assess the impact [18]. In order to overcome these problems, this paper will define the relationship between communication and sustainability in detail. Particularly, the next section will be devoted to discussion of the differences among communication about sustainability, communication of sustainability and communication for sustainability.

## 3. Communication and Sustainability

Communication plays a crucial role in any sustainability strategy. When there is a lack of internal communication within an organization, it would be hard to implement the changes with respect to making the organization more sustainable. Moreover, external communication with the customers, work partners and the community is a must for sustainability strategies, otherwise the organization may face with losses in terms of sales of goods or services, hence there is an increasing trend towards sustainability at a global scale. The reason why communication is fundamental for sustainable development can be explained by considering the nature of sustainability. First of all, societal discourse is fundamental to provide legitimacy in sustainable development [19]. Second, sustainability is a highly complex issue that requires overcoming specific regarding to societal communication [20].

Typically, issues with respect to sustainability are characterized by high levels of complexity and uncertainty, thus communication plays a key role in delivering information across the agents. Due to these high decision stakes, for instance, Funtowicz and Ravetz have suggested new modes of science including high levels of communication and dialogue, involvement of stakeholders for broadening the information basis as well as involving increased amount of societal values [21]. Furthermore, sustainability goals appear as ambivalent in terms of involving conflicts of interests and conflict of values. At this point, communication becomes essential for creating a common understanding about societal values on sustainability and determining some concrete goals which require being followed [22].

Last but not the least, implementation of measures for sustainable development is slightly difficult, since the capacities to govern sustainable development are not centered, highly dispersed among various actors in the society and involves multiple levels of decision making. Therefore, coordination based on network-like forms would be useful for allowing effective arguing bargaining as well as social learning, which in turn, contribute to the implementation of sustainable development strategies [23].

## 4. Communication about Sustainability

Starting with the communication *about* sustainability (CaS), it implies the processes where information, interpretations, and opinions with respect to the sustainability issues are exchanged and discussed. Issues which are transformed and framed in horizontal communication may take place on various levels, from interpersonal face-to-face interaction to the mediated level of mass communication [24]. CaS incorporates the perception of sustainability issues as it serves significant functions of framing concerns and structuring facts, arguments, and claims through establishing a common understanding of the issue at stake, of the goals which required to be accomplished, and of

who should take action. These processes are not necessarily harmonious and inclusive, but rather can be considered as controversially structured fields of symbolic interaction where different actors try to assert their own interpretation of issues, their explanations and the remedies [25].

The effectiveness or quality of CaS can be assessed through the amount of attention which a problem receives from the mass media [26, 27]. Another indicator for the assessment includes the determination of who has access to the discourse and impacts the framing processes, where effectiveness implies structural conditions and the overall design of communication process [28]. And last, the potential for communication exchange between spheres, or subsystems of communication is another aspect for the assessment of CaS [29]. In general, an indicator of communication effectiveness is expected to measure the compatibility of the discourse in one subsystem, such as political system, with the discourses in other subsystems, such as science; and the likelihood of transferring significant aspects from one subsystem to another so that realization of sustainable development can be established [30].

## 5. Communication of Sustainability

In contrast to Communication about Sustainability, Communication *of* sustainability (CoS) is generally instrumental or managerial. The main focus of CoS is mono-directional, sender-receiver flow of communication, in which the sender follows a particular objective of communication [31]. In this type, scientists, NGOs, educators, companies, and journalists pursue to receive the attention of decision makers or the public in general to provide information about the issues with respect to sustainability. As long as the demands of society for sustainable action are growing, actors may realize the requirement for CoS as a measure to defend or legitimize their own behavior. An example for this type of communication can be considered as corporate sustainability.

CoS has some specific functions, such as informing and educating individuals, and achieving some level of social engagement and taking action [32]. From this point of view, CoS takes an elitist stance by making a central distinction between experts and ordinary people regarding to their knowledge and capacities related to sustainability [33]. CoS is required to be assessed in terms of its effectiveness as it has clear intentions about the desired effects. It considers the questions whether recipients have been reached, whether they have understood the message, or whether they have changed their values and behaviors accordingly. However, this mode of communication where experts educate ordinary people is increasingly being criticized in scientific area [34]. The privileged position of science is eroding, as well as the dominant quest for behavioral alteration at the individual level, that only has a limited success is increasingly questioned in favor of dialogue and discourse [35]. Hence, step by step, CoS approaches the sphere of CaS.

## 6. Communication for Sustainability

As the distinction between CoS and CaS implies the direction and the initiators of information flows, the concept of communication *for* sustainability (CfS) focuses on the normative aspect of sustainable development. In this respect, communication is not merely about providing information related to sustainability and raising awareness for sustainability considerations. The objective of CfS is to establish societal transformation on the basis of the normative goals of sustainable development. CfS may share elements of CoS and CaS, including the knowledge generation (or social) learning [36] and collaboratively developing solutions for sustainability issues, in terms of direction and senders. The effectiveness of CfS is measured with respect to its impact in terms of measurable action towards sustainable development.

CfS has counterparts in that communication related to sustainability may in fact neglect or even inhibit sustainable development. Since no one is openly against sustainability, this is generally done by symbolically seem to be supporting sustainability despite following hidden non-sustainable agendas.

Although the boundaries between these different types of communication are ambiguous, they can be considered as providing useful analytical tools when considering the various communication processes to be found in the context of sustainable development.

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