

COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS AND 360-DEGREE EVALUATION: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO CONCEPTS?

Rita Andreia Mourão e Sandra Miranda

Abstract The performance appraisal has a very important role in the strategic objectives of the organization, because it contributes to its efficacy (Aguinis, 2007). However, some limitations of top-down performance appraisal like the subjectivity have been proposed other evaluations, like 360-degree evaluation (Kondrasuk, 2012). This is a specific evaluation that considers more than one appraiser (Brutus & Gorriti, 2005).

The purpose of this research is to know if the application of 360-degree evaluation influences organizational communication. We conducted a qualitative exploratory study through the interviews with experts. The results that will be presented are still preliminary and have theoretical and practical applications. In general, we conclude that 360-degree evaluation could be advantageous for organizational communication (e.g. active voice of employees; symmetrical and bi-directional communication).

Key-words Performance Appraisal; 360-degree evaluation; Organizational Communication

Introduction

The performance evaluation has a central role in organizations because it allows justify the decision making of managers (Becton & Schraeder, 2004; Bracken, Timmreck, Fleenor & Summers, 2001). These decision-making may have consequences at different levels, such as reward systems management (*i.e.*, increase of salaries); justification of decisions about the management of professional careers (*i.e.*, transfers, promotions, progressions, changes in labor contracts); identification of training needs of evaluated people, with a view to personal and professional development (Bracken *et al.*, 2001; Brutus & Gorriti, 2005, Caetano, 2008; Caetano & Vala, 2000). Some authors also argue that the application of performance evaluation may be useful in selection and recruitment procedures (Aguinis, 2007; Brutus & Gorriti, 2005; Caetano, 2008; Tannenbaum, 2006).

In recent years some factors began promoting other type of performance appraisal that may include more than one evaluator (e.g. colleagues, clients and supervisors) and this particular type of performance evaluation is called 360-degree evaluation. A previous study found that 360-degree evaluation may be advantageous when compared with traditional performance appraisal (*i.e.*, manager evaluate their subordinates) (Mourão, Miranda & Ramalho, 2015). According to the same study, the diversity of perspectives that 360-degree evaluation has, could be relevant to: a higher reliability of the evaluation process; a decentralization manager's power; a neutralization of the influence of emotional relationships; and a possible resolution of conflicts among employees. In this sense, the interviewed employees consider that this type of evaluation will evaluate the employees mostly considering their professional performance, rather than the quality of personal relationships that they establish in organizations. Furthermore, the analysis of focus group allowed to realize that respondents consider that the 360-degree evaluation may help discover possible conflicts between employees (Mourão, Miranda & Ramalho, 2015).

When we are studying the practice of communication we can consider that the 360-degree evaluation may promote a more effective organizational communication (Carson, 2006). This is because organizations with a power-sharing culture could be responsible to have a horizontal organizational communication that tends to be promoted by 360-degree evaluation (Heijden & Nijhof, 2004; Mamatoglu, 2008).

In this study we pretend to understand how some kind of experts define and understand organizational communication and 360-degree evaluation and we intend to understand how experts perceive the practice of organizational communication, under the application of 360-degree evaluation. Some authors argue that, there are specific ways of communication, depending on the type of appraisal used and the sharing of power in organizations (e.g. Heijden & Nijhof, 2004). This research allows us to have a general idea about the possible relationship between organizational communication and 360-degree evaluation.

Literature Review

360-degree evaluation: Definition and advantages

360-degree evaluation is a specific type of performance appraisal. It is different from other methods, because it includes several evaluators (Brutus & Gorriti, 2005; Caetano, 2008). The majority of authors argue that the evaluators are: the employee (through its self-evaluation); colleagues; direct supervisors (Bracken *et al.*, 2001; Craig & Hannum, 2006; Nowack, 2009).

The main objective of 360-degree evaluation is the development of organizational actors (Nowack, 2009), allowing them an identification of their learning needs and therefore an understanding of its performance, promoting communication and trust between them (Slenttenhaar, 2008).

The 360-degree evaluation could be relevant to overcome some limitations of traditional performance appraisal (*i.e.*, top-down evaluation). Firstly, it is important to note the confidentiality of the process. Confidentiality is crucial to increase participation of the individuals. However, the evaluation of traditional performance does not include this confidentiality, because it is made by the superior of the employee who prepares an analysis of the strengths and areas for improvement, discussing with the employee which may be the possible future action plans (Caetano, 2008). This aspect can be also seen as an obstacle of traditional performance appraisal, because when the evaluation process is not confidential, may develop conflicts between evaluators and evaluated people. This is because disagreements may arise between them (Craig & Hannum 2006). Considering the aspects mentioned above, 360-degree evaluation is seen as advantageous. The 360-degree evaluation is a confidential and anonymous process, unlike other evaluation methods (e.g. traditional performance evaluation) (Carson, 2006; Craig & Hannum, 2006; Gillespie & Parry, 2006; Kline & Sulsky, 2009). This confidentiality and anonymity mean that there is greater acceptance of this evaluation by the individuals who are evaluated (Heijden & Nijhof, 2004).

The majority of companies promotes an organizational structure in which the managers have more power and therefore the performance evaluation of employees is

made by their managers (Caetano & Vala, 2000). However, the evaluations made by the supervisors tend to have quotation errors (Caetano, 2008). These errors are related to the subjectivity of the interpretations of individuals, which can cause cognitive distortions. In turn, these cognitive distortions may compromise the validity and accuracy of the evaluations. In these cases and one more time, 360-degree evaluation is advantageous. In this sense, the 360-degree evaluation has been seen as more valid (has confidential information) and more reliable (includes more than one appraiser) (Maurer, Mitchell & Barbeite, 2002). This is because the average number of evaluations may control idiosyncrasies (Kondrasuk, 2012; Smither, London & Reilly, 2005). In this context, the 360-degree evaluation has more clear and objective appraisals, because it encourages dialogue between all organizational actors, enabling the exposure of their point of views (e.g. Gomes, Cunha Rego, Cunha, Cardoso & Marques, 2008).

For the communication aspect, it is noted that in a general way, the organizational communication can be more effective when the 360-degree evaluation is applied. This is because this type of evaluation involves better performance and the perception of greater organizational membership (Carson, 2006). In this sense, 360-degree evaluation involves a more effective organizational communication (Gomes et al., 2008), enabling the dissolution of hierarchical barriers (e.g. Brutus & Brassard, 2005). In that way, it is considered that this type of feedback enables a greater interest in the different views of each organizational actor, enabling a greater sharing of opinions between them and a more dynamic communication environment (e.g. Atwater & Brett, 2005; Carson, 2006). This type of communicative environment may become responsible for the perception of a larger organizational membership (e.g. shared values and goals with the organization), by organizational actors and consequently for better individual and group performances (Carson, 2006; Mamatoglu, 2008). Thus, the 360-degree feedback may become a facilitator of organizational communication and it allows a greater closeness and trust among employees, because the perceptions of power tend to be modified (*i.e.*, power sharing among the organizational actors), changing climate perceptions and organizational culture (Mamatoglu, 2008).

Finally, it is important to note that 360-degree evaluation is useful to evaluate supervisors (Carson, 2006; Letchfield & Bourn, 2011). In this way, it is possible to know how direct supervisors react when are evaluated (Atwater & Brett, 2005). In addition, this kind of evaluation may promote a better dialogue between supervisors and employees (Gomes et al., 2008).

Considering the aspects mentioned above, it is important to have studies about organizational communication under 360-degree evaluation, to understand how they can be related.

Organizational Communication: How can we define it?

In general terms, there is a need for individuals communicate with each other within a group in order to have knowledge of their social functions. Specifically, in an increasingly complex organizational context employees also need to be aware of their tasks to follow the same direction and hence achieve organization's objectives (Quirke, 2008). In this context, we may have the concept of organizational communication that allows the

dissemination of information for the coordination and conclusion of tasks, decision making and a possible conflict resolution among organizational actors (Ayub, Manaf & Hamzah, 2014; Ricardo, 2008).

The organizational communication can be defined as the communication that organizational actors establish among themselves (Vercic, Vercic & Sriramesh, 2012). When we refer to organizational communication is important to understand that this may involve all members of the organization (*i.e.*, customers, suppliers, leaders, employees) (Keyton, 2005). In this way, we have to consider not only an internal communication, but also an external communication (Smith & Mounter, 2008).

One of the main objectives of organizational communication is related to an effective human resource management (Ruão, 1999) and, consequently, with better individual performance and greater organizational effectiveness (Proctor & Doukakakis, 2003). The internet has modified the interactions established between organizational actors. In this way, this type of communication allows a more constant communication between them (Almeida, 2003). Furthermore, the emergence of the internet has enabled communication in many ways, namely downward, upward and lateral/horizontal.

The downward communication refers to the communication that flows from the top to the bottom. This type of communication may include information about rules and tasks, regulations and organizational policies; performance evaluations; information about objectives and organizational culture (Almeida, Orgambídez-Ramos, Monteiro & Sousa, 2013).

The upward communication involves the communication occurs from bottom to top. In this case, the leaders receive information about the areas of the organization, and could understand the messages and the overall performance of the organization or sector (Almeida *et al.*, 2013).

Finally, the lateral or horizontal communication is one that occurs at the same level and allows an improvement of coordination of interdependent activities. In this case, it has been considered the workflow, and employees communicate with individuals who are closest to them (Almeida *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, in addition to a vertical communication (between supervisors and subordinates) organizations also have an horizontal communication (*i.e.*, communication between all different organizational people within organizations). However, this horizontal communication tends to be more applied in democratic organizational contexts (Mamatoglu, 2008).

We can conclude that the organization's structure plays a very important role to realize the type of communication adopted by companies. In addition to the structure, also the organizational culture enables a greater understanding of communication established between the organizational actors. It is known that different cultures involve different assumptions and knowledge, contributing also to acquire different meanings of received messages (Duck & McMahan, 2012). In this sense, the communication is generically defined as the process that is responsible to send messages / information between individuals; from a sender to a receiver. However, this is not restricted only to a dissemination of information, because it is influenced by the contexts in which it is applied, the sender and the receiver culture and the relationships that they establish among themselves. In addition, it can also depend on the socio-demographic and socio-professional of organizational actors (eg "status", gender, political position, profession) (Duck & McMahan, 2012).

Considering the definition of organizational communication we can claim that organizational communication makes influence in performance, because it allows the alignment of work objectives of organizational actors and provides feedback about their performance (e.g. Simões & Miranda, 2011). Furthermore, and after defining 360-degree evaluation, we conclude that this kind of evaluation may also become advantageous for organizational communication as it allows an increase of information exchange between the different organizational actors. This exchange of information is not possible in other type of performance appraisal like traditional/ top-down performance appraisal (Heijden & Nijhof, 2004).

The literature review allowed us to assume that the structure and culture of the organization have an influence on the level of communication and the application of evaluation 360-degree evaluation. In this way, we may predict a relationship between these two practices.

Method

In this study, we used an exploratory qualitative methodology. In this way, according to the information obtained in the literature review, we have created a semi-structured interview guide with open questions. This script was previously tested. After this pre-test, we proceed to the interviews. In this sense, whereas this study was an exploratory study, we interviewed nine people. People interviewed had specific features considering initial objectives of this study. We interviewed 2 university professors; 3 organizational communication trainers and 4 department's communication employees. In total, we interviewed 5 women and 4 men. Their professional experience ranged from 5 to 20 years and all of them have postgraduate studies. At the beginning of each interview we gave an informed consent document, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the process.

All of the interviews were recorded and were transcribed, to have a more reliable analysis. To analyze them we have created different categories and sub-categories to summarize the key ideas. These key ideas will be presented below. They are only preliminary results that allow a general idea of the relationship between organizational communication and 360-degree evaluation. In this sense, through the results we can understand how some experts perceive these two themes.

The Relationship between Organizational Communication and 360-degree evaluation: Results

The interviews were analyzed initially in a more generic way. This analysis allowed to divide the speech of participants in 5 categories, namely: 1. "The Organizational Communication"; 2. "The Barriers of Organizational Communication"; 3. "How to Overcome the Barriers of Organizational Communication" 4. "The 360-degree Evaluation" and 5. "The 360-degree Evaluation as Advantageous to Organizational Communication".

In the first case, respondents help to define organizational communication, referring also to its relevance. After defining organizational communication, the participants noted

some aspects that could be related to the barriers to implementing this type of communication. In this case, we have category 2 “The barriers of organizational communication”, participants explain the interest of leaders and employees about this practice. After that, respondents try to understand how these barriers can be overcome. Thus, we may define the category 3 “how to overcome the barriers of organizational communication”. In category 4, participants define the 360-degree evaluation and explain what is its application context. Finally, in category 5 respondents explain why the 360-degree evaluation may be advantageous for organizational communication. In this case, the participants advocated that the feedback of 360-degree evaluation is more reliable and that this type of performance appraisal promotes a bi-directional and symmetrical communication.

Considering these categories it is important to highlight some sub-categories, such as: 1.1. “Definition of Organizational Communication”; 1.2. “The Relevance of Organizational Communication”; 1.3. “The Relevance of Internal Communication”; 2.1. “Little Interest of Leaders”; 2.2. “Little Interest of Employees”; 2.3. “No Involvement of all Employees”; 3.1. “Involve of all Employees”; 3.2. “Investment in Research”; 4.1. “The organizational Context for the Application of 360-degree Evaluation”; 5.1. “Relevance of 360-degree Feedback”; 5.2. “Symmetric Communication”; 5.3. “Two-way Communication”.

The first category concerns the definition of organizational communication. In this case, participants define organizational communication as a way to make decisions within the organization, and these decisions will have consequences to an external level. According to the speech of respondents: *“The organizational communication may be understood as all forms of interaction that can promote making decisions, within the organization and its relationship with the external environment.”* (E3). In the sub-category “The Relevance of Organizational Communication” participants report that *“Today, if there is no communication in organizations is the same as these do not exist, isn't it? People do not know them ... and this fact is the same that organizations do not exist”* (E6). When defining organizational communication, respondents mentioned also the relevance of internal communication. For participants, internal communication plays a very important role because for them: *“(...) it's very relevant to look at internal communication, because the internal communication will reflect what is happening at the outside”* (E3).

In category 2 respondents refer to the organizational communication obstacles. In this case, participants mention the little interest of the leaders, because they state that: *“The leaders feel that communication would be a poor part of the organization ... In other words, it was not important to create communication flows, or engage employees, or inform them about the decision making in the organization.”* (E4). Apart from the little interest of the leaders, the participants argue that there is also little interest of employees. In this case, the respondents said that: *“I do not like to say that the problem is the people, because they are not, people are the challenge. But the truth is that people also sometimes do not want to receive the information or do not want to know the information.”* (E2). No involvement of all employees was another aspect mentioned. In this case, it was argued that *“(...)communication, sometimes, only reaches certain levels and does not come down.”*

The category 3 comprises two sub-categories, which are “Involve of all Employees” and “Investment in Research”. In the first case, the participants said that: “(...) for communication flows and be effective, everyone [all organizational actors] should be involved!” (E4). In the second case, respondents assume that there should be a large investment in the research of these topics: *“There is no time to lose! And the time we waste trying and making mistakes could be overcome with going to read two or three scientific articles”* (E6).

The Category 4 relates to the application context of a 360-degree evaluation. In this sense, the respondents argue that: *“(...) it's more focused on their internal talent organization ... is a more flexible organization, is an organization ... younger! It's not as bureaucratic, not so hierarchically closed and usually also a ... a company or an entity with ... with few hierarchical levels.”* (E7)

Finally, the category 5 involves 3 subcategories, namely: 5.1. “Relevance of 360-degree Feedback”; 5.2. “Symmetric Communication”; 5.3. “Two-way Communication”. In the first sub-category, the participants considered that the feedback of 360-degree evaluation is very useful. In this case, they argue that: *“In this moment of evaluation [feedback] there is opportunity to transmit this feedback and this is useful to improve some procedures”* (E4). The second sub-category concerns the symmetrical communication of 360-degree evaluation's application: *“Another ... Another aspect is the issue of symmetry. That is, is the more important the communication will flow from leadership to operation, but also the communication that flows from the operation to the leadership”* (E5) The third and final sub-category is related to the fact that the evaluation 360-degree evaluation allows a two-way communication. In this case, respondents said: *“The proposals and resolutions arising from the evaluation are always related to this bidirectionality of communication circuits. That is, we do things to get better understand what is happening here with you, let's make things to solve better and to involve you better ...”* (E5)

After the description of the results, there is a need to discuss them. In this sense, a brief conclusion and discussion will be presented.

Discussions and Conclusion

The preliminary findings of this study are about the initially proposed objectives. In this sense, these findings become useful for further theoretical understanding of the issues and hence to more effective practical implementation.

In a generic way, participants defined organizational communication and noted its relevance. After that explanation, respondents mentioned their possible barriers, considering possible ways to overcome them. In addition to the topic of organizational communication, participants also talked about 360-degree evaluation. In this case, they mentioned the context of application and what could be the consequences of 360-degree evaluation to organizational communication.

Specifically, participants reported that 360-degree evaluation may be advantageous for communication that organizational actors have with each other. This is because, respondents argue that the 360-degree evaluation allows a more symmetrical communication and bi-directional between all organizational actors. Participants argue

that despite the organizational communication is relevant to organizations, their application will depend on the interest of leaders and the interests of employees. In this sense, the little interest of leaders and the little interest of employees and non-involvement of all organizational actors are some of the barriers to the application of organizational communication. In addition, the subjects reported that the application of the 360-degree evaluation will also depend on the organizational context, and it is not possible to apply it in any context.

In conclusion, organizational communication can be defined generally as communication that organizational actors establish among themselves. This type of communication allows the development of an organizational identity and decision making. In this sense, organizational communication becomes responsible for making decisions such as: planning work; selection and recruitment; integration of new employees; performance evaluation; training and human resource development. In turn, 360-degree evaluation is a specific performance appraisal which allows a diversity of perspectives of organizational actors. This diversity makes this type of evaluation perceived as more reliable than the traditional evaluation (top-down evaluation). In addition, this evaluation allows a decentralization of power of managers. Furthermore, the 360-degree evaluation promotes a greater dialogue between organizational actors and thus a more effective organizational communication.

Theoretical/Practical Implications & Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study was useful to define the theme of organizational communication and 360-degree evaluation. In addition, it was possible to understand what may be the positive and negative aspects, as well as possible ways to overcome their barriers. It is known that there is a lack of national and international studies on the subject of organizational communication (Ruão, 2008). In this sense, this study could be advantageous to enrich the little knowledge that literature has on these two themes (*i.e.*, organizational communication and 360-degree evaluation). The information of the interviews allowed the identification of potential facilitators and potential barriers to the implementation of organizational communication within the 360-degree evaluation. These barriers and facilitators will help to build a more effective evaluation systems, which offer a more constant communication between different organizational actors and, consequently, better professional performance. In this way, we could conclude that the knowledge obtained through this study may be relevant to the promotion of the application of these practices, contributing to better organizational effectiveness.

This study is still exploratory. In this sense, the results are preliminary and the findings may not be fully extended. It is necessary to interview more experts, to the study becomes more complete. In these sense, we need more categories to have more consistent conclusions.

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Rita Andreia Monteiro Mourão, Estudante do Doutoramento FCT em Estudos de Comunicação, Cultura, Tecnologia e Sociedade. Membro da Comissão de Revisão Científica da Revista Universitária de Psicologia e membro do Grupo de Trabalho de Jovens Investigadores em Ciências da Comunicação, ritaandreiamourao@gmail.com

Sandra Miranda, Professora na Escola Superior de Comunicação Social – Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa e membro investigador do CIES-IUL, smiranda@escs.ipl.pt