

WARNING: consumption of uncontrolled information is injurious to your health.

Right to know, need to learn

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Managers and professional staff voice two complaints with high frequency when I visit with them. The first — “I’m snowed ... overloaded with information. Look at this desk, look at my calendar. Too many meetings, too many interviews, too many reports and printouts. I’m inundated with information.” The second — “I don’t feel I’m a part of this outfit any more. They don’t communicate with me. The organization is cold and impersonal. I don’t know what’s going on, don’t feel I have a stake in the organization, don’t believe it cares about me. I’m alienated ... or getting that way.”

The complaints are sincere; their frequency is disturbing as a warning signal of a lessening of organizational health and productivity. What is fascinating is that *the two complaints often come from the same person*. How can one complain

about too much information and too little communication at the same time?

Slavery and freedom: twin tyrannies

The term “freedom” abbreviates the notion of freedom of choice, of the option to select among choices as to what we want, what we think we can do. If I can’t select among those options, for whatever reasons, I feel I have no control over myself. I experience a tyranny of control.

Traditionally, we’ve thought of tyranny only in one form: slavery. If I’m your slave, you are the arbiter of my decisions — you decide what I should want and what I will do. You control the information system — with whom I talk, what I learn,

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even what I say. I report only to you because a slave can serve only one master. I'm told only what I need to learn to get the work out and you decide what I need to learn. I have no rights, not even a right to know. You manage me, you organize my life, you are the traditional authority. I'm not free to choose; however, I can cope. I may not be happy, but I can cope as long as you have the responsibility for what's going to happen. I probably don't feel as if I'm losing anything because I never had anything to lose. Control is external to me.

As we analyze the typical organization "chart", we might infer that many managers and organizations still believe that master/slave is the best control relationship. However, there is a growing realization by both supervisor and subordinate that "slavery control" isn't working well.

Managers realize that this kind of control is not helping them get their job done or increasing productivity. Their subordinates realize that this kind of control system inhibits their development as individuals. Master/slave control precludes self-control, imposes inferiority on the subordinate while conferring superiority on the supervisor. Today's subordinate believes that you're his supervisor, not his superior. He's your subordinate, not your inferior. He believes you have no right to control what he learns. He has a right to know what he wants to know so that he can anticipate what's going to happen and make plans as to what he wants and can and will do. He believes he has a right to self-control.

Given those beliefs, *traditional authority is obsolete as a control system*. Neither supervisor nor subordinate can achieve his or her goals under it. "Supervisor instructs ... subordinate reports" is a communication strategy that leads to malfunctioning of the system. Failure to realize that has led to a shortage of qualified subordinates because it's hard to convince a competent person to accept an "inferior" position. The organizations I work with are not short of compe-

tent managers; they *are* short of competent subordinates. And that shortage will continue until we realize that systems controlled by traditional authority simply won't work in the long run.

There are at least three reasons for that. First, complex tasks require informed workers — even the slave has to be sent to school if the master is to make a profit. Second, complex organizations require information management at many levels. Master/slave gives way to hierarchical organizations in which middle managers manage information, not traditional physical work. Most first-line supervisors spend most of their time moving information. At higher levels, management is communication. That's all the manager does and the quality of information controls the quality of managerial decisions.

Third, informed people become complex people. Travel, media exposure, educational exposure all lead to increased knowledge. A subordinate must remain naive and innocent if he or she is to accept the principle that the supervisor is a superior and *the price of knowledge is the loss of innocence*. Master "rights" won't sell any more and the masters no longer have the force or clout to impose them.

Today's subordinate believes that he or she has the right to decide what's good for Self. While supervisors debate the relative merits of Theories X and Y, subordinates are voting and their vote counts. Traditionally, authorities decided what subordinates needed to learn, told them only that and prevented subordinates from learning anything else. "I'll tell you what you need to learn" has been displaced by "You'll tell me what I want to learn" as a communication rule. *Right to know has displaced need to learn*. Both "buyer beware" and "hearer beware" rules are changing, displaced by "tellers and sellers beware". A primarily agrarian society may control 800 million people by telling them only what authorities think they need to learn, but a post-industrialized society changes the game.

Down with slavery, up with freedom. Slavery is tyrannical. The question, though, is might freedom be tyrannical, too?

Tyranny of freedom

In escaping from slavery, we have deified freedom. We have come to believe in total openness, in systems governed only by "right to know", systems in which all information is disseminated to all members. We learned that ignorance is bad for us and that a little learning is a dangerous thing. What we haven't learned is that too much information may be more than dangerous, it may be catastrophic.

Right to know or duty to know?

The awareness that information is *potentially* useful has given way to a newer assumption, that information is *inherently* good for you. Get all you can. Now that communication is the major process for getting and giving information, it, too, has been accepted as inherently good — the more we do it, the better we'll be. It's simply not so.

The "right" of one generation to go to college has been displaced by the "duty" of the next to go, with or without purpose or desire. School is inherently good, not as a means to an end. We've come to accept the thesis that consumption of the media is good — inherently. It's "good" to read, to listen, to view. Our right to belong to an informed electorate has been displaced by the duty to remain informed and failure to fulfill that duty leads to feelings of guilt and attacks of irresponsibility.

Some even suggest that freedom of choice should be imposed and required; e.g., voting in elections should be compulsory or attendance at corporate-sponsored "freedom" seminars should be mandatory. I find it paradoxical that some managers are willing to order, coerce, or persuade their colleagues to participate in the various "rise of self-consciousness" workshops that

are the current vogue. A much larger group believe it is their duty to at least try to consume all of the information that is sent to them on the job and to disseminate everything they know to those with whom they work. Neither, of course, can be accomplished. Feelings of both inundation and alienation follow.

Learn, learn. Consume, consume. That is the liturgy. Learn what? Everything that's known. Learn how much of it? All you can. Consume what? Everything that's produced. The liturgy concludes: that keeps you involved, informed, participating ... and that's good.

Information consumption has a cost ... sometimes dear. Clearly, there are benefits to information and communication; however, there are costs as well. To assume no costs or to assume that the costs are always exceeded by the benefits is to fail to understand the nature of information and communication in a highly informative environment.

In recent years, technology has helped us reduce the costs of producing information and drastically reduced the costs of disseminating information; however, *it costs as much to consume information as it ever did.*

It takes as long to listen to a speech, to read a page, to consume a training film as it ever did. The belief that information is "free" ... or even inexpensive ... is a producer's belief, not a consumer's belief. From the consumer's point of view, there's no free speech or free press. To believe otherwise is to join in the fallacy of those who still believe there is a free lunch. As the costs of information production and dissemination go down, the amount of information in the system has gone up — at a high cost to those who believe they should eat everything on their plates. Companies who measure the costs of their copying and reproducing machinery in terms of paper and machine rentals overlook the dominant cost — the cost of consuming those copies, often by people who have no reason to consume but can't know that until afterward.

A comparison of corporate marketing and management strategies reveals another paradox. Through technology, marketing professionals have moved away from mass communication toward highly personalized information; e.g., direct mail marketers realize they can't afford to send messages to "boxholders" and rent lists which help pinpoint their market. Meanwhile, their managerial counterparts have moved toward "to whom it may concern" pieces, generated in sufficient copies to meet the "mass" market.

The movement toward mass distribution of information within the organization has been based, in part, on management's belief that everything is "good to know" and, in part, on the subordinate's demand that his right to know be recognized. Given the subsequent belief that all have a duty to know, information overload is inevitable. Information overload is dangerous to our health. Over-consumption of information can and does lead to depression, accompanied both by fatigue and alienation.

You know more than is good for you. As a youngster, I was curious about everything. My grandmother occasionally admonished me to mind my own business and suggested that I was learning too much for my own good. I interpreted her comments as an attempt by the establishment to maintain control and, in part, they were; however, I learned much later that there also was an element of consumer protection in her suggestion.

The cost of consumption is one aspect of information cost. There are at least two costs *after* consumption. Once information is on the table, you may have to deal with it, whether you want to or not, whether you know how to or not. Any company which has sponsored a climate study or employee attitude survey comes to realize that. Such a survey "makes" information. Once it is made, it is real in its consequences. If you know how to deal with what you learn, fine; however, if you can't deal with it or don't know how to deal with it or don't want to deal

with it, you'd better not make it. Information is make-believe, but make-believe is real.

The second post-consumption cost may be even higher. It may incapacitate you in the exercise of your freedom of choice. Choice is exercised as to what you want and what you believe you can do. As information increases, the number of options increases. Given high information inputs, you approach the point at which you believe you can want anything and can do anything. That makes choice exciting, but difficult and expensive. The cost is prohibitive if we do not have a basis for exercising it. That basis is the capacity to anticipate what is going to happen, our expectations of what will happen over the long run.

Other things being equal, the more information we consume, the less able we are to anticipate what will happen; i.e., we learn that there are more things that could happen than we had previously believed and we learn that the probability of what we were used to having happen is lower than we had expected. As options increase, the world becomes increasingly uncertain. Predictability goes down, surprise goes up. That is what is meant by information overload: more surprise than we can tolerate. At the extreme, we can make no predictions; i.e., we come to believe that anything can happen and we believe we can't predict, but we still believe we should be able to. If control is based on predictability, the system has gone out of control for some of us. Given that, freedom of choice becomes trivial. How can I select what I want if I can't predict what will happen? How can I decide what I will do if I can't predict what's going to happen? How can I plan?

Freedom of choice is meaningful if, and only if, we believe the system is under enough control to permit prediction. For information to contribute to the value of freedom, we must be able to make sense out of the information we receive, be able to organize it and bring things under control. The consumption of controlled information facilitates our emergence from slavery and is

the basis for our rejection of the beliefs that "ignorance is bliss" and "what you don't know can't hurt you".

On the other hand, if we don't control what we consume, if we believe we have the duty to consume and digest everything sent to us, if we seek information without a plan for its use, we face a new problem: what we do know can also hurt us. At the extreme, if predictability is forfeited, we have simply exchanged one tyranny (slavery) for another (freedom). At that point, we can empathize with the phrase from one of this decade's most popular lyrics: "Freedom" is just another word for "nothing left to lose".

Information and control

Conventional wisdom suggests that information and control are positively related; i.e., the more information you acquire, the more control you have. If you control your consumption, I agree with that suggestion. Under other conditions, however, just the opposite is true. If the consumption of information isn't controlled, *the more information you get, the less control you have.*

To understand that statement, we need to distinguish between the notion of the "now" or "then", and the notion of the "long run". Now and then refer to a particular point in time at which a particular event happened at a particular place. The long run refers to the patterning, the probabilities, with which events will occur over time. One might ask, how "long" is the long run. That's relative and not crucial to the distinction between long run and now and then. What is crucial is that the concept of "long run" groups particular events, tries to make sense out of them and to use the past to anticipate the future.

"Planning" is a term that refers to "in the long run". To make a plan,

you need four things: 1) statements of what is wanted (goals, values, objectives, etc.); 2) statements of what can be done (skills that can be used, activities engaged in, steps that can be taken, etc.); 3) expectations as to what will happen over time (statements of the patterning of events) that can be used to predict what will happen at any given time; and, 4) relationships among those three kinds of statements. As we develop those relationships, we attempt to relate what we want to what we can do and to what we expect to happen. When we do that, we are planning.

"Control" is a term that refers to "in the long run". As I'm using the term "control", it refers to the predictability of the system over time. To the extent that events can be predicted, the system is under control. As uncertainty rises (i.e., predictability is reduced), control is lessened. At the extreme, if no predictions can be made, the system is out of control. To take a simple example, suppose you have a coin with two heads. The coin will be flipped many times. Each flip is a "now". Your expectation is that all flips will result in a head. Given that expectation, you can plan, taking into account what you want and what you can do. Given that expectation, you also can predict what will happen at any given "now". In our example, you always would predict "heads" and you would always be right; i.e., you would never be surprised. The system is totally under control; no uncertainty exists as to what will happen. If you are clear on what you want and what you can do and how to relate those to what will happen, you can develop a plan that will always "work". You are operating under a totally planned system, which assumes, of course, totally controlled occurrences of events.

Go to the other extreme. Suppose you have the traditional "true" coin. Under the definition of "true", your expectation as to what will happen in the long run is that you will observe a "head" in half of the nows or thens and you will observe a "tails" in the other half. Your expectation about the long run is quite

*clear and easily articulated. The only problem is that such an expectation does not permit any planning because it leads to no prediction for any given "now". To state the problem differently, all you can predict at any given time is that *something* will happen (i.e., the game will go on) — a heads or tails will occur. You can't predict which one. After the end of the "long run" (i.e., when the game is over), your expectation will be totally accurate; i.e., half of the events will have been heads and the other half tails. The only problem is that your expectation is of no use until after the game is over. It can't affect or influence the play. During the game, as a series of "nows" and "thens" occur, every day is a new day. Surprise, surprise, surprise. That's all you get ... planning is impossible.*

"Information" is a term that refers to the "now". Information is obtained from a report. We may report to ourselves, based on first-hand experience or we may receive a report from others that has been coded, symbolically. Both are reports, one (the latter) is communication. Is there always information in a report? No. It depends on whether we're surprised by what we receive. If you get a report of something you already "knew" had happened, there is no information. ... you didn't learn anything, no surprise was involved. Similarly, if what happens corresponds to what you predicted, there is little information, little surprise. The amount of information corresponds to the amount of surprise; i.e., dog bites man is not news, but man bites dog is news. Why? You wouldn't have predicted it.

The amount of information in a report is measured, one way or another, by the discrepancy between what we predicted would happen and what did happen. If we're told what we already predicted, we might say "so what else is new? Tell me something I don't know already." As the surprise rises, we say "that's interesting; I didn't know that." As it rises more,

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we say "that's news" and we are willing to pay the reporter to give us the information.

When the amount of surprise exceeds our tolerance for surprise (i.e., information overload), we say, "I can't believe that". There are three possible bases for our incredulity. First, if our plan (our expectation) told us that the event *could* happen, but only *rarely*, we might say "that's hard to believe". Second, if our plan includes the idea of a particular happening, but also includes the belief that it will never happen, we might say "that's impossible". Finally, if our plan doesn't include even the idea of a particular happening and it happens, we might say "that's unbelievable, inconceivable". All such reactions are statements of the degree of surprise we experience, a measure of the amount of information we have received.

Expectations: key to control

If the amount of information equals the amount of surprise we experience, how can we reduce surprise? By developing expectations as to what will occur ... before the fact.

We often think of information consumption as a passive act, receiving what is sent to us and attempting to digest it. You can approach consumption that way; however, if you do, overload has a high probability. An alternative is to construct a set of beliefs as to what we can expect in the long run. Scientists call such a set of beliefs "theory" and use their theories to process the information they get from particular observations. We all need to develop such theories and use them to predict what we're going to consume. As our theories improve and are incorporated into our plans, the amount of information we receive from a report decreases and events are brought

under control. With an expectation (a theory of what's happening) of high quality, there is very little information in a report, i.e., events are going according to plan, everything is under control.

Note that when we say "under control" we are not referring to *your* control, or anybody's control. We simply are referring to the predictability of the system. As you relate your expectations to your objectives (what you want) and your options (what you can do), you are planning — beginning to exercise your control over the situation.

Management by exception: control of consumption. Given a plan, you can reduce the amount of messages you consume. If you can teach those who report to you, after sharing the plan, to separate statements that are consistent with the plan from statements that are exceptions to the plan, you need only consume the exceptions; i.e., you learn where the surprises are, nothing else. Productive consumption is increased as the quality of expectations is improved. We can refer to that as management by exception ... a most effective information-communication system. By "quality of expectations", of course, I refer only to the extent to which the system is predictable, given the expectation. The higher the predictability, the better the "quality".

Management by crisis: uncontrolled consumption. If our expectations do not lead to high predictability, we get a lot of information from each report. Often, we get more than we can process. As a minimum, we can expect that the system will behave randomly. Given that, no predictability can be introduced. We only can guess. Sometimes we'll be right, sometimes not. Without predictability, uncertainty in the long run is maximal; correspondingly, the amount of information at any given "now" also is maximal. The less control, the greater the amount of information.

Without a plan or expectation that improves on randomness, we must respond to each report as we receive it. We can refer to that as

management by crisis. Every day is a new day and each "now" is handled without long-run contexts. As our environments become increasingly variable, we can't function that way without overload. Given overload, we usually try to combat it by consuming even more information, which is the worst possible thing we could do.

Given overload, what we should do is tune out of the system until we can develop a set of expectations. If we don't do that, we can't manage at all, we can only respond. Our behavior then becomes capricious, random, out of control. Anything can happen, and will. The system is "free", without restriction. There is no meaningful base for the exercise of choice and freedom becomes tyrannical. Alienation (disengagement) is inevitable. Small wonder that those who complain about information overload also complain about communication alienation — they're highly related. Given those complaints, the usual remedy requested and supplied by the organization is more communication, the worst possible prescription.

A communication policy

If we are to restore or maintain healthy human beings working productively in an organization that maintains itself over time, we must reduce the number of messages in the system. At present levels, consumption costs are excessive. We also must reduce the amount of informational uncertainty in the system. It is too expensive to process. Information overload is rising and *information overload inevitably results in communication disengagement and personal alienation.*

Overload is counter-productive and inhibits personal and organizational development. As we reduce message cost and information overload, we must at the same time maintain and increase feelings of

commitment to the organization, comfortability with Self and a feeling of personal stake in the organization's future. The accomplishment of both objectives rests on the adoption of a two-part communication policy.

Need to learn: the base for increased productivity. We erred in displacing the principle of "need to learn" by "right ... and duty ... to know". We need to return to the need to learn principle. "Don't learn what you can't use" is one part of an optimum communication policy. Information has a cost. Non-useful information is waste. It costs us to consume it and it may have high costs after consumption.

We need to screen our information linkages so that a given individual knows as much as possible that is needed to get the job done, and nothing else. If the task is production, those needs will be different from the needs of development; however, the criterion remains the same. We need to change our values so that knowing what you need becomes more important than knowing everything you can learn. Not only is it "all right" to avoid exposure to what you don't need, it often is essential if you are going to function effectively.

There was nothing wrong with the traditional "need to learn" principle. Our objection was with the control system; i.e., who decides what I need to learn? Traditionally, the authority decided and the reporting structure was identical to the authority structure. That's obsolete and our efforts to avoid thinking about that by employing concepts like line and staff don't go far enough.

When responsibility for a decision or act is placed at any given level of the organization, everyone in the organization who has information relevant to that decision or act should enter a reporting relationship with the decision-maker, independent of authority. The quality of information should control the decision. Information controls. Information should be routed to the appropriate decision point.

For example, if you're my supervisor and you delegate a decision to me, you report to me. Reporting shouldn't be "up" or "down". It should flow toward the decision point, wherever it is. If I have the most information, I should make the decision; however, you, as my supervisor, often have crucial information. If you don't report it to me, the quality of decision is impaired and we both lose. The supervisor is a scout for those to whom he has delegated responsibility.

How is the decision made as to what you, or someone else, need to learn? It should be negotiated. That should comprise a very important part of negotiating objectives or expected results and should again be evaluated as part of any appraisal process. Did the people who are related get each other the information they needed and *screen out* information they didn't need? Both are essential.

Planning: be a processor, not a consumer. If you don't have a set of expectations about what is going to happen *before* you receive reports, you'll be required to consume and store the information in the reports; furthermore, without expectations, the average report will contain maximal informational uncertainty.

As you develop a plan, including expectations, you can become less of a memorizer and more of a processor. You can compare the reports you receive with the expectations you brought with you and discard all reports that contain no surprise. Over time, you can train someone to do that for you and save a great deal of time, which then can be used in interpreting the surprises. If you are surprised excessively, the plan needs revision (a developmental process). Once revised, the plan lowers the surprise level of reports (a productive process). You then save both the time of consumption and the energy drain of coping with the uncertainty. Technology has made memory obsolete as a human talent; however, it has made the processing of reports against a plan much more valuable.

We need to formulate and revise

plans whenever engaged in an activity which is variable over time. We need to share plans with newcomers so that we and they are operating on similar expectations. We also need to share the ways in which we use reports to revise plans. As supervisors, we need to counsel our subordinates so that they can develop good plans, so that they can relate the information they have to goals and options. Unless you have helped the subordinate in the development of his plan, it is foolhardy to delegate decision-making.

Don't Learn What You Don't Need, Negotiate What You Do Need, Process ... According to Plan ... what you Receive Before You Decide to Consume and Store. If we implement that principle, productivity rises and the tensions of information overload are reduced, improving the maintenance levels of the system.

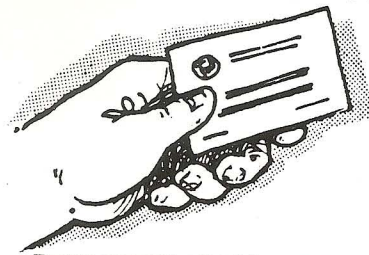
Right to know: the base for personal stake in the organization. "Need to learn" is necessary but not sufficient as a communication policy. It needs to be coupled with a continuation of "right to know". Organizational survival rates rise when members of the organization feel they have a stake in the organization. Economic stake is important; however, we also can provide an informational stake.

If I believe ... and can tell others ... that my organization believes that I can know anything about the organization that I choose to know, I have a stake in the organization, feel a part of it, feel as if I belong to it, just as stockholders, customers and top management feel they belong. Without that, people come to believe that information is being withheld from them and used by others to manipulate them. Maintenance of healthy work relationships becomes expensive, often impossible.

Importantly, as the belief that you have a right to know goes up, your feelings about your need to know go down — particularly if you also believe you'll like what you learn when you hear it. Many of the

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demands people make as to their right to know are based on the fear that no one will tell them without those demands and their apprehension that the information being withheld is "bad news". Many of the meetings we attend do not involve information we can use. Rather, we go to make sure we "don't miss anything", particularly something negative about us. If reports are to bypass the chain of command (and they must), the people being bypassed must believe they could know if they wanted to and are only being bypassed to save their time and energy. Need to learn won't work without right to know as an accompanying policy.

Access systems: how to find out what you could know. Under a "need to learn, right to know" policy, a supervisor or personnel professional explains to a subordinate or client that "I'll report to you everything you need, as we negotiated it . . . and nothing else. If you want to know something else, ask me and I'll be responsive; however, I won't initiate." A legitimate response to such an explanation is the statement or question, "But how do I know what to ask you about if I don't know what you're not telling me?" That's a problem.

To eliminate that problem, the communication system has to include indices of what is knowable and must develop access systems for people who want to know. The costs of such retrieval systems are less than the costs of existing massive dissemination systems that ship uncontrolled information to "whom it may concern". The characteristics of indexing and access systems will change from one organization to another; however, their existence is crucial in all organizations.

Right not to tell. Any organization or individual has legitimate reasons for not wanting to disclose some kinds of information. The areas of non-disclosure and the reasons for non-disclosure should be negotiated. From the organization's point of view, there should be only a small number of such areas, or the basis for right to know vanishes; fortunately, there seldom are very

many things which need to be kept secret and the reasons for them being non-disclosed make sense to a reasonable person. Just as does the individual, the organization has a right to privacy on matters which are personal. That's only fair play. Rules for that fairness, however, need to be made explicit, for ethical as well as governmental reasons.

I have tried to review our traditional ways of thinking about information and communication, pointed out areas that do not serve our present needs and suggested alternative policies that will reduce the problems and troubles we now are experiencing.

As I discuss the situation with clients and colleagues, I find few who believe that we're not in trouble, not having problems. Our traditional control systems are expensive, aren't working and seem to get worse as we tinker with them. The American public distrusts our business organizations and list as three of the major reasons: they don't communicate with stockholders; they don't communicate with employees; and they don't tell the truth. The fact that government is even less trusted gives little solace to either kind of institution.

Some organizations have initiated "need to learn, right to know" policies; however, we have little hard data as yet on the improvements that occur. More are thinking in that way and beginning to experiment. As data accumulate, the proposed plan will need modification to cope with surprise. Meanwhile, we have to begin, for survival as well as bottom line reasons. □

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