

Communication in Alcan Packaging

Case duration (Min):

45-60

Organizational Behaviour (OB)

Communication and decision making

Worldwide

Case summary:

Alcan Packaging represents one of four Alcan groups. With 29,000 people employed across 130 sites, in 31 countries, there are communication challenges - discussed in this case.

Learning objectives:

Identify the main functions of communication.

Describe the communications process.

Contrast and evaluate different types and classes of communication.

Identify barriers to communication.

Case problem:

How can organizations transfer information both effectively and efficiently, whilst using communication to motivate and control employees?

Packaging & Containers

Company

Alcan Packaging

<http://www.alcan.com>

Alcan is a multinational, market-driven company and a global leader in aluminium and packaging. With 68,000 employees, including its joint ventures, in 61 countries and regions, Alcan's head office is situated in Montreal, Canada. Alcan is a public company with typical revenues exceeding \$20 billion. Composed of four business groups, (Bauxite and Alumina, Primary Metal, Engineered Products and Packaging),each group has a responsibility for value creation.

Alcan Packaging generates a turnover of 6.5 billion US dollars. With 29,000 people and 130 sites in 31 countries, Alcan Packaging is present in the 5 continents. Alcan is a leading, full-service packaging provider, with a worldwide presence in food flexible, pharmaceutical, beauty and tobacco packaging. Alcan Packaging's focus on leadership and value is centred on its skilled and talented employees around the globe. The compaany places a high value on skills, knowledge, teamwork and leadership, whilst ensuring a challenging, safe and rewarding work experience.

First, if you are taking a taught management course then consult with your tutor and ensure that the case has not been scheduled into a teaching class or tutorial. If it has not:

1. Play/ read the media associated with the case. You may need to access the Internet and enter a URL to locate any video clips.
2. Attempt the Case study questions.

Consider attempting the case study as a group exercise; you could form a study group with fellow students.

3. Check the suggested answers - remember these are suggestions only and there are often many possible answers.

Discuss questions and answers with other students.

4. If you feel your answer(s) were weak then consider reading the relevant suggested readings again (also see the case study suggested references).

Title/ Media type

URL/ Media description

Keeping the Message Consistent.

http://feedroom.businessweek.com/?fr_story=288fdf920fa203e80741922758b6bd671bae130c&rf=bm

Film

Alcan Packaging's CEO, Ilene Gordon, talks to Alaina Love about the importance of employees getting the right information and passing it along.

The Alcan Packaging CEO recognises employees must understand what the challenges are and how the company is performing. She believes it is important that everyone in the organization frequently receives the same messages about performance and challenges. One top-down driven but two way communication initiative is discussed. Every eight weeks she engages in a "top 100" conference phone call where challenges and performance are discussed and people have the opportunity to raise issues and questions. Participants must then cascade messages to their subordinates so that the whole organization is updated every 2 months. The CEO also emphasises the need for her leaders and managers to have a plan and then to visit, meet with and connect with people throughout the organization, in order to engage them and ensure they understand what needs to be done and why.

NOTES:

Case study questions...

Action	Pre/During/After class
1 FUNCTION(S) OF COMMUNICATION. Discuss the main function(s) of communication within Alcan Packaging.	During
2 COMMUNICATION PROCESS. Outline the communication process described by the CEO – is it formal or informal, upwards, downwards or lateral?	During
3 EVALUATE. Critically evaluate the top 100 phone call and resulting downward cascade as a form of organizational communication – what alternatives might you consider? How might you expect the top 100 to then cascade the message – would it be verbal or written? Discuss barriers to effective communication when evaluating alternatives.	During
4 ICT. How might ICT be used within Alcan Packaging to facilitate and enable communication?	During
6 CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION. With 29,000 people and 130 sites in 31 countries, there may be problems in cross-cultural communication – suggest likely problems and possible strategies to overcome them.	During
7 COMMUNICATIONS CLIMATE. Discuss the concept of the communications climate at Alcan Packaging.	During

Answers...

COMMUNICATION

the activity of conveying information

COMMUNICATION CLIMATE

the prevailing organizational atmosphere in which ideas and information are exchanged; an open climate promotes collaborative working, which is discouraged by a closed communication climate.

FORMAL COMMUNICATION.

Formal communication involves presenting information in a structured and consistent manner. Such information is normally created for a specific purpose, making it likely to be more comprehensive, accurate and relevant than information transmitted using information communication. An example of formal communication is an accounting statement. See Informal communication.

INFORMAL COMMUNICATION.

This describes information that is transmitted by informal means, such as casual conversations between members of staff. The information transmitted in this way is often less structured and less detailed than information transmitted by formal communication. In addition, the information may be inconsistent or may contain inaccuracies. Furthermore, the information may also include a subjective element, such as personal opinions. See Formal communication.

COMMUNICATION PROCESS

the transmission of information, and the exchange of meaning, between at least two people.

Question/ Answer

1 Function(s) of communication.

Discuss the main function(s) of communication within Alcan Packaging.

Communication serves four main functions: information transfer, control, motivation and emotional expression. At Alcan, the communication discussed by the CEO could serve all of these functions. Results may motivate as might a goal, challenge or problem. Communication of the plan and resource allocation can control the behaviour of others.

2 Communication process.

Outline the communication process described by the CEO – is it formal or informal, upwards, downwards or lateral?

The communication process is the transmission of information, and the exchange of meaning, between at least two people. There is a sender (initially the CEO in downward communication) a channel (formal - structured, enabled by telephony technology) and recipients. In some cases the sender will receive feedback on the message from the recipient.

3 Evaluate.

Critically evaluate the top 100 phone call and resulting downward cascade as a form of organizational communication – what alternatives might you consider? How might you expect the top 100 to then cascade the message – would it be verbal or written? Discuss barriers to effective communication when evaluating alternatives.

Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of written versus oral communication – WRITTEN (tangible, verifiable, a record, can be stored, well thought out, logical and clear BUT time consuming, lack of feedback); ORAL (fast, feedback, BUT potential for distortion)

Barriers include: FILTERING (sender manipulates message to make it more favourable); SELECTIVE PERCEPTION (receivers manipulate the message in the way they decode it, based on their own predispositions); INFORMATION OVERLOAD, EMOTIONS (receiver feelings at the time) and LANGUAGE (words mean different things to different people)

Alternatives that may be considered: the top 100 is effectively based upon the management chain and regular meetings. Also consider in-house publications, notice boards, conferences, videos, reports, team briefings and email etc as one-way methods or surveys, quality circles, suggestion schemes, appraisals etc for upward and two way.

4 ICT.

How might ICT be used within Alcan Packaging to facilitate and enable communication?

Consider email, instant and text messaging, networking software, web/ intranet, video conferencing.

6 Cross-cultural communication.

With 29,000 people and 130 sites in 31 countries, there may be problems in cross-cultural communication – suggest likely problems and possible strategies to overcome them.

SEMANTICS and CONNOTATIONS: words mean different things to different people. CULTURAL CONTEXT (see terms)

7 Communications climate.

Discuss the concept of the communications climate at Alcan Packaging.

" the prevailing organizational atmosphere in which ideas and information are exchanged; an open climate promotes collaborative working, which is discouraged by a closed communication climate." See supportive versus defensive, solution-oriented versus controlling, open and honest or deceptive, caring or not, egalitarian or superior...

UPWARD FEEDBACK

An upward review or appraisal system that involves subordinates' appraisal of managers.

HIGH CONTEXT CULTURE

Culture in which information is conveyed nonverbally, often relying on personal understandings of meanings.

LOW CONTEXT CULTURE

Culture in which information is conveyed predominantly by explicit expression.

Case study references

Cole, G A. and Kelly, P P. (2011) 'Management Theory and Practice', Ed. 7. Cengage EMEA.

Nelson, D L. and Quick, J C. (2009) 'ORGB', Ed. 1. South Western.