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Hospitality Managers' Communication Practices

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Abstract

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Keywords

managerial communication, managerial activities, organizational communication

Disciplines

Business and Corporate Communications | Hospitality Administration and Management

Comments

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Hospitality Managers' Communication Practices

Introduction

The nature of an organization's culture and its ability to respond appropriately to change is determined largely by the communication practices of its management team. It has been proposed that today's organizational leader is characterized not by specific personality traits or by the accomplishment of clearly defined tasks, but rather by the response he or she is able to elicit from others (Bass, 1981; Bass *et al*., 1987; Yukl, 1989). Leadership is dynamic and interactive, concerned with the business of shared values and visions, clear and motivational language, and appropriate communication strategies.

The hospitality managers who emerge as leaders in the 21st century are likely to be men and women who deal effectively with a multi-cultural workforce, who present their ideas clearly, and who are able to mobilize others around a common goal. Their competence and sensitivity will ultimately affect millions of employees, travelers, and customers worldwide.

There is little question that communication will play an increasingly vital role as hospitality managers meet a wide variety of human resources challenges in the decades ahead. In a competitive marketplace, effective service is often synonymous

with effective communication; managers must not only make their messages clear, they must also develop and maintain positive relationships with both guests and employees. In a very real sense, effective management is effective communication; the business of leading and managing is accomplished largely through communication activities. A manager's communication skills, then, may well be his or her most potent tools for improving both individual and organizational performance.

In his 1988 review, Stegman cited a variety of sources documenting the importance of communication skills in business; yet, there is little question that the specific communication practices of hospitality managers remain largely unexplored. Understanding the nature and requirements of managerial communication in an increasingly turbulent, uncertain, and multi-national environment becomes essential both for the educators and practitioners alike.

The purpose of this study was to learn more about hospitality managers' communication activities. Two groups were surveyed; middle managers (those whose titles were department or division manager) and general managers (those whose job title was general manager). Although a variety of questions was asked of respondents, the most significant pertained to (1) the frequency and perceived difficulty of communication among individuals in various organizational roles, (2) the frequency

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with which managers engaged in specific types of communication activities, and (3) the degree of skill they perceived other hospitality managers had with regard to each of these practices. The study was designed to provide information that would allow tentative comparisons to be made between the middle and general manager groups.

First, a summary of relevant background information is provided. Next, a profile of the two management populations is drawn. Results of the study are then examined, first in terms of organizational communication relationships and then in terms of communication activities. Middle and general manager groups are each discussed, after which the two populations are compared. Finally, findings are highlighted as they provide insights into daily managerial communication activities and directions for future research.

Background

Numerous studies throughout the past decades have focused on the traits or characteristics of managers and leaders (Stogdill, 1974; Bass, 1981; Lord *et al*., 1986; Carnevale *et al*., 1988). Related literature examines the nature of managerial work and seeks to identify what effective managers actually do on the job (Katz, 1952; Kotter, 1982; Hannan, 1978; Gabarro, 1985; Isenberg, 1984; Kanter. 1983; Horne and Lupton, 1965). In

the vast majority of cases, this body of research confirms that mangers in general spend a good share of their time communicating, and that effective managers must communicate well.

In his 1986 review of the research to date, Hales identified nine recurring managerial tasks. Of these, seven are predominantly communication activities: leading, serving as a liaison, disseminating information, allocating resources, maintaining work flow, negotiating, controlling and directing subordinates (p. 95).

Emphasizing the need for effective communication in a slightly different manner, Carnevale and his colleagues explain that technological change and heightened competition drive what they call the 'upskilling' of work in America (1988, p. 23). More than ever before, managers must have strong interpersonal and oral communication skills.

Parallel to this research, there is a smaller but growing number of studies that have explored the characteristics (Arnaldo, 1981; Mullins and Davies, 1991; Seymour. 1985; Swanljung, 1981; Worsfold, 1989) and tasks (Ferguson and Berger, 1984; Ley, 1978; Hales and Nightingale, 1986; Dann, 1990; Umbreit and Eder, 1987) of hospitality managers. This research has also emphasized the importance of effective human relations skills to successful management practice. The case has

repeatedly been made that because of the nature of service industries and the wide range of demands placed on their workers, hospitality managers' communication competence is particularly important. Service employees, as Worsfold (1989) repeats, require strong 'people skills' (p. 58). In many cases, social interactions are part of the 'product' itself.

The individuals who lead their organizations through such 21st century realities as changing values, internationalization, increased diversification, and rapid technological advance must be excellent communicators. These transformational leaders (Bass, 1991) must accurately gather organizational information, develop commitment and trust from their colleagues, and facilitate organizational learning and development. In all of these tasks, communication is the key.

Effective communication prevents costly mistakes that may result in lower productivity. Information that is incorrect, or that arrives too late, or that is lost entirely as it passes through the organization's hierarchy, adversely affects the bottom line. What may be less obvious is the consequence ineffective communication has for human resources management and interpersonal relationships within the organization.

The multi-national workforce, combined with increasing international travel, requires that successful managers develop skills to deal effectively with those whose backgrounds and

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assumptions are unlike their own. Within the organizational

network, managers serve as links, communicating the perceptions

of their workgroups to others whose interests, role, needs, and

attitudes may be dissimilar. Poor communication, particularly in

this environment, results in negative attitudes and low morale,

high turnover and absenteeism, and increased stress (Thomas,

1991). Clearly, in service-oriented organizations already

plagued by high turnover and characterized by collaboration,

problem-solving, and uncertainty, effective managerial

communication must be a high priority.

Yet, beyond broad generalizations, relatively little is

known about the precise ways in which hospitality managers

communicate on the job or the differences in communication

activities between middle and general managers in the industry.

Those who seek positions in hospitality management, and

particularly those who aspire to move into top-level management

positions, may find it useful to know more about the specific

communication challenges hospitality industries pose. Business

educators in general, and hospitality educators in particular,

need guidelines from which to align their curricula with the

realities of the work environment and the communication tasks

that managers perform.

In an effort to address some of these needs, this study

explores, from the perspectives of both middle and general

managers, the nature of interactions among various organizational groups as well as the frequency and perceived difficulty of various managerial communication activities. This investigation follows in the tradition outlined by Hales (1986), who distinguished research focused on answering the questions: (1) With whom do managers work? and (2) What do managers do? Research methods are explained and a general description of the two populations is provided.

Method

This study relied on survey research, supplemented by telephone interviews. It began with five focus groups consisting of from four to seven practicing hospitality managers. These groups discussed their observations and personal experiences regarding managerial communication practices and challenges. Since previous research (Lewis and Reinsch, 1988) suggests that practitioner and academic understandings and definitions of communication-related variables may vary, the focus groups provide a check on research topics and direction. Videotapes and audiotapes were made of the focus group sessions, which were transcribed and used to direct the development of the final questionnaire.

The researcher and two assistants conducted a content analysis of the transcriptions of all focus group sessions to

determine recurring themes. Information was coded on the basis
of four categories that emerged from the data and which have
been frequently noted in previous communication research: (1)
the situation or context in which the communication took place,
(2) the receiver's role or position, (3) the specific type of
communication activity involved, and (4) the purpose of the
communication, Although content analysis involves a degree of
subjective interpretation, a very high level of rater agreement
(92%) increased the confidence level for accepting the following
results.

The analysis of the coded transcripts indicated that two of
the above variables appeared with much greater frequency and
were perceived by participants to have more influence in
determining the nature of communication encounters than the
others; the participants' role relationship and the type of
communication activity involved. I3oth were mentioned as
important factors in almost all communication situations
described by group members. The content analysis of focus group
discussions further revealed four distinct organizational roles
and eight communication activities.

An examination of the hospitality literature revealed the
same four role categories that emerged from the focus groups:
guests, hourly employees, middle managers, and the general
manager. Consequently, two survey questions were designed to

obtain information regarding the interactions among individuals occupying these organizational roles. In each case, the frequency and the degree of perceived difficulty in communicating are examined.

The final survey questions pertain to managerial communization activities. An extensive literature review of articles addressing the communication needs of managers (DiSalvo, 1976, 1980; Curtis *et al*., 1989; DiSalvo and Larson, 1987; Swenson, 1980; Stine and Skarzenski, 1979; Harris and Thomlison, 1983; Marshall and Cacioppe, 1986; Munter, 1983), coupled with an examination of the topics most frequently discussed in fourteen management communication textbooks, revealed a list of fifteen common management communication activities. Activities related specifically to the job search process were eliminated. In light of the content analysis performed on both the focus group transcriptions and the available literature, these fifteen topics were restructured into ten distinct management activities. Eight of these activities were generated by both the focus group transcripts and the literature searches. The remaining two (persuading and leading meetings), although appearing infrequently in the focus group transcripts, were included because they appeared with a high degree of frequency (in almost 90% of the cases) in the business communication texts surveyed. The ten topics include:

(1) writing business memos;

(2) writing business letters;

(3) writing management reports;

(4) giving oral presentations;

(5) managing interpersonal conflict;

(6) listening;

(7) persuading;

(8) leading meetings;

(9) conducting performance appeals;

(10) giving feedback

A questionnaire was developed that requested information regarding the frequency with which managers found themselves engaged in each of these activities as well as the extent to which they perceived each as problematic or difficult for other hospitality managers generally. Respondents were asked to rate the ten activities on six-point Likert scales for each dimension.

Respondent profiles were also gathered to obtain a clear image of each sample. Information pertaining to the size of the property, the number of employees supervised, and length of time both in the industry and in the particular position was also recorded.

Alumni lists were generated by the Alumni Office at the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University. Two populations of hospitality managers were identified, those in middle management and general managers. The pool of hospitality

managers was limited to those holding supervisory positions in hotels, clubs, and resorts. Middle managers were defined as department or division heads; a general manager was identified as the top executive at a particular property holding the title of general manager. Only managers working in United States properties were targeted.

All individuals who fit the required profile were surveyed. As in any non-probability sampling method, statistics from the sample never duplicate exactly the characteristics of the entire population. Given the nature of this study, however, it is reasonable to assume that Cornell School of Hotel Administration alumni represent other industry managers adequately enough to provide useful information and to allow tentative generalizations to be made. The limitations of sampling methods are discussed more fully in a later section.

One hundred and thirty-three questionnaires were sent to alumni identified as general managers, one hundred and ninety-seven questionnaires were sent to middle managers. After two mailings, ninety-one general managers and one hundred and fifty-three middle managers responded. Response rates were 68% and 78% respectively. The sample size and response rate were large enough to allow generalizations to be made to the larger population with a reasonable degree of precision and accuracy.

Results

The results of this study are discussed as they provide (I) information regarding managers' interactions in various organizational relationships and (2) insight into managers' perceptions of their specific communication activities. Before presenting these findings, however, more specific demographic information is provided for each of the two management groups.

Profile of management population

There were significant demographic differences between the middle and general manager populations. While 24% of the middle managers were women, women represented only 4% of the general management group. The ages of the two populations were also different. While 91% of the middle managers were under thirty-five, only 23% of the general managers fell into this age range. Only 2% of the middle managers were over forty-five, yet 65% of the general managers were over forty-five. While no middle managers were over fifty-five, 8% of the general managers were over sixty-five.

As might be expected, general managers had also worked in the industry far longer than middle managers. While over 70% of the middle managers had worked in the industry for less than ten years, the same was true for only 10% of the general managers.

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Twenty-eight percent of the middle managers had worked in the industry more than ten years, but none had worked over twenty years. This is in comparison to the general managers, where 91% had worked in the industry for over ten years and 38% had over twenty years of hospitality experience.

Generally, middle managers worked in larger properties than did the general managers. In the middle manager population, only 9.1% of the respondents worked in properties with fewer than 200 rooms, and 22% worked in properties with over 1000 rooms. When general managers were asked for information regarding the size of their properties, 14% indicated that there were fewer than 200 rooms in their hotel, while only 6% managed properties with over 1000 rooms. Thirty-eight percent of the middle managers worked in properties with 200-450 rooms; over 60% of the general managers ran hotels with 200-450 rooms.

Spearman rank correlations were run for each of the above variable—gender, age, time in the industry, and size of property-and responses to the survey questions in each of the two general sections below, organizational communication relationships and communication activities. Correlations at a significance of 0.05 or greater are discussed in a following section.

Organizational communication relationships

Much research has focused on communication networks and the nature of each relationship as individuals communicate up, down, and horizontally within the organization (Klauss and Rass, 1982; Rogers and Agarwala-Rogers, 1976; Monge *et al.*, 1976; Richards, 1981; Larkin, 1980). Special attention, in fact, has been paid to 'managers in the middle' who serve as links between various organizational levels. Yet another relationship, characteristic of service industries, is the interaction between managers and guests. As mentioned earlier, there has also been a growing interest in the activities of general managers as well, particularly with regard to their influence on organizational members during the process of development and change (Daniel, 1985; Nicholas, 1983).

Two broad questions were asked of respondents to determine (1) the frequency and (2) the perceived difficulty of their interactions in various organizational relationships. Respondents provided their ratings on six-point Likert scales.

Frequency of communication

Responses to the question, 'How frequently do you believe each group communicates with one another?' were made on 6-point Likert scales. Reducing the number of categories to: infrequently (low: ratings of 1and 2), sometimes (medium:

ratings of 3 and 4), and frequently (high: ratings of 5 and 6),
makes it clear that general and middle managers perceive very
different levels of communication at their properties. When
asked about communication between middle and general managers,
93% of the general managers rated their communication with
middle managers as high, while only 62% of the middle managers
said that they 'frequently' communicated with their general
managers.

As might be expected, over 97% of the middle managers said
their communication with hourly employees was high. By
comparison, 52% of the general managers indicated that they
communicated 'frequently' with hourly employees, although middle
managers had a different perspective of the general
manager/hourly employee interaction. Only 19% of the middle
managers indicated that communication between general managers
and hourly employees was high, and 45% rated the frequency as 1
or 2.

When communication with guests was examined, almost 75% of
the general managers said they communicate 'frequently' with
guests; this is compared with 46% of the middle managers who
assigned this rating. In fact, over 20% of the middle managers
indicated that middle manager communication with guests was low,
while less than 6% of the general managers said that general
managers communicated with guests infrequently.

As indicated on Table 1, middle managers' views of the general managers' communication did not always coincide with the general managers' responses. General managers appear to perceive more frequent communication between various groups than do middle managers. For instance, general managers perceive that middle managers communicate with both hourly employees and guests more frequently than do the middle managers themselves.

Finally, middle managers appear to have a great deal of interaction with one another. Over 94% of the middle managers indicated that they communicated 'frequently' with their peers, and none of the respondents in this group rated their communication with other middle managers as infrequent.

Difficulty of communication

Respondents were also asked to indicate the degree of perceived difficulty with regard to eight communication relationships (Table 2). Notice that in this case the direction of the communication is taken into account in each pair. For convenience, we might again discuss ratings in three categories: 1 and 2 indicate little difficulty communicating, 3 and 4 indicate moderate difficulty communicating, and 5 and 6 indicate significant difficulty communicating.

When means were examined, both middle and general managers identified hourly employee to middle manager communication as

the most troublesome, Approximately 40% of the middle managers and just over 30% of the general managers rated this upward communication as 'very difficult'. However, while the middle managers' mean for hourly employee to middle manager communication was 4.92, general managers perceived significantly less difficulty—their mean for this relationship was 3.75.

The internal communications posing the fewest problems, both sets agreed, were between colleagues. Over 50% of middle managers and 42% of general managers indicated that colleagues had 'little difficulty' communicating with one another. This finding supports previous research of organizational communication and organizational networks in general (Frank, 1985).

While this agreement is striking, there were important differences perceived by the two groups with regard to communication from middle managers to hourly employees, as well as communication between the middle and general manager groups. While the mean for middle managers was 3.97 (six represents the greatest degree of difficulty communicating) on the middle manager to hourly employee relationship, the mean for general managers answering the same question was 2.97, a full point lower. While only 6% of the middle managers felt that they had 'little difficulty' communicating down to hourly employees, almost 25% of the general managers rated the difficulty of the

middle manager to hourly employee communication relationship as 1 or 2.

Another relationship that was perceived differently by the two groups was upward communication from middle managers to the general manager. The middle manager mean for this question was one of the highest, 4.46. General managers perceived that middle managers had much less difficulty communicating with them; their mean was 3.01. This was the greatest difference between middle and general managers' ratings in any category. The 3.01 indicated that general managers perceived that middle managers had just slightly more trouble communicating upward to them than they did communicating downward to the middle managers.

Middle managers' again rated their communication with another group—guests—as more difficult (3.12 mean) than did the general managers (2.54 mean). While only 8% of the general managers believed that communication between middle managers and guests was 'very difficult', 19% of the middle managers felt that these interactions were very difficult for them. In comparison, middle managers perceive that their general managers have little difficulty (mean 1.64) communicating with guests-a difference of 1.48. General managers saw much less difference between the difficulty they and their middle managers had communicating with guests.

It appears that general managers perceived not only more frequent but also less problematic communication among various groups throughout their organizations than did the middle managers. The main exception to this is when general managers' self-perceptions are compared to the perceptions of middle managers with regard to the difficulty general managers have communicating with middle managers and with guests. In both of these cases, general managers perceived more difficulty communicating than did the middle managers.

After responding to questions pertaining to the various relationships within the organizational hierarchy, middle and general managers were asked to share their perceptions regarding specific communication activities—what they 'do' on the job.

Managers' communication activities

Managers were given a list of ten communication activities and asked to indicate, on six-point scales, the frequency with which they engage in each activity. They were then given the same list and asked how skilled they felt their peers are in each of the categories. Previous research indicates that phrasing the question in this manner is more likely to elicit a reliable response than if managers were asked to rate the degree of personal difficulty they experience.

Middle managers

Table 3 provides a list of the ten communication activities according to middle managers' ranking of the frequency with which they engage in each activity. Persuading, writing business letters, and writing reports were the top-ranked activities, followed by managing conflict, listening, and giving feedback. Making oral presentations, leading discussions, writing memos, and giving performance appraisals were the activities middle managers performed least frequently.

When responses to the second question regarding perceived skill level are examined, we find that scores were not extreme, with means ranging from 2.64 to 3.52. Middle managers perceive that they are most skilled at managing conflict, persuading others, and performing appraisals. They believe middle managers are least skilled in listening, giving constructive feedback, and writing reports.

The difference scores for each activity, a comparison between the frequency a particular activity is performed and perceived skill level, are also interesting. These scores ranged from 0.06 to 1.93. In every instance, frequency means were higher than perceived skill level means. The most interesting findings are those that identified activities managers perform regularly and which are perceived as particularly problematic. Note that difference scores for writing business letters (1.93)

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and reports (1.90) and listening (1.91) are particularly high,
followed by persuading (1.72) and giving feedback (1.67).

Spearman rank correlations among selected variables were
also examined. Of particular interest are correlations above
0.05 level of confidence $(r = 0.2)$. As might be expected, a high
correlation was found between perceived skill levels in memo and
letter writing $(r = 0.718)$, and letter and report writing $(r = 0.699)$. The correlation between managing conflict and performing
appraisals was also high $(r = 0.643)$. In addition, the number of
rooms in the manager's property and the frequency of writing
memos correlated at $r = 0.439$. The above suggests that managers
make relatively little distinction between the skills needed to
write letters and those required to write memos, and that there
may be some fundamental requirements—such as confrontation—
common to both managing conflict and performing appraisals.

General managers

Similar to the middle managers. Table 4 indicates the
general managers' rating of the ten communication activities
according to the frequency with which each is performed on the
job. The top-rated activity, with a mean score of 5.76 on a 6.0
scale, was listening. No one rated his or her listening as
infrequent, and close to 75% of the general managers gave

listening the highest possible rating. General managers also indicated that they spent a great deal of time giving feedback (4.87) and persuading (4.85). Close behind were managing conflict (4.69) and writing business letters (4.63). General managers were least likely to write reports (3.99), perform appraisals (3.75), and make oral presentations (3.17).

General managers say they find it relatively easy to manage conflict, lead discussions, and persuade others. Activities found to be slightly more difficult include writing memos and letters, and listening effectively. The activities perceived as most troublesome were writing reports and making oral presentations, two tasks that general managers indicated they performed less frequently as well. Presentational speaking, in fact, was given the lowest rating both in terms of frequency performed (3.12) and difficulty (2.64). General managers appeared to discriminate among various tasks slightly more than middle managers, with means ranging from 2.64 to 3.79.

When difference scores are examined, numbers range from 0.30 to 2.41. Table 4 presents the difference scores between the frequency and difficulty of each communication activity. The greatest difference score, 2.41, was related to listening. Other activities with difference scores above a 1.0 were giving feedback (1.58), writing business letters (1.47) and reports (1.10), and persuading (1.23).

As might be predicted, there were once again high correlations among the perceived skill levels in several of the communication activities, particularly if writing (correlation between perceived skill level of writing memos and letters was $r = 0.706$) and oral skills (correlation between perceived skill level of managing conflict and giving feedback was $r = 0.658$) are examined separately. These correlations were very similar to those found in the middle management group. The highest correlation between a communication activity and a demographic variable, $r = 0.401$, was between the number of rooms in the respondent's property and the frequency of providing feedback.

A comparison of middle and general mangers' activities

Greater differences occurred between the two management populations with regard to the frequency with which they performed various communication activities on the job than with regard to their perceptions of the difficulty they had practicing a particular skill. In fact, as noted, the range of mean scores for skill level was smaller in both populations than the frequency of communication range. The difference between middle and general managers' mean ratings for the frequency questions ranged from 0.03 to 1.21 while the greatest difference for the perceived skill level of any activity was 0.74. An examination of the frequency with which middle and general

managers perform various activities reveals the greatest
differences in making oral presentations (- 1.12), writing
reports (-0.79), and listening (1.21).

While middle managers make presentations and write reports
more often than general managers, the general managers indicate
that they listen more than department and division managers. In
fact, over 99% of the general managers rated listening as either
5 or 6 on a 6-point scale. Thirty percent of the middle managers
'very frequently' (ratings of 5 or 6) give oral presentations,
while the same is true of less than 20% of the general managers.
Over 60% of the middle managers also indicated that they very
frequently write reports, while only 25% of the general managers
perform this type of activity very frequently.

Comparisons between middle and general managers with regard
to perceived difficulty of the various communication activities
reveals less striking results. Difference scores between mean
ratings of middle and general managers with regard to perceived
skill level were all under 0.50, with the exception of listening
at 0.71 and leading discussions at 0.74. Middle managers
perceived themselves as considerably less skilled listeners than
did the general manager group. Although means for the frequency
of leading meetings were identical in both groups, general
managers perceived themselves to be more skilled at this
activity than did the middle managers.

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These results can now be considered in light of what we
already know about hospitality management and managerial
communication in organizations.

Discussion

Before the implications of this study are addressed, its
potential limitations should be acknowledged. This research
relied on reports from industry managers who were graduates of
one hospitality management school. Although all members of this
group were surveyed, non-probability sampling methods do not
permit objective measurement of sampling variability and are
therefore subject to greater error than probability sampling
methods. The degree to which results of this study can be
generalized to other hospitality managers depends upon how
similar Cornell alumni are to other hospitality management
groups.

Given the nature and purposes of this study, potential
homogeneity of the sample was not perceived to be a significant
concern. There is no reason to suspect a large variance between
this sample and the larger population of hospitality managers
with regard to factors that would influence the outcomes of the
study. Cornell alumni can be assumed to confront, generally, the
same communication situations and to require the same
communication strategies as other practicing hospitality

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managers. This group is not unique in any way that would influence their responses to survey questions regarding communication relationships and activities. Conclusions drawn from this data, of course, must be considered preliminary and serve to direct our attention to topics and questions requiring further consideration. Some of the most useful conclusions are presented below.

As mentioned, when middle and general manager populations were analyzed, there were surprisingly few significant correlations between any of the findings and other variables of the work setting or the demographics of the participants themselves. Middle managers working in larger properties may write more memos than those in smaller organizations; the amount of feedback general managers provide may also vary according to property size. Otherwise, participant responses were not correlated with gender, age, time in the industry, or length of time in the job. In spite of this fact, there are several conclusions that can be drawn from the demographic information itself.

Demographics indicate that those who reach general management positions do so after many years in the industry. Recall that 91% of the general managers had been working in the hospitality industry for more than ten years, and of that group 38% had been working for twenty years or more. It follows that

the general managers are also an older population than the middle manager group. This information may be important to new hospitality managers aspiring to run their own operations.

Previous studies on formal organizational communication networks have described the difficulties involved in upward, downward, and horizontal communication. Results from this study of organizational communication relationships draws our attention to some interesting points. As noted earlier, general managers perceive more frequent vertical communication between all groups than do middle managers. Contrasts between middle and general managers' perceptions of the degree of their own interactions are striking. General managers also believe that they communicate with both hourly employees and with guests far more frequently than middle managers suspect.

General managers perceive less difficulty in most organizational communication relationships than do middle managers. Several of these differences were statistically significant, including perceptions of the middle manager-hourly employee interaction by the two groups. The greatest discrepancy, however, was between general managers' perceptions of the degree of difficulty middle managers had communicating with them and the middle managers' view of this relationship.

When we examine the activities managers say they spend most time performing, listening was ranked first by general managers

while middle managers placed it fifth. There was a difference of 1.21 between the means of general and middle manager groups. In addition, middle managers perceived listening as the activity in which their peers were least competent.

An interesting comparison can be made between sending and receiving skills with regard to the two management groups. If we take the highest difference scores between middle and general managers with regard to the activities they report performing, the following pattern emerges:

	MM	GM	Diff
Listening	4.55	5.76	1.21
Presentations	4.29	3.17	−1.12
Reports	4.78	3.99	−0.79

Middle managers appear to present information, in both oral and written forms, more often than the general manager group. It appears that this group generates or collects and then presents or reports information to other organizational members. Middle managers also perform the traditional supervisory functions of controlling, delegating, organizing, and the like. These tasks require predominantly sender skills.

While middle managers operate in a sender or traditional 'communicator' role, the tasks associated with upper-level management appear to require more listening. General managers may be more involved with synthesizing, strategic planning, and decision-making; thereby, greater emphasis is placed on

receiving the processing information. Even when not in a decision-making mode, however, general managers appear to seek information. This emphasis on listening is consistent with the findings of Ferguson and Berger (1984), who observed general managers and reported that they typically asked a lot of questions even in casual conversations and, although they attempted to influence others, they often did so indirectly.

Yet, general managers believe they are only moderately skilled in an activity that they are engaged in continuously. It would appear that as individuals move into upper level management, their reliance on effective listening increases. This hypothesis is consistent with earlier work (Ried, 1983) on this subject. The importance of listening in organizations has been well-documented (Hunt and Cusella, 1983; Wolvin and Coakley, 1991); the implications of this need, both in middle- and upper-level management, are particularly relevant for service industries.

Middle managers may not spend as much time listening as the general managers simply because of the nature of the hospitality environment. It is likely that middle managers find themselves in even more of a reactive mode; their job has been described as fragmented and largely unplanned. A special report on career burnout indicated that hospitality managers perform approximately 97 different tasks in their supervisory role while

managers of other industries confront less than half that number

(Lang, 1991). Under such circumstances, middle managers appear

to recognize that their colleagues are generally poor listeners-

perhaps because a variety of 'sender tasks' demand the immediate

attention of this group, such as persuading and managing

conflict.

Middle managers indicated that they made oral presentations

more frequently than the general managers. Although

presentations were not one of the most frequently performed

activities for either management populations, making oral

presentations was perceived to be one of the more difficult

tasks by both groups. Whether it is performed relatively

infrequently because it is perceived as difficult is unclear;

certainly, both groups may create or avoid opportunities to make

presentations according to their degree of comfort with this

type of communication activity.

In general, middle managers appear to operate in a largely

verbal environment. This conclusion is consistent with earlier

research on managerial communication (Kaplan, 1984; Lewis and

Reinsch, 1988; Rhodes, 1985; Sypher *et al.*, 1989). Although they

frequently write letters and reports, hospitality managers send

relatively few memos. The assumption might be made that this is

because most of the information that needs to be communicated to

subordinates or colleagues is done so verbally in face-to-face interactions.

Both groups, in fact, indicated that they spent more time writing business letters than either reports or memos. The perceived difficulty in writing internal memos, however, was much less than the difficulty perceived in writing letters and reports. Correlations among individual communication activities with regard to perceived difficulty, however, indicate that practitioners tend to perceive all writing tasks as similar in their level of difficulty and may not discriminate to the extent that communication educators do among the skills required for writing memos, letters, and reports. Written communication, in general, was perceived as more problematic than performing such activities as persuading orally and managing conflict, which were viewed among the least troublesome, although most frequent, activities by both groups.

Future Research

The need for additional research is evident. While this study surveyed a sizeable population, all respondents were graduates of the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University. Other studies need to be conducted with more heterogeneous populations, including those managers who have not

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attended academic programs and those working in properties outside of the United States.

One of the most important factors for the effective communication-and effective management practice-is the accuracy of individuals' perceptions regarding their own and others' communication behaviors. Only when perceptions are accurate, and shared, can appropriate steps be taken to improve communication competence (Snyder, 1974; Schnake *et al.*, 1990). Results of this study indicate that major discrepancies exist between the perceptions of middle and general managers with regard to a wide range of communication activities (also see Marshall and Cacioppe, 1986; Sypher and Zorn. 1986).

Further studies might address the adequacy of feedback channels throughout hospitality organizations, particularly those that provide general managers with information regarding the challenges and problems middle managers confront. In addition, research related to communication training programs might focus on the best methods of providing accurate and detailed feedback to participants regarding their own communication behavior so that their self-monitoring skills are further developed.

This study also explored hospitality managers communication activities. As current communication practices are identified, an important question becomes: What communication needs lie

ahead as managers look to the 21st century? It would seem that the importance of effective listening, for one, would increase as middle managers find themselves communicating with an increasingly diverse workforce and striving to provide quality service to guests from all parts of the world. It is likely that patterns of oral and written communication may change, too, with increased technology. Computer-generated messages and electronic mail may replace traditional forms of memos and reports.

The lack of women in general management positions is striking. The hospitality literature, and literature on women in management generally, points to a high attrition rate and greater difficulties moving up the career ladder (DeLuca, 1988; Gattiker and Larwood, 1990; Gregg and Johnson, 1990). Even though greater numbers of women are being admitted into academic hospitality management programs, they continue to be underrepresented in the workplace, particularly in upper management levels. This study confirms the findings of previous research and, although gender was not a key concern of this project, the data suggests that future studies might profitably examine women's communication activities and their relationship to retention and upward mobility in the industry.

The differences between the communication needs of middle- and upper-level managers also deserves further exploration. This study suggests that these two groups may have different

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communication abilities and requirements. Do effective middle managers automatically make effective general managers, or are there communication competencies that are required of general managers that must be developed before middle managers can successfully assume upper-level leadership positions?

As we look more closely at those individuals who manage symbols, who inspire others toward a shared vision, and who perform the daily work of the organization, we are finding that communication competence distinguishes successful hospitality managers and leaders. This is not only an interesting discovery but an essential one, particularly as organizations undergo constant change and operate in ever-more turbulent, multi-cultural environments. Efforts directed toward learning more about management communication, and using that information to encourage more effective organizational practices, can help move the hospitality industry more smoothly into a promising but still uncertain future.

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Table 1. A comparison of middle and general managers' perceptions of communication frequency

(Percentages)	Middle manager			General Manager		
	Inf	Sometimes	V. freq	Inf	Sometimes	V. freq
a. Hr emp and MM	—	2.7	97.3	—	0.7	99.3
b. Hr emp and GM	44.9	26.2	18.7	24.3	23.6	52.1
c. MM and MM	—	5.7	94.3	—	8.2	91.8
d. MM and guest	22.6	31.3	46.1	11.2	32.1	56.7
e. GM and guest	7.8	55.7	36.5	5.7	20.1	74.2
f. MM and GM	14.3	23.5	62.2	—	6.6	93.4

Table 2. A comparison of middle and general managers'
perceptions of communication difficulty

(Mean scores)	Middle manager	SD	General manager	SD	Diff
a. Employee to MM	4.92	0.83	3.75	0.95	1.17
b. MM to employee	3.97	1.40	2.97	1.30	1.00
c. Colleague to colleague	2.77	1.07	2.52	1.16	0.25
d. Employee to guest	3.33	1.62	3.27	1.21	0.06
e. MM to guest	3.12	1.53	2.54	0.87	0.58
f. GM to guest	1.64	1.14	2.06	1.17	− 0.42
g. MM to GM	4.46	1.04	3.01	0.97	1.41
h. GM to MM	2.31	0.90	2.93	1.02	− 0.62

Table 3. Middle managers' communication activities (mean scores and standard deviations)

Activity	Frequency	SD	Skill level	SD	(Difference)
Persuading	5.12	0.54	3.40	0.93	1.72
Business letters	4.89	1.11	2.96	0.99	1.93
Writing reports	4.78	0.84	2.88	0.73	1.90
Managing conflict	4.75	1.07	3.52	0.90	1.23
Listening	4.55	0.63	2.64	0.72	1.91
Giving feedback	4.54	1.13	2.87	1.02	1.67
Presentations	3.81	0.66	2.94	1.07	1.31
Leading discussion	4.00	0.95	3.00	0.86	1.00
Writing memos	3.72	0.83	3.17	0.91	0.56
Appraisals	3.42	1.31	3.36	1.26	0.06

Table 4. General managers' communication activities (mean scores and standard deviations)

Activity	Frequency	SD	Skill level	SD	(Difference)
Listening	5.76	0.47	3.35	1.06	2.41
Giving feedback	4.87	1.07	3.29	1.11	1.58
Persuading	4.85	0.96	3.62	1.00	1.23
Managing conflict	4.69	1.15	3.78	0.89	0.86
Business letters	4.63	1.05	3.14	1.10	1.47
Memos	4.17	1.29	3.39	0.93	0.78
Leading meetings	4.03	1.15	3.74	1.02	0.30
Writing reports	3.99	0.86	2.89	0.94	1.10
Appraisals	3.75	1.29	3.09	1.12	0.66
Presentations	3.17	0.91	2.69	0.69	0.48

Table 5. Comparisons between general and middle managers' communication activities

Activity	Frequency			Skill level		
	GM	MM	(Diff)	GM	MM	(Diff)
Listening	5.76	4.55	1.21	3.35	2.64	0.71
Feedback	4.87	4.54	0.33	3.29	2.87	0.42
Persuading	4.85	5.12	−0.27	3.62	3.46	0.16
Mgmt conflict	4.69	4.75	−0.06	3.78	3.52	0.26
Bs letters	4.61	4.89	−0.28	3.14	2.96	0.18
Memos	4.16	3.72	0.44	3.39	3.17	0.22
Lead discussion	4.03	4.00	0.03	3.74	3.00	0.74
Reports	3.99	4.78	−0.79	2.89	2.88	0.01
Appraisals	3.75	3.42	0.33	3.09	3.36	−0.27
Presentations	3.17	4.29	−1.12	2.69	2.94	−0.25