

Report No. VTRC 87-R11	Report Date April 1987	No. Pages 14	Type Report: Executive Summary Period Covered:	Project No. : Contract No.:
Title and Subtitle Executive Summary: Improving Communications within the Virginia Department of Transportation			Key Words Internal Communications Focus Groups Employee Relations	
Author(s) C. W. Lynn				
Performing Organization Name and Address Virginia Transportation Research Council Box 3817, University Station Charlottesville, Virginia 22903-0817				
Sponsoring Agencies' Names and Addresses Va. Dept. of Transportation University of Virginia 1221 E. Broad Street Charlottesville Richmond, Virginia 23219 Virginia 22903				
Supplementary Notes				
Abstract As part of the efforts of an employee task force appointed to seek ways of improving communications within the Virginia Department of Transportation, nine focus-group meetings were held for Department employees. Participants were separated into the following groups: division administrators, district engineers, assistant division administrators, resident engineers, central office section heads, district section engineers, area superintendents, central office employees, and field employees. These focus groups met for three to four hours away from Department facilities with specially-selected group leaders, following a pre-arranged discussion guide. Owing to demand on their time, directors were interviewed on a one-to-one basis rather than in a group setting. This document summarizes the results of both the focus-group meetings and the director interviews. The full report has been published separately.				

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS WITHIN THE
VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

A report to

Assistant Commissioner
Albert W. Coates, Jr. and the Employee
Communications Task Force

by

Cheryl W. Lynn
Research Scientist

(The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the sponsoring agencies.)

Virginia Transportation Research Council
(A Cooperative Organization Sponsored Jointly by the Virginia Department of Transportation and the University of Virginia)

Charlottesville, Virginia

April 1987
VTRC 87-R11

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS WITHIN THE
VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

by

Cheryl W. Lynn
Research Scientist

BACKGROUND

This summary report presents highlights of a study conducted by the Virginia Transportation Research Council as part of a larger effort by the Employee Communications Task Force. The task force was created in February 1986 and was empowered to "identify the Department's existing procedures and techniques for employee communications, assess their effectiveness, suggest ways in which they can be strengthened and better coordinated, and recommend other opportunities for improvement." One part of that effort, conducted during the six weeks prior to the deadline for the task force's report, involved polling Department personnel at all levels to determine their concerns with regard to departmental communications. The approach taken was twofold. First, focus-group sessions were conducted for nine levels of employees. These groups were: (1) division administrators; (2) assistant division administrators; (3) district engineers; (4) district section engineers; (5) central office section heads; (6) resident engineers; (7) area superintendents/inspectors; (8) central office employees; and (9) field employees (including equipment operators, technicians, and clerical personnel). Each group consisted of six to ten employees and met for three to four hours at a location removed from the Department's offices. Each group met with one of three facilitators, all of whom were well versed in group techniques, and each group followed the same discussion guide to ensure comparability among groups. The second approach utilized one-on-one interviews with Department directors who, because of demands on their time, could not devote several hours to a focus group. Similar topics were discussed in both focus groups and director interviews. It should be noted that since the directors did not have the benefit of each other's thinking and did not operate in a group setting, differences between the results of the focus groups and those of the personal interviews may be due to the different methods used. Also, because of these methodological differences, the directors appeared to be less in concurrence concerning communications. They generally did not agree on common themes. Therefore, the themes attributed to the director level group throughout this executive summary do not necessarily represent

697

a consensus, but rather indicate the opinions of three or more of the directors.

It should also be noted that the study explicitly polled employees on their perceptions of Department communications. The study did not attempt to determine whether those perceptions were true. It was assumed that since the way individuals perceive communications has a great deal to do with the quality of internal relations in the organization, the study findings would be valid in and of themselves.

ANALYSIS

Sixteen common themes emerged from the nine employee focus groups and the director interviews. These themes and their origins are summarized in Exhibit 1 and are described as follows:

1. Prevalence of top-down communication. Departmental communication is often seen as one-way, going only from higher up to lower down. This theme emerged in the worker-level groups, in the middle-to-lower-middle management groups, and among assistant division administrators and district engineers. The impact of one-way communications was not brought up by division administrators or the directors. On the worker level, this top-down approach is seen as having a negative impact on communication and as indicating that persons above the worker level know little about the demands placed on the workers and the resources that they need. (One example cited was the use of radios designed so that Richmond could call the field at any time, but not the other way around.) Among resident engineers, district section engineers, and central office section heads, this top-down approach was seen as having a deleterious effect and as making horizontal communication even more important. Thus, horizontal communication is seen as being very effective. Among assistant division administrators, one-way communications were seen as wasting time and effort and as providing insufficient guidance, especially on policy issues. They also stated that this approach promoted the feeling among their supervisors that they could not say "no" to their bosses, thus putting subordinates in the untenable position of having to do the impossible and having to do it without proper guidance. District engineers shared the perception that top-down communications, especially those that are written, are often vague and contain insufficient background. Thus, the job of the recipient is to translate the message; this process involves considerable time and effort.

EXHIBIT 1: COMMON THEMES AMONG FOCUS GROUPS AND DIRECTORS

Area Supts. Cent. Off. Workers Field Workers	District Section Engrs. Cent. Off. Sec. Heads Resident Engineers	Asst. Div. Adms.	District Engineers	Div. Adms.	Directors
Comm. is Top-Down About Probs. Only The "Grapevine" Formal Channels/ Chain-of-Command Status & Power Commands without Meaning Overloaded but Starved Timeliness	Comm. is Top-Down About Probs. Only The "Grapevine" Formal Channels/ Chain-of-Command Overloaded but Starved Timeliness Comm. Blockage Isolation/Work Units Field vs. Cent. Off. Isolation	Comm. is Top-Down About Probs. Only The "Grapevine" Formal Channels/ Chain-of-Command Politics Network of Friends	Comm. is Top-Down The "Grapevine" Formal Channels/ Chain-of-Command Status & Power Overloaded but Starved Timeliness	The "Grapvine" Politics Network of Friends	The "Grapevine" Chain-of-Command (positive aspects) Politics Go Visit No Problems Powerlessness Crisis Mangement

694

In summary, the prevalence of top-down communications in the Department is seen by all but top management as promoting confusion and misunderstanding, and as wasting time and effort.

2. Communications about problems only. Up through the assistant division administrators, the content of communication in the Department is seen as being dominated by problems; i.e., "Most news is bad news." Some workers expressed the belief that management must think that workers who are satisfied can't be productive; thus, they do things to make them unhappy. Among the mid-level employees, written communication especially is seen as having a negative connotation. It is used to document: to show that activities have been done (so no one can complain) or to show that activities have not been done (so that pressure can be brought to bear or personnel action can be taken). Oral communication is seen as being more positive. Assistant division administrators thought that communications of all sorts are negative, not just those that are written. The perception that communication deals with problems only was not mentioned by district engineers, division administrators, or directors, except in the sense that politics and the outside accountability of the Department highlight the things that "go wrong" rather than accomplishments.

3. The "grapevine". All groups mentioned the "grapevine," the informal communications network, as being a very potent source of information. The workers use the "grapevine" to get information, but are disconcerted in having to go to an unofficial source to find something out (for example, workers learn about impending raises in pay from the Blue Cross representative). The "grapevine" is seen as working more quickly than official channels, but its use depends on having long experience and good connections. Thus, not all employees can use it efficiently. Mid-level employees (resident engineers, section heads, district section engineers) also recognized the "grapevine" as a strong, informal communications network, but they believed that for them it runs horizontally among persons on their level rather than vertically and thereby limits the information available. Assistant division administrators felt that although the "grapevine" often embellishes information, its accuracy is uncanny. However, they feel that many of the rumors circulated have a destructive effect. (For instance, rumors concerning decentralization and the possible end to flex-time have adversely affected morale.) It is felt that the destructive effects of the "grapevine" should be dealt with directly, since these informal channels will not just go away if ignored. The division administrators also noted that the "grapevine" can be quite destructive when false rumors are circulated, but they proposed few solutions. District engineers, on the other hand, noted that they obtained a significant amount of accurate information from the informal network very quickly.

Finally, while the directors also recognized the pervasiveness of the "grapevine," only a few attributed this to the Department's official reliance on a formal, but slower, chain-of-command. Many directors routinely attempt to debunk false rumors. Others ignore them, since to deny one rumor is to confirm another, and this is seen as undesirable. Some directors actually use the "grapevine" to send messages or to prepare their constituencies to receive written communications.

The only facts concerning the "grapevine" on which all groups agree is that it exists and is powerful. How it should be managed remains undetermined. Interestingly, this is the only theme mentioned by all groups.

4. Reliance on the formal chain-of-command. It was agreed by the worker-level groups, the mid-level groups, the assistant division administrators, the district engineers, and the directors that the Department's official channels of communication almost exclusively follow the chain-of-command. Workers thought that employees need to be aware of the demands of the chain and the consequences of violating it, and that approved horizontal communication could be accomplished only by going up and then down the chain. They also felt that a key to the interpretation of any communication is knowing where in the chain it originated. Mid-level employees (resident engineers, district section engineers, and central office section heads) also believed that reliance on the chain discourages their supervisors from checking with them before setting deadlines or detailing work on a project. Also, they thought that the chain-of-command enables specific individuals to intentionally withhold information from the rest of the chain and allows mistakes in routing to accomplish the same outcome. At the assistant division administrator level, these chain-of-command issues are seen as reflecting both the Department's military tradition/orientation and upper management's overt emphasis on having control of all activities. To the district engineers, the reliance on formal channels is most evident with regard to written communications (but it is also recognized that some verbal messages have to flow along the chain as well). The fact that they were strongly discouraged from sending lateral communications (and had previously been forbidden to meet laterally) made the chain more obtrusive to them. This lack of approval of lateral communications reflects most directors' attitudes toward formal channels. Although there is some disagreement, most directors see the formal chain-of-command as the way communications ought to flow under normal conditions. Clearly, this attitude by top management is quite different from that of most other levels of Department employees who see reliance on the chain as reducing effective communication.

- 698
5. Status and power. Related to the chain-of-command is the issue of control of communication to achieve status and power. This issue was mentioned by the worker-level groups and by district engineers. Much of the top-down communication is seen by workers as expressing the status of the sender with no other informational content or impact. Thus, the message has to be interpreted in light of the power of the sender in order to define its real meaning. The mid-level groups, while not expressly discussing status and power as an issue, mentioned that individuals use communications to build power bases or to protect "turf" by selectively releasing or withholding information (see "Communications Blockages," page 7). District engineers feel that status, expressed through dress, sex, and location, is a crucial element in departmental culture. They believe that this emphasis on status creates an atmosphere in which "power plays" using the formal lines of communication can occur. Status and power were not mentioned as issues by assistant division administrators, divisions administrators, or directors.

Clearly, the influence of status and power is seen by many employees as being extremely divisive and as creating the potential to stop communication entirely. None of the groups had insight into how these issues should be resolved.

6. Commands without meaning. This issue was mentioned exclusively by the worker-level group. Workers feel that a large proportion of the communication they receive is in the form of commands to do something. What is missing from these commands is information about what the action is for or what the intended outcome is to be (i.e., the "why" of the task). By strictly following the instructions rather than the intent of the project, the wrong work is often done or work is done incorrectly and has to be redone. Without the context being known, mere commands are insufficient to generate effective action. This withholding of intent may also alienate workers, thus reducing their motivation to do the job. Interestingly, this theme was not mentioned by any other group, even though its consequences deleteriously affect the performance of the bulk of the Department's labor force.
7. Overloaded with data, but starved for information. This theme emerged from the worker-level, mid-level, and district engineer groups, and was alluded to by the assistant division administrators. Most workers perceive themselves to be overloaded with data in the form of memos, phone calls, bulletins, announcements, and all forms of paper. At the same time, they feel starved for the information they need to do their jobs well. This overload is perceived by the mid-level groups as being primarily written communications. They perceive that the amount of paperwork they receive has increased dramatically, and the amount they are required to generate is increasing even more. The assistant division administrators also

noted the increase in paperwork, but did not mention this in the context of missing key information. District engineers, on the other hand, listed the overabundance of formal written communication as a problem. They believed that too little attention is paid to the climate or environment in which messages are received and that too much of the written communication is simply verbiage.

This is obviously a selectivity issue. Indiscriminately sending information down the line puts the burden of determining its significance on the receivers. The recipients, on the other hand, may misinterpret the importance of specific pieces of information; they may miss crucial information while concentrating on the trivial. Another danger is that recipients will decide that the process of sifting the wheat from the chaff is not worth the effort, and all communication will halt. This overloaded/starved dichotomy was not noted by division administrators or by most of the directors.

8. Timeliness. This issue was mentioned by workers, mid-level employees, and the district engineers. Workers feel that good communication requires that they receive information in time to use it. People in the field said they are embarrassed when they learn of something they need to know from the media, and are frustrated when they find things out too late to make an effective response. Almost identical statements were made by mid-level employees who want to be informed early enough to be involved in decision making. The district engineers also feel that they often do not receive information in a timely fashion; this causes significant problems and requires that they play "catch-up." The issue of timeliness was closely associated with the issue of communication by chain-of-command in that excessive time is required for information to filter down. It was also associated with status, power, and communication blockage, in that information is sometimes withheld (intentionally or unintentionally) until it is too late to be of use. Timeliness was not mentioned by division administrators or the bulk of the directors.

9. Communication blockages. Mid-level groups noted that there appear to be points along the chain where communication is stopped: (1) individuals mistakenly file or misroute documents and unintentionally block the flow of information; and (2) individuals intentionally use communications to build "power bases," either by defensively withholding information which might be used negatively by others or by aggressively controlling the dissemination of needed information. In either case, these communication blockages adversely affect morale and employee productivity.

10. Isolation of work units/isolation of the field from the central office. Resident engineers, district section engineers, and central office section heads mentioned that employees do not understand where they fit into the organization. Also, because of the discouragement of lateral communications, most work units do not understand the work of other units. There is little communication between groups that must interact on a project; this isolation is seen as having a negative impact on job performance as a result of which projects are sometimes not completed on time.
11. Politics. This issue was mentioned by assistant division administrators, division administrators, and directors. (Interestingly, this was not an issue for field personnel, specifically the district engineers, who must also have political dealings on the local level.) Upper-echelon or "third-floor" politics, as well as state politics, are seen as having an effect on the number and kind of requests that end up coming down the line (as far as the assistant division administrator level and above are concerned). In addition, it is recognized that politicking increases the pressure on these individuals and this eventually gets passed along to lower levels. This is related to the chain-of-command issue in that pressures are passed on to persons having no direct communication with those creating the pressures. The division administrators feel this politicization most strongly with regard to actions taken by top management and persons outside of the Department. Thus, members of the group feel personally and professionally compromised by political intrusions into their jobs. The directors generally experience this politicization of their jobs through interaction with the legislature (and individual legislators) and through accountability to other agencies, such as the Department of Planning and Budget and, previously, JLARC. Most directors believe this is part of the job and they have adapted to it.
12. The Department as family (the network of friends). The assistant division administrators, the division administrators, and the district engineers stated in several different ways that the Department had in the past, and to a certain extent continues to maintain, a feeling of solidarity against "outsiders" and a feeling of wanting to keep problems internal. In addition, the fact that many upper-level people are career employees with the Department seems to smooth the process of communication in many instances because people know whom to contact and informal communication is much easier among "old friends." These informal liaisons were also touched upon by some of the directors and are seen as the primary way in which things get done throughout the workday. This network of old friends seems to be a resource available mainly to upper-level management and must reflect what the Department was like in the past. However, this reliance on the "old friend" network may result

in the exclusion of newer employees from the day-to-day communications process.

While the previous themes were mentioned by several of the groups, the following themes were mentioned only by the directors. It should be remembered that the directors represented the group most variable in their opinions. They agreed only on this next theme.

13. "Go visit". The only common theme mentioned throughout all directors' interviews was that on the "third floor" the way one gets information is to go to someone's office. Directors also impart information most often by talking to people who come to their office. In this sense physical presence is the most important quality of successful communications among upper-level management. Those persons who do not "visit" as much sometimes seem to miss information. Other qualities of successful communications, outside of following the chain-of-command, appear to be largely transparent to the directors. Communications are successful because things "work the way they're supposed to." The need to visit to get information may be related to the "old-friend" network not available to lower-level managers and employees.
14. No problem. Although all directors stated that communication is a very important management function in the Department and one that has been under scrutiny since many of them first came to the organization, few believe that major problems exist. Those directors who could outline problems tend to have a somewhat more global view of the organization, gained by field or outside experience. Many directors feel that they do not have communications problems with their subordinates, although with regard to the "third floor" most experience some problem as a receiver of information, usually from above.

Some directors see communication as an obvious and somewhat superficial process of, "I tell them what to do and they do it." Others think that if the Department has problems, they are due to one of two factors:

1. Information is being sent correctly but others are not receiving it properly; or
2. Information is being sent and received correctly, but receivers don't like the information and are mistakenly calling the situation a communications problem.

It seems that some directors agree with the statement made by one that, "I don't believe that we've had the communications problem people perceive we've had; I think a lot of it is just perception

760

and I don't believe a lot of it's reality. Maybe I've got my head in the ground."

Many of the directors see the success of the communications effort as principally the responsibility of the receiver. This is similar to findings noted for division administrators, but not to those for lower-level groups. Thus, it appears that at this level in the hierarchy of the Department the responsibility for poor communications shifts from the sender to the receiver.

15. Reliance on the chain-of-command as a positive quality. Most of the directors see the chain-of-command as an inherent part of the Department and follow the chain in most of their dealings with both subordinates and supervisors. Most of them deal almost exclusively with division administrators, but some mentioned dealing with lower-level personnel. Usually, these dealings are either limited to one or two persons or occur when the division administrator is unavailable. Only one director mentioned deliberately and routinely circumventing the chain-of-command in order to simultaneously disseminate information and determine whether previous communications were received. In some cases this is perceived by others to be a positive step; in other cases it is frowned upon. The commissioner is seen by some as a breaker of the chain-of-command, and he is not always applauded for it.
16. Powerlessness in communications. Some of the directors believe that their ability to communicate with employees is curtailed by factors beyond their control, and that this is misunderstood throughout the Department. Often, directors are given no advance notice of changes which they must implement. This restricted ability is sometimes due to accountability outside the Department, particularly from the legislature, the secretary's office, or other state agencies; it is sometimes due to the internal workings of the Department. Also, some directors believe they are being asked by employees "What does the commissioner want or expect?" when that is still unknown. Finally, some directors feel that they are being held responsible for communicating information on statements made by the commissioner of which they are unaware. However, they mentioned that this is a problem that has occurred with every commissioner and is part of the job.

There is some indication that the theme of powerlessness mentioned by top management is similar to the workers' theory of status and power, only viewed from above. Whether the powerlessness mentioned by some directors is true or merely imagined, it should be noted that the feelings of powerlessness among a group holding the most powerful positions in the Department raises managerial or organizational issues beyond the scope of this study.

CONCLUSIONS

One must be very careful in the interpretation of the results of the focus groups and directors' interviews conducted for this study. Comparisons, except in the broadest sense, are discouraged for the following reasons:

1. The nine focus groups used very different techniques to gain information from those used during interviews with the directors. The focus groups had three to four hours to consider communications issues and used the group process to encourage the generation of new ideas. The directors did not have the benefit of each other's thinking and did not have three to four hours to devote to the subject.
2. The nine focus groups were directed by three different group facilitators. Dr. Gib Akin conducted the field worker, central office worker, and area superintendent groups. Dr. Bruce Gansneder conducted the resident engineer, district section engineer, and central office section head groups. Ms. Debra Ross conducted the assistant division administrator, division administrator, and district engineer groups. The findings, summarized in this executive summary and discussed in the complete report, are based upon the facilitators' summaries of the discussions. It is possible that differences noted between groups may be due to differences in facilitators, rather than to actual differences of opinion among Department employees.

There are some conclusions which can be drawn from these data. First, although it can be concluded that many levels of employees perceive a number of communications problems within the Department, it can also be hearteningly concluded that there is a clear model for good communications. The crisis situation model currently under such close scrutiny by management has helped all employees form a clear view of the characteristics of good communications. Among these are:

- All parties who should be involved in the task communicate directly, regardless of their rank or status. This implies that during a crisis, one has the ability to talk directly to each person involved without having to go through the chain-of-command. Also, because everyone becomes involved in the task under crisis situations, interest in getting the job done on all levels seems genuine to the worker.
- The message is kept meaningful, clear, and timely.
- Employees are provided with an explanation of how to perform a task, why the task has to be done, or why it has to be done in a certain manner.

- There is an awareness of the abilities of employees with whom one is dealing. This involves an understanding of their working situation and of their "territory."
- Feedback is provided and the message is repeated as often as needed to ensure that it gets through.

In addition, a few very broad comparisons can be made. First and foremost, it would appear that the view of communications from the top of the organization down is significantly different from the view from the bottom up; upper-level management, specifically the directors and the division administrators, perceive the communications issues within the Department very differently from managers and employees at lower levels. Although some reasons for this dichotomy seem obvious, exactly why such differences exist cannot be determined from this cursory analysis.

There are a number of alternative courses the Department may follow at this point. Additional information remains to be gleaned from an analysis of the focus-group tapes. Once all facilitators have reviewed all 33 hours of tapes generated by the nine groups, comparisons can be made. A detailed analysis of the examples of both communication successes and problems given by employees would assist in "fleshing out" concerns and developing countermeasures to resolve communications issues. As a result of this detailed analysis, experimental intervention could be undertaken on a small scale to improve conditions. These interventions could then be evaluated. A number of the focus groups recommended conducting additional focus groups composed of persons at different levels in the organization. This option could promote increased understanding among employees in different positions and at different levels. On the other hand, a traditional communications audit could be conducted. This audit would involve some of the same activities included in the current study, but would also: (1) examine the organization's communications philosophy; (2) determine whether objectives are understood by the recipients of communications; (3) analyze internal affairs; (4) examine current and previous attempts to improve communications, and determine whether they have actually worked; and (5) recommend changes in internal public relations. At the same time, management may wish to review the "suggestions to improve communication" developed by each group with an eye toward implementing those recommendations that might have an immediate impact on current practices.

It is recommended that communications become a topic of additional study in the Department. It is further recommended that a communications advisory group be formed consisting of managers from both upper and middle levels, employees, experts in communications, and researchers. This group would advise the Department on a future course of action.

