EXPLORING THE WAY TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION PRACTICES WITHIN SECTION III, HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DIVISION, CHIEF MINISTER’S DEPARTMENT: AN ACTION LEARNING APPROACH

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Abstract

This project employed the Action Learning approach in exploring the way to improve communication practices within Section III, Human Resource Management Division, Chief Minister’s Department, Kuching, Sarawak.

By its statement of vision, Section III aspires to be the most efficient, innovation and proactive arm of the Chief Minister’s Department, providing fast and quality service to the government and their customers. The Section is serving not only the external customer – civil servants from the other ministries, government departments, government agencies or statutory bodies as well as members of the public, but also those working in the organisation itself, i.e. other sections of the Human Resource Division.

Based on the preliminary observation done, it was identified that the communication practices within the Section needs to be improved. The problem of lacking effective communication may lead to the functional incompetence of the Section. With its service-oriented function, the Section must therefore project a very positive image of excellence, efficiency and effectiveness to the whole organisation.

It was also justified that an Action Learning approach could be used in this exploratory research project. The method consists of spiral of cycles of planning, action, observation, reflection and evaluation. This project has highlighted a number of processes and characteristics of the Action Learning method that emerged from the meeting, discussions and observations on the Action Research Group members and their learning sets. By exploring the used of Action Learning method to improve communication, the researcher is convinced that this method will be a promising approach to explore. Though the project was limited due to time constraints and some other limiting factors, it was evidenced that the participants involved were convinced that the method can be further introduced to the employees in the entire organisation. The participants also admitted that learning takes time, nevertheless exploring the method should be seen as part of acquiring more knowledge and skills towards bringing changes and improvement and each and everyone in the organisation should get involved.

Though the improvement in communication moved in a moderate pace, it should not be seen as a cutting point to judge that the participants involved were not effective in carrying out the Action Learning project. It was unquestionable that the participants were trying their very best to explore, learn and use the method to improve communication within the Section. It was also justified that learning took place and the research questions were acceptably answered.

Seksyen III telah meletakkan visi untuk menjadi tonggak yang paling efisien, berinovasi dan proaktif di Jabatan Ketua Menteri, dengan menyediakan perkhidmatan yang cepat dan berkualiti kepada kerajaan dan juga pelangganinya. Seksyen ini bukan sekadar memberikan perkhidmatan kepada pelanggan luaran yang terdiri daripada anggota perkhidmatan awam daripada kementerian-kementerian, jabatan-jabatan, agensi-agensi atau badan-badan berkanun yang lain dan juga pihak umum, malah kepada setiap anggota yang berkhidmat di seksyen-seksyen lain di Jabatan Ketua Menteri (Sumber Manusia).

Hasil daripada pemerhatian di peringkat awal, ketidakberkesanan dalam komunikasi telah dikenalpasti sebagai masalah yang perlu diperbaiki serta dipertingkatkan di Seksyen ini. Masalah komunikasi ini boleh membawa implikasi yang negatif terhadap kompetensi Seksyen itu sendiri. Dengan fungsinya sekarang, Seksyen ini sepatutnya memperlihatkan imej keseluruhan bahagian ini yang cemerlang, efisien serta efektif.


Walaupun peningkatan di dalam komunikasi ini menampakkan sedikit kemajuan, namun ia tidak sepenuhnya dianggap sebagai pengukur terhadap keberkesanan setiap ahli yang terlibat dalam melaksanakan projek ini. Memang tidak dapat dinafikan bahawa setiap ahli telah memberikan komitmen yang cukup tinggi terhadap projek ini demi mempertingkatkan komunikasi di Seksyen berkenaan. Pembelajaran juga turut berlaku serta soalan selidik yang dikemukakan sedikit sebanyak telah terjawab.

Abstrak
This piece of work is specially dedicated
to my beloved husband, Abdul Baderi

and our sons - Aqmal Syauqi and Asyraf Syuqran,

thank you for your continued patience and support
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Whilst writing this project is never the work of a single person, when attempting to acknowledge the contributions of others, one always runs the risk that he/she will omit some important contributions. Nonetheless, the attempt must be made because this project has been helped immensely by the many helpful comments I have received along the way.

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Sharifah Alauyah Syed Muhammad Shibli
Kuching,
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# Table of Contents

Abstract

Abstrak

Dedication

Acknowledgement

## CHAPTER 1

**INTRODUCTION**

1.0 Introduction 1

1.1 Background Of The Project 1

1.2 Purpose Of The Project 1

1.3 Research Questions 1

1.4 Scope Of The Project 2

1.5 Limitations In Carrying Out The Project 2 - 3

1.6 Conclusion 3

## CHAPTER 2

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

2.0 Introduction 4

2.1 Literature Review On Communication 4 - 13

## CHAPTER 3

**METHODOLOGY**

3.0 Introduction 14

3.1 Purpose Of The Project 14

3.2 Research Questions 14

3.3 Site / Thematic Concern

3.3.1 Site 14

3.3.2 Thematic Concern 14 - 15

3.4 Research Design 15 - 16

3.5 Action Research Literature Review 16

3.5.1 Definition of Action Research 16 - 18

3.6 Action Learning Literature Review 18

3.6.1 Definition of Action Learning 18 - 21

3.7 Why Adopt Action Research And Action Learning Methods?

3.7.1 The characteristics of Action Research that support this project 21 - 22

3.7.2 Action Research method as adopted in this project 22 - 25

3.7.3 Why Action Research method? 25 - 26

3.7.4 Action Research cycle and evaluation 26 - 29

3.7.5 Why adopt Action Learning method? 29 - 31

3.7.6 The evaluation 31 - 32

3.8 Conclusion 32

## CHAPTER 4

**ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE, PROCESSES AND FINDINGS**

4.0 Introduction 33

4.1 Purpose Of The Project 33

4.2 Research Questions 33

4.3 Background And Thematic Concern Of
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction  77
5.1 Purpose Of The Project  77
5.2 Research Questions  77
5.3 Overall Conclusions Based On The Research Questions And Data Collected From The Action Learning Project  77 - 79
5.4 Recommendations And Suggestions  79 - 80
5.5 Conclusion  81 - 82

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDICES

Appendix A  84
Appendix B  85
Appendix C  86
Appendix D  87
Lists of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title Of Figures</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Communication Variables</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>The Four Procedural Rules In Communication Process</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Decode - Feedback</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>The Spiral of Action Research Cycles</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>The Lewinian Experiential Learning Model</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>The Kolb Learning Cycle</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>The Action Research Group And Action Learning Set</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>The Action Research Cycle And Evaluation</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>The Mini-cycles Within The Main Action Research Cycle</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>The Sequences - Initial Efforts</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>The 1st Mini-cycle</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>The 2nd Mini-cycle</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>The 3rd Mini-cycle</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>The 4th Mini-cycle</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction
This chapter attempts to describe the background and purpose of the project. It will also discuss the research questions that need to be answered in order to achieve the purpose and scope of the project. The scope consists of the site of the project where it was carried out and the limitations that the researcher encountered in the course of the study.

1.1 Background Of The Project
The Section Head believes that the workers of his Section are not working as well as he expected them to be. He claims that the workers are not doing what they are supposed to be doing or what the Section Head would like them to be doing.

However, the workers do not share these views. They believe that works or tasks given to them were managed and done accordingly and they feel there is no reason for the Section Head to have any doubts of their skills and commitment in getting the job done.

The workers claim that the Section Head does not give much attention to them and thus fail to recognise their performance. Currently, the low level of energy, enthusiasm and commitment the workers bring to their work is also affecting their performance. This indicates that the employees are not highly motivated. This has created dissatisfaction in working environment.

However, the real problem here is that, there seems to be no effective communication within the Section. Both the Section Head and the workers are having two different perceptions toward each other and this will lead to a more difficult situation if it is not overcome. Misinterpretation and misunderstanding of information or messages were assumed to be the issue that contributed to lack of effective communication between the workers and the Section Head.

1.2 Purpose Of The Project
The purpose of this project is to explore the way to improve communication practices within Section III, Human Resource Management Division, Chief Minister Department using an Action Learning approach.

1.3 Research Questions
To achieve the said purpose, the following research questions were formulated:

1.3.1 Can Action Learning be used to improve communication within the Section?;
1.3.2 Is Action Learning effective as an active approach in communication process?;
1.3.3 Did the group members use Action Learning as a method to improve communication within the Section?; and
1.3.4 Can Action Learning be introduced to the employees of Section III, Human Resource Management Division (HRM), Chief Minister’s Department?
1.4 Scope Of The Project
Section III, also known as the Section of Administration, Registration, Privileges, Record & Sarawak Volunteer Service Corp (PPSS), is divided into four other sub-sections called Units:

1.4.1 Administration & Registration Unit;
1.4.2 Accounts, Leave & Privileges Unit;
1.4.3 Record & Computer Unit; and
1.4.4 Sarawak Volunteer Service Corp or Pasukan Perkhidmatan Sukarelawan Sarawak (PPSS) Unit.

The Section is headed by a Principal Assistant Director and assisted by four Assistant Directors, with 40 supporting staffs.

By its statement of vision, Section III aspires to be the most efficient, innovative and proactive arm of the Chief Minister's Department (Human Resource Management Division), providing fast and quality service to the government and their customers. Its mission is to develop and supervise the Management of Privileges and State Civil Servant Record System as well as the PPSS Training and Placement System, in order to achieve total effectiveness and productivity of the State Civil Service.

The Section is serving not only the external customer - civil servants from the other ministries, government departments, government agencies or statutory bodies as well as members of the public, but also those working in the organisation itself, i.e. other sections of the Human Resource Division.

1.5 Limitations In Carrying Out This Project
The project is to explore the use of Action Learning to improve communication practices within Section III, Human Resource Management Division (HRM), Chief Minister's Department.

The project is limited by the time frame set by the sponsor and the university, methods of data collection (findings, participants' observation and triangulation), as well as the researcher's knowledge and understanding on Action Research and Action Learning methods. On top of these, the researcher was also tied-up with other course works, individual and group assignments and the limited work-place attachment in carrying out the project.

The main technique of data collection applied was participants' observation which contributes to some limitations on the project. It requires the observer to become an impactful part of the social setting. Another limitation is the technique of triangulation (validation). There were no guidelines set down for the evaluation reports and self-reports in this project. Hence individuals recording observations may have highlighted different aspects of their development.

There is also a possibility that the participants are influenced by their relationship with the researcher, giving favourable comment on the observations and the project as a whole. The answers to some research questions were based on the perceptions of the participants and the researcher. The nature of perceptions per se is a limiting factor in the project and is acknowledged.

The participants' and the researcher's knowledge in communication were also limiting factors in this project. Therefore, the lack of understanding on the communication process, communication skills and other aspects regarding communication are also
Introduction

acknowledged.

1.6 Conclusion

It is the researcher's wish that this project would be able to achieve more effective communication by exploring the application of Action Learning and eventually understand the importance of effective communication and its practice in the workplace.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on communication. It will be seen in this chapter that there are varied views among selected writers about communication, including managerial communication, employee communication, the art of communicating and others.

2.1 Literature Review On Communication

Communication involves people - an obvious but often forgotten fact. The fact that people are dynamic and unique makes the world interesting, but communication difficult. Because people are unique, each views the world differently.

Whilst it is commonly accepted that effective communication is a vital part of change and can help tap into employees’ energy, potentials and ideas, organisations are not getting what they desired from their internal communication. In every organisation people seem to believe that communication could be better. There is a general consensus that it could and should be improved, but that improvement seems to be difficult to achieve.

Whilst the general consensus is that communication is important - that consensus masks very different perceptions the reasons for its importance, its role and how it can contribute towards the organisation’s success.

Most organisations recognise the need for good communication with their people. Over the last few years, that battle has largely been won. What still remains is a lack of understanding of what communication is and the role it has to play within organisations. Managers want and organisations need, more form communication than before.

There are many definition of communication and many different concepts of good communication. One dictionary alone carries several different entries and that figure rises dramatically if we look at ‘communicate’ and all other derivatives of the word.

Dimmick (1995 p. 21) cites that there are two definitions of communication. Dimmick, in quoting The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, wrote “communication is the imparting, conveying or exchange of ideas, knowledge etc. whether by speech, writing or signs”.

Dimmick (1995 p.21) also quoted Vallence and McWilliam through their book - Communication That Works (1991 pg. 8), as saying “communication is the foundation of all interpersonal relationships: through communication we reach some understanding of each other, learn to like, influence and trust each other, start and end relationships and learn about ourselves and how others see us”.

Decker (1996) claims that communicating with another person is not a science. It does not have a regimented set of practice and exacting procedures. There are specific sound principles and themes, but there are thousands of variations on these themes.

Decker (1996) further explains that the most critical of all communication is face-to-face. That’s when we are in the act of persuading others, ‘communicating’ our ideas, ourselves or our products. Simultaneously, we are also ‘selling’ our ideas, ourselves and our products.

For example, a supervisor must be able to clearly communicate the goals of the organisation to employees. A manager must be able to confront an employee who may also
be a friend when there is a poor performance by the employee.

From the ideas expressed by Decker (1996), it is important to know that communicating must also exist within an organisation. This scenario may occur during interviews, meetings, coffee breaks, staff meeting, telephone conversations, performance reviews, hallway conversation, working together on a project, lunch breaks, project reviews and many more.

However, Decker (1996) also claims that what really counts is not usually taught. The key to effective communicating is believability. Most of us would agree that in business, as in all of life, the believability of the presenter is critical to the success of the presentation.

However, Decker (1996) questions the criticality of believability of a person. He highlights that the believability of a person is critical to any interpersonal success. No matter what is said, it is not going to make much difference in the mind of the listener where a person is credible and believed. There can be no action where there is no belief and agreement.

This is not new to most people. What is new is that this is not normally taught in our schools. Even more importantly, it is not generally the way we conduct our communications in business. Effective communication provides the ability to continuously build credibility and believability into everything we communicate.

Corrado (1994) brings up the idea of management involvement in communication. Corrado (1994) explains that management seems to be cutting back and at the same time, giving more responsibility to employees. In this new environment, senior manager knows it literally cannot afford to look at employees simply as a labour cost; rather they must see them as potential contributors to growth.

The above statement reflects the importance of employee communication. Employee communication is the glue that can patch today's tattered working environment. The importance of communication in restoring balance between the needs of the employer and those of employees, and helping to restore and maintain credibility, is becoming apparent to more people.

Corrado (1994) also mentions that strategic communication focused on accomplishing concrete business objectives, is the order of the day as companies go back to the drawing board to re-engineer their businesses.

Corrado (1994) goes further by saying that employees have very simple communication needs. According to Corrado (1994 p. 5), they want to know:

a) what the problems are;
b) how the company (organisation) is going to deal with them;
c) what their role as an employee; and
d) how they can become empowered to assume more responsibility.

Organisations are realising that empowered employees must be informed employees. If employees don't understand organisational product and services, they cannot add value to those goods and services.

It is significantly important to know that, when supervisors don't communicate with their employees, grapevine fills in the gaps. Grapevine gives a real-live person seems to know what's going on. Grapevine is a particularly neglected aspect of management communication.

There is no dodging the fact that, as a carrier of news and gossip among
employees, executives and supervisors, the grapevine often affects the affair of management. The proof of this is the strong feelings that different employees have about it. Some regard the grapevine as an evil - all thorn in the side which regularly spreads rumour, destroys morale and reputations, leads to irresponsible actions and challenges authority. Some regard it as a good thing because it acts as a safety valve and carries news fast. Others regard it as a very mixed blessing.

Whether the grapevine is considered an asset or liability, it is important for all employees to try to understand it. For one thing is sure, although no employees can absolutely control the grapevine, he/she can influence it. Since it is here to stay, he/she should learn to live with it.

But today’s educated employees want more information. They want to know not just what, they also want to know why and how. These employees cannot get that kind of information from the grapevine. That’s how managers can beat the grapevine.

Corrado (1994) believes that good communication is good business. The more people working on the problem, the better chances for success are. Communication is the glue which binds people working together towards common goal. If employees are neither given adequate information nor allowed to contribute towards solving problems, they may turn into being the cause of them, lower productivity, grievances and so on.

As organisation go towards learning organisation in a much modern world, good communication is carefully planned from the top down, supported in writing, made part of a supervisor’s performance evaluation and focused on the business.

Corrado (1994) further mentions that there are three major variable that one needs to look at in evaluating organisational communication processes. He considers these variables as the characteristics of good communication. Figure 2.1 below illustrates the communication variables as mentioned by Corrado (1994):

![Communication Variables Diagram](image)

**Figure 2.1**: Communication Variables From “Communication With Employees” p. 11, by F.M. Corrado (1994), California: Crisp Publications Inc..

Based on the figure above, Corrado (1994) describes flow as how information moves through the organisation to its audience (the employees. It also assists the organisation to identify how the flow of communication is in the organisation and do the following statements applied in the organisation:

a) Do feedback and suggestions flow directly to senior management?
b) Do responsibilities for communication are defined and followed?

c) Do supervisors understand the key issues and can answer employee questions?

and
d) Does grapevine information is closely aligned with formal messages?

Corrado (1994) then defines content as the type of information communicated and how it is targeted to specific audiences, for example:

a) Do the messages targeted based on audience attitudes, information needs and media preferences?

b) Is there a connection between current communication efforts and the economic mission of the organisation?

c) Do employees understand and support the goals of the organisation?

d) Are employees aware of the issues and understand how they affect the organisation? and
e) Do employees understand their benefits and utilise them wisely?

Impact, Corrado (1994) defines as the results produced by communication efforts which may assist organisation in identifying whether:

a) Communication policies and practices need to be reviewed or not;

b) Employee morale is excellent;

c) External audiences have a favourable view of the organisation;

d) Communication efforts are evaluated after implementation; and

e) Employees are committed to the goals of the organisation.

The above statements by Corrado (1994) are supported by Smeltzer and Leonard (1994). Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) mention that as organisation approaches the mid 1990's, management communication is both challenging and exciting. This statement by Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) signifies that it is challenging because organisations are becoming much more complex and many new forces confront the manager.

To a greater distance the writers mention that, greater competitive pressures, shorter product life cycles, increased demands for quality and service, increased regulatory constraints, greater concerns for cost containment, heightened awareness of environmental concerns and renewed emphasis on human rights are just some of the pressures increasing the complexity of a manager's job. But these pressures also make managerial communication exciting.

Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) recommend that the contemporary manager has a greater opportunity than ever to make a significant difference in the success of the organisation and increase the quality of work life for fellow employees. But herein lies the challenge. Effective managerial communication skills are becoming more complex and more critical, so it is more difficult to master them.

Consequently, Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) believe that, the workplace is much more diverse and complex then it was just a few decades ago and it requires more sophisticated management communication skills.

With the advancement in technology, communication should also be seen as advancing as well. Technology helps with communication challenge, but it also adds new requirements. Advances in telecommunication have increased communication capabilities, but employees must learn how to best use these capabilities. In addition, the improved
communication systems mean we have greater abilities to interact with multiple cultures, which requires that we become better inter-cultural communication.

All organisations control communication through structures and norms. Lightening the information burden on people contributes to organisational efficiency, but separating people from crucial information can be a barrier to effectiveness. Obviously, the costs of lacking important information are the costs of repairing the damage the lack causes.

But having too much information can mean costly attention to things that don’t need it. Because computer networks reach so many people so fast, the information effects are magnified. Changing the nature of information or its distribution in this environment can be very costly. Managers who introduce computers and computer networks are therefore in a position to make critical decisions.

There is a bigger communication job for everybody in today’s flattened spread-out organisation. It is no longer a job just for somebody at the main office, every supervisor, manager and executive has to get involved.

The manner in which messages are being communicated is also changing in this new high-tech age. Electronic communication is supplementing, even replacing, print while managers are being asked to increase one-on-one and other high-touch forms of interpersonal communication. Today, there can be computer messages (E-mail) or voice mail sent to each employee from the CEO, as well as videos. This is far cry from the formal memos of yesterday.

But Kiesler (1993) holds different opinions regarding the above matter. Kiesler (1993, p. 208) claims that, when communication lacks dynamic personal information, people focus their attention on the message rather than on each other. Communicators feel a greater sense of anonymity and detect less individuality in others than they do talking on the phone or face-to-face. They, according to Kiesler, feel less empathy, less guilt, less concern over how they compare with others and are less influenced by norms.

Kiesler (1993) regards that to some degree communication technologies weaken the controls over information distribution that people have in dealing with each other. Kiesler (1993) sets the computer mail as an example, where computer mail provides neither static nor dynamic cues, which resulted to users having less social context information than with other communication devices, including paper.

Organisation and communication within organisation will continue to change. As a result we must think about how communication will take place in the future.

Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) suggest six factors that affect communication effectiveness and by understanding the six factors, managerial communication skills can be improved:

a) knowledge;
b) culture;
c) status;
d) attitudes;
e) emotions; and
f) communication skill.

Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) stress that the sender’s and the receiver’s knowledge of the subject under consideration affects the level of understanding achieved. Greater knowledge is not necessarily the key, rather the knowledge the sender and receiver have in
common is important. The more knowledge two people have in common, the greater probability of achieving understanding. Thus the sender and receiver must first find areas in common knowledge and then build on those areas to improve communication.

It comes into view that apart from having common knowledge, the more common culture between two people, the greater the chances of achieving understanding. When two people do not understand each other's trademarks, communication is all the more difficult.

Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) also regard that status is always assumed as a barrier for those at lower level who are intimidated solely because they are aware of their lower status. They may not ask appropriate questions for fear of appearing less knowledgeable, or they may act as if they understood the message when they really do not.

Apart from the above remarks, Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) also make it clear that emotions too play an important role in communication. Emotions can block communication from time to time. Emotions are a large part of the work environment and they refer to the psychological and physiological state at the time of communication.

Despite claiming emotion as a barrier in having effective communication, Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) also assert that the attitudes that people hold about things, people and themselves also affect how they react and communicate. If people have strong attitude against something, they may not want to discuss it, thus blocking any possible communication. Communication skills on the other hand, require the ability to encode, decode, receive feedback and adjust to noise as well as understand all internal personality factors involved.

According to communication literature, researchers stress on the importance of having effective organisational communication and reducing factors that block communication in the work place. However, Qubein (1997) is interested in how communication should be flowing in an organisation and the importance of communication skills and workplace communication.

According to Qubein (1997), successful company must be active with communication flowing in all directions, through all levels and division. This requires communication skills on the part of everyone - from the CEO to the most junior person on staff.

Qubein (1997) stresses on the importance of workplace communication. He mentions that, workplace communication is essential to the process of building quality into goods and services. Without communication skills, workers can't learn the techniques of statistical process control and other quality measures, much less put them into practice. Executives, managers and supervisors can not nurture quality-oriented corporate cultures unless they know how to communicate ideas and feelings.

Communication cannot be accomplished solely by microchips, fibre optics and satellite relays. These artefacts of our technology help fill the world with information, but information is lifeless without someone to breathe meaning into it.

Qubein (1997) further explains that, the greatest need is for understanding - for building bridges across the mental and emotional distances that separate human individuals from one another so that we can live and work together more harmoniously.

Qubein (1997) also mentions that, in the early twentieth century, communication were neat and clean. Executives told subordinates either carried out their bosses' wishes or delegated them to people below. If the boss wanted information from down below, he asked for it.

Qubein (1997) also relates that, communication follow a vertical channel, and
most messages flow from the top down. The 21st century business, he adds, will be a sponge that takes in information through countless pores, spreads it throughout the corporate body and pours it out where it does the most good.

Information, according to Qubein (1997), is no longer just flow downward from the executive suite and upward through well-defined channels carved through layers of supervision. It will spread:

a) from top management down to employees;
b) from employees upward to top management; and
c) horizontally among all individuals and departments within the organisation.

This up, down and across communication will distinguish the thinking organisation of the 21st century from the mechanistic organisation of the 20th century (Qubein, 1997).

Qubein (1997) also includes the basic process of communication. He says, to achieve precision and effectiveness in communicating, one should understand the basic process of communication. It has four requirements:

a) a message must be conveyed;
b) the message must be received;
c) there must be a response; and
d) each message must be understood.

As Qubein (1997) shows the way to achieve accuracy and effectiveness in communication, Munter (1982) recommends four procedural rules in the communication process, in order to communicate more effectively:

a) formulate objective;
b) analyse audience;
c) structure message appropriately; and
d) choose the communication channel.

Diagrammatically, the above procedural rules suggested by Munter (1982) can be illustrated as in Figure 2.2 below:

```
Formulate ----+ Analyse ----+ Structure Message ----+ Choose Communication
Objectives   Audience      Appropriately    Channel
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Figure 2.2: The Four Procedural Rules In Communication Process

The rules suggested by Munter (1982) may seem simple and obvious, yet by remembering to take them, most of speaking and writing problems that hamper clear communication in business and the professions today such as unclear, unread memos or confusing, misunderstood presentations, can be avoided.

By defining the objectives, two important benefits are provided. First, one will be more efficient because he/she will no longer waste time writing or presenting material unless he or she has a clear reason for doing so. Second, one will be more effective because formulating the objective precisely will help to communicate more clearly.
The ability to analyse the audience may help a person to determine what one knows about the audience and how the audience can best be appealed. Once audience is analysed, one can relate their benefits, increase credibility and work effectively within the organisational hierarchy.

Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) mention that there are four elements of the model needed to develop an effective communication that are, channel, encoding, decoding and feedback.

The channel is the method used to convey meaning among people. The type of channel used depends on the message and the approach used to exchange ideas. Messages are sent via channels, but channels also affect message. For example, a high level executive might visit an office area to convey support for the employees’ hard work. But if he or she seldom walked around in that area, his or her presence would probably cause anxiety. The interpersonal approach would thus alter the message he or she was trying to convey. Channel selection too has become more complex with the development of new technologies such as voice mail, e-mail and fax. Managers are frequently confronted with difficult decisions when deciding which communication channel to use.

Encoding - people encode when they choose the best symbols to represent their thoughts and feelings. They seek the symbols they think have the greatest chance of being understood by the person receiving the message. Managers must choose the symbols that best express the idea they wish the other person to understand and they must be sure the meaning they give the symbols will be the same meaning the receiver gives them.

Decoding on the other hand explains that once encoders have chosen and translated the symbols that represent their thought, the communication receiver must decode the message. Two steps occur in the decoding process (Smeltzer and Leonard, 1994). the person must first perceive the message and then he or she must interpret what has been perceived. Sending a message does not guarantee that someone will receive the intended or even a comparable message.

The last element in a model for effective communication as mentioned by Smeltzer and Leonard (1994) is feedback. Improving understanding is not so difficult for those who apply the right effort. The best way to increase the understanding of symbols is through feedback. Feedback allows the sender to determine how message was interpreted and if necessary, provides an opportunity to modify future messages. Feedback is essential for every planning, leading, organising and controlling function in business today to ensure that messages are complete (O’Reilly and Anderson, 1980). Consciously attending to feedback is critical for effective communication; without the two-way circular process, effective managerial communication is impossible. Figure 2.3 diagrams the model as it appears with feedback.
In Mody’s (1991) discussion with regard to communication, she seems to reach an understanding of Munter’s (1982) suggestions. Mody (1991) relates that if messages are designed for the sake of communication, then achieving identity of meaning between sender and receiver is the goal. Attention, interest and perfect comprehension are the desired responses to a message.

Bartholome (1993) concurs with Qubein (1997). Bartholome (1993) also refers communication as a matter of keeping subordinates informed, providing accurate feedback, explaining decisions and policies, being candid about one’s own problems and resisting the temptation to hoard information for use as a tool or a reward. It is important to communicate with subordinates not only as a group but also as individuals.

Bartholome (1993) further mentions that, middle or upper-level managers often find it difficult to talk with superiors about their own performance and career prospects. When the middle or upper-level managers feel they are not getting the feedback they want, they are uncomfortable asking for it. Communication must flow in both directions if it is to flow at all. Information won’t surge up from where it barely trickles down.

Bartholome (1993) also stresses on the importance of support. Support also play an important role in communication. Support means showing concern for subordinates as people. It means being available and approachable. It means helping people, coaching them, encouraging their ideas and defending their positions. According to Bartholome (1993), this may mean socialising with them. It certainly means taking an interest in their lives and careers.

Apart from the above statement, Bartholome (1993) also explains that, it is often tempting to abandon an employee who is in trouble, out of favour, or simply unpopular, but the extra effort extended in behalf of such a person can pay big dividends later. Subordinates trust most deeply superiors they feel will stand by them when the chips are down.

Bartholome (1993) also says that respect is as important as support. According to him, respects feeds on itself. The most important form of respect is delegation and the
second most important is listening to subordinates and acting on their opinions. Nevertheless, according to Bartholome (1993), in inter-personal relations, the law of reciprocity tends to rule. When supervisors use a lot of fine words about trust and respect but behave disdainfully, subordinates are likely to respond in kind.

Davis (1993) mentions that one big factor which management tend to overlook is communication within its own group. Communication to the worker and from the worker is dependent on effective management communication and clearly this in turn requires informal as well as formal channels.

As Booher (1994) puts it, communication is the soul of management: analysis and solid decisions translated into clear messages that influence people to act and feel good about their performance.

Effective communication involves the messages we send as well as those we remove - what we say, what we hear, what each of us think the other said and heard. Failure to communicate is the frustration of modern management. All human relationships depend on communication.

Along with the other writers mentioned earlier, Quirke (1995) also claims that organisations accept that good communication is important. From there, paths diverge. According to Quirke, different members of the management team have different views. The word ‘communication’ is traded around the boardroom table, but hides the divergence of values, definitions and agendas. While there is a natural tendency to believe that everyone is in agreement, it is more likely that, unbeknown to each other, each board member has a significantly different perception of communication issues.

The dilemma faced by organisations is that while internal communication is central to success, managers tend to regard it as peripheral, or as an optional ‘bolt on’ to their real job. It is something to be done when there is time and leisure, or something to be delegated to communications department. Most managers will readily agree that communication is a good thing and terribly important. However, that readiness is usually followed by a strong desire to get back to the real job of running a business. There is a low level of understanding of what communication involves and little commitment to getting it right.

Communication is involved in all human relations. It is the ‘nervous system’ of any organised group, providing the information and understanding necessary for high productivity and morale. For the individual organisation, it is a continuous process, a way of life, rather than one-shot campaign. Top management, therefore, should recognise the importance of communication and do something about it.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter addressed the Action Research method as adopted in this project. It discussed some major areas such as the purpose, site and thematic concern of the project. The chapter then explored justification of the Action Research method used in this project.

3.1 Purpose Of The Project

The purpose of this project was to explore the way to improve communication practices within the Section concerned, using an Action Learning approach.

3.2 Research Questions

To arrive at this purpose, the following research questions were formulated:

3.2.1 Can Action Learning be used to improve communication within the Section?
3.2.2 Is Action Learning effective as an active approach in communication process?
3.2.3 Did the group members use Action Learning as a method to improve communication within the section?; and
3.2.4 Can Action Learning be introduced to the employees of Section III, Human Resource Management Division, Chief Minister’s Department?

3.3 Site/Thematic Concern

3.3.1 Site

This research project was conducted in Section III of Human Resource Management Division of the Chief Minister's Department, Kuching, Sarawak. Section III or the Administration, Registration & Records Section is the biggest unit in the Human Resource Management Division (HRM), with more than 40 employees varying from the Management level to the Support Group (supervisory and clerical) level. The management (Unit Managers) group will form the Action Research Group.

The Director of Human Resource Management Division and the Principal Assistant Director of Section III have granted approval and consent to carry out this project. The letter of approval is attached in Appendix A.

The Section is serving not only the external customer - civil servants from the other ministries, government departments, government agencies or statutory bodies as well as members of the public, but also those working in the organisation itself, i.e. other sections of the Human Resource Division.

3.3.1 Thematic concern

The problem of lacking effective communication may lead to the functional incompetence of the Section. With its service-oriented function, the Section must therefore project a very positive image of excellence, efficiency and effectiveness to the whole organisation.
The above scenario has become a great concern to the Section Head. The problem has always been highlighted in the monthly sectional meetings - attended by the Section Head, the unit managers, the supervisors and the workers. The researcher has always been the co-ordinator for the said meeting. The Section Head himself chaired the meetings. Based on what transpired in the meetings, the Section Head had voiced out his opinions pertaining to the problem.

A few measures have been taken to tackle the problem in communication. Several meetings were conducted to discuss on the actions needed to be taken in order to create a more conducive communication environment. Weekly meetings, which were also attended by all the unit managers and the supervisors as well as the workers, have been organised to gather feedback from the workers pertaining to the said problem.

Unfortunately, the workers lack confidence to speak out their views, opinions or even ideas to develop a more effective communication within the Section. The workers preferred to voice out their grievances among themselves (normally after the meetings) rather than to the Section Head. But sometimes they do speak out their grievances to the unit managers concerned. This situation has created a big gap in communication between the Section Head and the workers.

Apart from having weekly meetings, the researcher have also organised a dialogue session, which was less formal. This dialogue session was conducted with the hope that the workers would be more open to voice out their feelings and grievances. However it was fruitless and the problem remains.

From the observation made by the researcher on the dialogue, the workers still prefer not to voice out the problems in the work place to the Section Head. Again, this has placed the Section Head in a difficult situation.

As a result, the Section Head was not aware of the workers' grievances. And the workers on the other hand, subscribe to the thought that, even if they speak out their affliction, the Section Head would not be much of a help to them. This is where the workers think that the Section Head does not pay much attention to them.

The lack of effective communication within the Section may also jeopardise the whole working system of the organisation, for it is the nerve centre for the whole organisation. Any misunderstanding or misinterpreting of information may cause deficiency in carrying jobs.

As one of the Section's functions is managing the filing and mailing system, the movement of files could slow down due to the low work performance. Consequently, it may also delay the other sections in taking action pertaining to any issues referred to the organisation by other organisations in the state which are considered as the external customers.

To conclude, it is justified that the Section needs to improve on its communication practices, in order to contribute to the success of the Section and the organisation as a whole. Effective communication could avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation of information from taking place.

3.4 Research Design

This is an exploratory research project. The research design involves an action research method. The method consists of a spiral of cycles of planning, action, observation,
reflection and evaluation.

Data collection during the Action Research method stage involves participant observation. The making and recording of observations is an essential part of this technique. Data collection can include direct observations, immediate experience of the observer, documents, informal/unstructured interview and questionnaires (in this case, the researcher adopted questionnaires designed by Corrado (1994)) and may be recorded by pen and paper, verbal and documents.

In her role as facilitator and also the observer, the researcher needs to be aware of all types of behaviour including facial expressions and body language that provided insight into the participants reactions to the project and to record any observations made about the participants, even those that did not seem relevant. It is also taken into consideration that the research problem (project) can be addressed by qualitative data gathered by direct observation and other means pertinent to the field setting. Apart from that, the research problem is also concerned with human meanings and interactions.

3.5 Action Research Literature Review

3.5.1 Definition of Action Research

Definitions of Action Research by writers is richly found in the literature review pertaining to Action Research. Burns (1997), defined Action Research as the application of fact-finding to practical problem-solving in a social situation with a view of improving the quality of action within it. The definition by Burns (1997) shows how Action Research is different from the traditional research because it involves the collaboration and co-operation of researchers, practitioners and laymen.

According to Cunningham (1993), Action Research is a term for describing a large range of activities which the point of convergence is research, planning, theorising, learning and development. It describes a continuous process of research and learning in the researcher's long-term relationships with a problem.

Cunningham (1993) also regards that an action researcher as a person with a "scientific attitude, an understanding of qualitative research principles, an understanding of the dynamics of change and a commitment to studying problems that are relevant in real settings".

Action Research encourages the researcher to experience the problem as it evolves. This is the act of 'engaging' in real-life problem-solving and getting legitimisation from real organisation. The researcher must be able to access real-life data in 'real' time. It is an act of being engaged in the universe where the problem is occurring. This requires the commitment and interest of those who are experiencing the problems.

Cunningham (1993) further states that Action Research help in the change process. He emphasises that action research is a process where employees become jointly responsible for managing the process of change through a steering committee or Action Research Group.

The process of action research was first conceptualised by Lewin and further developed by many other action researchers like Kolb, Carr, Kemmis and many others. In brief it is a spiral of cycles of action and research incorporating four major moments: plan, act, observe and reflect (Figure 3.1). Zuber-Skerritt