

Downs, C.W. & Adrian, A.D. (2004). *Assessing organizational communication: Strategic communication audits*. London, England: Guildford.

Reviewed by: [Jeannie Fletcher](#)

The authors primary aims are to describe the basic strategy or art of the communication audit, to acquaint readers with tools of the trade, and to challenge readers to improve upon them. Their interactive text design is successful and their approach provides a sense of collaboration with the reader. They cover a range of analytical means, from which the reader is free to choose what will work best in a given situation. The various methods are not ranked; rather, readers are encouraged to select what is most useful from each, as well as to develop new technologies. In seeking feedback and improvement on the various means of analysis the authors acknowledge the dynamic nature of the task and provide for ongoing improvement in the profession. They note that auditors should examine their own values and biases and that some auditors always seem to recommend the same solution to every problem. They note that one way of avoiding this is for the auditor to talk with other experts.

Chapter One effectively outlines the importance of communication in organizations, noting that the communication audit adopts a communication perspective on organizations. The authors observe that the role of communication is often oversimplified and they highlight the importance of the total environmental context, noting that the communication audit provides a framework for getting things done and should not be just a side concern. They point out that like all other assessments the communication audit should be characterised by: independence, professionalism, diagnostic thoroughness, skilled evaluation, tailored design, and current time frame. Communication audits are identified as valuable because they: enable repair of communication, thus preventing a breakdown before it occurs; generate new information that can verify employee perceptions and help the organization strategically; forecast problems to be addressed and identify strengths to be reinforced; and contribute to the development of communication systems within the organization.

For companies to plot where they're going, the authors point out that a communication audit enables comparative progress with where they have been. They also note that a 1983 survey of Fortune 500 companies revealed that 45% had conducted a communication audit. The audit is often used as a benchmark against which to compare later assessments and watch development of the organizations culture. Where cultural adjustments are made, assessments can provide unique insights into managing in an era of globalization.

Chapter Two describes each aspect of initiating and planning an assessment, from accommodating the clients purposes to familiarising management with the assessment procedure. Here, an annotated list of potential audit technologies is provided. Each is outlined in terms of the time and cost involved, the type of information it may yield, and the extent of disruption it may cause in the organization. Also included are a sample contract and a sample letter formalising arrangements between the auditor and organization.

Chapter Three describes conducting team audits, focusing on collaboration and making the process accessible to graduate students. The stepwise process of the audit is described, including issues that the team will face at each stage. Downs and Adrian point out the importance of the audit team being intact before entering the organization, having developed their own collaborative norms and systems for data collection. The team needs to be familiar with its own styles of communicating and to have considered the impact on the audit process. They should also have created a vision that is client focused.

Especially useful here are: a tabulated outline of team audit roles for each phase of the audit process; guidelines on systematizing quantitative data and summarising qualitative data; and guidelines on the interpretation phase to help teams avoid groupthink. The authors point out that the audit team will learn as much about their own communication as they learn about communication in the client company.

Chapter four provides a 12-step process to help auditors choose focal areas to assess. These aspects range from examining how task processes impact communication to linking internal communication to organizational strategies.

Chapters 5 to 12 provide a comprehensive description of a variety of analytic techniques. These include excellent tables, many of which are annotated, plus a selection of sample documentation. Extensive experience underpins this text and the writing is not only clear and concise but is easy to read.

I would like to comment on two chapters from this latter section of the book in particular, firstly the chapter on Diagnosing Communication Networks and secondly the chapter entitled Critical Communication Experiences.

Diagnosing Communication Networks

The authors point to network analysis as helping auditors to understand information flow. Although it enables mapping the organizations information structure, it would also be useful to consider the dynamics of the networks operation. Further development of this topic could include, for example, how such networks facilitate communities of practice in organizations, and how network development reflects the overall communication climate and culture of the organization. In discussing who is to be studied, the authors note that this is not always as obvious as it may seem, and this is my point in raising the matter of difference between network structure and the dynamics of network use. That is, it would be possible to map structure and information flow of networks while still not revealing the communication dynamics of many people who work in the organization.

Critical Communication Experience

The authors describe the history of the term and then clearly identify how they are applying it. They say they will use critical communication experience, but they then go on to use critical communication incident. Terms used in audits have a profound effect on peoples perceptions. The word audit for example remains threatening to many people, despite efforts to explain that it should not be seen as either a threatening term or process. The word critical, together with the word incident may distort peoples perceptions of what is required (in the case of self-report) and what is relevant (in the case of observer report). This appears to be supported by the authors observations and experience in using the technique. They note that When the critical incident questionnaire is used in conjunction with other questionnaires the response rate often drops below 33%. Consistent use of the term critical communication experience rather than critical communication incident may overcome this to some extent but it may be more useful in the longer term to develop a concept that participants will view more positively.

Overall the work is a well developed text. It should prove even more useful than the earlier version. The authors approach demonstrates sensitivity to the communication audit client whilst maintaining integrity of the content and providing a comprehensive and insightful coverage of the topic. It is a valuable resource for graduate students of organizational communication and audit practitioners alike.

Purchase information: This book is available from all good booksellers, or can be purchased direct from Footprint Books at www.footprint.com.au.

About the reviewer:

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