Communicating about Communication:
A Case Study of Ineffective Management in *Office Space*

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*Planning to Plan*
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Executive Summary

“It's not that I’m lazy, it's that I just don't care.”

This report explores the deficiencies and dysfunctions exhibited by the managers in the movie *Office Space*, especially those of Bill Lumbergh. Lumbergh, the Division Vice President at Initech, supervises a number of workers, including the movie’s main character, computer programmer Peter Gibbons. This report asserts that the main management deficiency at Initech, and for Lumbergh specifically, is a lack of communication skills. Several other problems are identified, but all of these problems are also connected to dysfunctional communication. It is suggested that Lumbergh and other Initech managers attend Camp Communication in order to realize that their communication issues are causing real harm to the company, and then learn skills that will help them communicate more effectively. Upon return from Camp Communication, the management team will share their new knowledge with their subordinates.

N.B.: Each of the section subtitles is a quotation from *Office Space*.

Statement of the Facts

“Work Sucks”

*Office Space* was released in 1999. It recounts the bleak life of Peter Gibbons, a software engineer. Peter works at Initech, a white-collar office. Peter finds most everything about his job frustrating: the commute, his coworkers, and his bosses. He has eight bosses, but the most prominent one in the movie is Bill Lumbergh, Initech Division Vice President. Of the eight bosses, the only other one that is seen in the movie is Dom Portwood, Lumbergh's subordinate manager. Lumbergh manages several other workers, including Michael Bolton and Samir Nagheenanajar, Peter’s friends. Peter, Michael, and Samir are all computer programmers.
Lumbergh also manages the characters Tom Smykowski, a customer relations representative, and Milton Waddams, whose exact role was not made clear in the movie.

Peter forgot to include a newly mandated cover sheet on his TPS reports, which led to a morning filled with his bosses stopping by his desk or phoning him to let him know about his mistake. Then there is a general panic when it is announced that there are two new team members. Employees quickly surmise that these recent additions are consultants who will be laying off people. The consultants, Bob and Bob, are known as the Bobs and conduct interviews with each staff member.

Peter attempts to sneak out of work early on Friday because he knows that Lumbergh is going to ask him to work the weekend. Peter’s plan is foiled when Lumbergh catches him on the way out the door and asks him to work Saturday and Sunday. The next morning, Peter stays in bed all day—ignoring many calls from Lumbergh. Since the movie takes place in the 90’s, Peter has an answering machine and can hear all of his boss’s messages.

On Monday, Peter decides not to quit, but to just stop going to work. Peter makes one last stop at the office to get his address book. He learns that he is scheduled to interview with the Bobs. He meets with them and makes clear his grievances without sugar-coating them.

Later, the Bobs are meeting Lumbergh concerning several of the employees who will be let go. They tell Lumbergh that they discovered that Milton had been laid off years ago, but because of an accounting glitch he continued to be paid. Instead of telling Milton that he has been laid off, the Bobs just turned off his paycheck and figure that he’ll eventually just stop coming to work. The Bobs then tell Lumbergh that Peter is management material. Lumbergh disagrees, and they assert their power by beginning to ask him the same kinds of questions they
asked the other employees. The Bobs invite Peter back to Initech. They tell Peter that he is getting a promotion, several direct reports, and a raise.

From there, the movie takes on an absurdist twist where Peter, Michael, and Samir plant a virus on Initech’s system that will embezzle money for them over the span of years. This plan fails, Milton sets the Initech offices ablaze, and Peter finds a new job as a construction worker.

**Identification of Management Issues**

*“We need to talk about your TPS reports.”*

A variety of issues demonstrate the poor management of Initech Corporation on organizational and personal levels. At the organizational level, structural problems cause confusion about to whom employees report. Initech works on a hierarchical structure that is not clearly defined. Peter and his colleagues report to several different bosses, leading to communication and motivation problems. Because of the stilted interactions with supervisors, employees tend to not build relationships with their supervisors. This lack of rapport and trust exacerbates the demotivation that pervades the organization. Peter mentions in his interview with the Bobs that it seems like the people who do the least amount of work seem to get the most rewards; he gets a promotion as a result of this interview. The interview that Lumbergh has with the Bobs underscores this idea; the Bobs recognize that Lumbergh is in a position of power, but that he cannot explain exactly what it is that he does.

Unrealistic employee expectations worsen management-employee relationships. At the end of each Friday, Peter and colleagues are consistently asked to work Saturday, and sometimes Sunday as well. This seriously detracts from job satisfaction and overall employee happiness,
and breeds a culture of resentment. Lumbergh also repeatedly moves Milton’s desk, and even takes away the red Swingline stapler which Milton loves so much because the company has switched to Boston staplers. A large banner asks, “Is it good for the company?” However, the company shows no signs of concern about what is good for its employees.

The biggest problem that causes management failures at Initech is poor communication. Communication problems exist both at the organizational and individual levels, and exacerbate all of the other problematic management issues. The unclear hierarchy is an example of an organizational communication issue. Peter reports to at least eight different bosses. When he fails to attach a cover sheet to his TPS report, he is reprimanded in person, on the phone, and via fax by several different bosses, all with the same message. This is not an effective way to motivate an employee to conform to standards. Ruck and Welch discuss a report on management’s effect on employee motivation that “found that 25 per cent of employees say that their manager rarely or never makes them feel their work counts” (295). It is clear that Initech’s supervisors spend more time pointing out employees’ failures than accomplishments.

Lumbergh personifies individual communication issues that cause problems within the organization. Lumbergh’s condescending tone and lack of listening skills undermine his attempts to communicate. This breeds resentment and adds to the reasons why the employees dislike their bosses. Peter tries to avoid Lumbergh rather than be subjected to his attempts to communicate. Lumbergh repeatedly demonstrates poor listening skills, asking Peter questions without waiting for a response. Lumbergh never listens to Milton either, and his failure to do so leads Milton to burn down the Initech office building.
### Table: Management Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character / Entity</th>
<th>Management Issue</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initech Corp</td>
<td>Poor organizational structure</td>
<td>Unclear assignment of responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter and colleagues</td>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td>Organizational culture and lack of rapport with supervisors contribute to pervasive demotivation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumbergh &amp; other supervisors</td>
<td>Unfair employee expectations</td>
<td>Work weekends, move desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumbergh</td>
<td>Communication style</td>
<td>Condescending tone, lack of listening skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initech Corp</td>
<td>Communication issues</td>
<td>Confused organizational structure lack of individuals’ communication skills, messages repeated ad nauseum until their meaning is essentially lost.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Statement of the Problem

"We always like to avoid confrontation, whenever possible."

The most urgent problem at Initech is the lack of communication. All of the other problems could be alleviated if communication were improved. If management communicated openly and honestly with workers, the workers would feel more engaged and valued by the company, leading to an increase in morale, motivation, and productivity. In the end, open and honest communication could have prevented the disgruntled Milton from burning down the building. If management were to clearly communicate their expectations to employees, employees would likely have a better attitude towards their colleagues and work as a whole. If
more effective communication were a part of the company culture, Milton would have been apprised of the fact that he had been laid off, and he could have begun the search for a new job. Lumbergh and other supervisors should have also been honest with the employees about why the Bobs were engaged as consultants. They weren’t new members of the “team”—employees should have been told about the possibility of layoffs. Peter should have also communicated more clearly with his supervisors—he should have told Lumbergh that he was unwilling to work on the weekend, and he should have communicated his desire to no longer work for Initech, instead of simply not showing up for work.

Communication includes listening as well as talking. Lumbergh would have to become a more effective listener, instead of just a talker, in order to improve communication with his employees. The majority of the time, Lumbergh would ask questions of employees without taking the time or effort to listen to the employees’ answers. This lack of listening is as critical as the lack of speaking honestly; communication really is a two-way street. Communication would also be improved if, as part of speaking honestly, employees used less corporate jargon.

### Table: Severity of Management Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Problem severity rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management does not communicate openly and honestly with subordinates (e.g. why the Bobs had been brought in)</td>
<td>Most urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management does not clearly express its expectations to employees</td>
<td>Less urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management expects too much out of employees (e.g. working weekends, Milton’s desk being moved multiple times)</td>
<td>Very urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Urgency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumbergh does not take the time to listen to employees’ responses and ideas</td>
<td>Very urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees have too many bosses</td>
<td>Less urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one informed Milton that he had been laid off</td>
<td>Urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one informed Milton that he would stop receiving paychecks</td>
<td>Very urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter should have communicated more effectively with his supervisors</td>
<td>Urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milton has set fire to the Initech office building</td>
<td>Very urgent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Statement of Alternative Courses of Action

“I did absolutely nothing, and it was everything that I thought it could be.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative Course of Action</th>
<th>Best Case Scenario</th>
<th>Worst Case Scenario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fire Lumbergh, replace with Peter</td>
<td>Peter may have the same failures if he based his performance on Lumbergh's example</td>
<td>Peter learns from Lumbergh's mistakes and performs much better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace violence prevention program</td>
<td>Milton does not burn down the office, peace is maintained</td>
<td>Inspires violence in workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring in mediators to facilitate employee-management communication</td>
<td>It works, and communication improves throughout the organization</td>
<td>Employees and management find it patronizing, do not take program seriously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves Human Resources Department</td>
<td>Improves relationships, initiate communication training, improve overall organizational culture</td>
<td>HR lacks communication skills, has bias toward management, further alienates workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educate employees on communication and up-management techniques</td>
<td>Raise workers' awareness about communication issues and empower them to deal directly with issues</td>
<td>Backfire by encouraging a culture of resentment, eroding workers' respect for their supervisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bobs bring in new management team</td>
<td>New management team gets on well with existing staff, understands organizational culture, has excellent problem solving skills</td>
<td>New management makes same mistakes as existing management, could also signal job insecurity to staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team-building retreat for entire company</td>
<td>Trust and communication is strengthened, new problem solving skills are learned</td>
<td>Expensive, time consuming, loss of productivity, employees may find patronizing, could deepen divisions if unsuccessful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Selection of the Best Alternative

“I just stare at my desk, but it looks like I'm working.”

Improving communication at Initech would help to solve most of the company’s problems. Good communication would promote better employee-management relations and improve motivation and performance. Ruck and Welch have shown that “Communication within organisations is linked to higher levels of performance and service (Tourish & Hargie, 2009, pp. 10–15) generating communication capital (Malmelin, 2007, p. 298) and social capital (Lee, 2009), grounded in organisational relationships” (294). The management at Initech needs to hone their skills at both delivering and receiving messages. Zeffane, Tipu, and Ryan note, “There's no such thing as employees being too informed. The sad thing today is that senior managers are so busy giving direction and orders that they fail to listen and subordinates decide to leave their brainpower at the door as they enter the workplace. People with suggestions are too often viewed as troublemakers or complainers. In this mode, no one can spell commitment to the organization and therefore would not trust its managers and leaders” (83).

Zeffane, Tipu, and Ryan discuss the relationship between communication, commitment, and trust. All three work together to create organizational culture; if the triad is successful, employees will be more motivated and perform more effectively. We recommend the training program at Camp Communication to improve communication skills for the supervisors at Initech. Daily exercises in active listening, building trust, and effective communication will make the supervisors at Initech more effective.

Lumbergh stands to benefit most from the activities that develop active listening skills. Taking Boyd’s active listening questionnaire will alert him to the fact that his active listening
skills are weak. Following the five-step program outlined by Cousins, Lumbergh will learn to
develop his listening skills, becoming more attuned to his subordinates’ feelings and opinions,
and improving his ability to communicate with them, gain their trust, and heighten their
commitment to their jobs at Initech.

Supervisors will also learn how to more effectively appraise employee performance.
David Baldwin points out: “In the absence of a formal performance-appraisal system, people will
judge the work performance of others, including subordinates, informally and arbitrarily” (83).
Initech supervisors will learn how to communicate recognition and appreciation to employees
who are meeting performance standards, as well as guidance to those who are not. Setting clear
performance standards and effectively communicating about employee performance will ensure
that the appraisal system is seen as effective, not “manipulative, abusive, autocratic, and
counterproductive” (Baldwin, D. 87). The supervisors will also learn circular supervisory skills
as described by Pan and Li, opening a channel for feedback to improve employee-management
relations, “because when a ruler bears wrong markings, you cannot expect the user of the ruler to
take the right measure” (Pan & Li 468).

After the supervisors complete Camp Communication, they will return to Initech and
share their experience with the entire staff in a short presentation. This will open lines of
communication, and demonstrate their new commitment to a transparent organizational structure
and systems thinking. Employees will have a chance to communicate their ideas with their
supervisors, and the entire organization will be on the same page. Momeni has found that “more
than 70% of employees’ perceptions of [organizational culture] is directly shaped by managers’
style of leadership and behavior,” so it would be reasonable to expect a trickle-down effect that
improves employees’ attitudes toward their supervisors (37). A culture of trust, mutual
accountability, and circular supervision will improve relationships and employee performance, benefitting Initech as a whole as well as the individuals who work there.

**Evaluation of the Group Work Experience**

*I could put strychnine in the guacamole.*

Our group formed from those in class who wanted to meet in person to work together in person (as opposed to online) on the final project. The storming phase was mild as we quickly established rapport based on mutual respect and communication. We soon moved on to the norming stage and began operating as a cohesive team. In the performance stage, we assigned primary responsibilities to each group member and then reviewed each contribution together as a team.

**Table: Group Division of Labor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>5/28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>5/28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>Christy</td>
<td>6/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Facts</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>6/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification of Management Issues</td>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>6/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>Christy</td>
<td>6/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Alternative Courses of Action</td>
<td>Melissa, Joseph &amp; Christy</td>
<td>6/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of the Best Alternative</td>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>6/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of the Group Work Experience</td>
<td>Melissa, Joseph &amp; Christy</td>
<td>6/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>5/28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Academic Integrity</td>
<td>Joseph, Christy &amp; Melissa</td>
<td>6/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PowerPoint</td>
<td>Joseph, Christy, Melissa</td>
<td>6/11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each group member felt that the other group members produced excellent work. The requirements of the assignment were not only satisfied but also exceeded expectations. We
formed a cohesive team that was both enjoyable to work with and productive. We were all satisfied with our group experience and would not have changed a thing.
Bibliography

“Sounds like someone has a case of the Mondays.”


Statement of Academic Integrity

“We're gonna bring in some entry-level graduates, farm some work out to Singapore…”

Managing Information Organizations (INFO640), Section 001
Deborah Turner
Spring 2011-2012

Academic integrity certification for Assignment #4: Case Study Analysis (30%)

Certification
We individually certify that:

- To the best of my knowledge, this assignment is entirely work produced by this group.
- Any identification of my individual work (e.g., in a “Table of Contributions”) is accurate.
- I have not quoted the words of any other person from a printed source or a website without indicating what has been quoted and providing an appropriate citation.
- I have not submitted any of the material in this document to satisfy the requirements of any other course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/s/ Melissa Correll</td>
<td>June 7, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/s/ Christy Curro</td>
<td>June 7, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/s/ Joseph Keslar</td>
<td>June 7, 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>