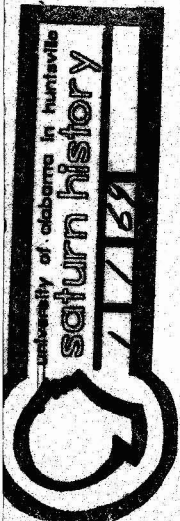


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SOURCE CREDIBILITY AND PERSONAL INFLUENCE IN THREE CONTEXTS:

A STUDY OF DYADIC COMMUNICATION IN A COMPLEX

AEROSPACE ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Richetto, Gary Marshall. Ph.D., Purdue University, January 1969. Source credibility and Personal Influence in Three Contexts: A Study of Dyadic Communication in a Complex Aerospace Organization. Major Professor: W. Charles Redding.

This study investigated the applicability of a theoretical model of communication to an ongoing complex organization. The model combined two concepts: the essentially sociological concept of the "two-step-flow" and the psychological-rhetorical concept of "ethos" (or "source credibility").

The research sample was composed of 178 civil service employees within two laboratories of the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center, largest field center of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Personal influence was investigated within three separate spheres (or contexts) of influence: (1) task-related, (2) political ("grapevine") and (3) social-emotional (non-job-related).

Data were collected in interviews, supplemented by rating scales. Subjects were asked to identify those individuals to whom they turned for information in each of the three spheres of influence. Persons named as "influential" were categorized as informal, if they were sources other than immediate supervisors; and formal, if they were immediate supervisors. Subjects were asked to rate their sources on four credibility scales: (1) expertise, (2) sociability, (3) good intent and (4) trustworthiness.

Within each of the three contexts, all subjects were asked to rank the relative importance of the four credibility factors. Subjects were asked a variety of questions concerning the nature of their communication relationships with sources identified as influential. Further, subjects reported their self-perceived levels of aspiration, and tolerance for job-related "ambiguity". Finally, all subjects reported the extent of their own utilization of printed materials, of interpersonal contacts, and of additional information sources related to the three influence spheres.

Among the conclusions drawn were the following:

1. The proposed theoretical model provided a useful framework for viewing human communication within a complex organization.
2. "Influentials" were found to receive high ratings on all measures of source credibility.
3. Sociability, as a credibility-determinant, was ranked lower in importance than expertise, good intent, or trustworthiness.
4. Subjects' rankings of the importance of credibility factors were found to vary from one influence sphere to another.
5. When subjects named immediate supervisors as influentials, the credibility of these supervisors did not differ significantly from the credibility of informal (non-supervisory) influentials.
6. When credibility ratings between informal influentials and immediate supervisors were compared, the informal sources rated significantly higher.
7. Influentials were found (1) to attend more to mass media and (2) to indulge in more interpersonal contacts outside of the laboratory branch than did non-influentials.

8. Influentials were found to possess a higher level of aspiration (as measured by anticipated hierarchical position within a five year time-frame).

9. Different types of influentials were found to differ from one another in certain forms of communication behavior.

10. Although it was not typical for a single influential to be a preferred source for the same influencee in more than one of the three spheres, it was also true that influential sources tended to be influential (for different influencees) in more than one context.