Organizational Communication at Marine Corps Intelligence Activity: "Word Posted" is not "Word Passed"

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"Above all, leadership communication entails nurturing and maintaining a workplace environment in which communication flows freely and quickly in all directions with minimal distortion or lag time."
(Mai and Akerson 2003, 1-2)

I. Introduction

"Ask executives if their organizations communicate well and chances are you'll hear a resounding yes," notes prominent business communication consultant Dianna Booher; "But ask those a little lower in the ranks and you may hear otherwise" (Booher 2007, 4-5). Fortunately, the Commander of Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (MCIA), Colonel D. Henry, does not suffer from such a limited and myopic view; he has asked Ka-Bar Cohort 5 to study communication at MCIA, and this paper is a response to that tasking. This paper uses multi-question surveys to examine the organizational communication of MCIA, the Marine Corps Intelligence Enterprise's largest organization. With Booher's challenge in mind, the study attempts to determine perceptions of organizational communication at all levels – from the Commander down to lower-level employees – in order to identify barriers to communication and understand weak linkages in the communication chain. The following paper provides a literature review of organizational communication, and then discusses the study's survey and its results; it concludes with a set of recommendations for improving organizational communication at Marine Corps Intelligence Activity.

II. Organizational Communication: What, Why, How (and How Not)

What is Communication?
Fundamentally, communication is the process of transferring information from one entity (the sender) to another (the receiver). This seems simple enough. In fact, it seems appropriate to assume, as the process model of communication (and many leaders/supervisors do) does, that if the message is communicated, the message is received and understood. And yet, as Mensch and Dingman point out, "communication is fraught with misunderstanding" (Mensch and Dingman 2010, 424). The more detailed perceptual model of communication suggests that there is much more to communication. The message senders must communicate accurately and message receivers need to perceive and understand the information accurately. The sender "encodes" the message, translating it into language or code for the receiver; the receiver then receives the message, translates the language/coding – "decoding" – and builds his or her own understanding or meaning from the message that is perceived. During the transmittal and translation process, anything that interferes with the transfer and understanding is called "noise," and represents a barrier to effective communication (Mensch and Dingman 2010, 424-426; Krlshnamacharyulu and Ramakrishnan 2009, 9-13).

The discussion above shows just how complex communication is. With this in mind, Mensch and Dingman offer a more complete definition in which communication is treated as "'the exchange of information between a sender and a receiver, and the inference (perception) of meaning between the individuals involved" (Mensch and Dingman 2010, 424).

Given this working definition, we now move on to the different types of organizational information – internal and external, formal and informal. External communication is an organization's messages to the outside world, whether its customers, collaborators, or competitors. Internal communication – the focus of this study – is the transfer of information within the confines and between the members of the organization itself.

Organizations communicate internally by both formal and informal means (Youngwerth and Twaddle 2011, 651). Formal communication is official communication between organizational members. The communication flows both vertically and horizontally. Vertical communication is the "flow of information between people at different organizational levels" (Mensch and Dingman 2010, 439), with messages going both ways – downward (from leadership to workers) and upward (from workers, toward

the leadership) (McNamara 2001; Mensch and Dingman 2010, 439-440). In contrast, horizontal communication "flows among coworkers and between different work units;" its main purposes tend to be coordination and collaboration (Mensch and Dingman 2010, 440).

Informal Communication encompasses what is typically known as "the grapevine." The grapevine is the unofficial way that messages make their way through an organization. Several key actors, such as gossips (active in passing information through the grapevine) and moles (obtain and use information informally to increase their own power) propagate and utilize informal communication media (Mensch and Dingman 2010, 440-441))

Why Communication?

The importance of communication may appear intuitively obvious, but does research support this assumed importance; the short answer is yes. Research has shown that "when employee needs are met through satisfying communication, employees are more likely to build effective work relationships." (Gray & Laidlow 2004, quoted in Tsai and Chuang 2009, 826). This "research satisfaction" – "the sum total of an individual's satisfaction with information flow and relationship variables" (Downs & Hazen, 1977, in Tsai and Chuang 2009, 826) has been correlated with key variables such as job performance and turnover rates. In fact, Tsai and Chuang (2009) found that "(1) communication satisfaction was positively related to job performance, (2) communication satisfaction was negatively related to turnover intention, and (3) job performance was not negatively related to turnover intention" (Tsai and Chuang 2009, 831). Further, "certain facets of employees' communication satisfaction that exhibit both information and relationship features – supervisory communication, personal feedback, and communication climate – were found to be the major dimensions of communication-job performance relationships" (Tsai and Chuang 2009, 831).[1] In other words, the ways in which information flows in an organization is critical to the way that personnel understand their relationship to and within the organization. In short, as Chen (2008) stated, each passing study seems to reveal "that the relationship between internal/employee communication and corporate effectiveness is more significant than what has previously been assumed" (Chen 2008, 167).

Effective Communication Basics

Effective communication starts at the top, but must encompass every level of an organization. Communication does not end once the message leaves the sender. Corrado et al (1994) suggest communication depends on the content of the message, the flow of information, and the impact that the message has on the intended audience (Corrado et al 1994, 12). The content represents the message and how it is targeted. Flow includes "how information moves through the organization to its audiences" (Corrado et al 1994, 12). Finally, impact relates to "the results produced by communications efforts" (Corrado et al 1994, 13). Kumuyi summarizes these factors well, stating "leadership communication is, therefore, passing a message to an audience by any appropriate means such that the audience understands the message, accepts it and reacts to it according to the sender's expectation" (Kumuyi 2007, 36).

With this in mind, Kumuyi suggests that leaders should take several steps to ensure effective communication, including examining the message (make it on-target in content and context), establishing the right work environment (one in which communication flows freely and openly), and engaging the right channels when the leadership speaks (not just the readily available channel) (Kumuyi 2007, 36-37). Leaders should build an ongoing, multi-stage communication plan that is coherent and relates processes back to mission and vision (Corrado et al 1994, 75). In particular, Corrado et al (1994) suggest talking to employees about key areas such mission, employee responsibilities, performance, employee needs and concerns, and employee feedback (Corrado et al 1994, 39-42). In Mai and Akerson's (2003) words, "the leader of an organization is automatically the designated chief communication officer and is accountable

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[1] According to Tsai and Chuang, the most predictive factor for job performance was personal feedback; the most predictive of turnover intention was supervisory communication (2009, 831).

for all communication in the organization — not only his or her own, but that of the entire workplace community. As such, communication demands a deeper understanding" (Mai and Akerson 2003, 1-2).

Even if an organization's leadership is committed to effective communication, how does it build an environment that is conducive to a free and open flow of open and effective messaging? Effective communication and collaboration can be correlated with organizational trust (Youngwerth and Twaddle 2011, 652). Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) suggest trust is "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (712).[2] Neal (2011) asserts that some of the most sought-after "actions" (using Mayer et al's term) and/or needs relate to security, acceptance, and objective achievement (38-39). Trust increases when workers have convergent goals and organizational commitment (Blomqvist & Ståhle 2000). Trust and collaboration may be impeded in cases in which specialization reduces workforce interaction/causes people to work alone, competition reduces information sharing, and/or the organizational culture fails to promote collaboration and cooperation overall (Mensch and Dingman 2010, 440). Supervisors and managers must be encouraged to communicate; their communication skills and performance must be included in their performance evaluation criteria (Corrado et al 1994, 75).
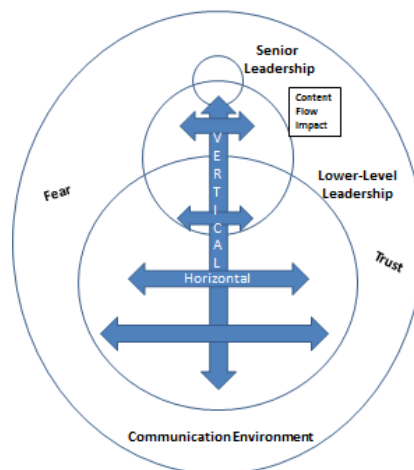
As Mai and Akerson (2003) conclude:

> Creating and sustaining a climate of trust and a sense of community within the organization must be a priority for any organization's leadership. How leaders extend trust, share information, provide direction and orientation, and in general develop a feeling of a common stake in the organization's future represents, in sum, what is preeminently a communications challenge (2).

Figure 1 attempts to provide a graphical model of organizational communication. It represents the manner in which communication occurs at multiple levels, from top to bottom (vertical communication) and horizontally within the organization. The content, flow, and impact of messages are critical, as is the overall organizational environment, which is shaped by factors such as feelings of trust and/or fear of repercussions when negative messages or feedback are provided.
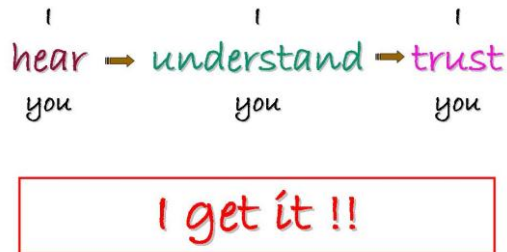
Figure 1. A Model of Communication

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[2] See also the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2011), which states "trusting requires that we can, 1) be vulnerable to others (vulnerable to betrayal in particular); 2) think well of others, at least in certain domains; and 3) be optimistic that they are, or at least will be, competent in certain respects." Available at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trust/.

If Figure 1 provides a robust and scholarly model of the key facets of organizational communication, perhaps the simple graphic from "BeClear's" Coaching and Communication Blog (2011), puts the complicated topic in sharper relief. It says simply, "I hear you, I understand you, I trust you… I GET IT." See Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. "BeClear" Blog Summary of Communication (2011)[3]

Barriers to Effective Communication

Mensch and Dingman (2010) list a wide range of barriers to communication, ranging from personal barriers to tangible physical barriers (427-428). These barriers and breakdowns are evidenced in various ways, ranging from diverging priorities, to poor "chemistry," to lack of coordination on the simplest of tasks (Booher 2007, 4-5); see Table 1 for summary of communication barriers and symptoms. Symptoms suggest the presence of barriers, and the end result is a reduction in organizational effectiveness. As Corrado et al (1994) summarizes, "if employees are not given adequate information nor allowed to contribute to the solution of problems, they may revert to being the cause of them, resulting in increased absenteeism, lower productivity, grievances and so on" (10).

Table 1. Ineffective Communication – Barriers and Symptoms	
Barriers (Mensch and Dingman 2010, 427-428)	**Symptoms** (Booher 2007, 4-5)
Personal - Communication skills - Variations on how messages are received - Variations in trust - Stereotypes and prejudices - egos - Poor listening skills - Natural tendency to evaluate others messages (from our point of view) - Inability to listen with understanding - Nonverbal communication Physical - Sound - Time - Space	- Conflicting goals and objectives - Conflicting priorities - Conflicting schedules - Left-hand, right-hand blindness (one section doesn't know what another is doing and duplicates or hinders their work.) - Turf wars - Unclear values - Low morale - People doing just enough - Lack of coordination of routine tasks - Missed details - Gossip/rumors - "Us" against "them" - Poor attitudes; cynicism - Bad "chemistry"

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[3] See "BeClear" Blog at http://beclear1.wordpress.com/2011/03/11/what-is-communication-3/.

III. Research Question and Methods

Colonel Henry's tasking and the literature reviewed above lead us to the study's research question: "What barriers hinder communication at MCIA?" This study uses a survey to gather answers about the communication climate, practices, and barriers at MCIA. Communication research recommends surveys as an efficient mechanism for understanding organizational culture (Corrado et al 1994, 81-86). The survey is a quantitative method, but its several open-ended questions leads to more qualitative results as well (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 2000, 205-275). The authors surveyed several different groups: The Commander and Deputy Commander, Senior Leadership, Mid-Level Managers, Non-Supervisory Employees, Senior Enlisted Marines, and Enlisted Marines. The surveys ranged in size (the shortest being 15 questions, the longest being 24 questions), but focused on the same key themes: 1) locating the levels at which communication breaks down at MCIA (both horizontal and vertical communication), 2) determining the causes of communication breakdowns (barriers and symptoms), 3) gauging levels of organizational teamwork and trust, 4) identifying steps that have been taken to improve communication, and 5) gathering ideas on ways in which improvement could be improved in the future. The research team designed the questions to facilitate a better understanding of MCIA communication patterns, and this understanding then serves as foundation for the recommendations found at the end of this paper, which are aimed at producing more effective communication techniques and patterns. The research team distributed the survey via email in early November 2011. Respondents were given four days to complete the survey, and participation was optional, but encouraged.
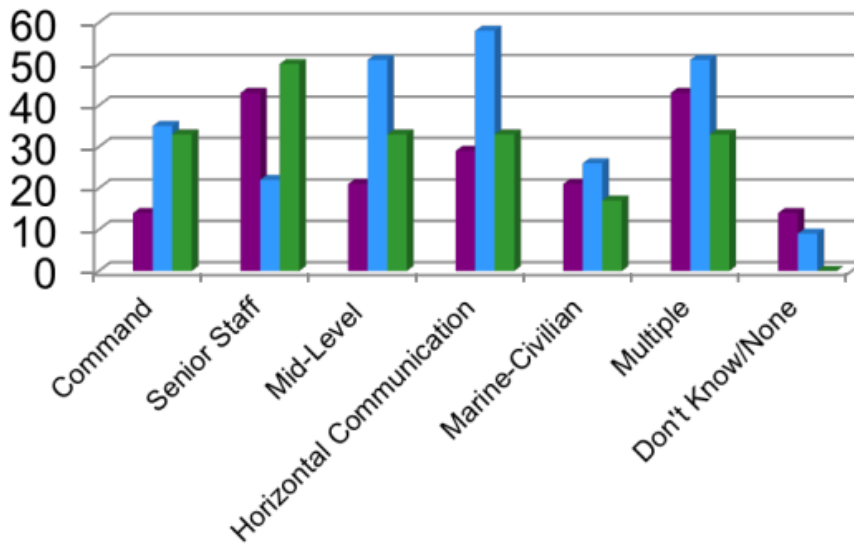
IV. Findings

In general, participation on the survey was low but acceptable, and the research term believes the results provide a reasonable gauge of the communication culture at MCIA. The participation of the Senior Level Managers (26%),[4] Mid-Level Managers (28%), Senior Enlisted Marines (20%), and Non-Supervisory Employees (26%) provide the bulk of the fodder for this paper. The Commander and Deputy responses (100% participation) and Enlisted Marines responses (only 4% participation) were noted as well, but do not have a substantive impact on this study. All results are published in Appendices A-F.

   a. Locating Communication Breakdowns/Barriers. Participants were asked "Do you sense communication problems at MCIA, and if so, at what level(s) does communication breakdown (in your opinion)?" All Senior Leadership respondents agreed to breakdowns at multiple levels, but beyond that, little insight was gained from their responses. Mid-Level Managers, too, suggested multiple problematic levels. More interestingly, however, is the fact that over 40% of these managers suggested problems at the Senior Leadership level (another 12% mentioned the Command Level). The Senior Enlisted Marines responded with similarly high numbers for the Senior Staff (nearly 50%), but provided large percentages (33%) for other levels (Command, Mid-Level, and Horizontal Communication) as well. The Non-Supervisory Employees provided what is perhaps the most self-reflective analysis, pinpointing the highest percentage of problems on across division and within division – that is, horizontal – communication. In this way, they placed emphasis on their own spheres of control, more so than other responding group. They also noted problems in the Mid-Level Managers and Command levels, which stands to reason given that these are their most immediate (Mid-Level) and most identifiable (Command) supervisory levels. Of note, several groups noted the Marine-Civilian divide, but no group results suggested it was a predominant level of communication breakdowns.

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[4] Of note, 7 of 15 Senior Level Managers returned responses but only 4 of these persons completed the survey fully. Therefore, their results are more difficult to quantify and use as will be discussed in the Results section.

Figure 3. Results on Levels of Communication Breakdowns

b. Barriers to Communication. The research team asked respondents two specific questions in order to identify the types of barriers to communication within MCIA. The first related question was "What do you believe is the general cause of the breakdown in communications at MCIA? For instance, is this personality, location, perception, or interaction driven?" The second related question pertained to more structural potential barriers; it asked "Do you believe there are structural barriers to effective communication in place at MCIA and if so, please discuss what barriers, at what levels, and your perception of how they developed. Please be as specific as possible."

Given that these questions were rather open-ended, the research team had to code and group responses into general categories (again, the raw results are found in the Appendices). The four Senior Leadership respondents provided a rather mixed bag of explanations that is not easily generalized. In contrast, the research found that the Mid-Level Managers and Senior Enlisted Marines responses could be categorized into four main categories: Poor Interactions (e.g. multiple, disjointed channels, mixed messages, too much email, etc.); Too Many Levels of Hierarchy and/or "Empire-building with those hierarchies; Personality Conflicts (particularly at the Senior Level, but also Mid-Level Managers); and finally, No Unity of Effort (e.g. no clear vision and/or mission). The Non-Supervisory Employees produced a similar list, but with slightly different weight for each category. They also mentioned the Marine-Civilian divide more than the other group. Table 3 summarizes the results.

Table 3. Sources of Communication Problems at MCIA	
Mid-Level Managers/Senior Enlisted	**Non-Supervisory Employees**
1. Poor Interactions 2. Hierarchy/Empire-Building 3. Personality Conflicts 4. No Unity of Effort/Lack of Direction	1. Hierarchy/Empire-Building 2. Personality Conflicts 3. Poor Interactions 4. No Unity of Effort/Lack of Direction 5. Marine-Civilian Divide

c. Organizational Trust. The research team asked an extensive series of questions pertaining to organizational trust. The questions attempted to pinpoint the feelings of trust toward different supervisory levels in the organization. They further sought to ascertain if MCIA leadership has developed an environment in which employees feel free to voice opinions, without fear of repercussion; and if employees feel that their voices are heard, respected, and acted upon when they do comment. The results of the various trust-related questions are difficult to concisely summarize, and perhaps the questions and responses are best viewed in their entirety. Suffice it to say that , in general, respondents were split down the middle on feelings of trust. The responses certainly do NOT suggest a pervasive feeling of trust within MCIA. Further, those employees that do feel their voices are heard and respected, cast doubt on the prospects of those commentaries being acted upon. Perhaps the trust results are best summarized by the results of one particular question; when asked (paraphrasing) "do you feel you can discuss any topic or voice any opinion to Senior Leadership without fear of reprisal" 60% of the respondents said no.

d. Ideas for Improvement. The survey concluded with two questions related to future improvements. The first asked "In the past 12-18 months, what have you done to improve communication at MCIA? Please discuss your efforts (no matter how larger or small you consider them) and includes outcomes and impact." The second question asked "If you could do one thing (at any level) to improve communication at MCIA, what would it be? Please explain."

The Senior-Level Managers' responses are best examined in totality; they offer some insights but are otherwise difficult to summarize. In contrast, the Mid-Level Managers, Senior Enlisted Marines, and Non-Supervisors offered many strong examples of collaboration initiatives, most of which fell generally into the vertical and horizontal communication realms. At those levels, ongoing fledgling efforts to continually improve MCIA communication do seem to be happening. This is encouraging.

With regard to the "what can be done" question, the research team once again grouped the Mid-Level Managers and Senior Enlisted into one group. The foci of those managers grouped roughly into the categories of 1) More dialogue/seek feedback, 2) Break down hierarchical barriers and "empires," and 3) Develop a clear mission/vision and prioritize efforts. There also seemed to be an underlying, implicit call for senior leaders to better value the employees and build trust within the organization. The Non-Supervisor responses can be generally grouped into 1) Team-building/Training and holding managers accountable for communication, 2) Transparent, consistent channels of communication, 3) Break down hierarchical levels/flatter organization, and again, 4) Build trust (no repercussions for voicing opinions).

Table 4. Ideas for Improved Communication at MCIA	
Mid-Level Managers/Senior Enlisted	**Non-Supervisory Employees**
1. More dialogue/feedback 2. Reduce Hierarchy/Empire-Building 3. Mission/Vision and Prioritization 4. (Implicit) Trust, Value Employees	1. Team-building, Train and Hold Accountable 2. Transparent, consistent comms channels 3. Flatter organization, less hierarchy 4. Build Trust (Reduce fear of repercussions)

These ideas fall closely in line with communication literature. The real test, of course, is what specific steps to take in order to dramatically improve organizational communication. The concluding section of this paper offers some initial steps to move in that direction.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

The overarching theme of the study is that the organizational communication at MCIA can be improved if the leadership develops a strategic communication plan, takes steps to build teamwork and trust in the organization, and if clear, concise, consistent messaging permeates the varied (and perhaps reduced) layers of MCIA hierarchical organizational structure.

The research study recommends the following concrete steps to improve communication at Marine Corps Intelligence Activity:

1. Develop a Strategic Communication Plan – "Word Posted" is not "Word Passed"
   a. Provide a clear presentation of the MCISR-E and MCIA "way-ahead." This is a time of transition at MCIA and the Marine Corps Intelligence Enterprise overall. Effective communication facilitates successful navigation of such periods of change. The leadership must convey the mission, values, and vision for the future behind MCISR-E in a clear, concise, and consistent manner. The message must be supported and consistent across all levels of MCIA leadership. Consider developing a clear, consistent "road show" that continually discusses the vision and current status of MCISR-E implementation.
   b. Communication Roundtables. Commander should consider holding non-attribution "Communication Roundtables" with Senior Manager and Mid-Level Manager groups (in workable sizes). The theme might include "Breaking Down Barriers to Communication." This roundtable needs to be an open and positive attempt to work on communication within the organization. Senior-Level Managers should consider implementing similar discussion groups as well.
   c. Consider consulting and employing a professional team from outside MCI/MCIA to develop and implement a strategic communication plan. Include in this plan possible refinements to communication channels and methods.
   d. Refine Communication Channels. Continue refinement of MCIA communication channels (Sharepoint, etc.). Address the technical challenges of modern communication flow. Consider codifying official communication channels so that appropriate mechanisms are clear and understood by all employees.
   e. Accountability. Hold supervisors accountable for organizational communication. Ensure that a consistent message permeates the command and seek to minimize leaks and "drive-by" transmission of mixed messages. Seek ways to identify symptoms of organizational breakdowns and endeavor to remedy them. Similarly, emphasize to managers that all employees must be held accountable for being active, seeking members of the enterprise team.
   f. Focus on and Emphasize the "Positive." The message that must permeate every level of the organization is simply: "you're valued." This is not to suggest that MCIA shouldn't focus on its deficiencies, but rather, there must be a positive vision for the future and one in which the employees of MCIA are recognized as valued contributors to excellence.
2. Team-Building – Building Trust.
   a. Senior Leadership Team-Building. The research team recommends developing and implementing a 4-session (3 hours apiece) team-building exercise for Command Leadership and Senior Managers. The sessions should be facilitated by professionals from outside the organization (perhaps the Deloitte team that constructed and facilitated Ka-Bar). We further recommend that at least one session be facilitated by Peter Scheerer

and include his "Motivators" exercise, which the research team found to be the most beneficial of our Ka-Bar experience. Finally, the research team recommends developing a Senior-Level continuing education program and community. Communication is a life-long learning process and needs to be seen and addressed as such.

    b. Develop an MCIA Learning Community for Mid-Level Managers and Non-Supervisory Employees. This group can be formed and led by Ka-Bar graduates, but should be opened to all interested organizational members. It will continue the momentum built by Ka-Bar among the mid- and lower-level employees at MCIA and will, hopefully, build an atmosphere of trust.

    c. Executive Coaching. MCIA leadership should consider implementing an executive coaching program for Senior- and Mid-Level Managers. The current Ka-Bar coordinators could facilitate contacts and/or a future program.

3. Hierarchy and Physical Barriers.

    a. If and when possible, flatten organizational hierarchy. The ultimate goal is a flexible, responsive organization with less distance between Command and work elements.

    b. Reduce physical barriers to communication where and when possible.

In summary, MCIA leadership has taken the critical first step in addressing organizational communication issues: they've asked for help in identifying problems and developing remedies. In addition, MCIA Leadership must develop an environment of trust in order for communication to flow freely in all directions. And finally, the content and flow of information from the top down and across all levels must be clear, concise, visionary, positive, consistent, and most importantly—understood—in order to have the desired impact; the development of effective communications that facilitates collaboration and cohesion throughout the organization. With appropriate emphasis and participation by all levels within the organization, that very goal is indeed within reach at MCIA.

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Appendix A: MCIA Communication Survey (Commander and Deputy) and Results

Appendix B: MCIA Communication Survey (Senior Leadership) and Results

Appendix C: MCIA Communication Survey (Mid-Level Managers) and Results

Appendix D: MCIA Communication Survey (Non-Supervisory Employees) and Results

Appendix E: MCIA Communication Survey (Senior Enlisted Marines) and Results

Appendix F: MCIA Communication Survey (Enlisted Marines) and Results