

# Communication Issues Within Amazon

04.30.2018

---

The A Team  
Organizational Communications  
Spring 2018

## Team Members:

- Sydney Mann
  - Team Leader
- Juliana Wellman
  - Solutions and Recommendations Analyst
- Leigh Jolivette
  - Theories & Research Analyst
- Chandler Simon
  - Theories & Research Analyst
- Caroline Touchet
  - Background & Case Description Analyst

# Table of Contents:

<b>Team Members:</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Case Description</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Critical Theory</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Case Analysis</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>7</b>



## Case Description

Amazon was founded in 1994 by CEO, Jeff Bezos. He is known as a technology entrepreneur, investor, and philanthropist. However, he is mostly recognized for his achievements and leadership at Amazon. Bezos was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico and was raised in Houston, Texas. He graduated from Princeton University in 1986 with two degrees in electrical engineering and computer science. Bezos got a job on Wall Street after college and worked there until 1994. In that same year he quit his corporate job to start up his own company. By the end of the year in 1994, he had successfully created an online bookstore which he named Amazon. In the beginning Amazon only sold books, but would later go on to sell much more. This includes but is not limited to, a wide variety of products and services, as well as video and audio streaming. The company is currently the world's largest electronic retailer. In 2000, Bezos founded an aerospace company called Blue Origin. He created this company to pursue his

passion of space travel. The company is currently working on the idea to develop a reusable rocket that will be able to carry passengers into space. In 2013, Jeff purchased the Washington Post for two hundred fifty million dollars in cash. Bezos also manages all of his other business investments through his capital fund. This fund is called Bezos Expeditions. In mid 2017, Bezos became the world's wealthiest person. His estimated net worth is just about ninety billion dollars! Bezos is also a family man aside from all of his career achievements. He is married to novelist, Mackenzie Tuttle. They married in the year 1992, after knowing each other for one short year. The couple are parents of four children. They have three sons and an adopted daughter from China.

While many Americans have fallen in love with the Amazon, many are not aware of what happens behind their factory doors. The company has become very successful over the years because of all they have to offer to their customers. Amazon is the website where you can buy it all. From books, clothes, technology needs, some groceries, and much more. They meet the needs of all of their buyers ranging from all different ages. Their biggest hit was when they created Amazon Prime. A perk for shoppers who spend fifty dollars a year for their membership. Those who are members receive free shipping and majority of the time it's two day delivery. Members also receive access to movies, books, and music.

The company also released an incentive for college students. Those who have an .edu email address are eligible to receive six months of Amazon Prime free.

Although Amazon looks like a dream from the outside, it is not always the case for those on the inside. As my group and I have learned more about this company we have become aware of all the downfalls it has.

The first and very large issue is one dealing with their leadership coming from Jeff Bezos.

Some of the company's main issues are from employees that are being overworked and fired if they fail to meet Amazon's unrealistically high standards. Management does not subscribe to a "learning culture" approach within the organization. In addition, superior and subordinate relationships are considered very hostile. Examples of overworked issues are employees fainting in the factories, while others suffer panic attacks at the office. Within the company, there is a large culture of backstabbing and mutual distrust. Workers are forced to report to their superiors if they notice their coworkers not following regulations. Causing distrust to be a giant factor and employees feeling isolated from one another. Amazon workers also fear job security and find that their superiors are often unapproachable. The examples stated above are defined by theories learned throughout this course. The three main theories our team analyzed are metaphor of machine, peer and

co-worker communication, and superior- subordinate relationship.

Jeff Bezos has been labeled as a harsh and difficult employer by former employees who have come forth with their own testimonies.. Before getting an interview, he has many "hoops" for future employees to jump through. The "lucky" ones that get hired have to then start to prove themselves. Again, Jeff has a very strict policy that's expected to be followed each morning. For new employees, questions are asked daily and may vary in subject and intensity. For example, one question could be on the effectiveness of their superior, while another may be simply if they enjoyed their shift. Questions like so make it very uncomfortable to answer, especially for recent hired employees. They fear that the answers might not be as confidential as portrayed and are scared that their job might be at jeopardy.

### The Question Mark Method



Another poor communication method implemented by Bezos is identified as the Question Mark Method. Jeff is not private with his personal email address at all. In fact,

he encourages customers to reach out to him with any problems and/ or concerns. When a consumer has an issue with an item he or she ordered from the company, Jeff simply forwards the email to that department along with a question mark. Although that seems like a harmless act, the question mark at the end of that email is scary enough to send workers of that department into panic mode. The question mark signifies a ticking time bomb that the employees should work very hard to shut off. They can do this by fixing the problem and insuring the customer that they will receive some sort of accommodation for their faults.

Our group has come up with some solutions that will help to make Amazon a pleasant and more welcoming place to work at. The first is to shift to a learning organization. Implement an semi-transactional leadership that is group based and create daily quota improvements. Lastly, work on perfecting the five categories of managerial behavior.

## Critical Theories:

### Metaphor of a Machine

The Metaphor of the Machine is one of the communication theories that we are using for our final project. The Metaphor of the Machine is a classical theory of organizations. From this

perspective, organizations are viewing workers as if they are machines. Managerial principles, modes of operation, treatment of workers, and communication in the organization are considered in light of this metaphor. One property of a machine is that a machine is very predictable in how it will function. Another property is that a machine rarely deviates from the norm (outside operator error) unless some part of it stops functioning properly or stops completely. In cases where parts of the machine no longer function or function ineffectively, they can be replaced with a standard part. Specific rules exist regarding repair of the machine and the specific role that each part of the machine plays in its functioning. In other words, each part of the machine is highly specialized.

When the metaphor of the machine is applied to organizations, the properties that describe a machine hold true for the organization as well and guide management as it attempts to regulate behavior, including communication. If an organization is a machine, then the workers are the parts of the machine. In accordance with the properties of a machine, the workers behave predictably so that management and the other workers will know exactly what to expect of each member of the organization at any given moment. If a worker functions outside the boundaries of what is expected, someone who can perform the functions of the job effectively, efficiently, and predictably



will replace that worker. This theory of the metaphor of the machine in organizations has obvious benefits for the organization and for some workers. For example, one of the benefits of the metaphor of the machine is that the resulting efficiency and predictability help create a perception of stability for everyone that is involved. However, the metaphor of the machine can affect workers in ways that may not be so positive. Being treated as parts of a machine devalues each employee. Workers know they are easily replaceable and live with the fear of causing any disruption to the machine, for fear of losing their position. Workers are over-worked and treated as robots when management perceives each member as just a gear in a well-functioning machine.

### **Peer - Coworker Relationships**

Peer- Coworker relationships is another issue that we've identified within Amazon. This theory holds that communication with co-workers can create one of the strongest connections between you and your job and you and the organization. Peer-Coworker relationship theory also states that as people feel more connected to one another, morale, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction significantly increase. Peer relationships can provide a source of intrinsic reward for the employee. Peer relationships can also buffer job-related stress and it can reduce job dissatisfaction and turnover. Proximity in terms of Peer- Coworker relationships is the distance between

people. People develop friendships based on which individuals happen to share the same space. In an organization, individuals are more likely to develop friendships with people that they are in constant contact with rather than people that they rarely see or hear from. Relational balance is the principle that has to do with the balance of the relationship. Some relationships are symmetrical, which means that the two partners are equal in the relationship. In this relationship, the two partners participate equally in decision making and share control over what they do together. Other relationships are complementary, which means that one person's behavior complements the other person's behavior. The third principle of Peer-Coworker relationships is Interpersonal needs. In any interpersonal relationship, both partners come to the relationship with the same psychological needs but at different levels of strength. Each partner expresses three kinds of needs to some degree: the need for affection, the need for inclusion, and the need to control others. Relational control refers to who, within a relationship, is in control of it. For instance, power in the workplace suggests that co-worker relationships can serve as a powerful control over an employee's behavior.



## **Superior-Subordinate Relationships**

The third major problem that we found within Amazon focuses on their Superior- Subordinate relationships. One theory that is related to this problem is the Leader Member Exchange Theory. Leader Member Exchange Theory is a relationship-based approach to leadership that focuses on the two-way relationship between leaders and followers. It suggests that leaders develop an exchange with each of their subordinates, and that the quality of these leader-member exchange relationships influences subordinates' responsibility, decisions, and access to resources and performance. In an LMX relationship, a subordinate will feel comfortable communicating frequently with the supervisor about topics both personal and professional, in a manner that is not always deferential, but perhaps challenging. Relationships are based on trust and respect and are often emotional relationships that extend beyond the scope of employment. Leader-member exchange may promote positive employment experiences and augment organizational effectiveness. This theory states that leadership consists of a dyadic relationship and that work roles are developed and negotiated over time through a series of exchanges or interacts between leader and member. The Leader-Member Exchange Theory focuses on individual relationships. The theory considers the supervisor to have many individual relationships with a heterogeneous group of

subordinates. The theory begins with the assumption that supervisors have a limited amount of time and resources. As a result, the supervisor cannot give the same amount of energy to every subordinate. Therefore, distinct relationships will form with individual subordinates. Leader Member Exchange relationships are characterized by mutual trust, reciprocal support, liking, and greater interaction. Leader Member Exchange relationships are related to several important outcomes. For instance, one outcome that is related to Leader Member Exchange relationships is subordinate turnover. Another outcome related to Leader Member Exchange relationships is the outcome of subordinate satisfaction and promotions. Another outcome of LMX relationships is ratings of subordinate performance and subordinate extra-role performance. In other words, subordinates in Leader Member Exchange relationships with their supervisors tend to stay in the organization longer, are more satisfied, and receive higher performance ratings than subordinates in either middle-group or out-group relationships. Subordinates in Leader Member Exchange relationships also tend to define the range of their jobs more closely or greater than their supervisor's expectations.



## Case Analysis:

### Metaphor of the Machine

Thousands of individuals are employed through Amazon each year, these jobs are wide ranging from filing and answering phones, to building and packaging items, or driving the delivery trucks. Out of all of these employees there is complaints within the workplace, of course, but that doesn't mean the entire corporation is flawed. It is when the business gets to a point that line workers are passing out from heat exhaustion or secretary's have panic attacks from the intense work hours then there is obvious a problem with the structure of the workplace. Articles have discussed the workplace conditions that have lead to these extreme circumstances- it boils down to how workers are viewed. Using the classical theory of the Metaphor of a Machine, it's easy to understand how problematic the workplace is. Metaphor of A Machine means that the workers are no longer seen as people, but rather dehumanized and

viewed at simple cogs in a larger system.

These workers have repetitive and fast pace jobs, which are highly specialized – an example of this being the workers constantly packaging boxes for hours to meet their quota. Some Amazon workers spend their entire shift standing at an assembly line, repeating the same actions for hours; packaging can be so strenuous in stifling sweatshops that people have been reported to faint.

It's important for a machine to be predictable, to follow the same pattern (such as assembling the same type of boxes continuous). This monstrous act can be mind numbing and unstimulating to the worker. If workers begin to slack off, or slow down then it goes against the predictability pattern that the organization has already set so this is not tolerated. This is highlighted by a common practice within Amazon to monitor its workers, watching their every move and being highly critical of work performances. In this intense setting it's not uncommon for workers to be fired for not being able to meet the high standards that is strictly enforced by management.

During an undercover assignment reporters discovered that the workers of an Amazon delivery warehouse in Stafford, UK often had

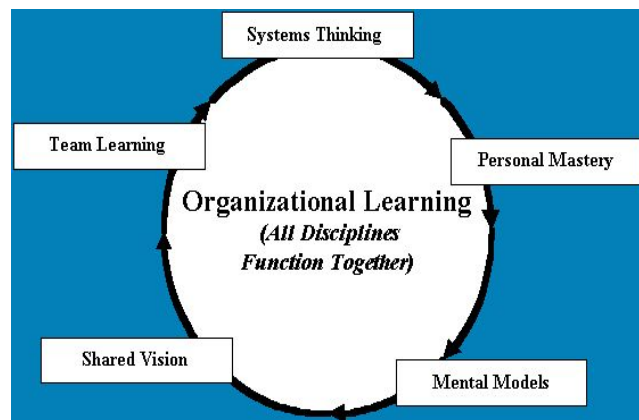
resort to using plastic bottles to relieve themselves while working, instead of taking a break to go to the restroom. This is because the worker have such high quotas to fill, that they fear leaving their post of minutes because they may fall behind or be reprimanded to not working continuous throughout their shift. This is an example of how the workers are treated as parts of a machine, since their needs are being ignored for products.

Another aspect of the this theory is that the workers are easily replaceable, this is shown through the measures that workers go through to prove their usefulness. Due to the current capitalist economy, having a steady job is crucial to surviving and yet it seems that there is a surplus of people who are out of work and desperate to find a job to support themselves. This system is exploited by Amazon, because managers are known to not be concerned for the well being of their workers since there are so many people who can replace them. Amazonian are reluctant to call into work, or report any issues they have with Amazon because it could put their job at risk. If an organization such as Amazon is a machine, then its workers are nothing more than glorified parts, that when broken are scraped, refitted and replaced for something better.

## Recommendations:

### SOLUTION #1

Transition to a Learning Organization from a closed system organization. A Learning Organization is the best type of managerial organization. Amazon currently has a closed system organizational process. A Learning Organization is all about the “interconnectedness of individual organizational members with one another and with their environment”. Developing a learning organization is more than just implementing new rules or policies. There are a few key attributes to developing an effective Learning Organization.



1. Increase in adaptability. Adaptability, or an increase in adaptability is a key component in having an effective organization. Peers, managers, and executives alike

must be able to properly adapt to any given situation that may arise within the workplace. Managers must also encourage and help team members to uphold an adaptable attitude. If team members are not willing to adapt or switch job duties for the better of the team, then the entire sector will suffer for it. This type of attitude falls on the shoulders of the managerial staff to encourage. Team members are much more willing to help one another and help the entire sector when they are used to adapting and moving around for the better of the team. Increasing adaptability allows for employees not to fear the reaction of their managers and helps with the group thinking outside of the box and being more open minded and acceptive of new ideas.

2. Team Learning through communication. Communication amongst everyone in the sector is the only way the teams and grow together. The teams need to learn to think together as a team. Finding the right balance between thinking alike and encouraging new and innovative ideas is essential to effective communication. Currently, at Amazon employees are encouraged not to think together or work together. They are encouraged to tear each other's ideas now, especially when someone presents an idea to the group. They tear each other's ideas now to make

each other look incompetent and to shine a better light on themselves.



Rather than tear down any idea, Amazon should encourage that each member analyzes the idea, not tear it down. When a new idea is presented, there should be praise for having a new idea in the first place and this should be encouragement to the rest of the team. Then the positives of the idea should be explained and clearly defined. Only after this step should people begin looking for negative consequences of this idea. This way, if the cons outweigh the pros at the least the team came to this conclusion together and are all in agreement and understanding. This format for communication helps the team learn and achieve more together.

3. Sustaining. Leaders and managers are responsible for

maintaining the proper workplace environment, they are responsible for keeping the learning organization flowing most effectively. The only way this system can flourish is if the managers take it upon themselves to work on and maintain this group mentality. It is easy for people to be selfish and only want to better themselves in a demanding situation. Not only creating a learning organization, but successfully maintaining it is one of the biggest challenges.

## **SOLUTION #2**

### **Semi- Transactional Leadership:**

A Transactional form of leadership is one where the leader/manager used punishments and rewards to steer employees in the right direction. Amazon currently rewards individuals and punishes individuals when necessary. Because of this system, Workers are focuses on themselves and bettering themselves and tearing down their peers. This adds to the lack of trust in the workplace and intense disunity. Amazon would better to shift to a team-based reward system. Rather than reward individuals Amazon should focus on building up teams. Sections of the company should be rewarded when the team is successful. With a group-focuses

mentality people would start helping each other and meet quotas to ensure the team unit succeeds. This process alone would get rid of the lack of trust in the workplace and the back-stabbing. Amazon should also only partially adopt the transactional leadership process. Punishments shouldn't be a way to encourage correct behavior, but positive reinforcement only. The main idea of this reward system is to shift from an independent mindset to an interdependent one.

## **SOLUTION #3**

### **Daily Quota Improvements:**

Amazon has very unrealistic daily expectations for their employees to meet. Even though most daily quotas are met, it doesn't come without complete exhaustion and misery from the employees. Having lower daily expectations would lower the stress level of the work environment. Former employees have shared that management only seemed to care about the numbers, not the people. There are multiple monitoring systems to make sure everyone knows just how fast everyone is working. The management of Amazon should lower daily quotas to improve the workplace ambiance. More workers can always be hired but slaving away current employees hurts the company more

than it helps. The company focuses too much on punishing those who immediately mess up. Instead, Amazon should adopt a 3-strike policy. Employees should get 3 free passes on missing quota, for having a day or whatever the cause may be. Punishments and negative intervention should not occur before the 3 strikes have taken place.

## **SOLUTION #4**

### **Managerial Behaviors:**


There is a severe lack of superior-subordinate relationships within Amazon. Amazons superiors only interact with their subordinates when they have something to critique and criticize. Amazon needs to adopt the five categories of managerial behavior, a theory Whitener created in 1998.

1. Behavioral consistency – subordinates need to have an idea of how a superior will respond to different situations and their tolerance level. Understanding their superiors removes fear from speaking to managers.
2. Behavioral Integrity – subordinates must be able to trust their superiors. There shouldn't be a fear that something told to a superior in confidence will be later shared with others. This has to do with the anonymous feedback as well.

Employees have said they fear sharing honest opinions because they do not trust their managers that it truly is anonymous and fear a negative backlash.

3. Sharing & Delegating control – decision processes shouldn't be solely to one person. A good leader will bring the team together and discuss how things should run together. Amazon currently tells its employees exactly what to do and expects no questions, comments, or concerns. They also continuously remind their employees that everyone is expendable, so workers don't question authority or control. Managers need to delegate control and raise up each employee as a leader in their own way. Good leaders make other good leaders. Making team members feel like they have a valid voice and opinion increases unity and the overall happiness of the workplace immensely.

4. (informational) Communication – there is an overall lack of communication amongst superiors and subordinates with Amazon and between coworkers as well. Amazon lacks a direct line of communication amongst leaders and peers. The question mark method is a perfectly example of everything wrong with the company's communication methods. Amazon leaders need to create a safe



and trustworthy direct line of communication. The question mark emails should no longer exist. A proper procedure of a sit-down discussion needs to take place when a customer has a discrepancy.

Demonstration of concern- There are countless accounts of former Amazon employees discussing the complete lack of concern that the company has for its employees. Workers undergoing traumatic life situations were monitored even harder to ensure they stayed focused on the task at hand. The leaders of amazon need to make their employees feel valued. Individual relationships need to exist with each team and the team's leader. It's been show that employees do better when they feel they are valued and have good relationships with their superiors. Immediacy cannot be faked or forced. A suggestion for Amazon would be to only appoint leaders who have a natural immediacy for people and are not all focused on the numbers. This is another situation where it is all about finding the right balance.



## References:

Modaff, D. P., Butler, J. A., & DeWine, S. (2012). *Organizational communication: foundations, challenges, and misunderstandings* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Schneider, L. (n.d.). Understanding Amazon.com's History and Corporate Culture. Retrieved from <https://www.thebalance.com/amazon-company-research-2071316>

Q. (2017, October 11). What Is The Internal Culture Like At Amazon? Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2017/10/11/what-is-the-internal-culture-like-at-amazon/#36e35e574a50>

Staff, M. (n.d.). Amazon's company culture: Innovative or punishing? Retrieved from <https://www.marketplace.org/2015/10/19/business/amazons-company-culture-innovative-or-punishing>

Vega, M. (2018, April 09). How a Task Management Platform Built for Amazon is Broadening Its Customer Base. Retrieved from <https://hypepotamus.com/companies/curo/>

Yohn, D. L. (2018, March 13). Company culture doesn't need to be "warm and fuzzy" to be effective. Retrieved from <https://work.qz.com/1227352/amazon-proves-company-culture-doesnt-need-to-be-warm-and-fuzzy-to-be-effective/>

Kim, E. (2018, March 30). Amazon employees start every day by answering a simple question about work. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/30/amazon-employee-reaction-to-hr-programs-connecti-ons-forte.html>

Kantor, J., & Streitfeld, D. (2015, August 15). Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>