ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Communicating and Organizing — There are two main approaches to defining the relationship between communicating and organizing:

1. The **container approach** assumes that organizations exist independently of communication and serve as containers that influence communication behavior. For example, organizational structures, such as hierarchical, are assumed to exist independently and influence the content and directional flow of communication.[1]

2. The **social constructionist approach** assumes that communication creates the form and shape of organizations.[2] For example, when organizational members consistently funnel their information through one person, they create a centralized network structure where one person maintains a high degree of power because s/he is at the hub and controls the flow of information. When people change the content and form of their communication such as transmitting their information to a larger array of people, they create new organizational structures, such as decentralized networks.

Defining Organizational Communication

How one defines organizational communication depends on one's view of the relationship between communicating and organizing. According to the container approach, organizational communication can be defined as the transmission of a message through a channel to a receiver. In the social constructionist approach, organizational communication can be defined as the way language is used to create different kinds of social structures, such as relationships, teams, and networks. The former definition emphasizes the constraints that are placed on communication given pre-existing organizational structures and the latter definition highlights the creative potential of communication to construct new possibilities for organizing.

However, organizational communication may be viewed more profitably as balancing creativity and constraint, as it is never entirely either constrained or creative. The definition of **organizational communication as balancing creativity and constraint** focuses on how individuals use communication to work out the tension between working within the constraints of pre-existing organizational structures and promoting change and creativity.[3] For example, assume that an organization was undergoing a major change initiative. An information transfer approach to organizational communication would require change messages to be sent clearly to all members in the organization. A social constructionist approach would focus on creating patterns of language use that would generate the desired change (i.e., to create a team-based organization, organizational members need to talk in the language of teamwork). An approach to organizational communication that emphasizes balancing creativity and constraint would focus on achieving a balance between using communication that fosters the desired change and being sensitive to the existing constraints of the organization.

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1 Axley, S. (1984). Managerial and organizational communication in terms of the conduit metaphor. *Academy of Management Review, 9,* 428–437.

2 Smith R. C., & Turner, P. K. (1995). A social constructionist reconfiguration of metaphor analysis. *Communication Monographs, 62,* 152–180.

3 Eisenberg, E. M., Goodall, H. L., & Trethewey, A. (2007). *Organizational communication: Balancing creativity and constraint*, 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Areas of Study in Organizational Communication

There are several research areas within the field of organizational communication.[4] For ease of presentation, identified here are five major areas that organizational communication scholars study: (1) leadership, (2) teams, (3) communication networks, (4) organizational culture, and (5) organizational learning.

1) LEADERSHIP

Leadership may be defined as a communicative process where the ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them.[5] This definition of leadership suggests that leadership may take many different forms and be associated with many different styles of communication. Nevertheless, a review of the literature suggests three important principles for effective leadership communication:

- ***Effective leadership communication connects with the hearts and minds of followers.*** At some level, effective leadership communication connects with the important values, attitudes, and commitments of followers and is viewed as addressing significant issues and facilitating task accomplishment.[6]

- ***Effective leadership communication manages competing goals and tensions.*** Effective leadership communication balances the needs to create strong interpersonal relationships and accomplish tasks, maintain a balance between order and chaos within the organization, and use rewards and punishments to motivate followers.[7] Rather than take an either-or position, effective leaders try to create a "both-and" position where oppositions are integrated constructively.

- ***Effective leadership communication is context dependent.*** Every context is unique, and effective leadership communication is appropriate to the special combination of people, time, place, and topic.[8]

2) TEAMS

Teams may be defined as two or more people who have a specific performance objective or recognizable goal to be attained where the coordination of activity among the members of the team is required for the attainment of the team goal or objective.[9] A variety of teams exist within organizations such as work teams, project teams, research and development teams, sales teams, and special task forces. In a comprehensive study of 6,000 managers, LaFasto and Larson argue that there are four important qualities of teams:[10]

1. ***Clear elevating goal:*** High performance teams have both a clear understanding of the goal to be achieved and a belief that the goal embodies a worthwhile or important result. When setting goals, it is important to remember that: (a) goal setting is better than no goal setting, (b) specific versus vague goals are better, (c) difficult goals are better than easy goals, and (d) participative goal setting is equally effective when compared to assigned goals provided the person assigning the goal is viewed as having more authority, power, and expertise than the follower.

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4 Jablin, F. M., & Putnam, L. L. (Eds.). (2001). *The new handbook of organizational communication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

5 Fairhurst, G. (2007). *Discursive leadership.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

6 Conger, J. A. *The charismatic leader*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989. Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2007). *The leadership challenge.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

7 Fairhurst, G. (2001). Dualisms in leadership research. In F.M. Jablin & L.L. Putnam (Eds.). *The new handbook of organizational communication,* 379–439. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

8 Barge, J. K. (2004). Reflexivity and managerial practice. *Communication Monographs, 71*, 70–96. Barge, J. K. & Little, M. (2002). Dialogical wisdom, communicative practice, and organizational life. *Communication Theory*, *12*, 375–397.

9 Katzenbach, J. R., & Smith, D. K. (2003). *The wisdom of teams: Creating the high-performance organization.* New York: Collins Business Essentials.

10 LaFasto, M. J. F., & Larson, C. (2001). *When teams work best: 6,000 team members and leaders tell what it takes to succeed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

2. ***Results-driven structure:*** Different kinds of performance objectives require different kinds of team structures. For example, creative teams such as those in advertising agencies would need to have a structure that fostered out-of-the-box thinking while tactical teams such as a surgical unit in an operating room would require a structure that facilitated executing surgeries in a competent and efficient manner. High-performing teams need to have clear roles and accountabilities, access to needed information from credible sources, a system to help them monitor performance and receive feedback, and a fact-based decision-making style.

3. ***Competent team members:*** High performance teams must be comprised of people who have the required: (a) technical competencies—the substantive knowledge, skills, and abilities related to the team's objectives, and (b) personal competencies—the qualities, skills, and abilities necessary to identify, address, and resolve socio-emotional issues.

4. ***Unified commitment:*** High performance teams have members who feel loyalty and dedication to the team.

3) COMMUNICATION NETWORK

A *communication network* is a group of individuals who may be identified as sharing regular lines of communication. These lines of communication can be described as: who talks to whom, about what, when, and where. A dominant theme in the network literature has been to distinguish between centralized and decentralized communication networks.[11] A **centralized network** exists when information is funneled through a small number of individuals within an organization. A **decentralized network** exists when information is shared widely among and flows through many individuals within an organization. Decentralized networks are well-suited for managing turbulent and complex environments because organizational members can communicate the changes they perceive in the business environment and each member can contribute ideas and knowledge for managing these changes.[12]

Network forms have recently been adopted by a growing number of global organizations because they facilitate the rapid acquisition, processing, and dissemination of information. Network forms of organizations:

- Employ relatively flat hierarchies by relying on flexible emergent communication.
- Develop flexible relationships with the network of organizations that go beyond the local country-bound network.
- Use information technology to coordinate units and members located in different geographic locations.
- Emphasize the use of autonomous, self-managing teams.[13]

By emphasizing autonomous and self-managed task teams, local units can manage emerging crises quickly rather than needing to receive permission from a centralized location. The existence of information technology permits the rapid dissemination of information and allows differing units to coordinate their response within the global network.

4) ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Organizational culture may be defined as the knowledge, ideology, values, and rituals that individuals share. There is not a single organizational culture within organizations, as unique sub-cultures may emerge within organizations according to demographics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, organizational

11 Conrad, C., & Poole, M.S. (2005). *Strategic organizational communication in a global economy*, 6th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

12 Miller, K. (2005). *Organizational communication: Approaches and processes,* 4th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

13 Monge, P., & Fulk, J. (1999). Communication technologies for global network organizations. In G. DeSanctis & J. Fulk (Eds.), *Communication technologies and organizational forms*, 71–100. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

tenure, and membership in a particular work unit or division. Nevertheless, many organizational leaders are concerned with creating overarching organizational cultures that emphasize ethical high performance. Eisenberg, Goodall, and Trethewey highlight several important characteristics of ethically high performing organizational cultures.

- Unethical practices are more likely to emerge in organizational cultures of broken promises, where no one takes responsibility for actions and decisions, and participation and dissent are minimized.[14]

- High performing cultures tend to be characterized by a bias for action, maintaining close relations to the customer, emphasizing autonomy and entrepreneurship, achieving productivity through its employees, fostering strong corporate values, focusing on what they do best, adopting simple organizational forms, and having simultaneous loose-tight properties (i.e., they are both centralized and decentralized).[15]

- High performing cultures tend to preserve their core purpose over time while simultaneously being open to change. To create this strong sense of core identity and purpose, organizations explicitly articulate their ideology to employees, indoctrinate their employees into the company's core ideology, select potential employees based on their fit with the existing culture, and emphasize the special qualities of the culture.[16]

Assessing the kind of culture that an organization has created requires you to focus on the communication that the organization uses in its messages and the various artifacts it creates. To analyze an organizational culture, you may want to focus on the following:

- The language that people use in their everyday conversation with other employees as well as formal organizational documents and communications. This may include exploring the way that people use technical terms, jargon, slang, jokes, gossip, and metaphors.

- The stories that people tell about their experience. Stories offer a window into the way that people make sense of their organizational experience.

- The way that physical work space is organized. For example, the simple arrangement of office space can provide clues as to the way power and hierarchy is constructed in the organization.

- Company rituals and ceremonies provide insight into what the company values.[17]

5) ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Organizational learning involves elaborating organizational members' capacity to think collectively in new and rich ways that foster coordinated activity. The topic of organizational learning has grown in importance since the late 1980s as contemporary organizations have recognized that one of the primary strategies for adapting to a rapidly changing business environment is to learn from their successes and failures as well as think strategically about their future. Perhaps the strongest proponent of organizational learning is Peter Senge and his colleagues at MIT.[18]

Senge argues that organizations are more likely to learn when they develop practices that allow them to engage in systems thinking, foster a shared vision, encourage self-reflection, and develop the ability to view situations from multiple perspectives. From a communication perspective, Senge argues that dialogue

14 Eisenberg, E. M., Goodall, H. L., & Trethewey, A. (2007). *Organizational communication: Balancing creativity and constraint,* 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

15 Peters, T., & Waterman, R. (1982). *In search of excellence.* New York: Harper & Row.

16 Collins, J., & Porras, J. (2002). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies.* New York: HarperCollins.

17 Driskill, G. W., & Brenton, A. L. (2005). *Organizational culture in action: A cultural analysis workbook.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

18 Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York: Currency. Senge, P. M., Scharmer, C. O., Jaworski, J., & Flowers, B. S. (2005). *Presence: An exploration of profound change in people, organizations, and society.* New York: Currency. Senge, P. M., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Roth, G, Ross, R., & Smith, B. (1999). *The dance of change: The challenges to sustaining momentum in learning organizations.* New York: Currency.

is central to fostering learning. From Senge's perspective, **dialogue** is a form of communication that fosters high-quality collective thinking. Dialogue is guided by several principles.

- *Inquiry and advocacy must be balanced.* Individuals must ask questions that challenge existing assumptions and beliefs while simultaneously engaging with advocacy by stating opinions and taking action. Inquiry without advocacy can lead to interrogation while advocacy without inquiry can lead to dictating.

- *Tacit assumptions and beliefs should be brought to the surface.* Many times we pay attention to certain elements of a situation and draw inferences about the situation based on our tacit assumptions and beliefs. While our perceptions and actions may make sense to us, their tacit nature may make it hard for other people to understand the good reasons we use to act in a particular way in a situation. Therefore, dialogue works on making the tacit assumptions and beliefs that people use to form impressions and take actions explicit within the conversation.

- *Suspend beliefs.* It is important for others to be open to the opinions and thoughts of others; therefore, it is important to suspend certainty about the best way to understand a situation and what counts as appropriate actions and be open to new ideas. Suspending beliefs also means that one is willing to make one's beliefs and opinions clear to others (i.e., suspending them in front of others for them to see).

- *A safe space for dialogue must be created.* To reveal one's thoughts and positions requires trust in the other person. A lack of trust and feeling that one's statements may be used against them create an unsafe space. When people feel they can trust each other and that they are safe when revealing their opinions, they are more likely to openly discuss their thinking.

CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

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