■ ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Rice, R.E. (2001).

Organizational communication is a process through which people construct, manage, and interpret behaviors and symbols (whether verbal or nonverbal), both intentionally and unintentionally, through interaction (mediated or direct), within and across particular organizational contexts.

An October 2000 search for publications that included "organiz-"and "communicat-" yielded more than 2,000 books or journals in the online Library of Congress catalog and more than 630 doctoral dissertations in the Dissertations Abstract database. ABI/Inform, the online business and

organizations database, included nearly 1,300 articles that were indexed with either "organizational" and "communication" as subject words and nearly 200 articles with the two words in the article title. Furthermore, many surveys show that managers rank communication among the most valuable skills new, and veteran, employees should have.

Organizational communication can occur at a variety of levels, involving interpersonal and dyadic interaction, small groups or teams, large meetings, and within or across organizational departments or units, entire organizations, industrial sectors, and national borders. This communication may emphasize specific content (such as a memo providing some information) or may emphasize the nature of the relationship, what is called "metacommunication" (such as that same memo emphasizing that the person providing the information is clearly the expert and the reader should follow orders). The focus of the communication may be on task or social aspects, on administrative or operational functions, and on disseminating or receiving.

Organizational Theories and the Role of Communication

Different theories about organizations involve different assumptions about communication. Developed during the beginning of the 1900s, "classical management theory"—including scientific management theory, administrative management theory, and formal bureaucracy theory—arose in response to the growth of large organizations performing standardized procedures to produce manufactured materials, a result of the industrial revolution. Classical management theory generally proposed that organizations could be efficient and successful through hierarchical structures, downward flow of task information from managers to workers, recognition of monetary and security motivations of employees while ignoring social relations and personal goals, avoidance of ambiguity or subjectivity of information especially in rules and procedures, optimal design of the work process, authority and legitimacy located in hierarchical position rather than in personal and political influence, hiring and rewarding employees on the basis of technical competence and task performance, division of labor to increase efficiency and specialization, facilitation of horizontal communication when necessary but only with approval of the relevant superiors, and a continuing focus on organizational goals. In classical management theory, communication is highly structured and hierarchical, impersonal, and focused only on the goals of the organization.

Human relations theory arose not so much as a rejection of classical management theory but as a means to manage relationships within hierarchical organizations. However, the famous Hawthorne Studies in the 1920s and 1930s found that humans value social interaction and attention. Thus, organizational communication should allow development of group cohesion and cooperation, relationships within and among workers and management, job satisfaction, managerial skills, and awareness of the organization's community.

By the end of World War II, human resource theory expanded the consideration of social aspects, by emphasizing the importance of genuine participation and involvement of members. Other strands emerged, such as the authority-communication theory, which argued that organizational authority is developed, maintained, and accepted through honest and open communication.

In the 1960s, systems theory conceptualized systems as being embedded in larger systems and consisting of smaller subsystems, each interdependent, each creating something greater than the sum of the parts, and each engaging in general processes. Organizational environments consist of other organizations providing inputs to, using outputs from, and creating constraints on, the focal organization. No longer could organizations be managed as fixed, efficient machines; rather, they must be considered organic, adaptive, and constantly challenged processes that require constant communication within and across system boundaries.

Related concepts include organizational communication networks and roles, such as gatekeepers (who filter communication to a specific manager or upward through the organization), liaisons (who mediate interaction between two groups), bridges (a group member who mediates interaction with outside individuals), cosmopolite or boundary spanner (one who monitors the environment and brings new information into the organization), cliques (members who communicate more with each other than with other members), and

grapevines and rumor networks (where members communicate through informal and social networks about salient, time-sensitive topics).

Communication structures influence outcomes (e.g., centralized or decentralized networks are differentially appropriate for different kinds of tasks), are affected by other factors (e.g., accuracy of upward communication is moderated by the level of trust between superior and subordinate), moderate other relationships (e.g., the ability of organizations to respond well to crises), and are both positive and negative influences on, and are both positively and negatively affected by, organizational changes such as the implementation of new media (Johnson and Rice, 1987). Evaluation and use of new organizational media may be influenced by the behaviors and attitudes of others in one's communication network (Fulk and Steinfield, 1990).

Related somewhat to systems theory, as well as to more recent notions of the interpretative and interactive nature of organizational communication, is the theory of organizational sense-making (Weick, 1979). The purpose of organizing is to reduce equivocality, or the extent to which multiple interpretations of a situation are possible. The nature of the environment is largely constructed by what people are able to, or choose to, "enact." To the extent that what is selected from this enacted environment is equivocal, people must either refer to interpretations and responses retained from past activities, or make sense of the situation through interactions with others. Jointly, through agreed-upon patterns of enactment, interaction, and interpretation, organizational members "make sense" of their world so that they can engage in behaviors. Often, however, people must first take action before they can make sense of the situation, what is known as "retrospective sense-making."

More interpretative and cultural conceptualizations view organizations as constituted and structured not by formal flows of downward or horizontal communication but through and in the form of stories, myths, rituals, artifacts, values, logos, trademarks, taken-for-granted behaviors, dress styles, and office landscapes. That is, these cultural symbols are both results of and influences on meanings and behaviors, both positively and negatively, and emerge organically through the communication of members. A powerful example of an interpretative or cultural perspective is the organizational metaphor. Members may be guided, often implicitly, by the organization's "root" metaphor—such as business as "war." These metaphors shape the values and interpretations of the members and thus their decisions and behaviors as well. Metaphors also communicate the organization's image to its members, publics, researchers, executives, and policymakers—such as machine, organism, brain/computer, culture, political system, prisons, self-producing systems, or instruments of domination (Morgan, 1986). Some theorists, such as Stanley Deetz (1992), Michel Foucault (1995), and Dennis Mumby (1988), argue that all organizational power is embedded in discourse—who controls what is communicable within the organizational context. Thus, communication is not just a tool for exercising power; it is the very form of power.

More recent developments in organizational theory focus on quality management (where communication with current and prospective customers is the crucial source of feedback necessary to guide and improve the organization), chaos theory and learning organizations (where organizations are complex, adaptive, self-organizing systems dependent on rich communication that fosters collaboration, shared knowledge, and constant feedback at various levels), and network organizations (where organizational boundaries are becoming blurred as entities engage in temporary relations for particular products or markets, divest or outsource entire divisions so as to take advantage of marketplace resources, or even create virtual organizations that exist only on the Internet).

Applications of Organizational Communication

Motivation theories argue that people may be influenced to take action by salient needs that are not currently being met (Maslow, 1970), by expectations of the likelihood and value of outcomes (Vroom, 1982), or by general perceptions of expectations, opportunities, fulfillment and performance (Pace and Faules, 1994). Each of these processes is moderated by or manifested in communication; for example, expectations can be changed through communication about abilities and outcomes.

Organizational climate—a macro, organizational-level perception of the environment based on one's experiences with and perceptions of organizational elements (such as work and manage-

ment practices)—influences a variety of communication outcomes (such as open and accurate downward information, and level of consultation in decision making). Communication satisfaction—a micro, individual-level evaluation—represents the extent to which basic communication processes (such as ability to suggest improvements, media quality, and adequacy of information) are acceptable. Both climate and satisfaction influence the attitudes and behaviors of individuals (Pace and Faules, 1994).

The concept of leadership has changed from a hierarchical role that delivers decisions and monitors workers, to a person who helps construct shared meanings and norms, provides support and motivation, and manages the boundaries of the unit. Various studies of leadership styles emphasize different communication aspects, from the appropriate balance among tasks and personal relations, to the extent to which all members can engage in decision making and self-regulation.

Another shift is from fixed organizational positions and specialized tasks to fluid teams and collaborative projects. Teams are often temporary groups that bring together particular expertise for a specific project, accomplish their task, and then disassemble to form new teams. These teams may even be "virtual," with the team consisting of members from different organizations who may be devoting only a portion of their time to each of several teams, and who may not even meet their team members face-to-face, instead collaborating and communicating through new communication technologies. Group decision support systems and other forms of groupware may be used to improve group communication (e.g., through anonymous brainstorming), allowing participation across time and space constraints, and providing different decision tools such as voting or ranking. Even traditional teams must communicate well to evolve through various group development stages and provide the necessary social support as well as task coordination. The necessary communication skills for dispersed and virtual teams are greater, especially as team members will be increasingly diverse—from different locales, organizations, professions, and cultures—and as members will have to switch between teams and adjust to new teams more frequently.

Conflict management and negotiation are fundamentally communication processes, as they are deeply embedded in the language, information, and interpretations available to, and valued by, each of the participants. There are formal and strategic communication styles that experienced negotiators apply in different contexts, for different goals.

Writing, public and group speaking, thinking critically, using new media, and presenting reports and results are increasing in importance. Working with others, especially in management and leadership roles, requires good listening and nonverbal communication abilities, an understanding of persuasive messages, familiarity with new interactive multimedia, interviewing, preparing and evaluating resumes, reading and assessing research reports, understanding the use and evaluation of online information and databases, and managing mediated interactions, such as through videoconferencing or online discussion groups.

Other areas of organizational communication include public relations, cross-cultural interaction, performance assessment, training, socialization, decision making, innovation, globalization, emotions, clothing design and selection, and office decoration. Nearly all organizational communication has ethical and legal implications concerning things such as harassment, discrimination, equity, cultural diversity, gender roles, racism, hiring and promotion bias, false or misleading advertisement, and even termination and retirement.

See also: DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS AND COMMUNICATION; INTERNET AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB; NETWORKS AND COMMUNICATION; ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION, CAREERS IN; PUBLIC RELATIONS.

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