

Fundamentals of Organizational Communication

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Chapter 2



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Learning Objectives

- 1.1 Distinguish among the functional tradition, the meaning-centered approach, and emerging perspectives
- 2.2 Describe the functional tradition to organizational communication
- 2.3 Describe the meaning-centered approach to organizational communication
- 2.4 Describe emerging perspectives for organizational communication



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What is Organizational Communication?

Organizational communication is a field of study and a practice that involves the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages in the context of a formal organization¹². It describes the structure and style of interaction among individuals within an organization and with external stakeholders³⁴. It also refers to the way an organization gives information about its aims and activities to the public and its employees⁵.

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What is Organizational Communication?

In Chapter 1 we defined organizational communication as the process through which organizations create and shape events and literally constitute organizations. This chapter is designed to help us understand this process and to develop our competencies in determining how Jane Douglas might approach her problem. Three different approaches—Functional, Meaning-Centered, and Emerging Perspectives— are presented as ways to understand the processes of organizational communication and are used as frameworks to help analyze specific organizational situations, experiences, and problems.

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Communication Perspectives

The Functional and Meaning-Centered approaches ask different questions about organizational communication. The Functional tradition asks **how and why communication works**, whereas the Meaning-Centered approach asks **what communication is**. The Functional tradition **asks what purpose communication serves within organizations and how messages move**. The Meaning-Centered approach **asks if communication is the process through which organizing, decision making, influence, and culture occur**.

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The Functional Tradition

1. What are different types of organizational messages?
2. How do organizing, relationship, and change messages differ?
3. How can communication networks be described?
4. How do different communications channels affect messages?
5. What is communication load?
6. What is distortion in organizational communication?

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The Meaning Center Approach

- 1 How is “reality” generated through human interaction?
- 2. Why are communicating and organizing almost synonymous processes?
- 3. How does communication contribute to decision making?
- 4. What is meant by sensemaking?
- 5. What are influence processes in organizations?
- 6. What are communication rules?
- 7. What is the difference between treating culture as something an organization has versus something an organization is?
- 8. What is meant by communication climate?



Chapter 2

Emerging Perspectives

1. What is meant by the constitutive role of communication?
2. Does communication constitute organizations?
3. What are the issues for organizational communication when adopting a postmodern viewpoint?
4. What is the emphasis of critical organizational communication theory?
5. What is feminist organizational communication theory?
6. What does understanding race and class perspectives contribute to organizational communication?
7. How do the values evidenced in Emerging Perspectives differ from the Functional tradition and Meaning-Centered approaches?
8. How does practical theory relate to the Functional tradition, Meaning-Centered approaches, and other Emerging Perspectives?
9. What is the common ground among the three perspectives? What are the most important differences?
10. How does the concept of institutions influence individual organizations?
11. What is the relationship between global cultures and organizational communication?
12. What is the relationship of communications technologies to issues in the Functional, Meaning-Centered, and Emerging Perspectives approaches?



Chapter 2

Functional tradition

Functional tradition Way of understanding organizational communication by describing what messages do and how they move through organizations.

The Functional tradition describes how communication produces organizational outcomes. This perspective describes communication as a complex organizational process that serves organizing, relationship, and change functions: what messages do. The way messages move through organizations is described by examining communication networks, channels, message directions, communication load, and distortion.

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Functional tradition

The Functional tradition suggests communication transmits rules, regulations, and information throughout the organization. Communication establishes and defines human relationships, helps individuals identify with goals and opportunities, and is the process by which the organization generates and manages change. These functions occur during the repetitive patterns of communication interactions in which organizational members engage.



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Organizational Communication System

Before we can examine what messages do and how they move in organizations, we need to understand the concept of an organizational communication system on which the Functional tradition is based. Organizational communication system Number of related units and processes that operate together within the organization and with its environment to create and shape organizational events. Information processing is the primary function of the communication system

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Communication Inputs

This relationship between external environment information and internal information processing is important for understanding organizational communication systems. Information in the external environment, commonly known as communication inputs, is any information that can potentially influence the decision making of the suprasystem (organization). It is crucial for an organization to have accurate and timely information inputs to adapt and change

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Communication Throughput

- When information enters the organization, the communication system begins a process known as communication throughput, or the transforming and changing of input information for internal organizational use.

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Communication Output

Messages to the external environment from within the organization are known as communication output. Outputs can be thought of as the results of the input and throughput process and are both intentional and unintentional.



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Open Versus Closed Systems

Open systems continually take in new information, transform that information, and give information back to the environment. By contrast, closed systems are characterized by a lack of input communication, making it difficult to make good decisions and stay current with the needs of the environment

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Message Functions

When we talk about message functions within organizations, we are talking about what communication does or how it contributes to the overall functioning of the organization. In our attempt to understand organizational communication from the Functional approach, we describe message functions in three broad categories—organizing functions, relationship functions, and change functions. Each function is seen as necessary for an open communication system, although the exact balance among message functions will vary by organizational type and circumstance.

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Organizing Functions

Organizing functions establish the rules and regulations of a particular environment. Policy manuals, employee handbooks, orientation training, newsletters, and a variety of other sources convey information about how the organization expects to work and what it requires of its members. These organizing messages define and clarify tasks, develop work instructions, and evaluate task accomplishment.

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Relationship Functions

- The relationship function of organizational communication helps individuals define their roles and assess the compatibility of individual and organizational goals. Relationship communication contributes to individuals' identification with an organization or sense of "belonging" in their work environment. Frequently referred to as integrative or maintenance messages, relationship communication contributes to employee morale and maintains or integrates individuals with their work environments.



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Change Functions

Change functions help organizations adapt what they do and how they do it and are essential to an open system. Change messages occur in organizational problem solving, individual decision making, feedback from the environment, and numerous other choice-making situations



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Message Structure

The message structure of organizational communication is the movement of organizing, relationship, and change messages throughout the organization and between the organization and its external environment. The Functional tradition approach to structure asks questions about the repetitive patterns of interactions among members of the organization (networks), the use of a variety of channels for communication, message directions, and the amount of messages and the types of distortions that can be expected to occur in organizational communication. In other words, the structure of organizational communication can be understood in terms of networks, channels, message directions, load, and distortion.



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Communication Networks

Communication networks are the formal and informal patterns of communication that link organizational members together. Networks can be described by how formally or informally they are organized, by the links between people, and by the roles people perform as they link.



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Communication Channels

Channels are the means for transmission of messages. Organizations typically have a wide variety of channels available for transmitting oral and written messages. Face-to-face interaction, group meetings, memos, letters, computer-mediated exchanges, Web sites, presentations, and teleconferencing are among the channels commonly used in contemporary organizations. Increasing emphasis is placed on developing new and improved technical channels that speed information transfer and shorten decision-making response time. Indeed, it is fair to say the choice and availability of communication channels influence the way the organization can and does operate.



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Message Direction

As messages move through channels, we begin to think about that movement in terms of direction. Researchers typically describe three primary message directions in organizations: downward, upward, and horizontal. Downward communication describes message movement from a person in a position of authority to an employee or group with lesser authority. It is characterized by those with higher authority developing messages to transmit to those lower in authority, with authority being defined by the chain of command or the formal structure of the organization. We have downward communication, for example, when the board of regents for the university votes to raise tuition for the upcoming semester. The board formally informs the school's president, who in turn informs officials in admissions and records; finally, students, who will pay the new fees, are advised of the bad news.

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Message Direction

Horizontal communication moves laterally across the organization among individuals of approximately the same level and without distinct reporting relationships to one another. In other words, horizontal flow occurs when various department heads come together to discuss common problems from their respective groups. This communication generally moves messages more quickly across the organization than if the messages were to follow the vertical chain of command.



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Communication Load

The number of messages moving through the communication system is yet another important variable for describing the message structure of organizational communication. We commonly refer to the number of messages as communication load, or the volume, rate, and complexity of messages processed by an individual or the organization as a whole.



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Message Distortion

Closely related to the concept of load are the types of communication problems, or distortions, which occur as messages move throughout the organization. These distortions occur because of load, message direction, channel usage, and the very composition of the networks themselves. Put simply, distortions are those things that contribute to alterations in meaning as messages move through the organization. Distortions are noise in the organizational communication system.

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The Meaning Centered Approach

- The second major approach for understanding organizational communication is the Meaning-Centered approach. This approach asks what communication is, not how and why it works. The Meaning-Centered perspective is concerned with how organizational reality is generated through human interaction. As such, message purposes (functions) and message movement (structure) are secondary to understanding communication as the construction of shared realities (human interaction). Specifically, the Meaning-Centered approach describes organizational communication as the process for generating shared realities that become organizing, decision making, sensemaking, influence, and culture.

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1

Communication as Organizing and Decision Making

Organizing In Chapter 1 we described organizing as bringing order out of chaos and organizations as the products of the organizing process. The Meaning-Centered approach to organizational communication describes communicating and organizing as almost synonymous processes. Decision making, or the process of choosing from among uncertain alternatives, also is viewed as essentially a communication phenomenon and part of the organizing process.

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Decision Making

- Decision Making The process of choosing from among numerous alternatives—decision making—is the organizing process of directing behaviors and resources toward organizational goals. Decision making, as with other organizing efforts, is accomplished primarily through communication

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Communication as Influence

The Meaning-Centered approach proposes that influence is a necessary process for creating and changing organizational events. In other words, who and what are viewed as influential, the way people seek to influence others, and how people respond to influence all contribute to organizing and decision making.



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Identification

- We all come to organizational experiences with a sense of self, or our personal identity or identities. Our identity can be described as relatively stable characteristics that include our core beliefs, values, attitudes, preferences, and decisional premises. We are more likely to be receptive to influence attempts in organizations with which we identify or have a sense of “we” or belonging. Identification or the lack of it results from the identity or identities we bring to our organizational experiences and from a variety of organizational relationships (supervisors, peers, employees). As such, identification can be understood as an active process to which both individuals and organizations contribute.

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Socialization and Assimilation

Closely associated with identification is the influence process of socialization, or active organizational attempts to help members learn appropriate behaviors, norms, and values. The socialization process attempts to help new members understand how their interests overlap with those of the organization.



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Socialization and Assimilation

Socialization efforts frequently are categorized in phases or stages: anticipatory socialization, encounter socialization, and metamorphosis socialization. Anticipatory socialization begins before individuals enter organizations and results from past work experiences and interactions with family, friends, and institutions such as schools, churches, or social organizations. Anticipatory socialization is shaped by pre-entry information about the organization and the anticipated work role. Anticipatory socialization is the readiness an individual brings to the “reality shock” of organizational entry. Anticipatory socialization also includes what individuals learn about particular organizations prior to entry. The employment interview is an important example. Organizational representatives conducting interviews provide important socialization information while assessing the potential fit of the candidate to the organization. In addition, interviews are important opportunities for individuals to determine whether their expectations match their perceptions of the expectations of the organization.

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Socialization and Assimilation

The encounter stage for socialization involves new employee training, supervisor coaching, peer groups, and formal organizational documents. Newcomers learn tasks, develop relationships, and reduce uncertainty about most aspects of organizational life. The encounter phase includes social activities, messages about performance proficiency, and other experiences that contribute to learning about the organization. These messages can be described as memorable messages for newcomers. Finally, the metamorphosis phase of socialization occurs when the newcomer begins to master basic organizational requirements and adjusts to the organization. The phases, however, should be considered only general descriptions of the socialization process with full realization that differences in individuals and influence attempts generate very different socialization experiences.



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Assimilation

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Newcomers often want to find out for themselves how they can succeed in an organization, gain a variety of competencies, and, in general, reduce the uncertainty of new environments. Newcomers want to know how they are perceived by others and whether they are accepted in their new roles. Although information-seeking tactics vary among newcomers, it is fair to say information seeking by newcomers is a powerful part of assimilation processes



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Communication Rules

Communication rules are general prescriptions about appropriate communication behaviors in particular settings. Rules operate to influence behavior, are specific enough to be followed, and occur in particular contexts. In other words, communication rules are informal norms about what type of communication is desirable in a particular organization. Rules tell us, for example, whether disagreement is encouraged or discouraged, how we are expected to contribute our ideas, and whether we should ask for a raise or never mention the subject of salary in a particular situation. Generally, rules are learned through informal communication such as organizational stories,

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Power

An additional communication dynamic that influences behavior is the use of power. In its most general sense, power has been defined as an attempt to influence another person's behavior to produce desired outcomes. As such, power is a neutral term subject to positive use as well as abuse. The power process occurs through communication and relates to resources, dependencies, and alternatives

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Communication as a Culture

- Organizing, decision making, and influence processes, when taken together, help us describe the culture of organizations by describing how organizations do things and how they talk about how they do things. Put another way, organizational culture is the unique sense of the place that organizations generate through ways of doing and ways of communicating about the organization. Organizational culture reflects the shared realities and shared practices in the organization and how these realities create and shape organizational events. Organizational culture is the unique symbolic common ground that becomes the self-definitions or self-images of the organization

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Communication Climate

- The culture of an organization describes the unique sense of the place, its practices, and how that organization describes itself. The reaction to an organization's culture is the organization's communication climate.



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The Meaning Centered Approach Summary

- The Meaning-Centered approach to organizational communication understands communication as a complex process that creates and shapes organizational events. As such, communication is organizing, decision making, influence, and culture. Organizing is viewed as an ongoing process of human interactions attempting to reduce message equivocality. Decision making is part of organizing and is the process responsible for moving individuals and resources toward accomplishment of organizational goals. Influence is the process in which individuals and organizations engage to generate desired behaviors and is therefore closely related to organizing and decision making. Culture, as a metaphor for organizational communication, is the unique sense of a place that reflects the way things are done and how people talk about the way things are done. Finally, communication climate is the subjective reaction to the communication events that contribute to uniqueness or culture. The Meaning-Centered approach makes only limited distinctions among organizing, decision making, influence, and culture. All are seen as processes of communication, and all help us understand how organizations create and shape events through human interaction.

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Twenty First Century Emerging Perspectives

- Emerging Perspectives for organizational communication describe communication as a constitutive process, increasingly described as communication constitutes organization (CCO), and critique and challenge basic assumptions of message meaning and transfer, power and domination, and notions of rationality associated with hierarchical and patriarchal systems. Communication as a constitutive process brings about self and social environments. Communication literally produces organizing, decision making, and influence

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Communication as Constitutive Process

- Communication is not synonymous with organizing, decision making, and influence but is better understood as the process that literally produces organizing, decision making, and influence.

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Communication Constitutes Organization

- Generally speaking, CCO rejects the notion portrayed in the Functional tradition that the organization contains a variety of discrete and independent communication interactions which are manifested in an identifiable structure with known boundaries.
- CCO extends the Meaning-Centered approach by discussing how organizations develop identities, exercise power and influence, and sustain themselves.

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Postmodernism & Organizational Communication

- Generally referring to perspectives that reject former notions of authority and power, stability of meanings, and concepts of effectiveness, postmodernism has become known as theoretical perspectives that represent an alienation from the past, skepticism about authority structures, ambiguity of meanings, and mass culture. Historical modernism is viewed as preceding postmodernity in time and experience, with postmodernism presenting challenges to the established traditions of modernism.

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Critical Theory & Organizational Communication

- Critical theory focuses our attention on studying privilege, control, and power with specific attention to abuses of power through communication and organization. As Deetz (2001) explained, “The central goal of critical theory in organizational communication studies has been to create a society and workplaces that are free from domination and where all members can contribute equally to produce systems that meet human needs and lead to the progressive development of all

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Feminist , Race, and Class Perspective and Organizational Communication

- Feminist theory focuses on the marginalization and domination of women in the workplace and the devaluing of women's voices in all organizational processes. Although diverse in perspective and approaches, feminist theory generally attempts to move our society beyond patriarchal forms and social practices by critiquing power relationships that devalue women. Race perspectives and organizational communication currently are less developed, emerging, and of significant importance. Race perspectives focus on the domination of those not of a majority race and the uncovering of practices which both silence and devalue minority voices.



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