

Fundamentals of Organizational Communication

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Chapter 8



A person's hands are shown typing on a laptop keyboard. Above the laptop screen, several semi-transparent icons are floating, representing various educational concepts: a graduation cap, a target with an arrow, an open book, a magnifying glass, a play button on a monitor, a bar chart, and a group of people. The background is a warm, blurred indoor setting.

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Participating in Organizations

This chapter is designed to develop knowledge by identifying critical communication competencies for participation in organizations. The competencies developed focus on problem solving, decision making, and communications technologies. We encourage sensitivity through awareness of individual and organizational influences for problem solving and decision making. We increase skills through problem solving and decision-making practice. We influence values by relating quality decisions and problem solving to overall organizational effectiveness and by encouraging an understanding of the importance of ethical and credible individual behaviors. Finally, all four competencies—knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values—interact during analysis and practice opportunities.

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Participation Challenges for Problem Solving and Decision Making

- Problem-solving and decision-making challenges are numerous and diverse. We live in a global work environment with multi-cultural perspectives on how to approach problems and what types of decisions are possible. Problem solving and decision making increasingly are virtual. People who rarely if ever work face-to-face are challenged to understand interpersonal dynamics important for collaboration. The sheer volume of data available to inform a decision increases requiring critical thinking to understand issues and come to solid recommendations. Finally, all problem solving and decision making have ethical dimensions. Individuals with differing values often complicate problem solving and decision making with differing perceptions of what constitutes ethical and unethical behaviors.

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Participation Challenges for Problem Solving and Decision Making

- These challenges and numerous others underscore the need for communication competency at all organizational levels. Few would disagree that collaborating with others to reach excellent decisions is complicated by the complexity of our organizational environments. Think about the problem-solving and decision-making groups of which you have been a part. What challenges did you face? What communication competencies were required? How would you describe the challenges Joan Murphy is facing?

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Defining Problem Solving & Decision Making

- Problem solving and decision making occur through a variety of communication processes. The effectiveness of problem solving and decision making directly influences the effectiveness of individuals as well as entire organization.
- Problem solving Multistage process for moving an issue, a situation, or a state from an undesirable to a more desirable condition.
- Decision making Process of choosing from among several alternatives.

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Defining Problem Solving & Decision Making

- Although problem solving includes decision making, decision making and problem solving are not one and the same process.
- Decision making depends on individuals and groups choosing from among known alternatives. Problem solving is the process by which individuals and groups generate alternatives and evaluate those alternatives in light of the identified problem.
- All problem solving and decision making involve a level of risk. Decisions, whether as choices from among well-defined alternatives or the result of complex problem solving, reflect desired courses of action before the results of the action are known. Unknown results represent risk.

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Influences for Problem Solving & Decision Making

- We will describe four primary factors that influence individual and group problem solving and decision making. These factors—organizational culture (including power and control processes), decision/problem issues, communication competencies, and technical competencies—influence the methods used for problem solving, the quality of decisions made, and the satisfaction participants feel with problem-solving and decision-making processes.

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1. Culture

Organizational cultures influence the methods of decision making. Some organizations expect leaders to make and announce decisions. The military, for example, does not depend on majority rule or consensus decision making for determining plans of action. The university, on the other hand, has a long tradition of consensus decision making at all organizational levels. Some organizations expect individuals to make decisions about their jobs or areas of responsibility without notifying others or seeking extensive input.

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2.The Problem/ Decision Issue

- The nature of a problem also influences decision making and problem solving. Is the problem highly complex? Does the organization have available resources to understand the problem? How important is this decision or solution to organizational effectiveness? Has the organization previously attempted to solve this type of dilemma?

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3. Communication Competency

Throughout this text we have described the need for communication competency. Many of the competencies discussed relate to effective problem solving and decision making. What motivates us and what we believe motivates others influence the quality of our decision-making participation.

- Our perception of our personal competencies and our predispositions for communication help determine how and when we engage in individual and group decision making.
- In addition to our individual participation, the communication competencies of others influence the quality of decision making. Individuals who fail to participate even though they have needed information lower the quality of problem solving. Because problem solving and decision making occur through human communication, the ability and willingness of all involved to engage in quality participation influence the ultimate quality of decisions.

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4. Technical Competency

The final factor to influence problem solving and decision making is technical competency. Do individuals involved in decision making have the technical background or competencies necessary to approach the problem thoughtfully? Are decision makers aware of the best available information on which to base their evaluations? Has the group been formed with a distribution of appropriate technical skills?

Most of us have attended meetings in which we were willing to participate and yet found that we had no relevant information for the problem at hand.

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Methods for Problem Solving & Decision Making

We describe the following methods—individual approach, leader mandate, majority rule, powerful minority, and consensus—to illustrate the diversity of options available for individuals, groups, or entire organizations. It is important to note in the twenty-first century, the emphasis on problem solving and decision making is rapidly shifting from an individual to a group or team responsibility.

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1. Individual Approach

Individuals engage in decision making and problem solving with a variety of methods and approaches. Individuals make decisions with a range of involvement from others. At times they come to important decisions without others even knowing that a decision is being considered.

- An individual may decide to apply for a promotion, leave a company, or go back to school based on private evaluations of alternatives.

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2. Leader Mandate

- Groups also come to decisions with a variety of methods. When a group is hopelessly deadlocked, for example, a leader may make a decision and announce the decision to the group. The authority of the leadership position may be sufficient to enforce the decision without regard to disagreements. Some leaders prefer this method of decision making and use group members only to gather information from which the leader will arrive at the final decision.
- Decisions made in this fashion may or may not be of high quality. Research suggests, however, that leader-made decisions frequently have less group commitment than decisions in which members are more actively involved.

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3. Majority Rule

- Majority rule is a common method for decision making. When more than 50 percent of a group agree, a decision is reached. Some groups reach majority agreement informally whereas others, such as legislative bodies, have operating rules and procedures governing majority decisions. Although faster than moving a group to true consensus, the majority-rule method may not adequately account for the views of the minority. Majority-rule decisions can be high in quality, but they can also ignore central issues of concern.

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4. Powerful Minority

- Although used less frequently than majority vote, the powerful minority decision is another way groups can make decisions. When group membership is characterized by unequal distribution of power among members, those members who have the most power (although in the numerical minority) are in a position to assume decision-making responsibility.
- The powerful-minority method can be effective when the minority members have the best information on which to base the decision.

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5. Consensus

- The consensus method results in a decision all members can agree is best and all can support. The consensus method may take more time than other methods, unless considerable agreement existed at the beginning of the process. Complete consensus is not common because it is difficult for all members of a group to believe the very best decision possible has been made. The consensus method does not rest with everyone completely agreeing but with everyone reaching a level of agreement sufficient for decision support.

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Barriers to Effective Problem Solving & Decision Making

Barriers to effective problem solving and decision making can be described in organizational, group task and procedural, and interpersonal areas. It is important for our knowledge and sensitivity competency development to understand what commonly goes wrong during problem solving even when individuals have the best of intentions.

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1. Organizational Barriers

Groups who work together over time can become so cohesive they suspend critical thinking during decision making. The term “groupthink” is commonly used to describe the surface harmony which groups adopt rather than probe the complexity of an issue. This suspension of critical thinking and limiting of information considered in order to maintain harmony is a powerful barrier to excellent decisions. (We will discuss groupthink in greater detail in Chapter 9.) Can you identify a time where you and others engaged in groupthink? What was the result?

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2. Group Task and Procedural Barriers

- One of the most important barriers to problem-solving effectiveness is an inadequate description of problems. Group members frequently jump to solutions that appeal to them rather than work toward solutions better suited to the complexity of the issues. In addition, both individuals and groups have been known to overestimate the positive benefits of a chosen alternative while rejecting accurate or valid information in favor of more popular but flawed data. لصالح بيانات أكثر شيوعاً ولكنها معيبة.

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3. Interpersonal Barriers

We all have observed or participated in interpersonal conflict that blocked effective decision making. We know from experience poor leadership or a variety of self-centered or ego-centered behaviors can negatively influence any group. What we may not see is group cohesion—too much to too little—can influence the quality of decisions.

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Problem Solving Process

A variety of processes can be identified for both individual and group problem solving. These processes help individuals and groups move from problem identification to determination of action appropriate for problem needs. Although these processes include numerous decision-making activities, they are described as problemsolving processes because of their focus on moving situations, issues, or problems from undesirable to more desirable states.

- Although decision making occurs during problem solving, problem-solving processes include numerous other stages. Next, we describe four approaches to problem solving—the Standard Agenda, brainstorming, experientially based processes, and a decision tree model.

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1. The Standard Agenda: A Rational Model

- Standard Agenda Process for decision making based on reflective thinking, beginning with understanding the charge, and followed by understanding and phrasing the question, fact-finding, setting criteria and limitations, discovering and selecting solutions, and preparing and presenting the final report.
- 1. Understanding the charge. What output is desired? Do you choose your own problem? What are your instructions? How will your work be evaluated?
- 2. Understanding and phrasing the question. Who decided it was a problem? Is the problem routine or an emergency? Has the issue been addressed before? Is everyone clear about the goal? What do the words in the question mean? Are the words specific and realistic?
- 3. Fact-finding. What are the evidences and symptoms of the problem? What is the effect of these symptoms? Has this happened before? What caused the condition? What have other interested and expert parties had to say about this issue? What might happen if the problem is not addressed? Using the answers to the previous questions, what is the problem now?

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1. The Standard Agenda: A Rational Model

4. Setting criteria and limitations. What are the standards or goals by which we can judge possible solutions? What could be achieved by an effective solution? What are the legal, institutional (policy and tradition), financial, persuasive, moral, and logistical limits on decision making?

The Solution Phase

1. Discovering and selecting solutions. What are the alternatives? How does each meet the goals? How do they measure up against the limitations? Which provides more of what is wanted with the least new harm? Which one should be selected? Who is to do what about what, when, where, and with what projected effect, and how will it be paid for? What evaluation plan can be used to measure the effectiveness of the solution?
- 2. Preparing and presenting the final report. What must be written down and said? When, where, and to whom? How can the final report be most persuasively presented?

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2. Brain Storming

Brainstorming Technique for generating ideas for problem solving based on methods that break away from linear and controlled processes. The process encourages maximum idea generation in a short period of time.

Seeks creative thinking based on four basic rules: (1) criticism is not appropriate during idea generation; (2) all ideas are welcome (the more absurd, the better); (3) quantity is wanted (the more ideas, the better); and (4) combinations and alterations of ideas are sought (improve on the ideas of others and combine them). Brainstorming often is used to help understand or diagnose a problem and to elicit ideas when groups

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3. Decision Tree Process

- A series of questions to determine the degree of involvement needed for a specific problem situation. Questions relate to the nature of the problem, the quality of decision needed, the quality of available information, and the amount of involvement needed for a quality decision to be made and supported.
- The questions deal with (1) quality requirements for the decision; (2) the level of commitment required for successful decision implementation; (3) the quality of the information the leader already possesses; (4) the structure of the problem in terms of clarity, organization, and time constraints; (5) how committed people will be to the decision if they are not involved in making the decision; (6) goal congruence between the organization and those implementing the decision; (7) the degree of likely conflict over preferred solutions; and (8) the amount of information people other than the leader have to make a quality decision. This model proposes the decision-making approach used should be determined based on an assessment of the needs of very specific situations. The Decision Tree process is envisioned as utilized first by a leader to determine the degree of involvement desired for a given decision. It is also possible a Decision Tree approach can be used by a group to think about the approach best suited to a particular problem.

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4. Experientially based processes

- Bounded rationality assumes that people intend to be rational, but with limited information-processing capacity, human decision making is based on selective perception and therefore exhibits “limited” rationality.
- Simon (1960) argued individuals often make organizational decisions realizing their decisions are based on partial information. Simon called this process “satisficing,” or making decisions with the hope that the decisions will be good enough if not the very best. This satisficing approach frequently uses individuals’ past experiences and is mindful of organizational precedents developed while handling similar problems.
- We all bring to our decision-making efforts masses of facts, techniques, values, knowledge, beliefs, and awareness of outcomes of previous decisions. We use intuition, feelings, fears, hopes, power relationships, and a variety of other personal and organizational concerns to select positions and courses of action.

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Increasing Problem –Solving and Decision Making Process

- Effective problem solving and decision making require individuals and groups to use a broad range of communication and technical competencies. In the next section we focus on two types of skills necessary for problem solving: interaction process and fact-finding and evaluation skills. These communication competencies, coupled with competencies developed in previous chapters, form a basis for increasing our decision-making and problem-solving effectiveness.



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1. Interaction Process Skills

Previously, we discussed individual strategies and tactics for effectiveness. Yet to be described, however, are interaction process skills that relate to effectiveness for decision making and problem solving. Interaction process skills are based on an understanding of the communication process; an awareness of individual predispositions, strategies, and tactics in a variety of circumstances; and knowledge and sensitivity for decision-making and problem-solving processes. Interaction process skills are related to our critical thinking competencies, our use of technologies, our global and cultural awareness, and our ability to collaborate effectively. Interaction process skills help individuals and groups structure problem-solving discussions, exhibit productive individual behaviors, and avoid behaviors destructive to effective decision making and problem solving.



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2. Fact Finding and Evaluation Skills

We make decisions based on our evaluation of the information that bears on the decision. We solve problems based on information about the problem and decisions about the adequacy of our solutions. Furthermore, we base complex decisions on the information available to us, whether or not it is the best information. It is therefore fair to say the quality of information we bring to decision-making and problem solving processes directly influences the quality of our decisions and solutions. Our fact-finding and evaluation skills are central to our ability to discover and critique information used in problem solving and decision making

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Information Criteria

- How can we evaluate the information we need? What criteria are important for our fact-finding and evaluation skills? Dennis Gouran (1979) suggested three characteristics of information should be considered in forming our decision-making rules: relevancy, sufficiency, and plausibility.

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1. Relevancy

- Relevancy refers to the extent to which information bears directly on the matter up for decision

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2. sufficiency

- Sufficiency refers to the amount of information necessary to establish positions or claims, or to verify what is likely to be correct.

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3.Plausibility

- Plausibility or the extent to which information is credible, also influences our decision.

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Communication Technology in Organizations

Nowhere will our communication competencies be more challenged than by the increasing use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in all types of organizations. None of us will participate in organizations of today and tomorrow without the use of technology.

Most of us are familiar with voice and text messaging, personal digital assistants, all types of phones with multimedia capabilities, fax machines, computer word processing, e-mail, and the Internet. Fewer of us are regular users of teleconferencing, high-definition conferencing, desktop publishing, spreadsheets, graphics, GDSS, and high-pow

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Communication Technology in Organizations

- The extensive connectivity characteristic of the work world of today and tomorrow facilitates communication and coordination of work in both
- Synchronous settings Technology use enabling two-way communication.
- Asynchronous settings Technology use enabling one-way communication.
- Technologies, of course, can be both. The telephone is synchronous when we talk with another. The telephone is asynchronous when we leave a message.

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Media richness theory

Richard Daft and Robert Lengel (1984, 1987) described media richness as the medium's capacity for feedback, the number of cues and channels available, language variety, and focus on the receiver.

Generally speaking, richer mediums have more capacity for feedback, more cues and channels available, more language variety, and more focus on receivers. Less rich mediums are low or completely lacking in immediate feedback, limit the number of cues and channels available, have limited language variety, and are more sender- than receiver-focused.

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Increasing Technology Effectiveness

Perhaps the most important preparation for our rapidly changing technological environments is an attitudinal preparation, the understanding that we may never completely master the technologies we use and that change will bring about the necessity for lifelong learning.

The good news is research consistently demonstrates that, as we go through our careers, we are capable of new learning and increased competencies with the machines of today and those projected for the future.

- In addition to accepting as normal that our learning does not stop with formal education but is an ongoing part of our organizational lives, we can prepare for communications technology by availing ourselves of opportunities to experience as many diverse applications of technologies as are readily available.

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Increasing Technology Effectiveness

Most schools and public libraries have a variety of computer as well as teleconferencing capabilities. In addition, most work organizations and more in the future will provide basic training for a variety of specific applications. It is important when we think about preparing for participation in the organizations of the future to consider how we can develop competencies in communications technology that will support the human communication competencies that we continue to develop.



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