Communicating in Groups 10th edition Adams Solutions Manual

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Chapter 2
Groups as Open Systems

Summary

The aim of this chapter is to encourage students to see a group as a complex interaction of various elements. Students should also be able to recognize that groups are not isolated from the larger environment but act within and are influenced by it. They especially need to realize that most task groups operate within larger groups (organizations). Chapter 2 presents a general systems framework for organizing the many concepts important to understanding how groups function.

Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Explain what a theory is and why systems theory is useful for studying small group communication.
2. Define and give examples of a system.
3. Define inputs, throughput process, and outputs of a group system.
4. Explain why communication is the heart of a group's throughput process.
5. Describe the role of the group's environment.
6. Compare open and closed systems.
7. Describe what interdependence means for the manner in which a small group system functions.
8. Explain the role of feedback in helping a system adapt to changing circumstances.
9. Explain why all groups experience multiple causes and multiple paths.
10. Explain synergy, and explain why groups occasionally exhibit positive or negative synergy.

Sample Lecture Notes

I. What Is a Theory?

- A theory is defined as a "map of reality," something that helps people navigate unfamiliar terrain and make decisions.
- Like a map, a theory describes relationships between elements and shows how to get from one element to another.

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- Good theories are practical and reliable ways to help improve one's decision making.

II. Overview of General Systems Theory

- General systems theory was developed by a biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, as a way to examine and explain complex living organisms.
- The human body is an example where various systems work together to allow the entire system to perform tasks.
- Although groups are composed of individual members, those members are interdependent. As they interact, they form a social system that becomes its own entity.
- Many individual elements affect the dynamics of a group in the following ways:
  - The reason the group was formed
  - The personalities of the group members
  - The information available
  - The type of leadership
  - How the group handles conflict
  - How successful the group has been in accomplishing its assigned task
- No single element functions alone—they all interact continuously.

III. The Small Group as a System

A. Definition of a System

- A system is defined as a set of elements that functions as a whole because of interdependent relationships.
- A small group functions interdependently with the environment.

B. Concepts Vital to Understanding Systems

Inputs

- Inputs are defined as all the elements of a system that are present at the outset, or the initial raw materials of the system.
  - Personalities and characteristics (e.g., age, gender)
  - Needs
  - Attitudes
  - Values
  - Abilities and skills

Throughput Processes

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- Throughput processes are defined as influences on the system that result from actual activities within the group as it goes about its business.
    - Throughput processes include (a) the group's rules, (b) how roles and leadership develop, (c) how members handle conflict, and (d) how members evaluate information.
- Communication is the central activity in this transformative process.

Outputs

- Outputs are defined as those tangible and intangible products or achievements of the group system emerging from throughput processes.
- Outputs include the following examples:
    - A report, recommendation, or presentation
    - Feelings among members, personal growth, personal satisfaction, and modifications

Environment

- An environment refers to those systems that do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in multiple surroundings or contexts.
    - A classroom can be either pleasant or ugly or noisy or quiet.
    - The small group system is linked to its environment. This in turn affects communication processes within the small group itself.
- Bona fide group perspective is defined as the focus on the relationship between a group and its environment, which is a characteristic of real-life, naturally occurring groups. This mutual influence occurs for the following reasons:
    - Group members belong to other groups that simultaneously influence and are influenced by them.
    - Groups coordinate with other groups within the same organization.
    - There is frequent internal/external communication over the groups' goals.
    - Members bring a variety of interests, ways of speaking, and mental models of effective group problem solving.
- All of these factors affect how members create their sense of "group."
- Class Discussion: Use the "Apply Now" box on page 34 to further elaborate bona fide group perspective.
- A virtual group is defined as a group in which members do not communicate with each other in the same time or at the same place. This alters traditional small group concepts.
    - Virtual groups deal with tasks that are more multidimensional than those

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addressed by traditional groups.
- Virtual group members may not know whom to contact for more information.
- Formal positions of power rarely exist.
- Decision-making procedures are often created internally in traditional groups.

C. Characteristics of Systems

Open and Closed Systems

- An open system is defined as a system with a free exchange of information with its environment—that is, with inputs and outputs flowing back and forth between the system and its environment.
- A closed system is defined as a system of limited flow of information between itself and its environment.
- A boundary spanner is defined as a group member who scans the group's environment to allow or prevent information from flowing into and out of the group.
- Boundary spanners tend to do two main things:
  - They look for ideas and support by scouting information.
  - They help protect the group from outside influences by buffering and bringing up borders.
- Because closed and open systems have advantages and disadvantages, boundary spanners can manage to have more positives without negatives. See the Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) example on page 38.
- Class Discussion: Use the "Media and Technology" textbox on page 39 to apply the impact of technology on groups as open systems.

Interdependence

- Interdependence refers to the fact that each element of a system simultaneously influences and is influenced by the other elements.

Feedback

- Feedback is the return of system outputs as system inputs, which allows the system to monitor its movement toward goals and make necessary changes.
  - To be helpful, feedback must be clear, accurate, and relevant.
  - The best way to give feedback is to "sandwich" it between two favorable observations.
  - Feedback will be evaluated based on source and content.

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Multiple Causes, Multiple Paths

- The complex nature of groups makes it impossible to predetermine where a group will end up.
    - The concept of equifinality suggests that groups can start out at very different places but end up at the same place.
    - The concept of multifinality suggests that groups starting out the same may end up in different places.
- In groups, many factors produce the final outcome.
- No single system input determines system outputs; instead, system outcomes are the result of numerous, interdependent factors. This concept is referred to as multiple causes.
- Class Discussion: Why does one NBA team make it to the finals and another team doesn't? Which factors led to success or failure?
- There is usually more than one appropriate way to reach a particular goal or endpoint. This principle is indicated by the concept of multiple paths.
- It is the idea that system objectives can be reached in a variety of ways.
- Class Discussion: What is the process of making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? Do we perform this task in all the same ways?

Synergy

- Synergy (also called nonsummativity) is defined as a system's ability to take on an identity separate from its individual elements.
    - When group members come together, they create an entirely unique entity that is something other than just a collection of individual parts
- Groups often achieve a positive synergy (assembly effect) in which the output is superior to the averaging of the outputs of the individual member
- Negative synergy is whether the group encounters obstacles during its problem-solving process, and how it deals with those obstacles
- Groups can also achieve process loss, or negative synergy, when they perform worse than abilities would suggest.
- Class Discussion: Use the "Apply Now" box on page 42 to tie together the characteristics of systems with a real world example.
- Systems theory is not the only way to explain group dynamics, and researchers have raised concerns about this theory's abilities to explain various phenomena.
    - Critics suggest that the theory is merely descriptive and does not provide useful explanations.
    - The theory assumes homeostasis rather than change.
- In spite of concerns, a useful theory can help explain the individual components of

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the system, but it emphasizes that each part functions in relation to all the other parts of the system; what affects one part affects them all.

Learning Activities

1. Divide the class into groups of four to six members each, and instruct each group to create a model of a small human group as an open system. This may be accomplished in a variety of ways. For example, students may be instructed to draw the model on paper, or they may be asked to act out the model using the members of the groups as components. Groups may then share their models with the rest of the class. The following discussion questions may be used to help the class synthesize the information they have learned:
   a. What did you discover from creating a model of an open system of small groups?
   b. What elements did all the various models have in common?
   c. What elements did two or three of the models have in common?
   d. What elements were unique?
   e. What did you learn from the models created by the other groups?

2. Divide the class into groups of four to six members each, and ask each group to identify a student group (a work group is also appropriate) with which they are familiar. Students should then identify all the ways in which this group interacts with its environment (for example, a service club may need to recruit new members and work with other groups to coordinate a large charity event). Students should include actions from the group to the environment as well as actions from the environment to the group. They should also focus on how these various interactions affect the internal operation (throughput) of the group. Have the students share their findings with the class.

3. Ask each student to select three groups to which she or he belongs, to identify the life cycle stage each group is in, and to explain her or his decision. Students should share their information in small groups of three to six members.

4. Play a song for the class, and have them identify all of the things that go into the making of that song. As students respond, write their answers on a whiteboard, and after you have collected all responses, have students identify inputs, throughputs, and outputs.

5. Place your students in groups of five to seven members each, and give them a similar hypothetical task—painting a room, picking a class, etc. Have each group map the steps to achieve the task. You must only give the task without any other instructions. At the end of the activity, have each group present their method of achieving the task, and use the findings to discuss the principle of multiple paths.

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Media Learning Activity

1. Divide the class into groups of four to six members each. Show one of the segments of the video *Communicating Effectively in Small Groups* (any one of the four segments will work). Ask the groups to identify all the inputs, throughputs, and outputs they observe in the group. Also, ask them to explain how the concepts of an open system, interdependence, feedback, and multiple causalities are shown in the video. Ask the groups to report their findings to the class. When Kathy uses this learning activity, she uses the *Ineffective Problem-Solving Discussion* that the students viewed during the first class session because the students are already familiar with it. She has the groups report in round-robin fashion so that each group has an opportunity to participate. The online video is available at http://highered.mheducation.com/sites/0073523860/student_view0/videos__communicating_effectively_in_small_groups.html.

2. Show a clip of *The Office*, *30 Rock*, or *Parks and Recreation*, and ask students to identify the elements of the organizational system. Have them discuss how the environment impacts the system.

Media Resources

1. *We're On the Same Team, Remember?* (DVD, CRM Learning, 11400 SE 8th Street, Suite 210, Bellevue, WA 98004-0520, 800-408-5657; 1-800-421-0833) http://www.crmlearning.com/Were-on-the-Same-Team-Remember-P54309.aspx

   This video demonstrates the value of intergroup communication within an organization and illustrates the concept of the organization as a network of interlocking and interdependent teams.

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The Small Group as a System

Inputs

Throughputs

Outputs

Environments

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Characteristics of Systems

Open versus Closed

Interdependence

Feedback

Multiple Causes/Multiple Paths

Synergy

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Groups as Open Systems

Chapter 2



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Preview

What Is a Theory

Overview of General Systems Theory

The Small Group as a System

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What Is a Theory?

A theory is a “map of reality” that helps us navigate unfamiliar territory and make decisions

Good theories are practical and reliable



General Systems Theory

Developed by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy as a way to examine and explain complex living organisms

A system is composed of parts that are interdependent with each other and is connected in such a manner that any change in one part ripples through the entire system

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The Small Group as a System, 1

Group member interdependence is the mutual influence between members that creates a "group" from a collection of individuals

Concepts Vital to Understanding Systems

- **Environment**: Systems do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in multiple surroundings or contexts

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The Small Group as a System, 2

- **Inputs**: All the elements of a system that are present at the outset, or the initial raw materials of the system

- Some examples of inputs include personalities, needs, attitudes, values, and abilities and skills



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The Small Group as a System, 3

- **Throughput processes**: Influences on the system that result from actual activities within the group as it goes about its business

- Some examples of small group throughput processes include members' behaviors, group norms, communication networks, status relationships, and procedures

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The Small Group as a System, 4

- **Outputs**: Those tangible and intangible products or achievements of the group system emerging from throughput processes
- Some examples of tangible outputs include reports, recommendations, solutions and decisions, and physical objects
- Some examples of intangible outputs include feelings, personal growth, and personal satisfaction

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Bona Fide Group Perspective

The focus on the relationship between a group and its environment, which is a characteristic of real-life, naturally occurring groups

Group members are influenced by their other groups

Groups coordinate with other groups within the same parent organization or across organizations

Communication occurs within the group as well as between the group and other larger groups over interpretation of group goals, the extent of the group's authority, and support for group actions that helps define a group's accountability for its task

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Characteristics of Systems, 1

Closed system: A system with limited flow of information between itself and its environment

One disadvantage of a closed system is that companies can be cut off from information that may help them improve

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Characteristics of Systems, 2

Open system: A system with a free exchange of information with its environment—that is, with inputs and outputs flowing back and forth between the system and its environment

One advantage of an open system is that managers maintain less control

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Characteristics of Systems, 3

Interdependence: When the elements of a system mutually influence each other

Just as the system as a whole is affected by its environment, so are the system's individual components affected by each other

One element, idea, behavior, or person can change the functioning of the entire group



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Characteristics of Systems, 4

Feedback: The return of system outputs as system inputs, which allows the system to monitor its movement toward goals and make necessary changes

Feedback should be clear and accurate and can be tangible or intangible

Multiple Causes: The idea that no single system input determines system outputs; instead, system outcomes are the result of numerous, interdependent factors

Multiple paths: The idea that system objectives can be reached in a variety of ways

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Characteristics of Systems, 5

Synergy: A system's ability to take on an identity separate from its individual elements

Positive synergy (assembly effect) occurs when the group's output is superior to the individual members' abilities

Negative synergy (process loss) occurs when the group's output is less than the individual members' abilities

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Exercise



Bring a large muffin to class. Use the muffin to discuss inputs, throughputs, and outputs. Make a list of the inputs for making the muffin. Discuss the kinds of throughputs necessary for the creation of the muffin, and then point out the output. Discuss how the environment may influence the muffin.

After this discussion, compare the making of a muffin, as a relatively closed system, to the creation of a group, a relatively open system. How are they similar and how are they different?

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